Identity

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IDENTITY

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The West has a rich history of identity discourses, going back to golden age narratives developed in ancient Israel and Greece. Modern understandings of identity, which build on this history, emerge in early modern Europe. The most comprehensive study of selfhood is by Jerrold Seigel (2005). The term "self," Seigel suggests, means "the particular being any person is, whatever it is about each of us that distinguishes you or me from others, draws the parts of our existence together, persists through changes, or opens the way to becoming who we might or should be" (2003: 3) The concept of the self is more or less identical to that of identity, as understood psychologists and political scientists.

The nature of selfhood has been one of the most enduring questions of Western culture and central to its attempts at self-definition. Seigel contends that at least since the time of Descartes, Western selfhood has three dimensions: bodily or material, relational or social, and reflective. Each gives rise to different understandings of self, not all of which are compatible. This multiplicity and the tensions it generates is a key reason why the concept of identity is so difficult to define and operationalize. Seigel's categories are intended to capture the diversity of philosophical thought about the self, but they are equally useful empirically as they capture key dimensions of what constitutes identity for ordinary people.
Physical Identity: Bodies are more than platforms for our minds as they define our capabilities and often our sense of who we are. This is most evident when they begin to fail us. Ill people are routinely announce that they are not "feeling themselves," implying that a healthy body is a key component of their persona. This is also true of elderly people who feel an increasing disconnect between what they think of as still young minds and spirit but fast-aging bodies. Such tension between reflective and physical selves is even more extreme in people who feel trapped in a body of the wrong gender; some of them put up with considerable pain and great expense to become transgendered. For those of us content with our gender, the simple thought experiment of putting ourselves into a body of the opposite sex should drive home how much our sense of who we are is a function of the platform we inhabit.

Social Identity: Our relational or social identity refers to the sense of self that arises from social interaction. It can be attributed in the first instance to socialization by family and the various institutions of society. In the ancient world, it is frequently asserted, people conceived of their identities largely in terms of the roles they performed. Some social scientists maintain that little has changed, that our identities are still social even if we have come to believe otherwise. Marx and Durkheim subscribe to a strong social ontology and modern sociology is based on this premise. Sociologists like Erving Goffman (1959) have documented the extent to which and how roles and their performance constitute a "public self."

Society shapes identity by encouraging individuals to develop certain kinds of affiliations and assume certain kinds of roles. Affiliations refer to objects of attachment – this includes ideas and institutions as well as people -- and roles to proscribed ways of
behaving. Whether we recognize it or not, affiliations and roles account for much of the selfhood we feel. We generally self-identity in terms of them (e.g., born again Christian, mother, psychologist) and others invoke them to define us. Together, affiliations and roles do much of the analytical work for which the concept of identity is mobilized.

Affiliation has emotional and often institutional components. We can feel part of a social unit and may or may not have an official relationship to it. Marriage, arguably the oldest and most important form of affiliation, is an institution in most societies. In some societies, affiliation comes first and is considered prerequisite to institutionalization of the partnership. In societies where marriages are arranged, emotional attachments are expected to follow institutional recognition. Affiliations exist at every level of social aggregation; people identity with partners, families, clans, social and professional groups, organizations, communities, religions, nations, regions and the human race. Such affiliations are markers of selfhood and achieve deeper meaning for actors when they are repetitively enacted in practice.

Most practices are associated with roles. They are prescribed behaviors, some simple and clearly defined, others complex and more ambiguous or with more leeway in how they can be enacted. All involve performance of some kind. Roles are socially assigned or validated. We cannot credibly declare ourselves fire fighters; we must have some training and professional experience, and better yet, work or be a volunteer for a fire department. Only then, will we be recognized as fire fighters by others. Most institutions encourage members to develop emotional attachments to them, and some (e.g., marriages, platoons) only function effectively when this happens. In other institutions, positive identification is not required, but becoming emotionally attached and
loyal to one’s boss or organization -- or at least giving this appearance -- often brings practical rewards.

Affiliations do not require roles. People feel strong attachments to collectivities like sports teams, religions and ethnic groups without those feelings being recognized, reciprocated or validated. Roles often generate affect. Many people love or hate their jobs and most feel positively about roles for which they volunteer. Strong attachment to roles can shape people’s understanding of themselves, especially when their roles have high status. This also happens when roles require considerable time, intellectual resources, courage or emotional commitment. Like affiliations, roles are powerful sources of self-identification; as noted earlier, we routinely encounter people who define themselves in terms of their profession. To the degree that roles generate positive affect toward the social unit that confers or legitimates them, roles and affiliations will become mutually reinforcing pillars of self-identification.

Social identity has another important component: labels that powerful groups in a society impose on actors. Categories of this kind can confer high status and related advantages, as it has done historically for Brahmins in India, aristocrats in Europe and currently celebrities in the United States. Other labels consign people to low status and deny them opportunities or privileges. Dalits, Jews, African-Americans, Catholics, the Irish, Asian-Americans and colonized peoples of all kind were -- and some still remain -- the objects of prejudice and discrimination. Labels are independent of affiliations and roles but they can consign actors to particular roles. The power of socialization is such that some members of groups created or assigned labels inevitably internalize the stereotypes of them. Stereotypes also have the potential to be made self-fulfilling, and
when this happens, labels appear valid to many people, increasing the hold of the stereotype.

**Reflexive Identity:** Cultural systems are learned through imitation and reflection on the meaning of this behavior. We learn to behave in accord with social expectations and recognize that this is usually an efficacious way of achieving our goals. These goals are also generally products of socialization. Reflection also enables agency. If we are unhappy about our behavior, its consequences or goals, we may behave differently in the future. Our reflexive self is constrained but also enabled by our physical and social selves and can be considered to some degree self-governing (Seigel: 7).

There are multiple levels of reflection. The simplest is about one's affiliations and roles or any other component of self-identification. We reflect on these roles, their requirements and what they say or communicate about who we are. We also reflect on who we would like to be, and often frame this inquiry in terms of roles and affiliations we would like to have but are not currently available to us. Such reflection can be an incentive for doing what it takes to achieve these goals. Self-identifications can be socially self-defeating if they are unattainable or greatly at odds with the understandings other have us.

Second level reflection about self-identification involves choice in the sense of creating a hierarchy of our many self-identifications. Such reflection is often triggered by the need to describe oneself. If someone who is identifiable foreign asks "who are you?" many people will define themselves in terms of their nationality. If the interlocutor is a fellow-citizen, we might emphasize our regional or local affiliations. Some people might put their religious affiliations first, or combine them with national or ethnic ones.
Members of minority groups might foreground these later identifications. Context is all-important. If the interlocutor happens to be wearing a Yankee cap, many people in my community would proudly self-identity as members of "the Red Sox nation." Such questions make us aware of our self-identifications and the need at times to make choices among them.

This also happens when we confront role conflicts, divided affiliations or tensions between roles and affiliations. In these situations, people want to dissonance, which encourages them to make choices when they cannot be finessed. Alternatively, people strive to make their self-identifications acceptable to others or upgrade them in status. African-Americans have been largely successful in the latter enterprise. New roles and identities have accordingly opened up to them. In this case and others, we observe on-going interaction between individual and social level reflections that can be provoked by reflection about identity or changes in its practice by individuals or groups.

A third level of reflection is about the categories of affiliations, roles and other forms of self-identification. Many affiliations develop naturally, although most are to some degree authorized and regulated by society. Roles and self-identifications depend on the prior existence of categories people use to characterize their behavior and themselves. Existing categories can often be stretched or modified to suit actor needs. The creation of new categories and the self-identifications they enable is a daunting task. One of the most moving scenes in Western literature is book twenty-four of the *Iliad* where the Greek warrior Achilles and Trojan King Priam together lament the war that has killed the former's beloved and the latter's son and will soon claim them both. They lack role models for new identities or a language in which they could construct them. Despite
intense desires to escape their fates, they are trapped in roles that will ineluctably bring
them about.

Homer is offering, if not a new language, an incentive to find one that will enable
new affiliations, roles and self-identifications. His narratives – commonly considered the
work of multiple bards – provided a chap book for later Greeks to construct a cultural
identity built around a shared literary language and a particular understanding of honor.
Achilles and Hector were the first of many role models thrown up by Western literature.
Rousseau's Julie and Goethe's Werther performed a similar function in late eighteenth
century. More recent role models come from film, television and the sports world.
We also gain access to new practices, roles and forms of identification when we
encounter other cultures, as the ancient Greeks did through trade with other peoples of
the Mediterranean basin. Cultural contacts create the possibility of using a highly
stylized account of another culture as a vantage point to interrogate one’s own. This
strategy was pioneered by Herodotus, who deployed it to demonstrate Greek superiority.
He portrays Hellenes as the happy means between various extremes represented by
Beginning with Montesquieu (1993), the use of “proximate others” was widely used for
the opposite goal: to critique one’s own society and its practices. Today, multi-cultural
settings, education, travel, and above all, the media, expose people to numerous
alternative practices and identities and concepts about them.

Affiliations, roles, practices and identities can be questioned in the absence of
conceptual categories. Children do this all the time. Critiques nevertheless benefit from
abstract conceptions that facilitate comparisons of affiliations, roles and self-
identifications with other representatives of these categories. Third level reflection of this
kind has the potential to develop into a critical discourse about social values, practices and even the nature of identities. Identities, like practices, no longer function the same way when they are understood as social constructions rather than something natural. They undergo further stress when they become the subject of discourses that allow their functional and comparative analysis. Criticism of identities or practices make people more aware of the and can easily generate role anxiety. Heightened awareness and anxiety can change how or why a role is performed and how people understanding its meaning and consequences. When roles evolve, acquire new meanings, or simply become controversial, these changes provide a stimulus to develop discourses that help to explain this process. Discourses in turn affect practice. A similar recursive process characterizes the relationship between roles and self-identifications.

**Autobiographical identity**: Seigel's categories map nicely on to various forms of identity, but they are incomplete. Understandings of the self invariably include an historical or biographical component that cuts across Seigel's categories. Our biographies are social and reflective, and for some people physical as well. For most of us, our biographies begin before we are born. We are raised as members of families, ethnic groups, regions and countries and are generally taught something about all of them. To the extent we assimilate this information the historical triumphs and tragedies of one or more of these units become part of our lives and sense of who we are. Our biography consists of life experiences, the emotions they generate and reflections on both. As we shall see, there is a heavy social component to personal memories and efforts to construct autobiographies.
The physical component of biography concerns the history of our body and the ways it has made us who we are. The most obvious example concerns handicapped people, whose life trajectories and personalities are almost certain to be influenced by any kind of major handicap. Handicaps, physical traumas or disease can have profound effects on the life choices people make and their resulting self-definitions. So too can exceptional physical features and abilities that make certain kinds of career choices possible. For some people the body is much more than a platform, but an important persona – perhaps the most important one – they present to the world. The phenomenal increase in recent years in the US of breast enhancement, liposuction, eye makeovers, cosmetic surgery and use of botox can be offered in evidence. For people who avail themselves of these procedures – and for most of us in less dramatic ways – our bodies and their histories help make us who we are.

This cursory exploration of identity indicates that it has "horizontal" and "vertical" dimensions. The former refers to the self-identifications we develop in response to our affiliations and roles, and the latter to our autobiographical understandings. The horizontal dimension connects us to the social world by making us more like others. The vertical dimension confers a sense of uniqueness and continuity across time and space. It is unclear how these several dimensions of reflectivity are related. The scholarly literature is largely mute on the matter. Empirical evidence indicates that when asked who they are people sometimes refer to affiliations and roles and sometimes to their personal or group histories and the identifications they generate. Conceptually, philosophers sometimes incorporate all three dimensions but more often emphasize one at the expense, even to the exclusion, of others. Descartes postulated the
self as purely reflective, while Diderot (1976) had a speaker in *D'Alembert's Dream* attribute moral and social selves to bodily constitution. Some contemporary biologists and neuroscientists follow Diderot, while others (Edelman 1992; Damasio, 1994) argue against reducing our drives and emotions to material processes. For Hegel and Marx, the self is largely social, although the late Marx allows workers to gain reflexive agency after the revolution. Nietzsche and Heidegger, Freud and Proust, all attempt to integrate the three dimensions of self into more comprehensive understandings or to explain them with reference to some deeper power or principle. In theory and practice alike, identity is a many-headed hydra, and which head we see depends very much on how we frame the problem and the social context in which we choose to ask or look.

**INTERROGATING IDENTITY**

Identity is a universal phenomenon it does not necessarily follow that the concept of identity is a useful vehicle for its analysis. Rogers Brubacker and Frederick Cooper (2000) rightly accuse the social sciences and humanities of surrendering to the word “identity,” and of paying a considerable price in doing do. They object to the use of identity as an analytical category because it is defined in so many different ways as to denude the concept of any rigor, rendering difficult, if not futile, any comparison across empirical studies. Many studies fail to distinguish between identity as a practice and an analytical concept. The use of identity as an analytical concept legitimizes it as a category of practice and, by extension, the political projects with which it is associated.

The concept of identity becomes more problematic still when we examine its genealogy. Identity turns out to be the secular descendant of the soul and conjured up for
much the same purposes. It was initially invoked to provide uniqueness and continuity to individuals, important to philosophers for moral and legal reasons. Like the soul, identity has no physical presence; nobody has ever seen one. Nor can the conceptual construct of identity be inferred on the basis of its behavioral consequences. More troubling still, it is not anything like the neutral analytical category its advocates suppose. It is a component, expression and prop of highly politicized identity discourses.

The concept of identity rests on three dubious assumptions. The first is that we are somehow able to maintain continuous identities even though their personalities and characters, affiliations and roles change over the course of their lives. The second is that our ideates are somehow unique. The third is our potential to remake ourselves, or at least to discover our "true" selves. All three beliefs are deeply ingrained in the modern Western psyche and scholarly literature.

The continuity assumption is central to Locke’s (1995) construction of identity which made memory the source of individual continuity and continues to resonate with more recent authorities who associate it with autobiography. Paul Ricoeur (1991) maintains that identity is little more than a continuously reconstructed biography. Charles Taylor (1989: 47) insists that "In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become and of where we are going." Anthony Giddens (1992: 54) maintains that a person’s identity "is not to be found in behavior. . . but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going." Erik Erikson (1959: 2), arguably the most influential late twentieth century writer on the subject, tells us that "The conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the immediate perception of one's selfsameness and continuity in time; and the simultaneous perception
of the fact that others recognize one's sameness and continuity." He associates a healthy personality with a strong ego and group identity and both with a continuous biography.

From everything we know about memory, the assumption of continuity is unsupportable. Psychological studies reveal that memory is based on a highly selective representation of internal and external stimuli. It is an abstract recording, ordering and reordering of only some of these experiences. It misrepresents experience in three fundamental ways. We process only part of the stimuli received by our sense organs, remember only a fraction of those experiences and a sharply declining percentage of those over time. Memory is highly selective. There are distinct biases in what we remember or choose to remember. Nor do we necessarily recall events accurately or in proper sequence. The more often a memory is recalled, the more likely it is to evolve. Psychologists find it useful to distinguish among episodic memory (recall of a past event), autobiographical memory (a recalled event that seems to play an important part in a person's life) and life narratives, which incorporate a series of autobiographical memories and are important means of defining the self (Neisser and Fivush, 1994). Extensive research on all three kinds of memory highlights their subjective nature and changing substance has led some to question the utility, and even the epistemological status, of “original events.” Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter (1992) suggest that reality is not something out there that can be used to validate memories, but a mental configuration created by memories.

The second assumption, about uniqueness, can also be traced back to the soul, and like continuity, finds no empirical support. Individuals are unique in the sense that everyone – identical twins aside -- has a different genetic makeup. Even twins have
different life experiences that make them different people. It is not self-evident how biological uniqueness confers identity, and it is not the usual grounds on which people claim it. For some years I have asked my students if they are unique and they all insist they are. When I ask them what makes them unique they routinely cite the same constellation of qualities: intelligence, creativity, caring, feelings for others, sense of humor and, of course, idiosyncratic life experiences. Their life experiences, they readily concede, are mediated by memory, and they are confident about the accuracy of their memories in spite of all the research to the contrary.

One of the most compelling critiques of uniqueness builds on the pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs (1925), a French sociologist and student of Durkheim (2001), who, like his mentor, maintained that individual memory was often socially constructed. Durkheim and Halbwachs argued that memory is “created” through communications with other members of society and thus heavily stylized and a reflection of its dominant discourses. It helps people find meaning in their lives and create bonds of solidarity with others. Collective memory and its ritualization form the core of communities Durkheim, 2001; Deutsch, 1953). Numerous subsequent studies reveal memory to be as much a social as individual practice.

At the neurological level our ability to store, recall and reconfigure verbal and nonverbal stimuli is mediated by patterns that we have learned from our social and cultural environments. (Schacter, 1996, 1999). In the process, more general memories are typically simplified and condensed in their representation. Their detail is reduced and aspects are emphasized that more readily allow their assimilation to widely used narrative schemes (Rubin, 1986; Conway, 1992; Allport and Postman, 1997). So-called “flashbulb
memories” are a case in point. They refer to vivid memories: where we were, what we were doing, what we thought at the time of dramatic events like Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy assassination or the fall of the Berlin Wall. Although reported in exquisite detail, such memories are notoriously unreliable (Neisser, 1982). This may be because “flashbulb memories” are not fully established at the time, but only later when the significance of the event for society has been established. For this reason, such memories, diverse at their onset, gradually converge as months and years pass (Bohannon and Symons, 1992).

Current events more broadly affect the way in which we remember earlier events. Commemorations of past events lead people to make upward revisions in memories about the event or the individuals involved (Schwarz, 1982). These revisions appear to help people assimilate such events cognitively, and once this happens they have no further need to ruminate about them. Conversely, when people talk less about an event, they remember it more, dream about it more and feel it more intensely. The problem of recall aside, narratives of the past are not static, but evolve and may change with each retelling. Psychologists have discovered multiple “remembered selves,” whose evocation depends on the nature of the trigger and the social milieu in which the person is situated at the time (White, 1989; Polkinghorne, 1991; Neisser and Fivush, 1994). To the extent that identity is socially conferred and memory socially constructed, it is something we share with other people. Identities are also shared to the extent they derive from affiliations and roles, as the demonstrably do in part. For these reasons, claims of uniqueness are more ideology than reality.
The third questionable claim about identity is our ability to remake ourselves. It was a goal of Rousseau and the Romantic movement. More recently, Abraham Maslow (1968) popularized the concept of "self-actualization," which holds that people have a responsibility to discover and develop their inner selves. This project finds expression in the literature on “authenticity” in philosophy and psychology that stresses the alleged self-shaping powers of the self and its potential to commit itself to value-based action. Contemporary advocates claim to Rousseau, Herder, Schiller, Kierkegaard or Sartre as their intellectual forebears. Some claim that authenticity is more important than ever given the "toxic levels of inauthenticity" that constantly barrage us in ads, emails and blogs (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 43).

Socialization is undeniably imperfect and leaves room for agency. Even strong social ontologists like Durkheim (1951, 2001) acknowledge its importance. He maintained that human passions routinely ride roughshod over socialization. This "flexibility" is responsible for positive changes in society as well as various pathologies, including suicide. Agency, as Durkheim understood, does necessarily imply freedom. Throughout history people have rebelled against the affiliations and roles their families and societies expect them to have or fill. It is revealing that many people who reject their socialization quickly affiliate with other communities and willingly assume the roles they assign. Individuals who join countercultures are likely to find themselves under just as much social pressure to conform to another, no less rigid, set of values, practices and dress codes. Chapter six examines this dynamic in the context of millenarian movements. It is unclear how far we can – or actually want – to purge ourselves of external shaping in the hope of discovering or becoming ourselves.
For ancient Greeks, who, it is claimed, conceived of identities entirely in terms of social roles, the quest of self-discovery would have appeared nonsensical. They pitied people like slaves and the stateless who, deprived of social roles and the status they conferred, were thought to have lost a key enabling component of their humanity. Thomas Hobbes, a close reader of the Greeks, also thought such a quest chimerical. His state of nature can be read as a thought experiment intended to demonstrate that human beings removed from society become nothing more than a collection of raw appetites and are accordingly a danger to themselves and everyone around them. Robert Musil (1995) makes the same claim in A Man Without Qualities.

There are also logical objections to the self-actualization project. If we can reshape our identity, we are no longer the same people we previously were and our continuity is ruptured. The very possibility of transformation requires some other, deeper layer, of mind that inspires and helps us accomplish this change and overcome the identifications that constitute our identity. If so, identity cannot represent our core essence. Multiple identities points to the same conclusion. Some of these identifications are mutually supporting, but others are not, and all of them rise and fall in salience depending on the context. Here too, the concept of a unitary identity requires something superordinate to all our internal heterogeneity. In its absence, the struggle between or among competing identifications can only divide one’s sense of being.

IDENTITY RECONSIDERED

Most understandings of identity envisage it as something constitutive of the person. Constitution can have causal consequences, but they are never direct in the way
mental states are imputed to be. The deeper the level of constitution – and identity is presumed to operate at the most fundamental level -- the more important the causal consequences, but the fewer empirical traces they leave. To get a handle on this relationship scholars must engage in process tracing and counterfactual analysis (Lebow, 2009). This is exceedingly difficult to do for a level of constitution that is seemingly responsible for most cognitive and affective orientations.

It is worth considering the heretical proposition, first voiced by Alice B. Toklas about Oakland, California, that “there is no there there.” Like the soul, identity can neither be observed nor its existence be established by other means. In and of itself, this is not an insuperable obstacle as social science routinely uses concepts whose presence can only be inferred. Anxiety, dissonance, self-esteem and cognitive consistency are unobservables central to the field of psychology. They differ from identity in two important respects. They are imagined mental states and defined in ways that make it possible for us to determine their “presence” by carefully specified behaviors to which they are said to give rise. Identity does not meet either requirement. It is not a mental state but a meta-mental organizing principle that allegedly provides guidance and coherence to a wide range of cognitions and affects. There is absolutely no consensus about what identity as definitions of it vary enormously. With no consensus about its meaning or specification of its behavioral consequences it is useless analytically.

The fascination with identity goes deeper than epiphenomenal trends in popular culture and academic disciplines. Self-identifications address fundamental human needs. Identity in the first instance, is a vehicle for achieving status and self-esteem. The ancient Greeks considered the motive of self-esteem different from but a co-equal drive
with appetite. It was achieved by excelling in activities valued by one’s peer group or society. By winning their approbation we in turn feel good about ourselves (Lebow, 2008). Self-esteem can also be achieved vicariously, through the achievements of one’s city state, or today, through those of one’s sports team or nation. Psychologists have discovered that membership in high-status groups enhances self-esteem and that people will go to great efforts to enhance the standing of their group or seek membership higher-status groups (Ellemers and Barreto, 2001). Fans whose sports teams regularly lose are more likely than others to switch allegiances (Castano, Yzerbyt and Paladino, 2001). Affiliations and the identifications associated with them are attractive because of the ends they serve.

If high status groups confer esteem, membership in low status groups, or exclusion from higher status ones, can engender humiliation. In Orhan Pamuk’s novel, Snow, Blue, a Muslim fundamentalist, tells Ka, a Westernized Turk that “Most of the time it’s not the Europeans who belittle us. What happens when we look at them is that we belittle ourselves” (2004: 75). Each of these characters has a different route to achieve self-esteem, and neither is happy with his choice. Such dilemmas are commonplace in the contemporary Middle East as they are elsewhere in the world. It is difficult, although by no means impossible to change national affiliations; people not infrequently do so for reasons of status, wealth or security.

Identifications serve as a vehicle for increasing wealth and mobility. Changing churches puts someone into a different social circle where it may be possible to make more useful professional and business contacts. Karl W. Deutsch describes nationalism as an “implied claim for privilege” in a world dominated by group competition for wealth
and standing. By joining a nationality and individual could help the group advance and
benefit economically and psychologically from its success (1953: 102). Much of the
enthusiasm in Eastern Europe for entering the European Union following the end of the
Cold War was fueled by aspirations of this kind (Bache and George, 2006: 549-50).

Degrees from high status institutions open all kinds of doors as do the contacts one makes
while a student. John F. Kennedy, a Harvard alumni, was awarded an honorary doctor of
laws degree by Yale in 1962. Yale was famous for colonizing New York banks, law
firms and other prestige professions with its graduates. Upon receiving his degree, the
courageous President announced to the assembled multitude of Elis that he now had the
best of two possible worlds: a Harvard education and a Yale degree (Kennedy, 1962).

Identity can provide security. Individuals have strong incentives to associate with
groups to protect themselves from human and other forms of predation. Security
concerns were probably a core motive for the formation of tribes and clans, which
became the basis of hunter-gatherer societies. In historical times, people have had
incentives to associate with or assimilate to politically dominant groups, especially when
they are otherwise vulnerable. The same is true for states. Security was a key concern
for many Eastern European countries in the aftermath of the Cold War, especially the
Baltic states, which had formerly been a part of the Soviet Union and now anxious to join
NATO. Gangs serve a similar function in communities where the police or incapable of
maintaining order. In some countries, Donald Horowitz (1995), observes, identity can be
a matter of life and death. Attempts at genocide and ethnic cleansing confirm this
unpleasant truth.
Affiliations and roles help us make sense of our lives and impart meaning to them. Psychologists have discovered that these and other experiences form the basis for life narratives. More recently, terror management theory bases itself on the Heideggerian assumption that identity is a means of coping with mortality. Pioneered by Greenberg, Pyszczynski and Solomon, it seeks to develop and test a general theory of human behavior based on the existential dilemma posed by mortality (Greenberg et al, 1995, 1997). It assumes that the inevitability of death would give rise to paralyzing terror in the absence of psychological mechanisms to cope with it. The most prominent of these mechanisms is a cultural system of meaning, or worldview, that imposes meaning, order, stability and continuity on life. It confers symbolic immortality on those who perform well the social roles derived from this worldview, or live up to it behavioral standards. The second mechanism is self-esteem, also derived from performing roles well and acting consistently with the expectations of a shared worldview. It has been described as a stimulus for our species to develop and sustain complex social orders and to improve the quality of life through a range of social and scientific innovations (Greenberg et al, 1994).

Terror Management Theory has stimulated considerable research, much of it lending support to the claim that culture is an important buffer for anxiety associated with death (Greenberg et al, 1994, 1997).

Finally, identity enables relationships and intimacy. This is true in all groups that bring people into closer personal contact, but may be easier and more important for people in low status and marginal groups. Examples include the Amish, orthodox Jews and recent immigrants who congregate in the same neighborhood. Lebow (2011) maintains that identity involves integration as well as separation, making close
relationships and intimacy means of building and maintaining identities rather than constituting threats to them.

Self-identifications entail emotional commitments, and these commitments are often intensified by the practices and social relationships they involve. When this happens, people can find it difficult, perhaps inconceivable, to imagine themselves as someone else and can come to believe that renouncing their identity represents nothing less than renouncing themselves. Such people are likely to defend their identities even when it threatens, or actually involves, external punishment rather than rewards. For two millennia, Jews resisted efforts to convert them although it could mean expulsion or death. Other religious and ethnic groups have done the same.

Analytical use of identity tends to reify the concept and direct attention to its seemingly stable attributes. Alberto Melucci (1995) observes that identity "is semantically inseparable from the idea of permanence." In practice, even forms of identification that have social, political or legal substance are ambiguous and pliable and have varying degrees of salience for actors. What people and many scholars call identities are always in the process of evolving, often gradually but sometimes quite dramatically. Like institutions, even seemingly stable identifications must undergo constant evolution to retain the appearance of stability. This is equally true of social collectivities, whose politics generally entails internal struggles over what they are, what they stand for and who may belong.

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