

March 2007

BOOK REVIEW: Social identity and its discontents

David Moshman

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, dmoshman1@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/edpsychpapers>



Part of the [Educational Psychology Commons](#)

Moshman, David, "BOOK REVIEW: Social identity and its discontents" (2007). *Educational Psychology Papers and Publications*. 42.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/edpsychpapers/42>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Educational Psychology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Psychology Papers and Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Published online January 25, 2007.

BOOK REVIEW

Social identity and its discontents

Amartya Sen, *Identity and violence: The illusion of destiny*, Norton, New York (2006) ISBN 0-393-06007-1 (cloth), xx+215 pp., \$24.95.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The ethics of identity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ (2005) ISBN 0-691-12036-6 (cloth), xvii+358 pp., \$32.95.

Tom Postmes and Jolanda Jetten, Editors, *Individuality and the group: Advances in social identity*, Sage, London (2006) ISBN 1-4129-0321-3 (paper), 286 pp., \$44.95.

In 1944, a Muslim day laborer named Kader Mia was knifed while looking for work in Dhaka, Bengal, in what later became the geographically separated eastern part of Pakistan, and still later Bangladesh. His assailants were unknown to him except that they were Hindus for whom his Muslim identity was sufficient reason to kill him. Bleeding profusely, he stumbled through a gate into a garden where he asked an eleven-year-old boy for help and water. The boy called his parents and got some water, but Kader Mia later died in the hospital.

The boy who couldn't save him was Amartya Sen, who grew up to win the Nobel Prize in economics. In *Identity and violence* Sen draws on his broad knowledge of the social sciences and humanities to address, in lucid and readable prose, the nature of identity and its relation to violence. Violence, in his view, is the result of dichotomization, in which people divide into two fundamental groups, failing to recognize the multidimensionality of identity. To recognize that individual identities are multidimensional—we all belong to multiple groups—is to recognize, in turn, the necessity of reason and choice in matters of identity.

Similarly, in *The ethics of identity*, the renowned philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, also an elegant writer, observes that we are not simply members of groups or products of culture. Individuality and autonomy, he argues, are fundamental to personhood in all social and cultural contexts. Group affiliations are not only consistent with the liberal individualism of John Stuart Mill but in fact complement it.

By *identity* both Sen and Appiah mean something like what social psychologists call *social identity*. Your identity is constituted by the groups with which you identify. But we identify with multiple groups and thus cannot be reduced to membership in a single category. This mandates reason and choice, and thus a rational agent to engage in reasoning and make choices. The autonomous individual simply cannot be eliminated, either from our cultures or from our theories.

Among social psychologists, meanwhile, there are concerns about social identity that correspond precisely with those of Sen and Appiah. In *Individuality and the group*, editors Tom Postmes and Jolanda Jetten have assembled a cast of two dozen authors, in addition to themselves, to address what they call in their introductory chapter “the puzzle of individuality and the group.” Social identity theory has helped us appreciate the extent to which we see ourselves as members of groups, but its proponents have increasingly recognized that it is in some important sense individuals who see themselves in that way.

Sen, Appiah, and the social psychologists all seem to suggest a conception of identity that encompasses individuality and autonomy but they seem unaware of the extensive body of neo-Eriksonian research and theory in developmental psychology that provides such a conception. Among developmentalists there have been important challenges to Eriksonian theory in recent years. Taking a broader perspective, however, I will conclude that developmental theo-

ries of identity have just what is lacking in the standard conceptions of social identity that have dominated the social sciences and humanities, including social psychology. If the present books are typical, there appears to be increasing recognition of the problem, if not the solution.

1. The multidimensionality of identity

It is common, Amartya Sen points out, to respond to a tragic story like that of Kader Mia with a wish that Hindus and Muslims could learn to respect each other, or at least tolerate each other, rather than killing each other. Such a response, however, implicitly accepts the fundamental assumption underlying the violence: that there are two types of people, Hindus and Muslims (along with other religions not relevant here). This fails to acknowledge that people are multidimensional and that any two people, therefore, are likely to be similar in some important ways and different in some important ways. Kader Mia and his killers differed in religion but were all Bengali. Had this identity been salient, there would have been no reason for murder.

In fact, within just a few years, the religious dichotomization did give way to a new nationalism. Now the people of Dhaka were celebrating Bengali culture, including its language, literature, and music, united across religious lines in a Bengali patriotism aimed at resisting the political, linguistic, and economic hegemony of western Pakistan. Sen's point is not that a Bengali identity is better than a Hindu or Muslim identity. The events leading to the division of Pakistan and the founding of Bangladesh were violent in their own right. His point is that we all have multiple identities, or at least multidimensional identities, such that we cannot be characterized accurately on the basis of one dimension. It is the pervasive misunderstanding of this empirical fact, he believes, that underlies most of the large-scale political violence in the world.

2. The rational construction of identity

Unwarranted dichotomization of identity on the basis of a single dimension—you are and must be Hindu or Muslim—creates what Sen calls the illusion of destiny. We think we are born into a particular group and are thus destined to have a singular identity defined by that group, but in fact we are born into and affiliate with multiple groups. Similarly, in *The ethics of identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah rejects the romantic notion of identity formation as a search for a pre-existing authentic self waiting to be found or discovered.

But Appiah equally rejects the existential conception of identity formation as the unconstrained invention of self. And Sen, similarly, sees identity as the product of reason and choice within constraints beyond our choosing. We are not free to be whomever we wish. There are always options, but there are always limits.

These views are fully consistent with the rational constructivism underlying the neo-Eriksonian paradigm in developmental psychology (Moshman, 2005). Identity, in this view, is constructed, not simply discovered, but the construction is not a free creation. Rather the construction of identity is a creative act constrained, but not determined, by inner and outer realities, including our social affiliations and the perceptions of those around us. We cannot ignore our ongoing connections with others or the categories into which others classify us, but neither are our identities entirely determined by such facts. Rather our identities are rationally constructed. Such construction occurs within social contexts and its outcomes reflect such contexts. But without the constructive actions of a rational agent, no identities would be constructed. Thus identity entails individuality and autonomy. Social and personal identity cannot be sharply distinguished. Our identities are simultaneously social and personal.

3. Identity, culture, and diversity

Part of the problem in conceptualizing identity, argue both Sen and Appiah, is that we are immersed in loose talk about culture and diversity. Contrary to common assumptions, argues Sen, cultures intersect and interact in complex ways that undermine any effort to attribute particular identities to particular cultures. Moreover, as he illustrates in detail, this is nothing new: Communication and interchange across cultures have been the norm all over the world for millennia.

Similarly, Appiah questions common perceptions of the United States as a multicultural society. Clearly the United States does not consist of some finite number of discrete cultures. Even if we take a more subtle view of culture, the

U.S. is much less multicultural than it used to be and much less multicultural than many or most other countries. This is true for virtually any measure of cultural diversity. With respect to language, for example, the vast majority of Americans, including the children of Asian and Hispanic immigrants, speak fluent English. The proportion of non-English-speaking U.S. residents was four times greater in 1890 than it is today. Even more striking, in Appiah's native Ghana, with a population about that of New York State, there are several dozen current languages, none of which is used by a majority. The American preoccupation with diversity, he suggests, reflects a need, in a relatively homogeneous culture, to find more specific bases for identity.

It thus makes little sense to speak of identity as if each person grows up in a particular culture and comes to have an identity determined largely by that culture. To make matters worse, not only do we succumb to the illusion that the human world can be divided into some finite number of cultures, it is fashionable to reduce the number of such cultures to two: "Western" culture, rooted in the cultures of Europe, and "non-Western" or "Eastern" culture, encompassing everything else. Western culture is typically associated with individuality and autonomy; Eastern culture is associated with social identities in which group affiliation is intrinsic to the self.

Both Sen and Appiah decry simplistic reductions of this sort. Individuality, autonomy, and social interconnection are all aspects of the universal human condition, regardless of culture. Identity formation, moreover, is not a process driven by culture toward a predictable destination. To attribute identity to culture is to succumb to the illusion of destiny. We grow into a multiplicity of affiliations from the time we are born and we later make rational choices among multiple options in constructing our identities.

4. Reconsidering social identity

Meanwhile in the field of social psychology, proponents of social identity theory have reached similar conclusions. Individuality and collectivity, note the editors in their introduction to *Individuality and the group*, have traditionally been seen as inconsistent, or at least in tension, with each other. The concept of social identity potentially undermines the individual vs. group dichotomy in that social identities simultaneously define individuals and connect them with groups. Social identity theory, however, has tended to highlight group phenomena at the expense of individuality. This is understandable in that social identity theory was originally developed in reaction to a perceived overemphasis on individuals and with the primary intent of illuminating intergroup relations. Unfortunately, social identity theory—and especially its close cousin, self-categorization theory—have tended toward deterministic views of group influence that underplay individual autonomy. The editors believe, however, that conceptions of social identity have increasingly recognized individuality and autonomy, and have organized the present volume to illustrate recent advances along these lines in social identity research and theory.

The individual chapters are diverse both in topic and perspective. In a concluding synthesis, the editors helpfully identify five key themes. First, personal identity, an individual's unique sense of self, is both constrained and informed by social identity in multiple ways. Second, researchers must address the subjective experience of individuality and autonomy, as well as the need for feelings of connection. Third, groups may value, rather than punish, individual autonomy when it is perceived as for the good of the group. Fourth, the relation between personal and social identity is one of reciprocal interaction in which neither can be considered primary. Finally, groups are dynamic, and it is precisely in the evolution of social identities that we see the role of individuality and autonomy in group processes.

Despite the recognition and status of personal identity among social identity theorists, however, it continues to be seen as distinct from, albeit interacting with, social identity. But identity is about oneness. Without seeking to deny the importance of either the individual or the social, what are we to make of this personal/social duality?

5. What the world needs now is Erik Erikson

Within developmental psychology, there is a rich tradition of theory and research on identity that derives its impetus from the developmental theorizing of Erik Erikson and the theoretical and methodological refinements of James Marcia (Kroger, 2007 and Moshman, 2005). This work focuses on what has traditionally been called *ego identity*, reflecting the psychoanalytic roots of Erikson's theorizing, and is now often called *personal identity*. The developmental approach has always incorporated the conception that our identities are deeply rooted in our social roles and con-

nections with others. Our conceptions of ourselves as persons cannot help but be, in part, conceptions of our relations with other persons and of our affiliations with various social groups. Thus social identity is intrinsic to identity rather than distinct from a more “personal” form of identity.

Unfortunately, the identity literatures of social and developmental psychology are remarkably insulated from each other. Only one chapter of the Postmes/Jetten volume cites Erikson or Marcia and that one cites both together in a single passing reference. Not a single chapter cites Archer, Berzonsky, Chandler, Côté, Grotevant, Kroger, Phinney, or Waterman, all mainstays of the Eriksonian identity literature. Another recent edited volume on social identity (Ashmore, Jussim, & Wilder, 2001), chosen only because it was readily available, gives equally short shrift to the developmental literature. Correspondingly, two recent reviews of the neo-Eriksonian identity literature (Kroger, 2007 and Moshman, 2005) each cite all of the Eriksonian developmentalists named above but neither cites the social identity literature.

The two psychological literatures of identity—social and developmental—are not slighted only by each other, moreover. Neither of these psychological literatures gets more than passing mention in *Identity and violence* or *The ethics of identity*, or in other recent works on identity (Gutmann, 2003 and Maalouf, 2001). Clearly the identity literatures of the behavioral and social sciences and humanities could profit from awareness of each other and greater interaction of ideas. And in this broader realm, without denying that developmental psychology has much to learn, it already has much to offer. Theorists in diverse disciplines and fields of study are looking for what developmentalists take for granted: an Eriksonian conception of identity that encompasses social identity without losing itself in social or cultural determinism.

The developmental tradition, in turn, can learn from the social identity tradition in social psychology and fields beyond psychology that identity is not just a glorious developmental achievement but also a serious danger—a source of division, suspicion, antagonism, and violence (in addition to Sen’s *Identity and violence*, see Ashmore et al., 2001, Dovidio et al., 2005, Maalouf, 2001 and Moshman, in press). An integrated understanding of identity may enable the construction of more cosmopolitan identities as recommended in the final chapter of Appiah’s *Ethics of identity* (for elaboration, see Appiah, 2006). But at the very least it may help us recognize that we have choices, and that dichotomization is not destiny.

Would any of this have helped Kader Mia? When all those around you categorize you in a particular way, your options are limited. When our options are less constricted, however, and especially when we enjoy the luxury of reflective theorizing, we should resist the forces and fallacies of dichotomization by insisting on the multidimensional complexity of identity and the role of individuality and autonomy. On that point, all the social theorists represented in these books seem to agree not only with each other but also, without realizing it, with developmental research and theory.

References

- Appiah, K. A., *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a world of strangers*, Norton, New York (2006).
- Ashmore, R.D., Jussim, L., and Wilder, D., *Social identity, intergroup conflict, and conflict reduction*, Oxford University Press, New York (2001).
- Dovidio, J. F., Glick, P., and Rudman, L. A., *On the nature of prejudice: Fifty years after Allport*, Blackwell, Malden, MA (2005).
- Gutmann, A., *Identity in democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ (2003).
- Kroger, J., *Identity development: Adolescence through adulthood* (2nd ed.), Sage, London (2007).
- Maalouf, A., *In the name of identity: Violence and the need to belong*, Arcade, New York (2001).
- Moshman, D., *Adolescent psychological development: Rationality, morality, and identity* (2nd ed.), Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ (2005).
- Moshman, D. (in press). Us and them: Identity and genocide. *Identity*.

David Moshman
 Educational Psychology, University of Nebraska–Lincoln
 Lincoln, NE 68588-0345, USA
 email: dmoshman1@unl.edu