

Personal identity in multicultural constitutional democracies.

Record: 1

Title:

Personal identity in multicultural constitutional democracies.

Authors:

Lotter, H.P.P

Source:

South African Journal of Philosophy; Aug98, Vol. 17 Issue 3, p179, 19p

Document Type:

Article

Subject Terms:

*IDENTITY (Philosophical concept)

*DEMOCRACY

*MULTICULTURALISM

Abstract:

Examines an approach for accommodating varying kinds of identity within a multicultural constitutional democracy, showing how people define, construct and change their personal identities in order to become unique individuals. Examination of a definition of personal identity; Assessment of the components of personal identity; Effect which personal identity has on one's life and how it changes.

Full Text Word Count:

9989

ISSN:

02580136

Accession Number:

1219294

Persistent link to this record (Permalink):

<http://0-search.ebscohost.com.ujlink.uj.ac.za/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=1219294&loginpage=Login.asp&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Cut and Paste:

Personal identity in multicultural constitutional democracies.

Database:

Academic Search Premier

1 PERSONAL IDENTITY IN MULTICULTURAL CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACIES

Awareness of, and respect for differences of gender, race, religion, language, and culture have liberated many oppressed groups from the hegemony of white, Western males. However, respect for previously denigrated collective identities should not be allowed to confine individuals to identities constructed around one main component used for political mobilisation, or to identities that depend on a priority of properties that are not optional, like race, gender, and language. In this article I want to sketch an approach for accommodating different kinds of identity within a multicultural

constitutional democracy. From a vantage point provided by a definition and explanation of personal identity, I want to show how people define, construct and change their personal identities to make themselves into unique individuals. Next I show how democratic political institutions and the personal identities of individuals reciprocally influence one another. In the final section I sketch ways in which diverse personal identities ought to be accommodated in multicultural constitutional democracies. The conclusion is that a society which gives its members the liberty, space, and opportunity to freely construct their own identities might avoid the formation of closed groups committed exclusively to their own sectional interests.

Introduction

In his response to Charles Taylor's essay on 'The Politics of Recognition', Anthony Appiah warns that there is no bright line between the politics of recognition and the politics of compulsion (cf. Taylor & Gutmann 1994: 25-74, 149-163). Taking personal autonomy seriously leads Appiah to ask whether embracing the politics of recognition does not imply replacing 'one kind of tyranny with another'. According to his interpretation, the politics of recognition might require 'that one's skin color, one's sexual body, should be acknowledged politically in ways that make it hard for those who want to treat their skin and their sexual body as personal dimensions of the self.' Appiah denies that any person can demand that he (Appiah) should organise his life around his race or sexuality, as such a demand constitutes the crossing of a boundary which, one infers, would violate his personal autonomy to create his own authentic life.

Iris Marion Young (1990:236) adds to Appiah's warning about the dangers of group politics. She points out that social movements asserting positive group difference have found 'through painful confrontation that an urge to unity and mutual identification does indeed have exclusionary implications.' As a result of people's 'multiple group identifications', every social group will contain several subgroups within it. The feminist movement has asserted a positive group difference throughout its history. Nevertheless, at times the perspective of one subgroup were assumed to be the only one. This assumption led to the exclusion of other subgroups with different perspectives and experiences.

Appiah and Young's warnings must be taken seriously. Awareness of, and respect for differences of gender, race, religion, language, and culture have liberated many oppressed groups from the hegemony of white, Western males. However, respect for previously denigrated collective identities should not be allowed to confine individuals to identities constructed around one main component used for political mobilisation, or to identities that depend on a priority of properties that are not optional, like race, gender, and language.

In this essay I want to sketch an alternative approach for accommodating different kinds of identity within a multicultural constitutional democracy. From a vantage point provided by a definition and explanation of personal identity, I want to move the focus back to the importance of acknowledging individual persons and their diversity of personal identities and authentic lifestyles. I want to articulate a deepened understanding of personal identity in the context of democratic political institutions. I will develop and expand Taylor's view on personal identity by making use of social science research generated by Erik Erikson's seminal psychological work (1963,1968) on personal identity. I will make the claim that personal identity is the fingerprint of the conscious mind which expresses the unique individuality of a human being. To explain personal identity as unique fingerprint I look from two perspectives, viz. personal identity viewed as a product and as the processes that continually shape and modify personal identity (cf. Spencer & Markstrom-Adams 1990:300). Next I show how democratic political institutions and the personal identities of individuals reciprocally influence one another. I argue that Plato was fundamentally correct when he postulated a mirror image between person and society, although the mirror might be much more

fragmented than the shorthand formulation of his view that society is 'man (person) writ large' allows. In the final section I sketch ways in which diverse personal identities ought to be accommodated in multicultural constitutional democracies.

A definition of personal identity

Most of the contemporary philosophical debates about personal identity are focused on the issue what it is that makes a person one and the same person at two different times (cf. Shoemaker & Swinburne 1984, Parfit 1984 and Nozick 1981). The issue of the identity of a person through time is surely relevant to politics, as people must often be re-identified for the purpose of voting, taxes, or criminal justice. This means that state officials must be able to say that in spite of a lapse of time and the changes that this brings, a specific person is the same one they have identified before (cf. Penelhum 1967:95). However, this is not the really troubling - and interesting - issue that I want to explore. The much less discussed issue of personal identity, viz. what differentiates or individuates one person from another, seems far more significant for understanding major issues in politics resulting from recent developments.

Charles Taylor is one of the philosophers who have shown an interest in these issues of personal identity. In his book, *Sources of the self*, he says that 'my identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which i can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose' (1989:27). People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual commitment (Catholic, anarchist) or they may define it partly by reference to the nation or tradition to which they belong (American, German, Afrikaner). What they are saying by defining their identities in this way is that they are very strongly attached to a spiritual view or cultural background, and especially that this provides 'the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value' (Taylor 1989:27).

He refines this definition in a later article called 'The politics of recognition', where he uses it to develop his views on multiculturalism. He defines personal identity as the understanding that persons have of who they are, 'of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being' (Taylor 1992:1). Since the eighteenth century we speak of an individualised identity that is particular to a person and which that person must discover within him- or herself (Taylor 1992:2). This notion is accompanied by the ideal of authenticity, i.e. that of 'being true to myself and my own particular way of doing' (Taylor 1992: 2, 4). Such an authentic lifestyle cannot be 'socially derived', but must be 'inwardly generated' (Taylor 1992:4). Taylor emphasises that persons furthermore define an identity through the acquisition of 'rich human languages of expression', which implies the dialogical character of our attempts to define our own identity. For Taylor personal identity is always defined 'in dialogue with, sometimes struggle against, the identities which significant others want to recognize in us' (1992:5).

Taylor uses this definition of personal identity to justify his version of liberalism that would allow a government to pursue the collective goals of a dominant cultural group. Pursuing such goals might require restrictions on individuals, though not violating any of their fundamental human rights 'that should never be infringed' (Taylor & Gutmann 1994:59). Despite the emphasis on the collective goals of the majority, diversity should still be respected, 'especially when dealing with those who do not share its common goals' (Taylor & Gutmann 1994:59). Taylor's use of authentic personal identity is developed to justify the demands of Quebec for greater autonomy or secession from Canada, thus, they are tailored to support Quebec's claims for acting and being treated as 'a distinct society'. His complaint that a liberalism of equal rights can't give 'only a very restricted acknowledgment of distinct cultural identities' (Taylor & Gutmann 1994:52) shows a deficient

understanding of the possibilities inherent in modern constitutional democracies and betrays his exclusive focus on applying his view of personal identity to linguistic, cultural, or religious groups.

Habermas has rejected Taylor's restricted view of modern constitutional democracies by demonstrating that a perspective from modern law enables a liberalism of equal rights to fully accommodate diverse groups (Habermas in Taylor & Gutmann 1994). I want to follow a different route by exploring a deepened understanding of personal identity within the context of the rich possibilities of accommodating difference offered by modern constitutional democracies.

Although Taylor's definition of personal identity provides a good starting point for understanding personal identity as that which differentiates or individuates a person, it is still too vague. Taylor has not as yet advanced much further than providing what seems to be an insufficient definition of personal identity. The definition in his book *Sources of the self* focuses too strongly on moral, spiritual and ethnic values linked to social groups and thus ignores other possible components of personal identity. The definition in his article 'The Politics of Recognition' seems more promising when Taylor refers to personal identity as an understanding that persons have of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics. However, he does not explain exactly what he means thereby, nor does he indicate the components one could expect to find in such a personal identity, how they are related and what causes them to change.

Taylor's shortcomings of definition leads to a deficient understanding of the nature and working of personal identity as that which individuates persons from one another. It leads him to a view of group politics in the context of a modern constitutional democracy which is insufficiently aware of the risks of coercion contained therein. A revised version of Taylor's definition of personal identity is thus called for.

To talk about a human being's personal identity in the sense of that which individuates or differentiates a person is to refer to persons' understanding of what they are in terms of what they regard as their fundamental defining characteristics (cf. Taylor 1992:1). Thus, your personal identity defines what it means to be who you are, and forms a standard or reference for who you are (Burke 1991:837). In your personal identity the resources for the self-formation of your life are interpreted and configured in a unique and unrepeatable way (Hinchman 1990:777). To put it differently: personal identity is the complex answer a person gives to the question: 'What do I want to make of myself, and what do I have to work with?' (cf. Erikson 1968:314). This implies that personal identity is a configuration of diverse components ranging from interpretations of a person's body, abilities, skills, ethnic origin, moral values and so on. This has to be explained in more detail, by first discussing this configuration of diverse components as a product, and then by highlighting the processes that shape this product.

Personal identity as a product

2 Components of personal identity

What make people unique individuals are the diverse components which they can use in an endless variety of ways to construct their own identities. Some examples of such components which make up personal identity as a product are the following. One component of a personal identity concerns a person's perceptions and feelings about his or her body. Part of your identity might be that you are a tall or a short person, or someone with a fat or a trim body. You might perceive yourself to be pretty or attractive and find that confirmed by other people. In similar fashion several other features of a person's body might become part of his or her identity, because a person regards it as definitive of who he or she is. However, which features of a person's body would form significant parts of his or her identity would differ from person to person. In the case of a person of average length that

person's length, for example, will not necessarily feature in his or her identity if it does not significantly contribute in determining who the person is. Whether it would feature will also depend on the other components in a person's identity and the importance assigned to them.

One could easily argue that part of a person's bodily identity is her or her sexual identity. This might however be confusing, as this kind of identity is not only formed by perceptions of one's own body. In this context it is useful to distinguish sex and gender. Sex has a biological connotation and to determine a person's sex one must take into account several physical characteristics and conditions (cf. Ayim & Houston 1985:27). In the concept gender psychological and cultural connotations outweigh the biological connotations of the concept sex (Ayim & Houston 1985:27). For this reason the gender aspect of personal identity can be defined as the way in which a person appropriates, transcends, conforms or ignores the standards of masculinity and femininity prevalent within a society (Ayim & Houston 1985:27). It is a psychological fact that most people have elements of both masculinity and femininity in them and it is also the case that the ratio of masculinity to femininity can 'vary in the same individual at different times' (Ayim & Houston 1985:27).

Under normal circumstances the talents and abilities possessed, exercised and sometimes developed into specialised skills might form part of a person's identity. Some people have the perception of themselves - often confirmed by others - that they are intelligent, good with handiwork or machines. Others define their identity in terms of the sport they are good at, such 'I am an athlete', or 'I am a tennis player'.

Besides a person's body, talents, abilities and skills, the values that a person are committed to also play a very important role in the constitution of his or her identity. These values can be about moral, political, religious or cultural issues. A person might, for example, have utilitarian moral values, belong to a Protestant church, identify with a social democratic political party and regard him or herself as being a true American. This implies a complex arrangement of the various values contained in these commitments into a configuration that are more or less coherent and unified. Although these values might be arranged according to a specific priority that operates in all situations, it could also be that different values become dominant in specific kinds of situations.

A component of personal identity that resembles the values referred to above is a person's origin. In this context a person's origin can refer literally to his or her country, province, city or town of origin. A person might strongly identify with the values of a particular community, the scenic beauty, plant and animal life of a district, the spirit of a city and the ideals that it symbolises, and the geographic area and common experiences that people within a state's borders share with one another. Identifying with a place of origin can also mean that a person identifies with the complex series of experiences that shaped that person's identity that took place at or in a geographical location such as a town, city, province or state.

Origin in a metaphorical sense is often one of the decisive elements of personal identity. Here there are several possibilities. One of these is a person's family origin. Some people strongly identify with their own family or family name. Closely related is a person's language. Besides needing language for expressing and articulating the various aspects of one's personal identity, a person's identity can be strongly influenced through the language(s) which he or she speaks. Language is not only an instrument - which makes available the stories, literature, history, folklore and media written and told by all those speaking that language - but also a medium of expressing one's deepest feelings, thoughts, wishes and longings, towards which a person develops a deep attachment.

Often associated with language is a person's ethnic origin. Ethnicity -regardless whether it is judged to be good or bad - is a permanent feature of human life (cf. Walzer 1992:171). It includes the history, cultural traditions, prescribed norms and values, and heritage of a group of people -not

necessarily based on race - that persist over generations (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams 1990:292). Membership in an ethnic group mostly accords a person 'a sense of belonging and group pride' (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams 1990: 292) - as does membership in several other groups in modern societies, such as sport teams, schools, universities, labour unions and so on. Some of the most intractable political conflicts of our time occur when this component - ethnicity -of a group of people's identity becomes dominant. The reason for its strong hold is that it unifies several components of personal identity -mostly those with strong emotional commitments involved - into a more or less coherent whole.

A constantly changing component of a person's identity is his or her age group, or developmental stage and its accompanying activities. The status of student could have a significant effect on personal identity, as it implies being a young adult not yet saddled with the responsibilities and duties of mature adults. Mature adults engaged in full time careers find that involvement in a career can significantly focus their personal identity as they develop the characteristics and qualities suited to their chosen career. The personal identity of mature adults is also drastically affected by their marital status - being married, divorced or single - and by their becoming parents or not.

3 The constitution and coherence of personal identity

From a discussion of possible components of personal identity several issues emerge. These issues concern the constitution of personal identity, the effect it has on a person's life and the ways in which it changes. If a person's identity is a configuration of several components mentioned above, one immediately wonders whether such a configuration forms a coherent whole. Obviously there could be a myriad of configurations, especially if the relative importance and priority assigned to the constituent parts are taken into account. In general it is true that persons experience themselves as integrated human beings, despite the fact that their personal identities are formed by 'extremely varied social categories' (Taylor & Dub6 1986:82). Somehow human beings just have a compelling sense that they possess a centre from which crucial choices are made (Hinchman 1990:774). Linked to this sense is a capacity of persons to grasp that they are not fully identical with all their roles, beliefs or values (Hinchman 1990:773-774). A plausible psychological explanation hereof might run as follows:

The ego and its functions, although operating primarily unconsciously, possess the capacity for synthesis and resynthesis, differentiation and integration, and the psychological sequences of interjection and identification that undergird identity formation (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams 1990:291).

However, in some situations some people do not experience themselves as being integrated and unified. The reason is that unity of a personal identity is not a natural given, but must be attained psychologically and be maintained in a 'continuous and often conflictive process of socialization' (Graumann 1983:315). In a study on children of minority groups in America, Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990:302) found that many American Indian youngsters 'swing back and forth between an Anglo identity and a tribal identity without ever forming a coherent blend of the two'. Their experience is by no means uncommon, as several strategies are known to social scientists whereby people attempt to solve conflicts in their personal identity. An identity conflict occurs when some of the various definitions contained in a person's identity become incompatible. As consequence the person experiences severe difficulties in 'reconciling the demands that follow from diverse commitments' (Baumeister, Shapiro & Tice 1985:408).

Identity conflict can be resolved in one of three ways. A person could decide to make a compromise between conflicting components of his or her identity. For example, married female medical doctors could experience a conflict between their physician identity and their gender identity, which

specifies the role of motherhood. What they mostly do is to postpone motherhood until after their residency and while being mothers 'their physician identities would in turn be relegated to a secondary position for a few years' (Baumeister et al., 1985:419).

Another way of resolving identity conflict is compartmentalisation. When a person does this, the different components of his or her identity are maintained in 'enforcedly separate spheres' of his or her life (Baumeister et al., 1985:419). The spheres must be kept rigidly separate so that conflicting prescriptions for behaviour are avoided. Israeli Arabs utilised this strategy by acting as Arabs in private and as Israelis in public life (cf. Baumeister et al., 1985:419).

Although it is by no means necessary to have one component of a personal identity be assigned priority and thus dominate the others, it is a common strategy for solving identity conflict. In general it seems as though a specific kind of component gets this dominant role, viz. those identifications which make a person belong to a group, or those which give a person responsibility (Graumann 1983:312). Examples of people who assign a particular component dominance in their personal identity abound, though an apt choice would be to demonstrate the dominance of religion and ethnicity. Jewish identity presents a sample case of a multiple identity in which religion dominates. For a large part of Jewish history, they lived in Diaspora 'confronted with, and assimilating to diverse cultural or national identities while to a large extent keeping their own religious identity' (Graumann 1983:317). The strength of ethnic identity amongst black adolescents in America is illustrated in a study by Aries and Moorhead (1989). They report that ethnicity was most frequently singled out by black adolescents as being 'most important to self-definition' (Aries & Moorhead 1989:80). Both examples share the feature of making individuals belong to a clearly identifiable group.

Although a person's identity can form a reasonably coherent whole, only some elements thereof become salient in different situations. Differently put, some elements only get activated in very specific circumstances. A person thus becomes identity-conscious only in specific settings that demand 'identity-conduct' or are 'identity-revealing'. Institutions such as churches and schools mostly demand conduct specified by a common identity based on shared beliefs or common values (cf. Graumann 1983:316). Migrant workers might be expected to give up their own ethnic identity and to assimilate the identity of their host country. They often resist such an identity change by desperately holding on to their own ethnic identity (Graumann 1983:316). A further example is how one's gender identity might be activated when, in response to an attack on all males, a male person feels a responsibility to defend 'all others who are members of the social category' (Taylor & Dub6 1986: 91).

In the above section I have given an extended definition of personal identity and discussed the components and constitution of a personal identity. What must be clear from this definition is that a personal identity provides a frame and horizon for all kinds of decisions that a person needs to make. The quality of a person's identity has an important effect on his or her psychological well-being. The achievement of a positive identity influences the way a person is oriented towards the future (Rappaport, Enrich & Wilson 1985:1618), give persons a sense of authenticity and a feeling of confidence about what they care about and how others perceive them (Newman, P. & Newman, B. 1988:552).

Personal identity as a process

Throughout the previous section it is suggested that personal identity is something that changes and develops all the time. Although adults might have much more stable personal identities than children or adolescents, even their identities are subject to constant modification and change (cf. Aries & Moorhead 1989:75). To understand something of the processes that shape the personal

identities of persons, I will briefly discuss the development of identity from childhood to adolescence and then refer to the ways and means that bring about changes or modifications in the personal identities of adults.

4 Personal identity in children

To fully understand the concept of personal identity it is necessary to recognise its place in the human life cycle (cf. Erikson 1963:238). Already early in life children in favourable circumstances have the nucleus of a separate identity (Erikson 1963:233). The formation of personal identity starts already when a baby establishes a relationship with its parents and gradually its personal identity differentiates (Erikson 1968:23). Erikson stresses that personal identity is formed within relationships with other people who have special significance for a person (Erikson 1968:23). Throughout childhood an identity 'emerges as an evolving configuration' which is established by means of selective repudiation and assimilation of childhood identifications in successive syntheses (Erikson 1968:159, 161).

It is during adolescence however, that a positive identity becomes established (Erikson 1968:298). Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990:290) describes the achievement of a personal identity as a 'major developmental task for all adolescents'. However, they do not all handle this task in the same way. Their various reactions can be described in the following ways (cf. Rappaport et al., 1985:1610, Pragar 1982:177, 178 and Read, Adams & Dobson 1984:169). Foreclosure status refers to adolescents who have made strong commitments (usually those of their parents) without having been through a crisis period or an exploration. Identity achievement describes adolescents who have experienced a crisis period or exploration and emerged from it with a set of their own commitments. Adolescents in the moratorium status are in the midst of an identity crisis or a period of exploration and thus experiences doubt and indecision about what to commit themselves to. Identity diffusion depicts adolescents who are neither experiencing an identity crisis, not involved in exploration, nor have any established commitments.

5 Adults and personal identity

The formation of a personal identity might be the special developmental task of adolescents, but is by no means restricted to this stage in the human life cycle. In the same way that early childhood already contributes to identity formation, so various experiences in adulthood can lead to changes and modifications to the personal identity developed in adolescence. One such experience concerns significant events that occur during adulthood. Achieving an important goal might lead to a redefinition of a person's identity, for example, when a poor boy eventually becomes a rich man. Reaching a new stage in the development of the human life cycle such as getting married, becoming a parent or reaching middle age are also events which demand significant modification to one's personal identity. Similarly, experiencing life's inevitable trauma's such as the death of a spouse, becoming disabled or terminally ill also necessitates changes to one's identity.

The personal identity of an adult can also be significantly influenced by other people who give feedback to a person which is incongruent with his or her identity (Burke 1991:839). Such negative (sometimes also positive) feedback causes distress and leads to either a change in behaviour that would produce positive (negative) feedback or, if that is impossible, a modification or change of a person's identity (Burke 1991:846) to change the standards that the person measures him- or herself by. This process again suggests the tremendous important role that other people play in the shaping of our personal identities. Obviously people do not handle such feedback in the same way. One often finds that people's own sense of identity clash with the ways in which others appraise them. The explanation hereof is that people interpret such feedback and such interpretations 'may prove formidable adversaries for self-discrepant feedback' (Swann 1987:1042).

6 The influence of institutions on personal identity

Not only other people, but also the atmosphere and opportunities created by them in institutional contexts can significantly influence the personal identity of adolescents and adults. If institutions such as the family, church and especially the state and civil society, allow role experimentation and intellectual questioning and actively encourage that, it would facilitate and nurture the possibilities that people can achieve, maintain and develop authentic personal identities (Newman, P. & Newman, B. 1988:557). Such a context provides the space within which new identities can be forged and experiments with new configurations can be tried out. In such conditions of security and liberty, it becomes possible to acquire complex identities constituted by multiple components woven into a coherent harmony (cf. Walzer 1992:171).

To acquire a personal identity in the context of participation in multiple institutions means both to make certain choices amongst competing values, for example, as well as to discover certain things about yourself or the values and ideas transmitted to you by another generation. A society allowing individuals to choose and discover multiple personal identities within a society has a distinct advantage over a society with space for only one or a few dominant group identities. The advantage is that the political passions of people are divided and an adherence is fostered to the fundamental values of the society allowing such breathing space for different identities to be.

Personal identity as fingerprints of the human mind

What does it mean to say, as I did at the outset, that personal identity is the fingerprint (text) of the mind which creates or identifies unique individuals? It means that the personal identities of individuals are as unique as their fingerprints. Three implications from the preceding sections on personal identity as product and process give a further explanation thereof. One implication is that personal identities are constructed from a wide variety of components, some which are only available to people of a certain age, origin, language, gender, talent, ability, religion, country, family, career, and so on. Not only are there this wide variety of components to which people do not all have equal access, but people appropriate or reject them in different ways.

Furthermore, from these components each individual constructs a unique configuration, by active choice and discovery, through own involvement or passively selecting influences from significant others in their lives. These configurations can be ordered in many different ways, showing different sets of priorities. These priorities can also vary in one person according to the situation the person is in, as situations often call forth different aspects of one's identity as dominant. A last implication from the preceding sections is that persons become unique individuals because they have different life experiences which influence and change their personal identities, and often when they have the same experiences, they react to it differently. This is not only because personalities differ, but also because the impact of a similar experience varies when it confronts personal identities with different configurations. Thus, even similar experiences can contribute to the creation of unique individuals.

Society and individuals: mirror images?

In the preceding sections I have given an extended definition of personal identity and explained some of the processes that form unique individuals and through which they constantly change and adapt their identities. The focus was on the components of personal identity, the construction and change of personal identity, the role of life experiences and significant others in the development of a personal identity, and the importance of sufficient space, opportunity and liberty to change and adapt a personal identity. The importance of societal influences in the construction, development and change of personal identity can be seen in the strong influence of families and institutions on personal identities. But how should we understand the relation between individual and society

concerning the construction of identities? Are they mirror images of one another, or do one determine the other?

Some political theorists find a comparison between state (society) and individual useful. Plato's famous remark that the state is the person 'writ large' embodies his assumption of a mirror relationship between the individual and the state. Not only are the same virtues applicable to individuals and the state, but the best way to understand what justice requires of individuals would be to study what justice requires of the state. For Plato the individual person is just 'in the same way that the state is just' (Plato 1955:218). Then, Plato argues, we can 'proceed to the individual and see if we can find in the conformation of the smaller entity anything similar to what we have found in the larger' (Plato 1955: 117). For Plato the nature of the state is formed by the nature of its individuals. Changes of character among the dominant individuals will reflect in a new constitution of the state, as societies are made of people 'whose individual characters ... determine the direction of the whole' (Plato 1955:358). Thus, the dominant kind of individual character determines the nature of the state.

Stephen Macedo (1990) argues that the influence between individuals and the state works in the opposite direction. Political values, he says, 'penetrate and shape the private lives of citizens' (Macedo 1990:274). The virtues needed for government also enables individuals to govern their own lives (Macedo 1990:276). Therefore the virtues applicable to the state and individuals are described as being independent and complementary (Macedo 1990:275). Macedo's three categories of virtues, namely judicial, legislative, and executive correspond to the three branches of the American governmental system, thus showing his commitment to the primacy of the state's influence on the character of the individuals.

Michael Walzer interestingly echoes Plato's assumption that the state is the person 'writ large', when he compares social criticism with self-criticism (Walzer 1994:97). Similar to Plato, Walzer finds it more difficult to describe what happens at individual level, as he says that it 'isn't easy to say what I do when I criticize myself' (Walzer 1994:86). Again, as Plato, he finds the analogous macro level less of a problem, as 'social criticism, by contrast, is easier to describe' (Walzer 1994:87).

Walzer oscillates between Plato's emphasis on the influence of individual character on the state and Macedo's claim that political values shape the lives of individual citizens. He defends his theory of spheres of justice by illustrating that such a society can accommodate complicated life plans 'in which the self distributes itself, as it were, among the spheres, figuring simultaneously as a loving parent, a qualified worker, a committed citizen, an apt student, a discerning citizen, a fruitful member of the church, a helpful neighbour' (Walzer 1994:38). Walzer here suggests that the complex nature of individual selves requires a complex society consisting of various spheres, each with their own principles of, and requirements for justice. This idea is reinforced when Walzer states that his many-sided self requires a 'thickly differentiated society' so that his different capacities, talents, and different senses of who he is, can be expressed (Walzer 1994:102). His claim is that 'specific sets of thick selves find themselves more or less at home in specific complex societies' (Walzer 1994:101) and therefore he feels obliged to aim for a society that can accommodate divided selves (Walzer 1994:104). Complementing these formulations emphasising individuals as primary so that just states ought to create space for them, are ideas that suggest that complex selves are products of 'thick, differentiated, and pluralist societies' (Walzer 1994:101). Thus, Walzer articulates a view that suggests individuals and the state have reciprocal relationships through which they shape one another.

The reciprocal, shaping influence exerted by individuals and the state on one another is demonstrated by Amy Gutmann (1993). Her striking remark that not only societies, but people as well are multicultural can serve as starting point (Gutmann 1993:183). Gutmann explains this

remark through saying that most people's identities are multicultural, as they create their own individual identities in relation to cultural contexts, which usually include a mixture of 'religious, ethnic, local and national cultures' (Gutmann 1993:184). Through these influences, appropriated by individuals while constructing their identities, society shapes individuals. However, Gutmann suggests that the formation of personal identities is a more complex process than discussed so far. Her example of African-American identity is instructive. She refers to some African-Americans who reject an American identity and thus do not identify similarly to other hyphenated Americans. The reason for their rejection of an American identity comes from their experience, interpretation and evaluation of the institutions, laws, practices, and procedures of their country which led them to an 'acute sense of the social injustices endured' by African-Americans in the United States (Gutmann 1993:185). This example shows how individuals' moral evaluation and political rejection of injustice lead to the formation of a distinct identity, characterised by conscious rejection of an American identity and separatist behaviour. Thus, personal identities are not just constructed by individuals through utilising resources made available by their society, but new identities emerge that change the composition of society through autonomous moral evaluation of societal practices.

From the above survey of viewpoints on the relations between individual and society, I want to argue that a mirror image exists between person and society, albeit a fragmented one. What exactly does the metaphor of a fragmented mirror image want to convey? To talk of a mirror image means that there are significant similarities, likenesses and resemblances between aspects of the personal identities of unique individuals and facets of their society. One would thus find similar values, prejudices and conflicts in the personal identity of unique individuals than one would find operative in institutions or arrangements in society. The mirror image is fragmented, that is, it is no perfect match, but only a partial likeness, resemblance or similarity. There are several reasons for this.

One reason is that unique individuals have several other components, such as age group, origins, and language added to their personal identity, other than those operative in societal institutions and arrangements. Not only are societal elements part of a much larger configuration in personal identity, but unique individuals do not give the same priority to these societal components than a government, a constitution or an organisation would. Furthermore, unique individuals selectively appropriate from everything that they are exposed to and often make firm decisions whether or not they want to identify with things available to them in their environment. Often they do appropriate the core political values of their society - if these are good - but even in cases of good societies many people deliberately reject some or all of its values in favour of a different set, like the Ku Klux Klan members in America do. Even then, their personal identities somehow mirror their society, as from their chosen identity one can see what they reject and protest against in their society.

From the above remarks the relationship between personal identity and society, characterised as a fragmented mirror image, proves to be an extremely complex one. Two contrasting examples will reinforce the point. That a society with closed role models leads to a closure of personal identity should not lead to the conclusion that open societies leave no trace of themselves in the personal identities of their members. The American democracy with its emphasis on the rights and liberties of its citizens do seem an open society which allows the formation of diverse personal identities. Nevertheless, there is a remarkable consensus amongst Americans on what constitutes their national identity. Although most national identities are based on a common language, religion, or ethnic heritage, the American identity is fundamentally different in that it is mainly political in nature (Citrin, Reingold & Green 1990:1128). This means that it is defined in terms of a 'commitment to a set of liberal political principles' (Citrin et al., 1990:1128).

This political component, however, is not the only, albeit the most important one. Ethnic elements that also form a part thereof are the emphasis on competence in English in order to get along in

American society, and the need to believe in God. An empirical study shows a strikingly high consensus on this national identity - especially the liberal part thereof, also amongst members of minority ethnic groups (Citrin et al., 1990:1130, 1131). What this example of American national identity suggests is a fragmented mirror image between the democratic political institutions and the strongly supported liberal political values of the citizens. The experience of growing up in a democratic state inculcates its underlying values into its citizens in such a way that a component of their identity mirrors the institutions of the state.

An important feature of identity formation in society is the role that (significant) other people play in confirming or denying a person's identity by the kind of feedback that they give. As a person develops his or her identity throughout life and it thus is never set once and for all, it is fragile and vulnerable, as 'individuation occurs in complex, intersubjective, communicative processes of interaction' (Cohen & Arato 1992:398, 399). In some societies people grow up with a negative, deprecatory image of their group projected to them by another, mostly more dominant, group (cf. Taylor 1992:1 and Erikson 1968:303). In apartheid South Africa where whites dominated blacks, Steve Biko put it this way:

... the black man in himself has developed a certain state of alienation, he rejects himself, precisely because he attaches the meaning white to all that is good, in other words he associated good and he equates good with white (Biko 1976 in 1978:117).

In such cases they develop a negative identity which often becomes the strongest instrument of their continued oppression. This effect of dominance by one group over another underlines the importance of recognition or misrecognition by others of our identity. Misrecognition, Taylor says (1992:1), can cause a person, or a group of persons, 'real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining, or demeaning, or contemptible picture of themselves'. Again, the prejudices operative in a society are mirrored in the identity of an individual person.

In societies in transition the changes in values and prejudices at societal level are also mirrored in the personal identities of unique individuals. For example, the transition from authoritarian rule to democratic government can be described as a significant event in the lives of citizens which necessitates major changes to everyone's identity. For such a transition to succeed it implies the development of a new inclusive identity in which distinct groups 'who previously had come to depend on each other's negative identities (by living in a traditional situation of mutual enmity or in a symbiotic accommodation to one-sided exploitation) join their identities in such a way that new potentials are activated in both' (Erikson 1968:315). Both 'masters and slaves', or 'oppressors and oppressed', must redefine themselves as citizens of no more, or no less, than equal dignity. Modifying a personal identity to include the underlying values of symmetric reciprocity as embodied in modern constitutional democracies, demands that former oppressors modify their identity to erase the element specifying their role as dominant masters because of arbitrary characteristics, such as race, gender, or class. To replace this component a new component as equal partner in societal affairs must emerge. This change of identity can be difficult for former oppressors set in their ways, but can liberate them to engage in new kinds of relationships with others, much more satisfying than those based on their previous identity.

This redefinition of identity from oppressor to equal partner should preferably occur by means of dialogue through which 'we affirm and in part constitute ... who we are, and under which rules we wish to live together...' (Cohen & Arato 1992:368). The goal of a democratic society should preferably be reached through a process conforming to democratic values. The willingness to renegotiate personal identity under circumstances of open-ended dialogue during times of societal

transformation are the prerequisite for authentic democratic change based on the lasting consent of the governed.

Personal identity in multicultural constitutional democracies

We have thus far noted both the positive imprint of a society on personal identity, the emergence of new collective identities from the modifications of personal identities, as well as the negative and destructive influence of other people and their prejudices on personal identity. We have also seen that some societies enable a free construction of personal identity and others not, whilst societies in transition usually necessitates a reconstruction of personal identity. The question now arises how a multicultural, liberal, democratic society can enable people to freely construct their own unique personal identity. We have already noted that a person's identity needs recognition by significant others and is vulnerable to the withholding thereof. This implies that the stability and self-esteem contained in a personal identity crucially depends on reciprocal, communicative relations with others (Taylor 1992:6, Cohen & Arato 1992:398,399). In this section I want to show how the above understanding of personal identity ought to be accommodated within the possibilities offered by multicultural constitutional democracies.

7 The heterogeneity of individual persons

The first step towards accommodating diverse personal identities in multicultural constitutional democracies would be to acknowledge the heterogeneity of persons. Michael Walzer and Iris Marion Young both point to the heterogeneity of the individual person, or subject, in their political theories. Walzer (1994:85) contends that the human self can be divided in three different ways, making the self 'a wonderful complex entity'. The first division is among the interests and roles of persons, related to the social goods available. Among the roles of persons across a day or a week are 'citizen, parent, worker or professional or merchant, teacher or student, doctor or patient', where the self is defined in terms of its 'responsibilities, qualifications, skills, and entitlements' (Walzer 1994:85). The second division of the self refers to what Walzer calls its identities. This reference is to common group identifications, such as family, nation, religion, gender, and politics. The last division of the self refers to heterogeneity among the ideals, principles, and values of the person, a division which leads the self to speak 'with more than one moral voice' (Walzer 1994:85). Walzer's view of the heterogeneous self confirms the earlier argument about the diverse components available for use in the construction of personal identity. Any component among the three divisions he describes can potentially be included in a person's identity. The priority such a component gets would depend on the situation of the person, the priority assigned to it, and the degree of coherence of the person's identity.

Young develops a similar view of the heterogeneity of the person (subject), though with a slightly different aim. In typical post-modern vein she claims that the 'heterogeneity of the subject is inevitable' (Young 1990:153), as the subject is a 'play of difference', a heterogeneous process', that cannot 'be present to itself, know itself' (Young 1990: 231-232). Young ascribes the heterogeneity of the subject to internal and external factors. The internal factors are the multiple desires of a subject that do not cohere, layers of meanings attached to different objects without being aware of the other layers or the connections between them, the complexity of expressing desires, and the multiplicity of a person's group memberships. External factors are the 'varying and contradictory social contexts' in which persons live, their interactions with persons with different identities, and being subjects in a 'plural and complex society' (Young 1990:124, 153,232). Young uses this description of the heterogeneity of the subject to confront her readers to affirm their own heterogeneity, become comfortable with the otherness within themselves, and to acknowledge their multiple desires and affiliations (Young 1990:124, 153). This, she says, might be necessary for more harmonious social relations, 'to become comfortable with other whom we perceive as

different' (Young 1990:153). While fostering communication and understanding with people who are different, Young wants to undermine the simplistic view that persons in a homogeneous community are transparent to one another. She rejects the denial of difference between persons implicit in this view, and uses the heterogeneity of the subject to argue that sharing between members of homogenous communities never leads to complete mutual understanding and is at best fragile (Young 1990:231). The difference within and between persons enables sharing, but also 'makes misunderstanding, rejection, withdrawal, and conflict always possible conditions of social being' (Young 1990:231).

To acknowledge the heterogeneity within persons has the following implications for understanding and accommodating personal identity in multicultural constitutional democracies. The complex social organisation of modern constitutional democracies requires multiple roles of persons, that they will identify with in different degrees. The different cultures, languages, religions, and value systems available make partial and selective identification possible, resulting in a personal identity as pastiche or configuration, that is ever-changing and adapting, acquiring elements previously regarded as different or other from the person. The experience of difference increase 'the power of the individual subject, who manoeuvres amongst a range of alternatives without ever being locked into a single one' (Walzer 1994:82) and makes a person peaceably comfortable with persons different from oneself. In this atmosphere of freedom persons will not feel pressurised to conform to dominating cultural ideals of personality; rather, they would feel free to create themselves so that 'every life should be an art work whose creator is, in some sense, his or her own greatest creation' (Appiah in Taylor 1994:155).

Not being fully transparent to oneself or others, implies that the exact nature and definition of a person's constantly shifting identity might not be known to the person. Persons fixing one component as dominant in their personal identity could prohibit creative modification and growth in understanding their identity. Treating other persons according to an externally imposed dominant component of their identity, amounts to the injustice of stereotyping, through not allowing the other persons the liberty to reveal the components of their personal identity they want to publicise.

8 Security and personal identity

Conditions of security in a modern constitutional democracy can allow the personal identities of heterogeneous persons to flourish into freely designed and lived complex identities (Walzer 1994:82). Conditions of security mean that people must feel that they will not be harassed, discriminated against, or persecuted because of the way their identities are constructed. State officials and citizens can be prevented from discriminating against fellow citizens, by a right to non-discrimination that lists forbidden grounds for discrimination. Combined with rights ensuring equal human dignity, persons can feel the freedom to be themselves in safety. People in conditions of security do not have to mobilise around specific shared identities as protest against discrimination, or the withholding of recognition in interpersonal relationships and through institutional arrangements.

If they do mobilise like this, the ethnic, religious, or national component of their personal identities becomes the dominant part which subordinates all other aspects thereof. Walzer describes it thus: 'When my parochialism is threatened, then I am wholly, radically parochial: a Serb, a Jew (a black, a woman, a homosexual), and nothing else' (Walzer 1994:82). Gutmann's earlier mentioned example of African-Americans who reject an American identity also illustrates this point. They reject an American identity as a result of the 'acute sense of the social injustices endured' by African-Americans in the United States (Gutmann 1993:185). They develop a personal identity strongly dominated by their shared African-American characteristics and history.

A society modelled on relations of symmetric reciprocity that are mirrored in a person's identity, changes the behaviour of persons. A citizen of a modern constitutional democracy is likely to be 'more independent, more assertive about one's rights, more disposed to respond politically to grievances or injustices' (Connolly 1991:198). If political mobilisation around one component of persons' identity does occur, all the instruments, mechanisms, and processes available for securing justice must be brought into play to undo contemporary or historical injustices causing the mobilisation. Relations of symmetric reciprocity, such as are guaranteed by the rights and liberties provided by modern constitutional democracies, should provide the framework for dealing with such issues.

The judicial system, bill of rights, a special governmental commission to examine injustices of the past and to rectify or compensate for them must be utilised. In some cases acknowledgement of injustice will do, in others compensation or rectification will be needed. In still other cases the existing political framework, be it the constitution, bill of rights, or laws, will have to be modified to 'create more space for differences of language, culture, or gender. Individual rights to safeguard the use of a person's language, to give space for religious groups, and to allow cultural organisation can be formulated. Exercising such rights ought to conform to the constraints of existing individual rights.

Thus, through dialogue and negotiation, a bill of rights, the electoral process, the supremacy of the judicial system in enforcing the constitution, and a healthy scepticism toward 'final answers' modern constitutional democracies are adequately equipped to continually restore conditions of security for any members complaining that they have lost out. Once the source of their mobilisation has been removed, they can reprioritise their identities to reduce the dominance of the component called forth by injustice.

9 A shared overlapping political identity

In multicultural constitutional democracies the underlying values of these democracies, viz. equal respect for every person and the equal consideration of everyone's interest, must be included as vital, influential parts of the identity of every person, though not necessarily as the main or dominant part thereof. If people weave these democratic values into their personal identity as a prominent, though not necessarily a dominant component thereof, the following becomes possible. Despite the plurality of moral values, ethnic identities, and modes of religious life present in many modern societies, a collective overlapping political identity, based on a Rawlsian overlapping consensus on political values, can be discovered through dialogue about 'who we are, and under which rules we wish to live together' (Cohen & Arato 1992:368). Such a collective identity can help to provide the legitimate norms of the society (Cohen & Arato 1992:368). Despite a plurality of diverse groups that each nurtures its own version of the good life, social solidarity is still possible in a society on the basis of such collective political identity. A shared minimal collective political identity also enables mutual recognition of one another based on relations of symmetric reciprocity, and this allows the development of complex and diverse personal identities, selected from a multiplicity of components and structured according to an endless variety of priorities. It does not force the closure of group identities in order to protect and mobilise members to fight for their self-esteem and other interests.

Conclusion

In this essay I have shown how people define, construct and change their personal identities to make themselves into unique individuals. I have also shown what influence a society has on both the product and processes of the personal identity of unique individuals. The view developed here has one very important implication, viz. that a society which gives its members the liberty, space

and opportunity to freely construct their own identities might avoid the formation of closed groups committed exclusively to their own sectional interests, like ethnic groups, for example.

Once people have the freedom to explore all possibilities of identity formation, and are allowed to arrange the components of their personal identity according to their own chosen priority, one would get diverse groups formed around different components of personal identity. This would produce a society of people with a variety of personal identities, where ethnic elements, for example, do not dominate all other elements. Some people would give their career priority, and thus identify the strongest with that and the associated group. Others would identify with their sporting abilities or their family. However, the symmetric reciprocity of truly democratic societies which results in a collective political identity, ensures that every person is treated with respect according to a set of basic human rights, despite the nature of their personal identity, their social status, or wealth. In such a society destructive group formation around a compounded identity is replaced by the formation of endless smaller groups, having members with diverse identities. When persons with differing ethnic identities belong to several such groups, one gets overlapping interests between them and their ethnic identity becomes less important relative to other more important components thereof. The shared minimal political identity, comprised of an overlapping consensus on political values, provides the framework within which the free construction of diverse identities takes place. It also keeps a complex society with an endless variety of diverse interest groups from falling apart.

Bibliography

Aries, E. & Moorhead, K. 1989. The importance of ethnicity in the development of identity of black adolescents. *Psychological Reports*, 65: 75-82.

Ayim, M. & Houston, B. 1985. The epistemology of gender identity: implications for social policy. *Social Theory and Practice*, 11(1): 25-59.

Baumeister, R.F., Shapiro, J.P. & Tice, D.M. 1985. Two kinds of identity crisis. *Journal of Personality*, 53(3): 407-424.

Biko, Steve. 1976. What is black consciousness? in Steve Biko, 1978, *I write what I like*. A. Stubbs (Ed.), N.B. Pityana (Intro.) (pp. 115-137). London: Penguin Books,

Burke, P.J. 1991. Identity processes and social stress. *American Sociological Review*, 56: 836-849.

Citrin, J., Reingold, B. & Green, D.P. 1990. American identity and the politics of ethnic change. *Journal of Politics*, 52(4): 1124-1154.

Cohen, J.L. & Arato, A. 1992. *Civil society and political theory*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press.

Connolly, W.E. 1991. *Identity/Difference: democratic negotiations of political paradox*. Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Pr.

Erikson, E. 1963 (1965). *Childhood and society*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.

Erikson, E. 1968. *Identity: youth and crisis*. London: Faber and Faber Limited.

Graumann, C.F. 1983. On multiple identities. *International Social Science Journal*, 35(2): 309-321.

- Gutmann, A. 1993. The challenge of multiculturalism in political ethics. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 22(3): 171-206.
- Hinchman, L.P. 1990. The idea of individuality: origins, meaning and political significance. *Journal of Politics*, 52(3): 761-781.
- Macedo, S. 1990. *Liberal virtues: citizenship, virtue and community in liberal constitutionalism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Newman, P.R. & Newman, B.M. 1988. Differences between childhood and adulthood: the identity watershed. *Adolescence*, XXIII(91): 551-557.
- Nozick, R. 1981. *Philosophical explanations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Parfit, D. 1984. *Reasons and persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Penelhum, T. 1967. Personal identity, in P. Edwards, *The encyclopedia of philosophy*, Vol. 6. (pp. 95-107). New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.
- Plato. 1955. *The Republic* (2nd edition [revised]). D. Lee (Trans. and Intro.) Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books.
- Pragar, K.J. 1982. Identity development and self-esteem in young women. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 141:177-182.
- Rappaport, H., Enrich, K. & Wilson, A. 1985. Relation between ego identity and temporal perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 48(6): 1609-1620.
- Read, D., Adams, G.R. & Dobson, W.R. 1984. Ego-identity, personality, and social-influence style. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46(1): 169-177.
- Shoemaker, S. & Swinburne, R. 1984. *Personal identity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Spencer, M.B. & Markstrom-Adams, A. 1990. Identity processes among racial and ethnic minority children in America. *Child Development*, 61:290-310.
- Swann, W.B. 1987. Identity negotiation: where two roads meet. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53(6): 1038-1051.
- Taylor, C. 1989. *Sources of the self: the making of the modern identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr.
- Taylor, C. 1992. *The politics of recognition*. Working papers and proceedings of the Center for Psychosocial Studies, Chicago.
- Taylor, C. & Gutmann, A. (Ed.). 1994. *Multiculturalism: examining the politics of recognition*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Pr.
- Taylor, D.M. & Dub6, L. 1986. Two faces of identity: The T and the 'We'. *Journal of Social Issues*, 42(2): 81-98.
- Walzer, M. 1992. The new tribalism: notes on a difficult problem. *Dissent*, (Spring): 164-171.

Walzer, M. 1994. Thick and thin: moral argument at home and abroad. Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press.

Young, I.M. 1990. Justice and the politics of difference. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Pr.

~~~~~

By H.P.P Lotter, Department of Philosophy, Rand Afrikaans University, P.O. Box 524, Auckland Park 2006, South Africa

---

Copyright of South African Journal of Philosophy is the property of Philosophical Society of Southern Africa (PSSA) and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

[Back](#)

University of Johannesburg