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THE TRUE IDENTITY OF *IDENTITY*

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A man never discloses his character so clearly as when he describes another's. (Jean Paul Richter)

Sumário

Todas as pessoas têm uma necessidade psicológica de identidade, tal como qualquer grupo de pessoas, cultura ou sociedade precisa de se centrar numa identidade partilhada colectivamente. Para as pessoas individuais ou os grupos, uma identidade representa uma concepção (um tanto ilusória, mas ainda relativamente persistente) de quem e do que se é e define as fronteiras físicas, psicológicas e socioculturais na relação com outras pessoas e com o mundo circundante. A vida e o desenvolvimento pessoal consiste na descoberta do eu, na presença simultânea da mudança e da continuidade pessoal.

Abstract

Every human being has a psychological need for an identity, the same way any group of people needs to focus on a collectively shared identity. For the people, individuals or groups, an identity represents a concept —somewhat illusory although relatively persistent— of whom and of what one is, thus defining both the physical, psychological, social and cultural relations with other people and with the surrounding world. Life and the individual growth comprise the discovery of oneself with the continuing presence of change and personal evolution.

The term *identity* can be derived from the Latin word *idéntitas* which means *"the same"* or *"sameness of essential character"* (National Encyklopedin, 1992:342; The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1974). Drawing upon ideas from various academic disciplines, this article discusses the phenomenon and concept of human identity.[1]

The Cartesian assertion *"Cogito ergo sum"* and everyday life phrases such as *"who am I?", "who are we?", "who is she?", "who are they?"* implicitly refer to the identities of single persons or groups of people. In themselves such identities constitute individually or socially constructed definitions of the organism as a meaningful and identifiable object of action within the category of human beings (Weigert, Smith Teitge & Teitge, 1986:31).

"I think, therefore I am" tacitly suggests that the individual makes himself the focal object of conscious thought and reason, something which presupposes an intrinsic ability for self-reflection and self-awareness. Intricately connected to *"cogito ergo sum"* are self-addressed questions such as *"who am I?"* and *"who is thinking?"* where the presumed answers might be *"I am me", "I am a male middle-class Swede"*, or *"I am thinking"*. In these instances the individual's mere reflection over *"I"* or *"me"* represents a subjective, self-perceived notion of his personhood and identity. By contrast, likely responses to the question *"who are we?"* might be *"the Toronto Blue Jays' Supporter Club"*, or *"the Canadians"*, indicating a self-defined and collectively shared identity . If some one asks *"who is she?"* the reply may be *"Jenny", "my neighbour"* or *"Raymond's daughter"* and, in a given situation, typically applies exclusively to a single person defined by another. Possible responses to the question *"who are they?"* could be *"they are the foreigners"* or *"the Indians"*, answers, which are expressions of socially shared and sustained collective identities ascribed by others.

These examples illustrate how issues of human identity are manifested in subtle, multiple and complex ways in everyday life situations. It seems fair to suggest that any sense of being a person or a human being presupposes the possession of an identity. Weigert says it *"transforms private existence into*

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[1] This article is an attempt to summarise and further discuss ideas presented in my book *Dimensions and Experiences of Human Identity: An Analytical Toolkit and Empirical Illustration* (1998).

personal being." (Weigert, 1986:174). Erikson extends this idea by saying *"...in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity."*(Erikson, 1968:130).

Every one has a psychological need for an identity, just as any group of people, culture or society need to be centred around a collectively shared identity of some sort. For single persons or groups of people, an identity represents a somewhat elusive, but still relatively persistent taken-for-granted conception of *who* and *what* one is, and defines the physical, psychological and sociocultural boundaries in relation to other people(s) and the surrounding world.

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The continuous presence and persistence of a person's identity generate psychologically productive feelings of self-recognition, self-acceptance and ontological security. By contrast, a lack of identity may cause existential ruminations and identity conflicts, perhaps manifested in feelings of despair and discontinuity. This has been noted, albeit in highly disparate ways, by many well-known writers, such as Albert Camus, Franz Kafka, Jean Paul Sartre, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. They all seem to have been preoccupied with identity concerns, expressing a lack of connectedness with other people and the world around them. To some extent their lives appeared to be centred around existential tasks of *"finding the way back to themselves"*, of *"trying to find out who they really are"*, and of *"redefining themselves and reconsidering their place in life."* This process of continuous *"self-redefinition"* is described vividly by Stuart Hall:

> So, I went to England in the 1950s, before the great wave of migration from the Caribbean and from the Asian subcontinent. I came from a highly respected, lower middle class Jamaican family. When I went back home at the end of the 50s, my mother, who was very classically of that class and culture, said to me 'I hope they don't think you're an immigrant over there. I had never thought of myself as an immigrant! And now I thought, well actually, I guess that's what I am. I migrated just at that moment. When she hailed me, when she said 'Hello immigrant,' she asked me to refuse it and in the moment of refusal – like almost everything my mother ever asked me to do – I said 'That's who I am! I'm an immigrant.' And I thought at last, I've come into my real self... And then, at the end of the 60s and the early 70s,

> somebody said to me 'These things are going on in the political world – I suppose you're really Black.' Well, I'd never thought of myself as Black, either! And I'll tell you something, nobody in Jamaica ever did. (Hall, 1989:15).

By directing attention to how individuals continuously and actively define and redefine themselves on the basis of internal and external characteristics as well as personal and collective criteria, Hall's personal experiences capture something essential about human identity. People are categorised also by others in terms of class, age, profession, culture, nationality, sex, and race.

Metaphorically speaking, life and personal development is about discovering yourself and your shadow, about the simultaneous presence of change and personal continuity. Mostly these issues remain at a pre-conscious and taken-for-granted level until the situation or the presence of other people make one's identity an issue.

For a variety of reasons migration presents an additional challenge to the endeavour of finding out and knowing *who* and *what* one is. For many immigrants the migration situation is ambiguous, with a multitude of implications for their identities. Since other people may negatively or unfavourably define and categorise them as *"strangers"*, *"aliens"*, or *"newcomers"*, feelings of ambivalence, incongruence and of being different are not uncommon. As a consequence, the quest for identity may become a life-long struggle, and in some cases present to the individual an obscure realisation of not being what he supposed himself to be.

Every individual adheres to an ongoing biography. Just as people change, so do their narratives of self. This can be an intended or unintended result of psychosocial development, personal aspirations and choices, a response to a given social and cultural context in which one lives, or a combination of these. By the same token, personal experiences, life events or other people's behaviours towards the individual have an impact on his or her identity.

Because human identity is formed, sustained and transformed in the space between people, it needs to be understood in its current sociocultural and historical context.

The Dawn of Identity

Ever since breaking free from philosophy, psychology has had as its primary foci the human soul, mind, consciousness and their development. At the end of the 19th century Freud suggested that children, in their mental development, proceed through a number of psychosexual stages during which they are confronted with various emotional conflicts. These conflicts must be resolved if the child is to develop in a *"healthy and mature"* way. By contrast, if they remain unresolved, this may bring about mental problems later in life (Mussen et al, 1990:16). During this process, early childhood experiences and child-parent interaction are critical.

Freud's view of personality development was at the time unquestionably controversial. Even if some psychologists today would reluctantly accept *all* the specifics of his work, his ideas have nonetheless had a vast impact on contemporary psychology (ibid).

With growing concerns for the children's situation in society, e. g. implementation of child labour laws, compulsory education, juvenile courts and children welfare programs, and with the introduction of psychoanalysis, children's mental development became central to psychology (ibid). Charles Darwin, for instance, made observations on child development by studying his son Doody, and his *"baby biography"* led others to become interested in the matter (Hoffman et al, 1994:21).

Pioneers such as G. Stanley Hall investigated the *"contents of children's minds"* with the ambition of describing how their mental development proceeds. Other key figures in the area included Jean Piaget, Lev Semanovich, Ivan P. Pavlov, John B. Watson, Edward L. Thorndike, Buurhus Frederic Skinner, Abraham Maslow, Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, Alfred Adler, Albert Bandura, Gordon Allport and several others. It appears, however, as if none of them explicitly addressed the issue of identity. Even if the concept of identity was used occasionally, psychologists typically were preoccupied with the development of the individual's personality, character and self, and not identity *per se* (Stier, 1998).

Instead it was in the United States in the aftermath of World War II that the term became increasingly popular for describing and interpreting the conditions of post-war society (Weigert, Smith Teitge & Teitge, 1986:1). Since the United States was a nation of immigrants, questions of national

origin and identity stood out as weighty tasks for social scientists, politicians and policy-makers. At this time three *"identity situations"* bred the emergence of the concept of identity (ibid:Chapter 1).

Firstly, there was an entire generation asking themselves what it really meant to be American. In many cases Americans were forced into a war against the countries of their ancestors. Thus, the project of defining an American identity became meaningful and desirable both to people in general, and also to politicians in particular in their attempts to motivate their citizens to take actions against former fellow countrymen.

Secondly, Erik Homburger Erikson, a migrant scholar himself, attempted to understand the unique and turbulent situation of contemporary man. He formulated the concept of ego identity, arguing that this problem was something quite typical for the modern world (Weinrich, 1989:47). Erikson's ideas still constitute an influential portion of the theoretical body on human identity, even to the extent that he sometimes is referred to as the father of the identity concept.

And thirdly, a group of American sociologists belonging to the pragmatic tradition were trying to develop an adequate framework for understanding social action and behaviour. They adopted Erikson's concept of ego identity as an analytical tool, but simply referred to it as identity.

With this historical context, and with these sources of theoretical inspiration, the concept of human identity became frequently addressed in the sixties and was in everybody's vocabulary in the seventies. Moreover, it was widely adopted by social scientists in the eighties and was politically revived in the nineties. But at base, the term was a product of Erikson's writings and ideas (Weigert, Smith Teitge & Teitge, 1986). In the two decades after World War II it was used, elaborated and applied to highly disparate areas by psychologists, social psychologists and sociologists belonging to a variety of scholarly traditions (Stier, 1998).

Identity and (Late) Modernity

Social scientists and others alike often assume and hypothesise that the present is radically different from any other period in history. It is presumed that modernity and post-modernity have had far-reaching implications for the

individual. Many writers have described growing social expectations, unfulfilled needs, increased mental stress, the dissolution of social bonds and the diffusion of place in contemporary society (Bauman, 1991; Fromm, 1955), Giddens, 1991, to mention merely a few).

But are our times exceptionally distinct from previous eras? It seems reasonable to believe that in every time, in one form or another, the meaning of life, the quest for acceptable answers to ontological questions such as *"who am I?"* or *"where do I belong?"* have been in the foreground. Earlier in history answers were predominantly sought in mythology, religion or philosophy. Yet even if every generation has most likely had similar concerns and grievances about life and the society in which they live, there is something qualitatively distinct about the last five decades. While identity was earlier, in many respects, foremost a collective accomplishment, in the Western world of today it has become an individualised task. Human identity has become a more pressing issue than before for the media, educators and policy makers, but also for people in general.

Thus it is reasonable to suggest that the present is an unparalleled era of quests for identity and meaning (Bauman, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Calhoun, 1994). This can possibly be explained by an ongoing globalisation, rapid technological development, accelerated specialisation, increased urbanisation, a boom in communication, intensified migration and rapid social change.

Modern society has made it impossible for the single person to completely grasp or be aware of everything around him. The inputs and influxes are immense, and social expectations high, while at the same time numerous personal choices and life-decisions have to be made. This has made contemporary society ambiguous, producing feelings of ambivalence and psychological fragmentation, and making the fundamental question of *"who am I?"* troublesome and challenging. Many people have difficulties *"figuring out who they are"* and finding their position in a larger social and existential context.

Unquestionably, this has made the formation and maintenance of human identity more complicated. Subsequently, there are few reasons to doubt that during times of rapid change and social dislocation identity concerns are brought to the foreground, against the background of whatever personal ambitions and social ties earlier periods have cultivated. The degree of self-awareness, attention and the manner in which these issues are

addressed and coped with vary between individuals, and across disparate historical periods and contexts. For such reasons, there is an growing need for studying human identity and identity questions.

Identity as a Scientific Challenge

It seems as if the last decades the concept of identity has become a cultural cliche as well as a prominent ideopolitical term (Gellner, 1987; Aronowitz, 1991; McAuley, 1994; Schmidtke, 1996). It is a common concern for social scientists, and although frequently debated, it remains unsatisfactorily conceptualised (Weigert, Smith Teitge & Teitge, 1986:5).

Its presence and analytical usage in sociology is rather new and quite frequently inconsistent. And despite the vast number of recent analyses, few adequate theoretical treatments are available (Weigert, 1986:165):

> ... sociology in a general sense has not shown much concern with identity as a problem area. 'Identity' is not a core sociological concept in spite of its frequent occurence in the everyday vocabulary of sociologists. Even in substantive areas, such as the study of ethnicity, where we can observe the use of the term with great frequency, identity has not received sustained analytic attention, in the sense of locating it in conceptual contexts and sharpening it to much more connotative significance. (Robertson & Holzner, 1980:2).

In sociology there is thus a need not only to clarify its paradigmatic concepts, but also to show how they can be employed effectively and methodically in empirical research.

Many approaches to human identity seem to lack a sufficient level of analytical value and theoretical consistency, and *"empirically usefulness"*. Identity has become something of a *"black-box-concept"* – things that cannot otherwise be explained can be explained as matters of identity.

The investigation of human identity, therefore, presents a challenge to the social sciences (Liebkind, 1989:25). In one way or another, it is the concern of all its academic disciplines – anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists alike. By introducing it as a conceptual tool, many social events, phenomena and processes can be made more comprehendible.

Areas of Conceptual Agreement and Disagreement

By reviewing the literature on human identity it is possible to discern a few areas of theoretical agreements and disagreements, conceptual similarities and dissimilarities, terminological inconsistencies and discrepancies, and analytical complementarities.[2]

Human identity is commonly conceived to be an *individual* entity (de Levita, 1965; Erikson, 1950/1968; Kelly, 1963; Kilpatrick, 1975; Kuhn, 1954; Laing, 1975; Lichtenstein, 1977; Lynd, 1958; Ruitenbeek, 1964; Weinrich, 1989; Wheelis, 1958). But it is conceived to be also a *collective* phenomenon (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burke, 1980; Foote and Cottrell, 1955; Goffman, 1959/1963; Klapp, 1969; Lofland, 1969; Mol, 1976; Parsons, 1968; Rex, 1991; Stone, 1962). There are also writers who emphasise the complex *connection* between inherent personal and collective qualities of human identity. In this sense, an individual's identity constitutes the interface between subjective and objective realities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burke, 1980; Cooley, 1902; Dashefsky, 1976; Foote and Cortrell, 1955; Fromm, 1955; McCall and Simmons, 1966; Mol, 1976; Strauss, 1959; Stryker, 1968/1987; Tajfel, 1982).

Likewise, there are disparate views regarding how human identity is to be understood and studied. In psychoanalysis it is typically thought of as an intrapsychic domain, a personality structure, an ego-process or a characteristic of the self. According to Erikson[3] (1950/1968), Fromm (1955), Laing (1975), Lichtenstein (1977) and Lynd (1958), human identity is to be considered a state of mind – *"a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops"* (Erikson, 1974: 27) As such it must be studied using psychological theories and methods.

An alternative view describes it as a *configuration*, that is to say, the sum of the various identifications, experiences, behaviours, roles, personality traits and ego qualities that, taken together, characterise a person. In this regard, human identity is the result of the interaction of intrapersonal (psychological) and interpersonal (social psychological) processes (Berger and Luckmann,

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[2] A number of texts have been selected and there is no claim to be exhaustive.

[3] In Erikson's texts identity is simultaneously thought of as a configuration, a process and as an inner state (sense of identity) mind.

1966; Burke, 1980; Dashefsky, 1976; Erikson, 1950/1968; Foote and Cottrell, 1955; Goffman, 1959/1963; McCall and Simmons, 1966; Mol, 1976; Parsons, 1968; Tajfel, 1982; Weinrich, 1989; Wheelis, 1958). By contrast, other theorists presume it to be a process *in itself* (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Cooley, 1902; Erikson, 1950/1968; Goffman, 1959/1963; Lofland, 1969; McCall and Simmons, 1966; Mead, 1934; Stone, 1962; Strauss, 1959; Stryker, 1968/1987).

Human identity is assumed to regulate the intricate interplay of individuals and the surrounding environment (Erikson, 1950/1968; Foote and Cottrell, 1955; Mead, 1934; Mol, 1976; Ruitenbeek, 1964). Identities are ascribed varying *meanings*, which, in turn, position individuals or groups of people in the social structure (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burke, 1980; Dashefsky, 1976; Goffman, 1959/1963; McCall and Simmons, 1966; Parsons, 1968; Stone, 1962; Strauss, 1959; Tajfel, 1982). In Sweden, being attributed an identity as an immigrant, alien or as deviant, different, stupid or worthless may be an example of a negative meaning which grants the individual a position at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Being a successful, well-educated genuine, male Swede may be an example of a positive meaning, which enables a position at the top.

The majority of writers claim human identity to be *dynamic* and *stable* at the same time (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Erikson, 1950/1968; Foote and Cottrell, 1955; Kilpatrick, 1975; Lofland, 1969; Mead, 1934). Just as people change, their identities change – most often gradually, at other times rapidly. Yet they perceive themselves as the same person from one day to another. Hence any identity seemingly presupposes a sufficient balance between change and stability (Dashefsky, 1976; Mol, 1976; and Parsons, 1968).

Also, it is surmised that for the most part a person's identity is not a salient issue, but, rather, is *taken-for-granted.* It is only at certain points in life (e.g. adolescence) or with radical change or dramatic events (e. g. the loss of a parent, a job etc) that it is likely to become a concern (Erikson, 1950/1968; Foote and Cottrell, 1955; Glasser, 1972; Klapp, 1969; Lichtenstein, 1977; Lynd, 1958; Ruitenbeek, 1964; Stein et al, 1960; Wheelis, 1958).

Similarly, there appears to be unanimous consent in acknowledging that human identity ensures a sense of *continuity* between the past, present and the future. In turn, a sense of continuity supposedly facilitates feelings of ontological security for the individual (Erikson, 1950/1968; Weinrich, 1989;

Giddens, 1991). Moreover, a person's identity constitutes an ongoing story about himself, his biography, and connects him to a collective history, but also to his personal past – his *roots*.

Individuals are presumed to strive for a sense of wholeness, congruence and integration in their identities. Or at least they want to avoid fragmentation, incongruence and disintegration in their identities. (Dashefsky, 1976; Erikson, 1950/1968; Foote and Cottrell, 1955; Glasser, 1972; Klapp, 1969; Laing, 1975; Lofland, 1969; McCall and Simmons, 1966; Mol, 1976; Ruitenbeek, 1964; Stone, 1962; Strauss, 1959; Weinrich, 1989; Wheelis, 1958). Once again, under certain conditions or in particular situations (e. g. as a result from migration, divorce etc.) individuals may feel as if there is a tension or contradiction between different aspects of their identity. For many people this may be a "natural" part of life, whereas for others it becomes a pathological state.

Furthermore, it is assumed that a person's identity is centred around – but also ensures – feelings of *sameness*, while concurrently ensuring feelings of *distinctiveness* and *uniqueness* (Dashefsky, 1976; Erikson, 1950/1968; Goffman, 1959/1963; Ruitenbeek, 1964; Tajfel, 1982). People have a need to be unique – to uphold an individuality – and yet at the same time to be similar to others.

Moreover, human identity develops as a result of the interplay of biological, psychological, and sociocultural processes (Erikson, 1950/1968; Stier, 1998). Biological processes refer to processes anchored in the very disposition of man i. e., *epigenetic* processes. Ageing in general, and hormonal changes in puberty in particular are examples of epigenetic processes. Psychological processes pertain to the process of *individuation*, i. e., the process of establishing psychological boundaries between oneself and others as well as developing a sense of autonomy and uniqueness. Biological and psychological processes take place *within* the individual. By contrast, sociocultural processes (e. g. *socialisation* and *identification*) connect the individual to the social and cultural environment.

Moreover, any identity must be situated in a biological organism. Its development becomes possible and is limited by the organism's disposition (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Erikson, 1950/1968; Laing, 1975; Lichtenstein, 1977; Lynd, 1958; Mills, 1960; Ruitenbeek, 1964; Wheelis, 1958). By the same token, the body, and particularly the face, is the most salient aspect of

a person's identity. People are recognised (and valued) by their looks, their face, eyes, body posture, skin colour, sex etc.

Disparate 'types' of identities, e. g. ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual identity, ego identity, professional identity, social identity, cultural identity, etc., are frequently discussed in the social sciences. These can presumably be derived from diverse objects of identifications (e.g. a shared ethnicity, culture, gender etc). Together these may be seen as constituent *subidentities* of a person's *overall* identity and are arranged according to their degree of salience. Each identity's salience is *"determined"* by the social situation, personal aspirations or collective attitudes and categorisations (Dashefsky, 1976; Erikson, 1950/1968; Foote, 1955; Goffman, 1959/1963; Stryker, 1968/1987; Rex, 1991; Wilpert, 1989).

Many writers assume that identities both motivates behaviour, and are used as a basis for interpreting, explaining and predicting one's own and other people's behaviour and actions (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burke, 1980; Erikson, 1950/1968; Dashesfky, 1976; Foote and Cottrell, 1955; Goffman, 1959/1963; Klapp, 1969; McCall and Simmons, 1966; Parsons, 1968; Stone, 1962; Stryker, 1968/1987; Tajfel, 1982).

For example, identities are potent motivators of collective behaviour. Social movements, subcultures, sects and cults, but also any given culture or nation are built up around some sort of identity. At an individual level people act or behave in accordance with the view they have of themselves. A positive self-image and strong self-esteem is likely to affect a person's actions differently than a negative self-image and a lack of self-esteem (Stier, 1998).

At the same time, a person's identity is affected by his own actions or other people's behaviours and actions. Other people's responses toward him may bring about, positive or negative, consequences for his self-image. Or he may decide to alter his identity and adopt a different life-style, change his looks, his way of speaking and so on (ibid).

An Analytical Toolkit for Understanding Human Identity

Drawing upon the literature and the discussion above ten analytical tools for understanding human identity can be singled out. They are formulated as

statements and are intended to provide a sense of guidance when directing attention to aspects of human identity that need to be accounted for when trying to grasp people's experiences of identity.[4] However, the analytical tools do not *define* human identity. Nor do they formulate verifiable or falsifiable statements about the *"true nature"* of identity. The analytical toolkit is thus *merely a tentative means of approaching, understanding and analysing human identity in different empirical situations*. Its purpose is, in other words, to render ideas and theories surrounding human identity more *"empirically manageable"* (Stier, 1998: 7).

1. Human identity may be understood in terms of a dialectic in three regards:

- it can be perceived, experienced and observed both by self and others;

- it is formed, maintained and transformed in the interplay of intrapersonal and interpersonal processes;

- it integrates the subjective world of the individual with the objective or social world.

2. Human identity may be understood as a configuration with a number of constituent parts.

3. Human identity may be understood as an individually – or socially – defined meaning, placing individuals or groups in a larger social and cultural context.

4. Human identity may be understood as being stable and dynamic at the same time.

5. Human identity may be understood as being self-perceived and self-experienced and most of the time taken-for-granted.

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[4] The analytical tools resemble Herbert Blumer's *sensitizing concepts* in their *sensitizing* function, but not in their form and epistemology. Still, Blumer's ideas have been a source of inspiration (see Blumer, 1969:140-152.

6. Human identity may be understood as extending over time and providing individuals with a sense of continuity and consonance.

7. Human identity may be understood as simultaneously providing and balancing a sense of sameness with a sense of distinctiveness and uniqueness.

8. Human identity may be understood as having a tripodal basis (it is located in the organism) and as being formed in the interplay of biological, psychological and social processes.

9. Human identity may be understood as a totality or repertoire of constituent and disparate *subidentities*, varying with regard to their degree of perceived salience.

10. Human identity may be understood as motivating individual and collective behaviour, at the same time as it is affected by such behaviours.

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As this discussion hopefully has shown, human identity is an intricate and complex matter. Struggling with existential ruminations and trying to figure out who one is perhaps the fate of man. By the same token, studying and successfully outlining the complexity of human identity may be the fate of the social scientist. In all its modesty, this article should merely be regarded as a small contribution to this task.

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