



## Theoretical Analysis

## Identity formation in educational settings: A contextualized view of theory and research in practice

Hanoch Flum<sup>a,\*</sup>, Avi Kaplan<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Education, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer Sheva 84105, Israel<sup>b</sup> Psychological Studies in Education, College of Education, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 28 February 2012

## Keywords:

Identity formation  
Educational context  
Learning process  
Identity exploration

## ABSTRACT

In this concluding article of the special issue entitled “Identity Formation in Educational Settings”, we explicate the notion of identity as an integrative concept, discuss its growing popularity in the social sciences, and point to its special significance to education in contemporary society. Following an Eriksonian psychosocial approach and sociocultural emphasis, we look at the process of identity formation as a product of interrelatedness between the context and the individual person, and underscore the interaction between developmental and learning processes. We draw examples from the studies in this collection to highlight these conceptual relationships, as well as to contribute insights from the different research questions and modes of inquiry into the practice of co-construction of identity and knowledge in a variety of school contexts. We conclude with a call for the promotion of practice, research and theory in the emerging domain of identity formation in educational settings.

© 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The concept of identity is very widely used. Some may say, overused. It is a key concept in the social sciences in general and a term that captures a variety of nuanced meanings. Identity is described as a ‘heavily burdened’, ‘elusive’ and ‘deeply ambiguous’ term which is, nevertheless, viewed as being ‘indispensable’ (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 8). Indeed, “(v)agueness and fuzziness... might be important inherent qualities of the concept of identity itself” observe Lichtwarck-Aschoff, van Geert, Bosma and Kunnen, who point to “the multidimensionality and versatility of the concept” (2008, p. 321) following Erikson’s (1968) work. While the ambiguity might be held as a weakness, the richness and depth of the concept make it invaluable.

Erikson’s (1959, 1963, 1968, 1975) work is regarded as highly instrumental to the effective introduction of ‘Identity’ as a core concept in the social sciences from the late 1950th on (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). In Erikson’s view, identity encompasses individual and social meaning and is considered in terms of the interplay between individual and society. The emphasis, or what pole is given primacy, may change with the perspective, but the essence of identity denotes the personal as well as the communal. Erikson, in his articulation of identity formation as the organizing developmental concept, anchors development in a psychosocial framework.

Developmentally, identity is an integrative concept. It may capture the objective and subjective; it commonly connects between the self and aspects of the world-out-there; it synthesizes past,

present and future experiences. The process of identity formation is also anchored in a sense of ‘being part of’—a web of relationships, group solidarity, and communal culture.

In this article, we focus on the integrative power of identity, which is central to Erikson’s theory, with an emphasis on how it encompasses the individual and context, and counters the tendency to split them conceptually and give primacy to one of these poles. As we will argue, and exemplify with theoretical clarifications and research evidence from the articles in the special issue, identity formation is a product of the interrelations between the individual and the context (cf. Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Ford & Lerner, 1992). In conjunction with this issue, we will highlight how the question of identity work, and its construction in school settings and as part of the educational process, is intertwined with motivation, learning, and knowledge construction (Kaplan & Flum, 2009). Along this discussion, we will select and revisit findings from the collection of research reports in this issue.

## 1. Why ‘identity’ – A socio historical perspective

A brief examination of the literature on identity from a historical perspective gives a context to the growing popularity of identity in social sciences in general, and to the impetus to bring identity to the foreground of the educational arena. Scholars denote the formation of personal and social identity as being related to the emergence of individualization. Historically, there has been a general growing emphasis on individualization as a function of destructuring processes in society, from the Renaissance and the

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [flum@bgu.ac.il](mailto:flum@bgu.ac.il) (H. Flum).

Enlightenment (in Europe) through modernity to late modernity (or postmodernism). At periods when people are left less embedded in traditional contexts to dominate and support them, when an old social order dissolves and people are left to their own devices in making major decisions in life, issues of self and identity are more of concern (Baumeister, 1987; Beck, 1992; Côté & Levine, 2002; Kroger, 2007). Erikson (1968) underscored the concern with identity issues as a recent phenomenon in Western society and attributed it to growing technological complexity. With a focus on American history, Erikson (1975) also referred to the struggle for self-definition by a new generation of immigrants far away from their original social environment.

In a chapter entitled: “Identity as an Analytic Lens for Research in Education”, Gee (2000) presented a sociohistorical perspective of identity. Following the work of social scientists like Bauman, Beck and Taylor, Gee described people in modern society as being set free to choose and author their own identities. People cannot rely anymore, as in pre-modern eras, on traditional authority and institutions to underwrite their identity; albeit, the identity they create (or recruit) still has to be recognized by others. People engage in ‘making sense of’ or in an interpretative effort, and construct and sustain identities through discourse and dialogue, rather than expect to derive their identity directly from “official” institutions. In contemporary society, being late-modern or post-modern is marked by discursive processes moving further to the foreground. People become more and more aware of discursive processes as a result of a number of trends that are associated with further stress on interpretive (semiotic) processes, and the ascending need for recognition through discourse and dialogue. Among these trends Gee mentioned the rapid change (driven by development in science and technology) that makes some identities obsolete, and creates opportunities to new ones. Another trend is “the exponential growth in diversity in most developed countries” and the “thicker connections” (p. 114) that ensures an encounter with diversity for most people. At the same time, Gee (2000) noted, “people... can communicate with (and get recognized by) other people ‘like them’ across the globe, thanks to modern travel and modern communications. They can come to feel that they share more with people far from them than they do with people closer by” (p. 114). Not surprisingly, Gee underscored in this chapter the relevancy of Vygotsky’s work. Vygotsky, whose approach to the development of mental functioning is sociocultural, does not refer in his writings to the concept of identity (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995). Nevertheless, his work is relevant to our discussion. We’ll return to this issue later.

## 2. Erikson’s concept of identity formation: the individual in context

Neo-Eriksonian interpretations of Erikson’s theory (e.g. Marcia, 1966; Waterman, 1988) came under critique as giving undue primacy to the individual’s choices, and as emphasizing the ‘purely’ psychological pole. Critics argued that this kind of interpretation of Erikson’s psychosocial approach leaves out a very important facet of his perspective, i.e. Erikson’s emphasis on the interrelatedness of the individual and the social, cultural and historical contexts (e.g. Côté & Levine, 1988; Côté & Levine, 2002). Similarly, scholars have pointed to relational processes as being key to identity formation (e.g. Josselson, 1987; Kroger, 1996). Whereas internal processes and the development of a coherent “sense of inner identity” are central to Erikson’s notion of identity formation, they are interrelated with contextual ones. Erikson’s own writings make it very clear: “... (W)e deal with a process ‘located’ in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities”

(Erikson, 1968, p. 22; italics in the original). Erikson continued by delineating a description of the process which mirrors, in his view, the depth and complexity of identity formation in the interpersonal context:

In psychological terms, the process of identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. This process is... for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, ‘identity-consciousness’ (Erikson, 1968, pp. 22–23).

Hence, others have to recognize the individual as having a particular meaning. Identity, as the niche that the person constructs for herself in society (or in terms of ‘a certain kind of person’, as Gee, 2000, p. 99, defines identity), has to be recognized and affirmed by others in dialogue with them and within a ‘typology significant to them’ (i.e. Gee’s Discourse).

## 3. Identity in the school context: examples from research in practice

Identity formation is formulated by Erikson as a lifelong process. However, education and school tasks resonate in the discussion of identity formation in terms of long-term meanings and relational effect. Experiences during adolescence, particularly in social contexts such as schools, carry pivotal meaning in people’s lives, among other reasons, because of adolescents’ emerging cognitive capacity, which, in turn, elevates their self-reflection ability and develops in tandem with identity (Cole & Cole, 1989; Erikson, 1968).

Vygotsky’s work, which focuses on the individual’s development of higher mental functioning from a sociocultural perspective, became very influential in recent decades in education and is guiding educational programs and research (see, for instance, Gee, 2000). As mentioned earlier, Vygotsky did not refer specifically to identity in his writings, but Penuel and Wertsch (1995) noted significant conceptual common ground between Vygotsky’s and Erikson’s work that can offer an integrative sociocultural approach to identity formation.

Yet, despite various indications for the relevancy of school experiences to the process of identity formation, and the role of school as a social agent and as an important developmental context, Lannegrand-Willems and Bosma (2006) concluded that “(t)he study of identity formation in the school context is a wasteland” (p. 87). Although there is no shortage of research interest in identity in general, and in the related conceptual space, an explicit focus on the interface of identity and education is still rare (Kaplan & Flum, 2009; Schachter & Rich, 2011).

## 4. Contextual cues

Identity development and learning seem to go hand in hand. Being engaged in identity construction involves learning, and “learning implies becoming a different person” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). A school as a social community provides a relational web, a system of relations that creates meaning. Students’ active participation – through tasks, active expression of interest, and the experience of unfolding understanding in action – promotes their learning, we argue, especially when their school experience connects between an issue relevant to their (personal) identity and to the meaning construction within their social community

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/352662>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/352662>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)