Chapter 1
Identity – a Brief Humanistic Perspective[1]

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Abstract

Today *identity* is 'the loudest talk in town', the burning issue on everybody's mind and tongue. Normally, we tend to notice things and put them into the focus of our scrutiny and contemplation only when they vanish, go bust, start to behave oddly or otherwise let us down (Bauman 2004: 16–17).Does the concept of identity find itself in a similar situation? Any extensive analysis undoubtedly blurs the concept, and interdisciplinary approaches do not help with grasping the essence of identity (if that is possible at all). The objective of this article is not to create another definition (we have enough already); instead, by making use of the richness of humanistic thought, the goal is to draw attention to certain dimensions and aspects of realizing identity, which are currently, in the author's opinion, worth considering. Personal identity is not created in a vacuum – one's environment and social reality have a great impact on them. The chapter addresses these influences with particular attention to selected elements.[2]

Keywords: culture, personal identity, social identity, symbol

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Introduction

The first chapter of Zygmunt Bauman's *Identity* opens with a story:

> According to the old custom of Charles University of Prague, the national anthem of the country to which the person receiving an honorary doctorate belongs is played during the conferment ceremony. When my turn to be so honored came, I was asked to choose between the British and the Polish anthems… well, I did not find and answer easy. Britain was the country of my choice and by which I was chosen through an offer of a teaching job once I could no longer stay in Poland, the country of my birth, because my right to teach was taken away. But there, in Britain, I was an immigrant, a newcomer – not so long ago a refugee from a foreign country, an alien. […] So perhaps the Polish anthem should have been played? But that would also mean acting on false pretences: thirty-odd years before the Prague ceremony I had been stripped of Polish citizenship. […] Janina, my lifelong companion […] found the solution: why not the European anthem? … Our decision to ask for the European anthem to be played was simultaneously "inclusive" and "exclusive". It referred to an entity that embraced both alternative reference points of my identity, but at the same time cancelled out, as less relevant or irrelevant, the difference between them and so also possible "identity split"(Bauman 2004: 9–10).

The issue of identity is not just theoretical. Although it is found in numerous academic publications, the interest in this topic results from the practical, human and internal need to understand oneself as a human being. This refers to the most obvious sense of one's existence: we are first aware of our existence, and then the entire world "grows" out of this experience. Self-awareness is original, direct and preconceptual, irreducible to any other forms of awareness, because all of those forms presuppose it (Zwoliński 2002). The question of identity is a question of the essence of being human.

The amount of literature analysing the problem of identity is overwhelming, however, the absence of a clear indication of designations for this concept is apparent (Osika 2016). What we have at hand is a huge tradition of the concept of identity. The history of this concept has not been straightforward; as British philosopher David Hume aptly notes, the concept of identity should be treated as a distinguished academic problem, or even an enigma[3] – "it is certain there is no question in philosophy more abstruse than that concerning identity, and the nature of the uniting principle, which constitutes a person" (Witkowski 1991: 69). However, the increasingly widespread use of the concept led to the decreasing rigour in its definition. Already in 1983, Philip Gleason could argue that identity had become more and more a cliché, its meaning progressively more diffuse, thereby

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3   D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book I, part IV, sect. II., https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/hume-a-treatise-of-human-nature (accessed 20.02.2020).

encouraging increasingly loose and irresponsible usage. In consequence, a good deal of what passes for a discussion about identity is little more than portentous incoherence (Kraay 2007). Bearing in mind these difficulties, it should be emphasized that it is impossible to even summarize the most important humanistic attempts at characterizing the intricate issue of identity in a short article, thus the proposed subtitle is a slight exaggeration – however, the goal here is different: it serves as an invitation to reflect on certain interdisciplinary features (aspects) of identity that are particularly worth highlighting today. Because finding identity to be a bunch of problems rather than a single-issue campaign is a feature we share with a much greater number of men and women (Bauman 2004).

Who am I?

Identity is the answer to the question "who am I" or "what makes me who I am". This constitutes and shapes a certain type of image – like painting a self-portrait. This metaphor of painting is incomplete when separated from the reality in which we live. We do not live in isolation, we are social beings, we live and impact one another – painting the image of "self" cannot fail to capture this aspect. Sociologists therefore stress that the problem of identity contained in the question "who am I" is associated with the answer to the question "who are we" – "what is the group in which I live?" The identity of "self" is also a characteristic of the relation between people and groups (myself and others surrounding me). Therefore, identity often does not boil down to definitions and characteristics of "self", but also contains (or should contain) a series of aspects of the world "around us", which the "self" shapes and/or constitutes in a very direct way. Norbert Elias, in his book *On Civilisation, Power, and Knowledge*, accurately grasps this thought:

> "The basic structure of the idea we have of ourselves […] is a fundamental precondition of our ability to deal successfully with other people and […] communicate with them" (Elias 1998: 280).

The answer to the question of oneself is inscribed in every human action and relationship with others, regardless of how we answer this question ourselves.

The issue of identity is, on the one hand, a reflection on who I am as an individual, but also a member of a group – whether or what of kind of group I belong to. The extraordinary popularity of this concept may be due to the fact that it fits into the discussion of the individual's relation with society (Osika 2016). Moreover, as Philip Gleanson points out, ever since the word "identity" started to be used in reference to the relationship between an individual personality and the entirety of social and cultural features that grant particular groups a distinct character, it has offered hope for explaining the connection between the individual and society.

Undoubtedly, how we perceive ourselves as individuals and as members of a given society is influenced by the reality that closely surrounds us – and more precisely, the symbols of that reality. Everything we perceive and what we think about is somehow defined – it is known to us and has its place. This world created by us is the only world that shapes our thoughts and actions, and also provides us with a feeling of security and life in a familiar and understandable area. When this world is disturbed, we experience fear and the an inability to orient ourselves in a given social environment (Mach 2008). Symbols found in one's closest community define and determine relationships between people, as well as ways and methods of communication. They also define the relationship with *sacrum*, ways of perceiving good and evil – in other words, people act according to this social, conventional and symbolic perspective, and not according to some objective nature of the world. Self-perception and people's behaviour are therefore determined by their vision and interpretation of reality, and the cultural model of the world they create is the only one known to them. Charles Taylor pointed this out by stating "To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. 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. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand" (Taylor 2006: 27). According to Taylor, this effort to place oneself within the categories of good and evil, in relation to others, serves one purpose: obtaining a coherent image of oneself and understanding the world. Studying another culture is therefore a process of interpreting the world in its language, an attempt at understanding the sense which that world has for the people living in it.

Social Identity

Social identity, understood as an element of that symbolic model of the world, gives every individual and group space in relation to other people and groups. Thus, it implies a certain synthesis of the human-world relationship determined by the group (social, cultural) perspective. On the one hand, identity maintains a state of unity, while on the other, it constitutes a conscious process of adapting individuals to the changing conditions surrounding them. In this perspective, it encompasses personal, mental and unique features for a given person along with biological characteristics shared with others (physical appearance, race, gender, etc.) (Paleczny 2008). As Tadeusz Paleczny indicated, we define identity as our spiritual, intellectual and emotional portrait (Paleczny 2008). Therefore, identity is both a relatively fixed system of features determining the continuity and stability of a person, and a product of relations with other people that change in various contexts. The answer to the question "who am I" simultaneously answers the question

"who am I in relation to other people" and "who am I in relation to other groups". Identity is simultaneously the foundation for interaction and its product. The self is "situated" – "cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgement of his participation or membership in social relations. One's identity is established when others *place* him as a social object by assigning him the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or *announces*" (Stone 2020). We may be members of a particular nation, religious group, region or professional group while simultaneously building an image of ourselves in relation to others who differ from us in some respect, and still remain ourselves. This is because each of us has a unique combination of elements for constructing our identity resulting from particular situations and biographies (Mach 2008). Maria Straś-Romanowska (2008: 28) expressed this aspect in the following manner:

> […] in light of descriptions of contemporary culture, as a global and dynamically transforming symbolic reality, diagnoses concerning the identity of people living in our age seem to be accurate insofar as we reject classical diagnostic criteria. Otherwise, it would be necessary to speak not of a new identity, but rather of the loss of identity. […] However, if we take into consideration the personal condition of people, these diagnoses can be considered to be somewhat exaggerated. People are, for their part, "unlimited" beings, open, unfinished – mainly due to consciousness, reflectiveness and freedom. Ultimately, human consciousness is shaped throughout the process of the clash of two needs: the need for rootedness, belonging, stability, while on the other hand, the need for freedom, change and development.

In the social process and in the dynamics of social life, both our own identity and that of our partners change and take on new expressions. As Edwin Ardener argued, identity is not a stable, intrinsic, and independent property of a human being, we do not "have" an identity, what we see are simply ways that we are identified (passive) and ways we identify (active). When we talk about somebody's identity, we abstract and objectify the process of an exchange of acts in which partners in a social contact classify, describe and define one another (Mach 1993) This constant developing of one's identity consists in "negotiating" interpretations of the world with partners in a social contract.

> '[S]elf' is not a solid kernel defined once and for all, but is in its formation connected with contingency in many ways. It evolves through contingent processes; it represents a matrix which offers a variety of potentialities; it constitutes a style rather than a substance, or a way of living, acting and thinking rather than a number of strictly defined contents or projects; it is not defined in a purely internal way, but takes shape in interaction with, and is dependent upon many entities outside: certain people, cultural contexts, and professional, economic and cultural conditions; finally, it is, as a matter of principle, never stable, but open to modifications (Welsch 2020).

Boundaries

Identity is therefore the world of "myself" and "we" in a certain system of interaction. It is problematic, despite the existence of standard labels – and particularly the typification of roles. Identity is therefore a consensus of roles which binds the participant, and which they and their partners ascribe to themselves in given situation (Hałas 2006). It is a dynamic phenomenon, but it also contains elements of endurance, stabilization and continuity. In conflict situations, perceived differences are exasperated and the sides of the conflict tend to polarize the world. The internal differentiation of each side is forgotten and people perceive themselves and their opponents in terms of one highlighted aspect of identity – that which defines the difference between them and constitutes the symbolic basis of the conflict (Mach 2008).

While shaping identity, we construct the boundaries which differentiate and separate us from others. In the words of Fredrik Barth, Zdzisław Mach argues that establishing and transforming boundaries makes interpersonal relationships meaningful. They assist in making classifications between "us" and "others" – between those who belong to our group and those who do not but with whom we want to maintain contact for our own various benefits. In the absence of boundaries the world becomes continuous, uniform and chaotic. Exchange is impossible, because its participants and partners cannot be defined. It is impossible to separate ourselves from others or to express feelings of friendship, because in such a uniform world, they are culturally indistinguishable. Without walls, fences and thresholds, there are no neighbours or guests whom you could invite into your home. Doors are needed not only to keep them closed, but also to be able to implement an "open door policy" (Barth 1969: 157, Mach 2008).

Boundaries are made of symbols. The symbols used to create boundaries certainly depend on a particular social situation and cultural differences between partners. This is particularly significant, because every culture selects only some of them – from an extremely wide range of symbols, which can potentially indicate and highlight differences between people. The materials for building boundaries can include religious, linguistic, racial, moral symbols etc. The symbols which selected and established boundaries are more important for understanding the identity of the group than its cultural features found within. The most important issue is what a group chooses and displays to emphasise the differences that separate them from others (Barth 1969).

Many symbolic structures of identity and images of other people are simplified, stereotypical and ideological in nature – and are primarily used to mark their differences. They then appear as different from us in terms that are relevant from the point of view of our culture. Based on these symbolic boundaries, it is possible to learn about the people who build them. These boundaries are constructed of symbols that are important and valuable from the point of view of the world of their builders. Understanding the symbolism of the barriers is of particular significance and plays an important role in multicultural societies.

We change our own image along with the transformation of the symbolic vision of the world. We build new boundaries and transform old ones, otherwise we answer the question of "who am I in relation to others" and at the same time, the constellation of partners changes in relation to whom we build our identity (Mach 2008). The image of the world is formed in this way, the image of us in the world – our identity in relation to other actors in social life. The model of the world that forms the foundation of people's perception consists of basic models of themselves and their partners' identities. People act in accordance with their interpretation of the world and their conduct is determined by their view of reality. Of course, this is a simplified generalization of the very complicated process of creating images of oneself and the world. However, at a high level of generality, it is possible to state that the image of the world and social identity are dynamic structures developing in a stream of social activities. In order to understand human activity, it is necessary to study both the conceptual model of the world and the processes of social interaction (Macg 2008).

Conclusion

Identity is an extremely vague idea. Contemporary identity turns out to be fluid and based on individual choice, however, it depends on interactions between partners in social situations to a large extent. It is often subject to negotiations during which the partners communicate to each other the sense of their mutual relations by simultaneously answering the question "who are we in relation to each other". This manner of describing identity is worthy of attention based on: (1) Indicating the significant influence between the identity of "myself" and that of "us". Individuals do not exist without groups – life always takes place in a social setting, which, whether we like it or not, has great impact on individuals (shaping their vision of the world and themselves); (2) I, as an individual, am an active person shaping my own identity; (3) Identity is a process of construction rather than a ready-made product. Identity is "becoming" rather than "being". Therefore, this fits into the busy and dynamic reality of the contemporary society in which constant change and choice are the way of life; (4) This model also allows us to understand that the contemporary world is based on the constant negotiation of certain aspects of identity.

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Key terms and definitions

Culture – the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time.

Personal Identity – properties which a person takes to "define him/her as a person" or "make him/her the person he/she is", and which distinguish him/her from others.

Social Identity – person's sense of who they are based on their group membership(s) or how they identify themselves in relation to others according to what they have in common.

Symbol – an object, word, or action that is used to represent something else with no natural relationship to what is culturally defined.

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