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Collective Identity and Expressive Forms

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If key concepts or expressions can be identified that function to capture the animating spirit of different epochs, then certainly one candidate concept for the latter quarter of the 20th century is the concept of collective identity.¹ Indeed, it is a concept that came of age in the latter part of the past century, as reflected in the outpouring of scholarly work invoking the concept directly or referring to it indirectly through the linkage of various collectivities and their identity interests via such concepts as identity politics, identity projects, contested identities, insurgent identities, and identity movements. This article provides an analytic overview of scholarly work on the concept by considering, in order, its conceptualization, its various empirical manifestations, the analytic approaches informing its discussion and analysis, and several unresolved theoretical and empirical issues.

Conceptualization

The concept of collective identity, just as the base concept of identity, is rooted in the observation that interaction between two or more sets of actors minimally requires that they be situated or placed as social objects. To do so is to announce or impute identities. Hence, interaction among individuals and groups, as social objects, is contingent on the reciprocal attribution and avowal of identities. This character of identity is highlighted in Stone's (1962) conceptualization of identity as the "coincidence of placements and announcements." This process holds for both individuals and collectivities, and it probably has always been a characteristic feature of human interaction, whether the interaction was among early pre-literate humans or among those in the modern social world. To note this is not to ignore the sociological truism that the issue of identity becomes more problematic and unsettled as societies become more structurally differentiated, fragmented, and culturally pluralistic (Castells 1997; Giddens 1991). But historical variation in the extent to which matters of identity are problematic does not undermine the double-edged observation that the reciprocal imputation and avowal of identities is a necessary condition for social interaction and that identities are thus rooted in the requisite conditions for social interaction.

Delineating the interactional roots of identities does not explain what is distinctive about collective identity, as there are at least three conceptually distinct types of identity: personal, social, and collective. Although they often overlap, one cannot be inferred from the other. Hence the necessity of distinguishing among them.

¹ Forthcoming in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, edited by Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes. (London: Elsevier Science, 2001).

Social identities are the identities attributed or imputed to others in an attempt to situate them in social space. They are grounded typically in established social roles, such as “teacher” and “mother,” or in broader and more inclusive social categories, such as gender categories or ethnic and national categories, and thus are often referred to as “role identities” (Stryker 1980) and “categorical identities” (Calhoun 1997). Whatever their specific sociocultural base, social identities are fundamental to social interaction in that they provide points of orientation to “alter” or “other” as a social object.

Personal identities are the attributes and meanings attributed to oneself by the actor; they are self-designations and self-attributions regarded as personally distinctive. They are especially likely to be asserted during the course of interaction when other-imputed social identities are regarded as contradictory, as when individuals are cast into social roles or categories that are insulting and demeaning (Snow and Anderson 1987). Thus, personal identities may derive from role incumbency or category-based memberships, but they are not necessarily comparable since the relative salience of social roles or category membership with respect to personal identity can be quite variable.

Just as social and personal identities are different yet typically overlapping and interacting constructs, such is the relationship between collective and social and personal identities. Although there is no consensual definition of collective identity, discussions of the concept invariably suggest that its essence resides in a shared sense of “one-ness” or “we-ness” anchored in real or imagined shared attributes and experiences among those who comprise the collectivity and in relation or contrast to one or more actual or imagined sets of “others.” Embedded within the shared sense of “we” is a corresponding sense of “collective agency.” This latter sense, which is the action component of collective identity, not only suggests the possibility of collective action in pursuit of common interests, but even invites such action. Thus, it can be argued that collective identity is constituted by a shared and interactive sense of “we-ness” and “collective agency.” This double-edged sense can be culled from classic sociological constructs such as Durkheim’s “collective conscience” and Marx’s “class consciousness,” but is reflected even more clearly in most conceptual discussions of collective identity, although the agentic dimension is sometimes implied rather than directly articulated (e.g., Castells 1997; Cerulo 1997; Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995; Jasper and Polletta 2001; Jensen 1995; Levitas 1995; Melucci 1989, 1995).

A common theme running throughout a segment of the literature is the insistence that collective identity is, at its core, a process rather than a property of social actors. Such work acknowledges that collective identity is “an interactive and shared definition” that is evocative of “a sense of ‘we,’” but then highlights the process through which social actors recognize themselves as a collectivity, contending that this process is more vital to conceptualizing collective identity than any resultant product or property (e.g., Melucci 1989: 34, 218, *passim*). Few scholars would take exception with the importance of the process through which collective identities develop, but it is both questionable and unnecessary to contend that the process is more fundamental than the product to understanding the character and functionality of collective identity. Not only is the product or “shared we” generative of a sense of agency that can be a powerful impetus to collective action, but it functions, as well, as the orientational identity for

other actors within the field of action. More concretely, it is the constructed social object to which the movement's protagonists, adversaries, and audience(s) respond (Hunt et al. 1994), and which, in turn, may have implications for the operation of its organizational carrier, affecting the availability and character of allies, resources, and even tactical possibilities (Jensen 1995). The initial projected collective identity may be short-lived and transient, subject to modification and even transformation during the course of ongoing collective (inter)action, but the set of properties that make up the initial collective identity, as well whatever subsequent ones emerge, constitute objects of orientation and interaction for other collectivities within the field of action.

If it is acknowledged that there is something of substance to collective identities, how are they distinguished from social and personal identities? Several factors appear to be at work. First, collective identities may or may not be embedded in existing social identities, since they are often emergent and evolving rather than firmly rooted in prior social categories. This is often the case with the collective identities that emerge in the course of dynamic social protest events (for illuminating examples, see Walder's research on the Beijing Red Guard Movement, and Calhoun's account of the Chinese student movement of 1989). Second, the collective, shared "sense of we" is animating and mobilizing cognitively, emotionally, and sometimes even morally. The shared perceptions and feelings of a common cause, threat, or fate that constitute the shared "sense of we" motivate people to act together in the name of, or for the sake of, the interests of the collectivity, thus generating the previously mentioned sense of collective agency. That potential inheres within social identities, but they typically function more like orientational markers as the routines of everyday life are negotiated. When they are activated or infused affectively and morally, it is arguable that they have been transformed into collective identities. Third, the emergence and operation of collective identities means that other social identities have subsided in relevance and salience for the time being. In other words, collective identities, when they are operative, generally have claims over—not so much normatively as cognitively and emotionally—other identities in terms of the object of orientation and character of corresponding action. Examples abound, as observed frequently in the case of many protest gatherings, gripping fads, joyous and celebratory sports crowds, and the concerted campaigns and actions associated with social movement activism. Fourth, while collective identities and personal identities are obviously different, they are still very much interconnected in the sense that collective identities are predicated, in part, on constituents' embracement of the relevant collective identity as a highly salient part of their personal identity and sense of self (Gamson 1991). And finally, while the attribution or avowal of all identities is interactionally contingent, collective identities tend to be more fluid, tentative, and transient than either categorically-based social identities or even personal identities.

Empirical Manifestations

Empirical manifestations of collective identity can vary in a number of significant ways. One important axis of variation is the size of the collectivity, and the corresponding scope of its claims. If the essence of collective identity resides in a sense of "we-ness" associated with real or imagined attributes in contrast to some set of others, then it follows that collective identities can surface among almost any grouping or aggregation in a variety of contexts, ranging from relatively small cliques and gangs to sports fans and celebrity devotees to laborers and

occupational groupings to neighborhoods and communities to even broader categories such as sexual and gender categories, religions, ethnic groups, and nations. The preponderance of empirical research on collective identity has focused on the last, more inclusive set of categories – sexuality and gender, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. Illustrative is Taylor and Whittier's (1992) research on lesbian identity and lesbian social movements; Nagel's (1997) analysis of the resurgence of collective identity among American Indians; Cornell and Hartmann's (1998) overview of the construction of ethnic and racial identities in the modern world; and Anderson's (1991) and Calhoun's work on nationalism, which the latter defines, in part, as one "way of constructing collective identities" (1997: 29). An additional characteristic of research on collective identity is its association with the study of social movements, no doubt because such mobilizations tend to be both generative of and dependent on collective identities (e.g., Gamson 1991; Hunt et al. 1994; Jasper and Polletta 2001; Melucci 1989; Snow and McAdam 2000).

Although collective identities can congeal in various aggregations and contexts, they appear not to do so on a continuous basis historically. Instead, their emergence and vitality appear to be associated with conditions of sociocultural change or challenge, socioeconomic and political exclusion, and political breakdown and renewal, thus suggesting that they cluster historically in social space. The latter part of the 20th century has generally been regarded as one such period of collective identity effervescence and clustering, with some scholars characterizing this period in terms of identity crises and collective searches for identity (e.g., Castells 1997; Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991; Klapp 1969). In *The Power of Identity*, Castells captures both this characterization and the kinds of conditions thought to be associated with the various manifestations of collective identity during this period:

Along with the technological revolution, the transformation of capitalism, and the demise of statism, we have experienced, in the last quarter of the century, the widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalization and cosmopolitanism on behalf of cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment. (Castells 1997: 2).

Analytic Approaches

To note that expressions of collective identities cluster historically according to the conjunction of various social conditions does not specify the character or content of the emergent collective identities. This issue has been addressed from the vantage point of three contrasting perspectives: primordialism, social structuralism, and social constructionism.

Both the primordialist and structuralist views can be construed as variants of an overarching essentialist perspective which posits that a collectivity's identity basically flows naturally from some underlying set of characteristics, often reduced to a single determinative attribute regarded as the collectivity's "defining essence." From the primordialist point of view, the defining characteristic is typically an ascriptive attribute, such as race, gender, or sexual orientation, or sometimes a deep, underlying psychological or personality disposition. From a structuralist perspective, the critical characteristic is typically a kind of master social category implying structural commonality, such as social class, ethnicity, or nationality; a set of relational

ties or networks suggesting structural connectedness; or a mixture of both. Individuals who are similarly situated structurally, such that they are incumbents of similar roles, work in similar enterprises, are linked to the same social networks, or members of the same social class, religion, or ethnic group, are presumed to have a shared collective identity or at least be candidates for such.

The constructionist perspective, in general, rejects both the primordialist and structuralist variants of the essentialist argument, seeing the presumed link between identities and their ascriptive or structural moorings as being more indeterminate than postulated. Instead, attention is shifted to the construction and maintenance of collective identities. Collective identities are seen as invented, created, reconstituted, or cobbled together rather than being biologically preordained or structurally or culturally determined.

Assessment of the three perspectives in terms of their relative analytic utility for explaining the character and content of collective identities reveals considerable support for the constructionist thesis. This may be due in part to the currents of fashion, influenced by the winds of multiculturalism, postmodernism, and identity politics, but it is due, more importantly, to other factors. One is that the hypothesized link between identities and the primordial attributes or structural categories in which they are presumably anchored is too mechanistic. In its hard version, it is contradicted by the sociological observation that people are often members of the same categories or groups in different ways and with varying degrees of commitment and identification, thus suggesting that inferring correspondence between personal, social, and collective identities solely on the basis of primordial or structural categories is empirically suspect. Additionally, the claims of primordialist and structuralist arguments do not fare well when confronted with the observation that people generally have multiple identities (e.g., family, work, leisure, gender, ethnic, religious, political, and national) that are differentially invoked or avowed depending on their relative salience and their situational pervasiveness. Salience refers to the relative importance of an identity in relation to other identities (Stryker 1980); pervasiveness or comprehensiveness refers to the situational relevance or reach of any particular identity and the corresponding degree to which it organizes social life, including collective action (Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Snow and McAdam 2000). Given the fact that increasing numbers of individuals live in a world in which they are the carriers of multiple and often conflicting identities, what determines any particular identity's relative salience and pervasiveness, and thus the influence of its claims, vis-e-vis others? Clearly such matters are not determined solely by an identity's primordial roots or structural footing. And finally, much of the empirical evidence is consistent with the constructionist argument. Two highly evocative examples include Trevor-Roper's (1983) account of the retrospective invention of the distinctive Highland culture and tradition so redolently associated with all of Scotland, and James' parallel conclusion, based on extensive archeological and archival research, regarding the origins of the modern Celts:

...the idea of a race, nation or ethnic group called Celts in Ancient Britain and Ireland is indeed a modern invention. It is an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century reification of a people that never existed, a factoid . . . assembled from fragments of evidence drawn from a wide range of societies across space and time, This reification served the interests

of a range of cultural expectations, aspirations, and political agendas – and still does (James 1999: 136).

Such conclusions should not be read as unequivocal refutations of the primordialist and structuralist arguments, since constructed identities are not fabricated whole cloth but typically knit together by drawing on threads of past and current cultural materials and traditions, structural arrangements, and even primordial attributes. These materials and attributes constitute the kinds of stuff from which collective identities—particularly ethnic, religious and national ones—are fashioned, and thereby function, in varying degrees, to constrain the construction process. Interpretative constraint also may be exercised by the institutional contexts and relations of power in which contestants are embedded (Castells 1997; Jensen 1995). Additionally, analyses of the relationship between collective identity and participation in social movements repeatedly point to the experience of collective action itself as a fertile seed-bed for the generation of collective identities (Calhoun 1991; Fantasia 1988; Melucci 1989; Walder 2000). Thus, while collective identities are undeniably constructed, they rarely are constructed *carte blanche*; rather, they typically are forged not only with the materials suggested by the primordialist and structuralist perspectives, but with and through the experience of collective action itself.

Theoretical and Empirical Issues

Relevant to a thoroughgoing understanding of collective identity, whatever its empirical locus, are several theoretical and empirical issues that require more careful consideration than often accorded.

Identity Work (the Expression of Collective Identities)

Fundamental to understanding collective identity, particularly from a constructionist standpoint, are the processes through which it is created, expressed, sustained and modified. These processes have been conceptualized as variants of “identity work,” which encompasses the range of activities people engage in, both individually and collectively, to signify and express who they are and what they stand for in relation or contrast to some set of others (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Snow and Anderson 1987; Snow and McAdam 2000). At its core is the generation, invocation, and maintenance of symbolic resources used to bound and distinguish the collectivity both internally and externally by accenting commonalities and differences (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Symbolic resources include the interpretive frameworks (or frames), avowed and imputed names, and dramaturgical codes of expression and demeanor (e.g., particularistic styles of storytelling, dress, adornment, and music) that are generated and employed during the course of a collectivity’s efforts to distinguish itself from one or more other collectivities. Concrete examples include the various forms of identity talk, such as “atrocious tales” and “war stories,” that group members repeatedly tell each other, prospective adherents, and the media (Hunt and Benford 1994); particular songs and styles of music that invite participation and that are politically and emotionally evocative, such as “We Shall Overcome” (Eyerman and Jamison 1998); key words and slogans that function in a similar fashion, such as “Liberte, Fraternite, and Egalite” and

“Workers of the World Unite”; and systems of gestures and signs, such as the raised clenched fist and the peace sign, that function similarly to the tradition of heraldry (Pastoureau 1997). These and other symbolic resources function as boundary markers of collective differentiation, distinguishing insiders from outsiders, or protagonists from antagonists, in a fashion that heightens awareness of in-group commonalities and connections and out-group differences. Together they congeal into a kind of “semiotic bricolage” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996) that gives symbolic substance to the claimed distinctive “we”, and it is largely through this bricolage that collective identity is expressed and known publicly. While the boundary-making and maintenance functions of these symbolic resources, or bricolage, are widely acknowledged, what accounts for the differential resonance or carrying power of different symbolic markers is less well understood.

The Problem of Identity Correspondence

A not uncommon problem with analyses of collective identity is the tendency to reify the collective identity, and thus take-for-granted the link between the individuals that make-up the collectivity and the shared, overarching identity. This gloss is particularly troublesome in light of the observation that people typically have multiple identities that vary in salience and pervasiveness. Thus, how is any particular collective identity reconciled with other identities adherents possess? How, in other words, do the shared cognitions and feelings indicative of a collective identity move center stage at the individual level? Such questions allude to what has been referred to as the problem of “identity correspondence” – the alignment or linkage of personal and collective identities (Snow and McAdam 2000).

One general answer is that this alignment “is accomplished by enlarging the personal identities of a constituency to include the relevant collective identities as part of their definition of self” (Gamson 1991: 41). But what are the processes through prospective adherents come to embrace the relevant collective identity, such that personal and collective identity are correspondent or congruous? Two broad processes have been suggested: identity convergence and identity construction.

Identity convergence refers to the union of personal and collective identities when both are congruent, such that an extant collectivity provides a venue for an individual to act in accordance with her or his personal identity. The analytic problem is not one of identity construction or transformation, but one of linkage or bridging and the identification of the mechanisms that facilitate the convergence. A number of such mechanisms have been identified. One operates at the organizational level, entailing the occasional appropriation of existing solidary networks by movement organizations (Snow and McAdam 2000); the other mechanisms are variants of rational choice processes. One is based on a “tipping” or “threshold” model, which posits that collective identities are assumed by individuals when the perceived actions of others reach a point that suggests that the payoffs for adopting, or at least acting in accordance with, the collective identity outweigh doing otherwise. Illustrative is the contention that such tipping points played a critical role in explaining language and identity shifts among Russian-speaking immigrants “beached” in four of the republics of the former Soviet Union (Laitin 1998). A related mechanism is the existence of intergenerational investments in personal identities that

may have implications for the embracement of future collective identities (Laitin 1998). A third rational choice explanation holds that the collective identities associated with social movements – and, by implication, with other collectivities as well – can be regarded as “selective incentives” for those who seek to express and affirm their personal identities (Friedman and McAdam 1992). The explanatory utility of these arguments, as well as the network appropriation thesis, is contingent on two underlying assumptions: that there is pre-established congruence among some number of personal identities and the proffered or available collective identities; and that collective identities are constituted by the aggregation or convergence of parallel personal identities. While the first assumption is empirically tenable, the second is questionable from the vantage point of many scholars of collective identity (e.g., Jasper and Polletta 2001; Melucci 1989, 1995).

In the absence of correspondence between personal identities and collective identities, some variety of identity work is necessary in order to facilitate their alignment. This alignment can vary significantly, ranging from the elevation of the salience of a particular identity to a fairly dramatic change in one’s sense of self. Four identity construction processes have been identified that capture this variation: identity amplification, identity consolidation, identity extension, and identity transformation (Snow and McAdam 2000). Identity amplification affects a change in an individual’s identity salience hierarchy, such that an existing but lower-order identity becomes sufficiently salient to ensure engagement in collective action, as in the many cases in which the identity of woman was elevated and expanded in conjunction with the Women’s Movement; identity consolidation involves the adoption of an identity that is a blend of two prior but seemingly incompatible identities, as in the case of the union of environmentalists and labor activists and “Jews for Jesus”; identity extension entails the expansion of the situational pervasiveness of an individual’s personal identity so that its reach is congruent with the collectivity’s, as when individuals come to see themselves as representatives for a specific cause that transcends other role obligations and identities; and identity transformation involves a dramatic change in identity, such that individuals now see themselves as remarkably different than before, as often occurs in the case of conversion to a new group or movement.

The mechanisms or processes underlying these various forms of identity construction include framing processes in which identities are announced or renounced, embraced or rejected, and modified or reframed in the course of various interactions with adherents, antagonists, and bystander audiences (Benford and Snow 2000; Hunt et al. 1994); engagement in collective action, as when direct observation or experience functions as a demonstration event that gives rise to a situationally specific collective identity or affirms collective claims and thus helps to render salient, and perhaps pervasive, what was previously a secondary or marginal personal or social identity (Melucci 1989; Calhoun 1991; Walder 2000); or some combination of both framing and actual engagement.

Given the variety of ways in which identity correspondence can be affected, the question arises as to whether the relevance of the convergence and construction processes varies by type of collectivity. In the case of social movements, for example, it has been hypothesized that movements that are culturally different, greedy in terms of the cognitive and behavioral demands, and/or politically radical are likely to rely more on identity construction than convergence

processes (Snow and McAdam 2000). Whether this is the case is an empirical question, but it does caution against presuming that what accounts for identity correspondence and shifts in one context necessarily holds for another.

Just as there may be variation between types of collectivities and the processes of identity convergence and identity construction, so it is reasonable to ask whether these processes might vary in importance at different points in the life course of a social movement or ethnic or nationalist mobilization? Rather than assuming that a particular process, such as the tipping process or identity amplification, operates routinely with respect to the emergence of a collective identity, might not these processes be more relevant at particular junctures in the career of a movement's collective identity? Preliminary consideration of such questions suggests that network appropriation, rational choice, and constructionist explanations, rather than being mutually exclusive and antithetical, may interact and combine in interesting ways in explaining the emergence, institutionalization, and diffusion of collective identities across different contexts (Snow and McAdam 2000).

Dimensions, Layers, and Types of Collective Identity

Although there is an extensive literature on collective identity, with considerable discussion regarding its conceptualization and sources, this literature has been relatively mute regarding variation in its form. The concept most often is invoked as if it is an invariant, uniform collective phenomenon. This is not the case, however, as collective identities can be multi-dimensional and be multi-layered within a specific locus, and they may also vary by type. The multi-dimensionality of collective identity is indicated by reference to its cognitive, emotional, and moral dimensions (Jasper and Polletta 2001; Melucci 1989). The relative importance of each of these dimensions to the vitality and motivational force of a collective identity has not been elaborated, however. Presumably the presence of each of these dimensions yields a more robust and vital collective identity. Clearly a collective identity in which the boundaries between "us" and "them" are unambiguously drawn, in which there is strong feeling about those differences, and in which there is a sense of moral virtue associated with both the perceptions and feelings, should be a more potent collective identity than one in which either the emotional or moral dimensions are weakly developed.

Similarly, several analyses have noted that collective identity can be multi-layered, such that there can be variation in its locus. Three such layers have been noted with respect to social movements (Gamson 1991; Stoecker 1995). They include, beginning with the broadest and potentially most inclusive layer: the social movement community or solidary group, which can be thought of as the constituent layer, as in the case of black Americans in relation to the civil rights movement; the social movement layer as in the case of the civil rights movement; and the organizational layer, as represented by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the context of the civil rights movement. In principle, each successive layer may be embedded in the larger more inclusive layer, giving rise to a generalized, cohesive collective identity at the community or national level. But clearly the existence of a collective identity at one level does not automatically generalize to or incorporate another level. Thus, collective

identities can be built around the organizational carriers of a movement, as in the case of SCLC and SNCC, without necessarily representing the broader movement, which indicates the potential for identity conflicts at the collective level and the potential for schism and factionalization. Such observations suggest the need for more careful consideration of the often multi-layered character of collective identities and of greater specification of the ways in they can interact and combine, and with what consequences. As well, these observations call for caution in generalizing about the scope and functioning of collective identities, particularly with respect to broader social categories, such as ethnicities and nationalities.

Finally, it is reasonable to wonder if collective identities vary by type. At the most general level, Hunt et al. (1994) distinguish among protagonist, antagonist, and audience or bystander identities, arguing that even though protagonist or oppositional identities have received most of the scholarly attention, each type or field of identity is fundamental to understanding the interactive dynamics underlying the emergence, character, and functioning of a collective identities. Noting as well that collective identities arise and operate within an interactive context “marked by power relationships,” Castells’ distinguishes among legitimizing, resistance, and project collective identities (1997: 7-10). Legitimizing identities are associated with dominant institutions or the state, whereas both resistance and project identities represent two basic forms of the antagonist identity, the former generated by devalued and stigmatized collectivities, and thus constituting the seedbed for identity movements and politics, and the latter associated with movement beyond resistance to the construction not only of alternative identities but also a new system that valorizes rather than defiles the new identity. The important issue is not whether such typologies of collective identities are exhaustive, but the emphasis on their contextually embedded and interactional character and their different consequences.

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