Strategies adopted when identity is threatened

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Abstract: Strategies adopted when identity is threatened.

A simple model of identity structure and processes is presented. Evidence is presented that the two identity processes (accommodation/assimilation and evaluation) operate in order to achieve certain endpoints for identity: self-esteem, continuity, and distinctiveness. Identity is defined as threatened when the processes are, for some reason, unable to maintain continuity or enhance self-esteem or distinctiveness. Whatever generates this interference is considered a threat to identity. The structure of threats is discussed. The types of coping strategies at three levels (intra-psychic, interpersonal and intergroup) are described. The determinants of choice of coping strategy are briefly outlined.

Key-words: Identity threats. Identity strategies.

Résumé: Quelles sont les stratégies adoptées quand l'identité de la personne est menacée ?

Dans cet article, nous présentons un modèle relativement simple de la structure de l'identité et des processus la concernant. Nous démontrons que deux processus d'identité — l'adaptation/assimilation et l'évaluation — sont mis en place afin d'atteindre certains états-d'êtres de l'identité: l'estime de soi, la continuité et le fait d'être distinct des autres. L'identité de la personne est menacée au cas où ces deux processus ne parviennent plus — pour une raison ou pour une autre — à maintenir la continuité ou à accroître l'estime de soi et le caractère distinct de la personne. Quelle que soit la cause de l'intervention dans ces processus, elle est considérée comme une menace. La structure des menaces est décrite ainsi que les stratégies qui permettent de faire face aux menaces. Ces stratégies se situent à trois niveaux: intra-psychique, interpersonnel et intergroupe. Nous décrivons aussi les déterminants du choix d'une stratégie.

Mots-clés: Identité menacée, Stratégies identitaires.

A simple model of identity

Any attempt to specify how people cope with threats to identity must begin with a description of what is meant by identity. The concept has had many definitions (for summaries see: Gecas, 1982; Jacobson-Widding, 1983). It has been modelled from many theoretical perspectives and each has produced a different variant on the theme of identity (see, for instance, Yardley and Honess, 1987). Much of the confusion emanates from its relationship to notions of personality and the self concept (Breakwell, 1987).

The object here is not to revisit those old battlefields. The object here is to set the scene for the discussion of threats to identity and strategies used in coping with them. Consequently, the definition of identity used will be as parsimonious as possible. It will be used as a foundation for the remainder of the discussion and nothing more; as a heuristic device for modelling threat and a means of systematising empirical explorations.

Models of identity, simple or not, nowadays need to specify both its structural and process components. As Gergen (1984) states, the lack of predictive power of the trait theories of personality and the topographical descriptions of the self-concept have propelled theorists into an examination of the processes whereby identity is changed or reconstructed socially and cognitively (Harre, 1987; Gergen, 1987; Markova, 1987).

Structure

Most theories of identity would acknowledge that it is dependent upon the capacities for memory, consciousness and organised construal that characterise the biological organism and their interaction with the physical and societal structures and influence processes which characterise society. Identity resides in psychological processes but is manifested through...
thought, action and affect which can only be articulated in a specific social context comprised of a matrix of personal and social power relationships.

The structure of identity, most simply, can be envisaged along two distinct planes: the content and the evaluative dimensions. Each of the three major sources of contemporary theories of the self or identity manifest a recognition of these two dimensions of the construct. James' (1890) seminal work sought to describe the constituent elements of self (spiritual, social and bodily) but he deemed these features of the self to be inextricably bound to the process of evaluating them: individuals are envisaged to be continually re-establishing self-esteem through a comparison of their current state with their "pretensions" (aspirations which establish criteria for personal success). The second major source is undoubtedly psychoanalytic theory: from Freud's (1933) concern with the structure of the ego and its protection, through Horney's (1950) focus upon self-love, Adler's (1927) discussion of the individuation process, to Erikson's (1950) explorations of identity development. All of these theorists describe both the content and evaluative dimensions of the constructs they use to equate with the self-concept. The third major source of contemporary theory about identity originates in the symbolic interactionist tradition. The influence is particularly evident in the writings of Mead (1934) and Cooley (1902) who both assert that the content and value of the self-concept is established through interaction with significant others.

Typically, the content dimension can be said to comprise information about the person: those properties which, taken together, mark the person as unique. Such information would include details of values, attitudes, behavioural patterns, and so on, which typically have been regarded as the preserve of personal identity. It would also encompass facts about interpersonal networks and group memberships which have often been regarded as the fulcrum of social identity. For the purposes of generating a simple model of identity, the distinction between personal and social identity is superfluous. The social becomes the personal over time: the distinction is dependent upon an arbitrary freezing of the temporal frame (Bbreakwell, 1983). All information about the person, regardless of the means whereby it is generated, exists on the content dimension of the identity structure.

Clearly, if the content dimension retains all the information available about the person, it has to be organised: it will have a structure of its own. The organisation of identity content has been discussed by many theorists (for instance, Kelly, 1955; Zavalloni, 1983; Liebkind, 1984). They suggest its structure can be characterised in terms of degree of centralisation, hierarchical arrangement of elements, and relative salience of components. The actual organisation is not envisaged to be static by any of these theorists. It will be responsive to the demands of incoming information and retrieval demands that are themselves dependent upon the social context in which the person operates. There is much empirical evidence to support this view (Weinreich, 1993). For instance, P. Th. Wahli and Cairns (1980) showed that with respect to the religious components of identity in Northern Ireland, salience is highly context-specific: being a Protestant or a Catholic becomes more salient to definitions of self when in the presence of outgroup members.

Each element of the content dimension has a temporally-specific value attached to it. Changes in the value of characteristics will occur as social value systems shift or as the person alters position relative to them. Changes can also be planned: designed to maximise the credit accruing to an identity configuration. It is important to recognize that the value dimension of identity structure comprises the values (positive or negative) of all identity elements. However, the value dimension is no mere summation of those values. It is not yet understood how the matrix of values is calculated to establish an overall value for identity. The value contribution of any one element must be weighted by the centrality and salience of its position in the organisation of the content dimension. Much empirical work is needed to establish the algorithms relating the values of different elements to the overall subjective worth of the identity.

Processes

While identity can be described in terms of its structural features, it can also be represented as a set of processes which operate in a principled manner. Most models of identity leave the processes to be inferred or, if they are specified, the principles governing their operation are ignored. Two types of processes are implicit in most models: the assimilation-accommodation process and the evaluation process.

Assimilation-accommodation should be treated as components of the same process although they are formally distinct. This two-pronged process in part of social cognition assimilation refers to the absorption of new information into the identity structure; accommodation refers to the adjustment which occurs in the existing structure to locate that information. The process can be conceptualised as a memory system (Kihlstrom and Cantor, 1984) subject to many biases which have been extensively documented (Greenwald, 1980). The main feature of this memory system is that it has self-interest rather than accuracy as a prime directive. Greenwald (1981) showed that:

- memory is best for information which is highly relevant to the self. This is tied to the fact that recall of information learnt actively is better than that attained passively.
- people seek information which accords their existing self-concept and autobiographical memories are retrospectively revised to comply with the current self-concept. This ties into the findings from many studies of the processes of social inference: self-schema.
- people readily see themselves as responsible for the positive outcomes of their action but deny responsibility for negative outcomes.

It is evident that the information-processing system actively reconstructs and records inputs which are originally the product of social experiences. All the work on social cognition would support this conclusion (Taylor and Fiske, 1984). Assimilation-accommodation is a process which is no more passive recipient of information: it operates as an editor and censor at the same time as it records events. Assimilation-accommodation is purposive and motivated; operating in accordance with principles which guide its transformation of memory. These principles are considered below.
The process of evaluation entails the allocation of value to elements that are assimilated into the identity. Since the value of elements is dependent upon changing systems of social values and upon the social position of the person relative to these value systems, the evaluation process is continuous. Basically, the evaluation process is another specialized form of biased information processing. It is probably founded upon an ordered series of comparisons where identity elements are compared against social and objective criteria to determine their worth. Again, the process is purposive and motivated; directed by principles which guide the choice of comparators and the conclusions subsequently reached.

Principles

The operation of the identity processes is guided by rules or principles which define which end states are desirable for the structure of identity. There is no exhaustive list of such principles, however, there is considerable evidence for at least three: self-esteem, identity continuity, and distinctiveness.

1. Virtually every theory of identity postulates the importance of the desire to achieve self-esteem (Wells and Marwell, 1976). The self-esteem principle has been claimed upon occasion to be universal (Rosenberg, 1979; Rokeach, 1978). It has been shown to direct attitude change (Greenwald and Rosis, 1977), value formation (Kahneman, 1975), influence attributes (Atkin, Appelman and Burger, 1980), and induce selective perception and social comparison (Rosenberg, 1979). Self-esteem is sometimes seen to operate in tandem with the desire for self-efficacy (Bandura, 1981) which is the wish to feel competent and in control of one's life. The absence of self-efficacy is associated with feelings of futility, alienation, and helplessness (Seligman, 1975). There seems to be little doubt that the desire for self-esteem, perhaps modulated by the motive of self-efficacy, will direct what will be assimilated into the identity structure, how it is accommodated (viz. centrality, salience, and hierarchical position), and what value it is attributed. It will also potentiate these processes by motivating the person to seek out a particular set of experiences.

2. The evidence regarding the power of the continuity principle is less forceful. Nevertheless some theorists treat continuity as a priori defining property of identity. Erikson (1980), for instance, defined personal identity as 'persistent sameness within oneself'. There does however appear to be some confusion which arises from the way continuity and consistency are treated as if they are interchangeable in some writings. This is clearly an error: there can be continuity in inconsistency. There is some evidence to support both as motives guiding the identity processes. For instance, consistency has been shown to direct information-processing (Epstein, 1973; Greenwald, 1970; Markus, 1977). But in relation to identity, it is subjective or perceived consistency, not objective consistency, which is sought. It is consequently difficult to categorically prove its operation since subjective and objective consistency may be at variance.

Arguments in support of continuity as a guiding principle in identity dynamics stem more frequently from the phenomenological and humanistic psychological traditions than from the sociological or experimental schools.

Where the person is viewed as an agent, intentionally creating an identity or social being through efforts after social accountability (Shostert, 1980; Harre, 1984; Gergen and Davies, 1984), continuity of self-concept is regarded as a major motivation and director of action and cognition. Evidence for the importance of continuity in self-concept is easier to access than that for consistency. After events which challenge continuity, such as change in social position (e.g. after job loss) or in interpersonal relationships (e.g. due to bereavement), a person will make many efforts to re-establish continuity, often inappropriately (Breakwell, 1986).

Much of the evidence for the power of the distinctiveness principle comes from theorists concerned with aspects of identity derived from group memberships (see Tajfel, 1978, 1984). They have shown that intergroup comparisons are used to achieve personal distinctiveness. But intergroup comparisons operate similarly to establish distinctiveness (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980; Maslach, 1984) though the comparisons are asymmetrical (Cotol, 1984; 1987).

This process of differentiation is also influenced by the desire for self-esteem. Where people seek to differentiate themselves from others they do so on dimensions where they can be seen as dominant or superior (Tajfel, 1978). Distinctiveness and self-esteem go hand-in-hand; it is rare, though not impossible, for distinctiveness to be sought which does not credit its owner with some positive qualities. It is also possible that distinctiveness may guide the organisation of identity content and evaluation without motivating action. Much of the work on social comparison processes (Suls and Miller, 1977) suggests that people do not seek to be too different from those about them in the characteristics which they claim. At the same time they may seek to be perceived as similar to those who act as referents in action and beliefs. Distinctiveness may be achieved not through what you are but through how you value identity components and how you establish relationships between those components.

These three principles are almost certainly not the only ones which control the operation of the identity processes. Apter (1983) for instance has suggested that the desire for autonomy is equally powerful. The evidence in that case is still rudimentary but it is a possible addition to the list. The point is that the list of identity principles presented here is not purporting to be exhaustive, it illustrates how the processes may be directed. As information accumulates, this list can be extended.

More concerning than the underinclusive nature of the list of principles, is the fact that it is impossible as yet to specify their relative salience in controlling identity processes. This is important since they may be making mutually exclusive demands: the desire for self-esteem calling for one type of adjustment, the requirements of continuity inducing another, and perhaps distinctiveness may suggest a third. It may be possible to establish empirically which has priority for any one person in any one situation and thus predict adjustments. However, in all probability the salience-hierarchy will be situation-specific and temporally relative. The task of the researcher will be to establish a set of rules which specify under what circumstances the person will shift from one principle to another in order to direct identity processes.

There is one further issue to be considered before moving on to describe threats to identity. The recent upsurge in historical social psy-
The nature of threats to identity

The outline of the model of identity is necessary to get to the point where a threat to identity can be systematically defined. Threat cannot be adequately characterized merely in terms of its experiential manifestations. Many types of experience can act as threats and they may share nothing in their outward form. The justification for treating them all as essentially similar lies in the form of the predicament they pose for identity. A threat to identity occurs when the processes of identity (assimilation-accommodation and evaluation) are, for some reason, unable to comply with the identity principles (self-esteem, distinctiveness and continuity, and possibly others) which habitually guide their operation. The reason, whatever it is, for this interference in the principled operation of the identity processes constitutes the threat. The threat can originate externally or internally. An internal threat may occur if the identity principles demand mutually exclusive adjustments. As each must then be ignored. An external threat may occur when the person finds some social change (in interpersonal or intergroup relationships) requires without violating the directives of the identity principles. Of course, even internal threats must be derived initially from some social change that calls for identity changes.

In order to understand how any change in the social position of the individual or in society itself gains the power to threaten identity, it is necessary to consider both its social and personal meaning. Events or stimuli (like bereavement, ageing, unemployment, ethnic marginality) represent threats because they abrogate self-esteem, continuity, or distinctiveness but they have the power to do that because social influence processes ascribe particular meanings to them. Ideologies, generated by groups and manifested in propaganda, rhetoric and social representations, define the meaning of the individual's movements in the social matrix (Althussier, 1985; Moscovichi, 1984; Billig, 1987). This is as true for threats whose origins lie in changes in interpersonal networks as for those produced by movements in group or social category memberships. For instance, the social meaning of divorce has changed substantially in Western cultures over the last fifty years (changes embodied in legislation) such that the impact it can have on identity has altered. Not only do ideologies specify the substance of the threat, they also dictate the range of permissible coping strategies. While both threats and coping are shaped by social influences, it would be an error to ignore the individual's role in attributing meaning to change. Ideologies may establish the social meaning of a change which will be potentially threatening but the personal meaning of the change is dependent upon the belief systems and values assimilated into identity earlier. The personal meaning, and consequently coping, is a function both of its contemporary social meaning and judgements of it based on idiosyncratic values or beliefs. Some identity configurations (i.e., content/value patterns) may be more responsive to threat than others. There is considerable evidence, for instance, from the research on depression (Brown and Harris, 1978) that the response to stressful events is mediated by prior self-esteem levels and by the logical heuristics employed in information-processing (Beck et al, 1979).

Coping strategies

Since threat has been defined in terms of subjective experience, coping strategies require a similarly cognitive definition: anything the individual believes to be done in order to expunge threat constitutes a coping strategy. The definition emphasizes the intention underlying the activity rather than its outcome: if intended to remove the threat, it remains a coping strategy even if it fails. Coping strategies can have any or all of the following targets:

1. removal of aspects of the social context, at the material or ideological level, which generate threat;
is shifted to the unthreatened (for instance, where continuity cannot be maintained it may be subordinated to self-esteem).

Strategies involving the process of evaluation concern either the re-evaluation of existing identity content or of prospective content. This can be achieved by associating less favourable identity elements with ones of greater value; the loss is thus tied to overall gain. In contrast, it may involve changing the criteria of evaluation which will then immediately modify the relative values of identity content. For instance, the person may decide to measure self-esteem in terms of efficiency (Franks and Marolla, 1976) rather than in relation to social approval. Alternatively, it may involve challenging the legitimacy or accuracy of social norms that establish the value of particular identity elements. As an intra-psychic strategy this would merely involve ignoring some norms when making evaluations.

Interpersonal Coping Strategies

Interpersonal coping strategies rely upon changing relationships with others in order to cope with threat. Four have been well-documented: self-isolation; negativism; passing; and compliance. Isolationism may impede the person from threatening events but also tends to annihilate the opportunities of using social network support in coping which has been established to be valuable (Politzer, 1980). Negativism entails outright conflict with anyone who challenges the identity structure (Apter, 1982); threats are rebutted through direct attacks on their source but this can result in a further aggregation of threats. Passing may be a strategy chosen when actual exit from a threatening position is impossible. Instead, the person pretends not to occupy the position, persuading others to accept the lie (Watson, 1970). The problem with passing as a strategy is that there is always the possibility that the deceit will be discovered and everything lost. Compliance entails "playing the role" (Goffman, 1976) required of someone in the threatening position and gaining social approval as a result; the losses due to the stigma of the position are ameliorated by the acceptance offered for doing what is expected. The cost of compliance is often learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975). Each strategy has inescapable disadvantages. Each requires that the individual operates within the existing social and ideological structures whilst the restrictions of dominant social representations, attributions and moral codes. To be at all effective, they require strategies at the intrapsychic levels to be used simultaneously.

Intergroup Coping Strategies

The individual may use group membership in a number of quite different ways when coping with threat. For instance, a carefully chosen mixture of multiple group memberships can operate to nullify the threat derived from any single membership: the stigma of one membership can be eradicated by the value of another. Alternatively, groups can be used as sources of information and support when threats materialise (for example, when illness strikes). But perhaps the most interesting strategies involve group action designed to bring about changes in dominant belief or value systems or in existing power relationships. This may involve small-scale pressure groups or bigger social movements (Turner and Killian, 1972). It
Choosing a coping strategy

Coping strategies have been described in terms of their level of operation but this sort of classification is only a precursor to the development of a model of coping (Breakwell, 1988). Such a model would have to account for choices between strategies and for their relative efficacy. In predicting coping strategies, it would have to examine the relationship between the type of threat (its origin, longevity, and stability), the social context of its occurrence (ideologically and in terms of available interpersonal networks, group memberships, and caring professionals), the preexistent identity structure (with regard to self-esteem levels and actual defining properties), and the cognitive resources available to the person (influenced by biases in personal and social attribution processes). It would have to examine phases in coping and the sequencing of strategy choices, particularly sub-optimal ones in order to establish the limits to coping. The greatest value in attempting to create such a model lies in the fact that it necessitates the integration of information from all areas of psychological knowledge.

References


