

WATCH THIS SPACE

Simon, B (2004) **Identity in modern society: A social psychological perspective**. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. ISBN 0-631-22747-4 pbk. Pages xvii + 222.

Cathy Vaughan
Institute of Social Psychology
London School of Economics and Political Science.
London

On the opening page of this inquiry into identity Bernd Simon reminds us that “Identity is fashionable. Everybody wants to have one, many promise to provide one”. Identity is not only highly topical in popular culture but is the subject of considerable academic musing and social scientific endeavour.

Identity in modern society reviews Simon’s extensive experimental research in the field of identity, and builds upon and extends his Self-Aspect Model of Identity (SAMI). Whilst it primarily draws upon Social Identity Theory and Self Categorisation Theory, Simon’s model attempts to integrate sociological and psychological approaches to identity. Throughout the text, he emphasises the underlying premise of SAMI – that “identity results from interaction in the social world and in turn guides interaction in the social world” (p2).

Simon introduces the book by briefly reviewing historically important perspectives on human consciousness and the social conditions of human existence. He follows this introduction by summarising the major contributions of both sociology (symbolic interactionism, role theory and identity theory) and psychology (the social cognition perspective, and the social identity and self categorisation perspectives) to the analysis of identity. It is in the third chapter, the ‘theoretical heartbeat’ of the book, that Simon details his model.

Simon draws on Linville’s (1985) notion of self-aspect as a “cognitive category or concept that serves to process and organise information and knowledge about oneself” (p45), noting the truly social psychological nature of self-aspects, in that they emerge through social interaction with others. The central assumption of the SAMI is that it is through self interpretation that people achieve an understanding of themselves, an identity, and that self interpretation involves a varying number of self-aspects. Identity is described as “collective” when self interpretation is focused on a dominant self-aspect and “individual” when identity results from self interpretation in terms of a more complex set of self-aspects (rather than the terms personal and social identity, Simon uses individual and collective identity to emphasise that identity is never asocial. It should be noted that the term “collective” is used in a psychological and not a sociological,

Durkheimian sense). Simon describes individual and collective identity as being in dialectic relation, context-dependent and functional.

The largest chapters of the book are devoted to reviewing Simon and colleague's extensive experimental work on identity in relation to the SAMI. These chapters explore the antecedents of individual and collective identity; and identity in minority-majority contexts. Following the minimal group paradigm of Tajfel et al (1971) most of the research drawn upon in these chapters is based on the creation of ad hoc, temporary groups. Whilst this is standard procedure in experimental group research, the limited presentation of empirical work from non-laboratory controlled settings and the at times only partial support demonstrated for the SAMI, mean many questions remain. Simon notes that "social context variations concerning the valence, frequency, meaningfulness and number of self-aspects available (and/or accessible) for self interpretation affect the construction of individual and collective identities" (p82). Variables in social context, such as the power and/or status of an experimental group, are manipulated in the research presented. However, the interaction of power and status with historical context, and political and economic circumstance, warrants further discussion than is generated by the experimental setting. Conclusions drawn about the impact of power or status on collective identity based on artificial researcher driven self-aspects (such as a preference for the artworks of one painter over another, or for rural or urban life) may or may not fit with the lived experience of identity outside the laboratory setting.

Simon devotes the following chapters to the exploration of identity in intercultural contexts; and the role of identity in social mobilisation and participation. Here he draws upon questionnaire and interview work conducted with colleagues in (predominantly) Germany to explore issues as diverse as immigration, right-wing extremism, and social movements such as the older people's movement, the gay movement and the US fat acceptance movement. In this part of the book the focus shifts from a specific model of identity to the role of identity in predicting social behaviour.

Identity in modern society provides a detailed overview of Simon's self-aspect model of identity, and is at its strongest highlighting the theoretical underpinning of the model, reviewing disciplinary contributions to the study of identity, and in locating the self-aspect approach within the social psychological literature. The book is clearly structured with a succinct summary of each chapter neatly leading into the next. Simon concludes the text by emphasising that the book is an interim report and outlines two key areas for future research, emphasising that these will form the basis of his future work: identity and power, and identity and action. And it is here that things begin to get interesting.

For the critical potential of the SAMI to be realised, the complex inter-relationships between power, status, affect and identity need to be further considered. In particular, it seems clear that the relationship between power and identity can only partially be understood through the manipulation of power as an experimental variable in a controlled group research setting. The socially constructed nature of power interacts with identity in settings of racism, structural violence, generational change, exclusion and privilege. Future research exploring the place of power in the dialectic relation between individual and collective identity would be more convincing if evidence were generated from these real world settings - 'contaminated' with solidarity, jealousy, and

history as they are. Doing so would be to take the approach back to its roots in Tajfel's interest in contexts of unequal power relations.

The other area identified by Simon for future research is identity and action. Here he highlights the independence of, and interaction between, collective identity and individual calculation (in terms of costs and benefits) and their dual affect on participation in collective action as an area requiring further conceptual work. In emphasising the dialectic nature of individual and collective identity, the SAMI has considerable potential for increasing understanding of how the values on which individual calculations of cost-benefit are based relate to individual and collective identity. The application of this understanding to increasing participation in mass social movements that also imply particular individual behaviours (with associated costs and benefits), such as the environmental movement, is particularly timely.

Throughout the text discussion of the theories underpinning the SAMI, particularly Social Identity Theory and Self Categorisation Theory, is clear and usefully grounds the text in the social psychological literature. However, the book does not really engage with existing critiques (and misunderstandings) of the social identity tradition. In addition, in the first chapter of **Identity in modern society** Simon discusses the complexity of the modern world under the heading "Nation, culture and globalisation". From the title of the book it is clear that the contextual focus of the work will be "modern society", however there is little discussion of how modern society might be defined for the purposes of this text. Assumptions appear to have been made about the nature of society outside Europe (in particular), as great swathes of the modern world (in Africa for example) are missing. Given that the book aims primarily to review and extend the author's previous work, and that he is based in Germany, this is not unexpected. However, discussion of the potential value of the SAMI in complex contexts of social change outside Europe is warranted.

Identity in modern society offers a detailed overview of a particular approach to individual and collective identity, grounded in the European tradition. However, perhaps it generates most interest in discussing what might come next, work better conceptualising the relationships between identity, power and action. In any case, Bernd Simon concludes the book by stating that he did not write it to stop working – watch this space.

REFERENCES.

Linville, P (1985) Self complexity and affective extremity: Don't put all your eggs in one cognitive basket. **Social Cognition**, 3, 94-120.

Tajfel H, Billig M, Bundy R & Flament C (1971) Social categorization and intergroup behaviour. **European Journal of Social Psychology**, 1, 149-178.