Reflexive identities

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Introduction

Reflexivity, in its various forms, is a core concept of personal and social identity. In the broadest of definitions, reflexivity means that which takes account of itself. Individuals monitor the world around them, and change their behavior in light of incoming information. Reflexivity is not so much a component of identity, but a process that is a driver in its formation and maintenance on a very basic level. Since the unsettling forces of globalization, increased information, and thus increased mediation, reflexivity has come to play a heightened or radicalized role in identity construction, specifically as a renegotiation of the interrelationship of individuals to broader social institutions and structures.

In this chapter, I trace the historical and intellectual development of reflexive identity. In the second section, I focus on the work of Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, who have both argued that identity in the contemporary world is individualized and reflexive.

Historical and intellectual development

The reflexive process in social theory can, and often is, split into several different types (May 2000; Pollner 1991). The historical development of reflexivity has focused on reflexivity on a more constitutive level: that of a cognitive process involving self and others that is an essential part of identity. Identity, who we are and who we think ourselves to be, is not innate, but is something that is constructed as part of a dialogue with ourselves, others, and social institutions and structures. Peter Caws frames the stance succinctly: “Identity, psychologically as well as logically, is a reflexive relation, a relation of myself to myself, but it can be a mediated relation: I relate to myself through my interaction with others and with the world” (1994: 378). Identity is not something that we simply have, but rather, identity is something that is created. Timothy May calls this type of reflexivity, endogenous: “Endogenous reflexivity refers to an awareness of the knowledge that is born in and through the actions of members of a given community in terms of their contribution to social reality. This includes an understanding not only of ‘who’ someone is, but also ‘how’ others view them” (May 1999).
In social theory, one prominent trend is to argue that identity is not something that can be determined, or studied by an investigation of individuals alone. Reflexivity is integral to the process by which identity is social, as it involves the back and forth nature of the constructing of identity. Anthony Elliott (2007: 10) writes, “The self is recursive or reflexive to the degree that people constantly monitor, or watch, their own activities, thoughts or emotions as a means of generating these aspects of their identity.” For Elliott, to study identity means to study the various kinds of interpretations that individuals make. In this sense, however, interpretation, and the process of reflecting information back to the self, is a mediated process. To reflect on others, social institutions, and even the self, involves representations, and signs, and most frequently, language. One of the leading promoters of the dialogical theory of the self is the philosopher Charles Taylor.

This crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally dialogical character. We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence of defining our identity, through our acquisition of rich human languages of expression . . . I want to take language in a broad sense, covering not only the words we speak, but also other modes of expression whereby we define ourselves, including the “languages” of art, of gesture, of love, and the like. But we learn these modes of expression through exchanges with others. (Taylor 1994: 79)

Identity relies on definitions of the self, definitions that we acquire through reflexive exchange with other people, various cultures, and ourselves. This process happens through “articulating” versions of self-identity; these views of ourselves come to actually constitute identity when they are filtered back to us through the outside world (ibid.: 78).

In part, Taylor draws this view of the self from the history of philosophy, where a version of this idea of a reflexive self has been stated in various forms, perhaps the first clear version of it coming from René Descartes. In thinking about himself and his position in the world, he overcame his doubt about the existence of the outside world, with the realization that there is an “I” doing the thinking (cogito ergo sum). For both Kant, and Hegel, reflexivity is important for self-consciousness and ultimately for consciousness to be able to apprehend the outside world.

One of the most significant figures in the development of understanding reflexive identity is George Herbert Mead. As Taylor points out, Mead was one of the first to realize that the acquisition of language happens through the interaction with others. For Mead (1962: 140), “the self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure.” The possibility of coming to know one’s self is based on the reflexive capacity to monitor the self from another’s assumed position. Taylor comments, “People do not acquire the languages needed for self-definition on their own” (1994: 79). He draws on Mead’s idea of “significant others,” who introduce us to important aspects of selfhood. Thus, identity, for Mead and Taylor, is always reflexively produced. Taylor writes, “We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us” (1994: 79). Identity rests upon the ability to monitor our actions with reference to others.

For Mead, not all of our identity is social. We have desires and impulses that arise purely within us, and not in dialogue with others. Thus Mead distinguished the social self, what he termed “me,” from the unsocialized self, the “I.” The social self is reflexively organized, but the relationship between I and me is also reflexively organized. The ability of individuals to distinguish between these aspects of themselves leads to self-awareness.

Another major figure in the development of concepts of reflexivity in identity is Erving Goffman. For Goffman, the strange thing about social identity is that individuals rarely are
aware that they are deciding to be a part of social structures. However, the decision is not the most important aspect, but rather that, as individuals, we are constantly making analyses of social situations and adapting our behavior to them. In his book *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman likens social life to a drama. Identity for Goffman is something that is performed by individuals within various interactive frameworks. Social actors have to work with the environment, to work with others, and, most importantly of all, to continually monitor how the performance is functioning. Goffman puts a high degree of emphasis on the necessity of continually monitoring and displaying social competence as elements of the successful production of identity.

There is a way in which reflexive identity can be considered a distinctly modern phenomenon. Not only because philosophy turned to thinking about rational agents in modern times, but because there seems to be something different about the modern era which means that the task of maintaining an identity falls on the individual. Lash and Friedman write, “pre-modern identity can be very generally understood as externally (or in Kant’s sense ‘heteronomously’) determined. In ‘tribal’ societies it is kinship-ordered cosmologies that define identity in terms of deciding who someone is” (1992: 4). Taylor (1994: 80) argues that people in pre-modern times did not lack the concept of identity, but rather structures were such that identity, and its recognition by others, was not a problem as such.

In many contemporary social theoretical accounts of the contemporary world, the modern way of life is under pressure from globalization. While it is beyond this chapter to engage the debates in social theory about the nature of globalization, there is a general consensus that globalization in general means that life, at least for many in the expensive West, has become faster and more complex. Zygmunt Bauman sums up well the feeling of globalization:

*To put it in a nutshell: no one seems to be now in control. Worse still, it is not clear what “being in control” could, under the circumstances, be like. As before, all ordering is local and issue-oriented, but there is no locality that could pronounce for humankind as a whole, or an issue that could stand up for the totality of global affairs. It is this novel and uncomfortable perception which has been articulated (with little benefit to intellectual clarity) in the currently fashionable concept of globalization.*

(1998: 38)

With regards to identity, without putting any specificity on it, modern sources of identity have come under increasing pressure. Things such as the nation-state have been pressured by immigration, stable lifetime jobs are now seemingly gone, on average nearly 50 percent of marriages end in divorce. From national belonging to the most intimate sphere, there has been a shakedown.

Globalization and its unsettling force on the stable institutions of modernity has come from technological innovation both through the ability of people to physically move around the globe and through being exposed to new information. John Urry (2007) pointed out that in 2010 there would be an estimated one billion international arrivals. Perhaps more significantly there has been a rise of new communication technologies including the internet and mobile phones. As of 2010, there was an estimated 1.9 billion internet users (out of a world population of 6.8 billion). People can connect in new and diverse ways to other people and to other cultures that are not necessarily physically proximate.

These distinct changes, brought on by globalization have distinct impacts for reflexive identity. The modern identity had reflexivity as a core component of social identity, and in a globalizing world, it is suggested, reflexivity has become radicalized. Bauman sums up the new era
of reflexive identity quite well: “Needing to become what one is is the hallmark of modern living” (Bauman in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001: xv). Identity, in this conception is an individualized project. It is not something external, determined by language, but something that is continually worked on.

The major claims and contributions of the theory of reflexive identity

Reflexivity has always played a constitutive role in modern understandings of social identity; in the global era, reflexivity, argue Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, has taken a radicalized turn. Through conditions of heightened reflexivity, the twining of global structures and personal identity has taken place. No longer, they argue is reflexivity just an incidental part of the construction of social identity, but it has taken on a constitutive role in the renegotiation of self and society. Thus they argue that the contemporary era could be labeled “Reflexive Modernity.”

This turn of phrase makes reference to the postmodernism debate, suggesting that the project of identity has not been entirely displaced but that the role of identity in the contemporary world has changed. Anthony Elliott writes, “observation of, and reflection upon, the social world by human agents comes to reshape the very forms of life instituted by society” (Elliott 2009: 287). For theories of reflexive individualization, not only does our self-knowledge matter to us and to the creation of identity but also it actually constitutes social structures.

The extreme shifts of the global (and modern) world are the starting point of British sociologist Anthony Giddens’s theory of reflexivity. He has developed one of the most powerful and influential accounts of the effects of reflexivity on identity. In his books *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990), *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), and *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), Giddens provides a compelling account of shifts to the experience of everyday life, and the fundamental role that reflexivity has come to play in the formation of identity. His theory of reflexivity brings together two major strands of this thinking and theory: his arguments about the recursive nature of social life, and the experience of living in the modern world. For Giddens the deep structural and institutional changes of globalization impact upon the self, and that “for the first time in human history, ‘self’ and ‘society’ are interrelated” (1991: 32). He argues that human societies should be viewed as constantly under construction, always being reconstructed.

Giddens’s account of the rise of reflexivity as a driving force of self-identity in the contemporary era begins with an account of the dislocating nature of modernity and globalization. Through the use of terms such as “runaway world” and “juggernaut,” Giddens calls attention to the way in which the experience of daily life is turbulent. He defines the juggernaut as “a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of control” (1990: 139). This is not to say that changes to social life are anything new, but for Giddens, the experience of change itself is constitutively different. What is new is that “change does not consistently conform either to human expectation or to human control” (1991: 28).

This contemporary world of unpredictable change is marked by a process of detraditionalization, or traditions that have been unseated. The complexity of the modern world, both in the explosion of information and in the movements of people around the globe, have changed the nature of community. Traditions were embedded in communities marked by physical co-presence. Giddens writes, “tradition always discriminates between ‘insider’ and ‘other’, because participation in ritual and acceptance of formulaic truth is the condition for its existence” (1994: 79). While traditions are certainly not disappearing, they are being eclipsed and renegotiated and their ability to determine status in the community is disappearing. Habermas writes of multicultural societies:
when a culture has become reflexive, the only traditions and forms of life that can sustain themselves are those that bind their members while at the same time subjecting themselves to critical examination and leaving later generations the option of learning from other traditions or converting and setting out for other shores.

(1994: 130–1)

This points to detraditionalization as a reflexive process of determination of group status, something that is reflexively negotiated.

In addition to detraditionalization, Giddens identifies a general process of what he calls “disembedding” (1990, 1991). By disembedding he means that social processes are pulled, or lifted out of a particular locality and become stretched over time and space. Giddens argues that as social actors we always to some extent have knowledge of what we are doing. This involves he argues, both practical knowledge of how to get by and discursive knowledge. However, our ability to get by in the modern world is challenged by feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and risk, which Giddens lumps under the category “ontological security.” The need and mode of monitoring of social action has been stretched beyond the confines of trust as we knew it. Without being able to have knowledge over local community and area, and with social interaction stretched over long distances, and including people and symbols that are not physically co-present, this alters the nature of trust. Trust is different when you cannot monitor the actions of others face to face, and when there are too many things to monitor. Similarly, risk is not equivalent to danger, but rather it is a danger over which you do not have knowledge, and so you have to trust in expert systems to keep going. Part of the heightening of reflexivity is that physical co-presence is not necessary to undertaking social interaction, including the building of identity. In short, individuals must create new modes of behavior, and new identities to cope with the uncertainties of a runaway world. While this all sounds very dire for individuals, Giddens has a positive spin on it. Previous societies that were more locked into tradition were fundamentally not open to self-awareness. Reflexivity exists more in the realm of re-embedding social practices.

In the post-traditional order, self and self-identity are negotiated with a plurality of choice (Giddens 1991: 82). While traditions have not necessarily disappeared, they have lost the social weight that gave them the ability to organize social identities. This means that our everyday experience at one and the same time is more diverse and more segmented. One example of this is that people tend to live geographically separated from work and family, which is a sense of isolation, but we are now confronted with many other people’s workplaces and experiences which run through our own. It is nearly impossible to walk down a street in a global city and not see many different cultural ways of living and have some experience of it. Even the ability of religion to provide cogent narratives of self has become contextualized. This is integrally linked to the change of religion, but people tend less and less to believe in absolutes, and to qualify beliefs within certain contexts.

Additionally, Giddens does not see reflexivity as a coping strategy, but actually a repositioning of the importance of reflexive self-identity as a means of negotiating the connection between self and social structure. On one level, Giddens maintains a concept of reflexivity as that of being a human with social knowledge and ability. On another, more serious level, the incorporation of new knowledges and information alter the very fabric of social life. In Giddens’s formulation of reflexivity, there is not simply a “bending back upon” or a reflection, but individuals through their reflexive action change social institutions and structures themselves. Giddens writes, “The reflexivity of modern social life consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information.
about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character” (1990: 38). Thus, reflexivity is not just reflection, or the reflective agent, but one who constitutively and actively alters the social landscape. Not only do we monitor social actions, but we also monitor the monitoring of social action.

The consequence of a shift to reflexive identity is of a switch from self as complete and internally constituted to a self, which is constantly being remade. Giddens calls this state a “plastic” state. The way in which we are able to maintain an identity is through the maintenance of a particular narrative of the self. Giddens writes:

A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self.

(1991: 54)

In creating a revisable identity, there is something about a reflexive identity that is more unifying than the postmodern one. Reflexive identity reinscribes people into new narratives and global structures.

Giddens argues that there are two sides to the increasing connectedness of globalization. Most often people focus on the way in which globalization is a top-down process, something like the spread of a homogenous (and often Americanized) culture. In contrast to that, reflexive identity highlights the way in which globalization moves bottom up. Giddens (1994: 58) points out that when you purchase an item of clothing, or particular kind of food, you are part of an extensive global web. The shirt might be made in Thailand, shipped by a Dutch company, on a ship based in Singapore. The simple act of deciding what suit to buy, actually comes to constitute trade patterns. Our actions come to be linked through risk, as there are ecological and ethical consequences to the decisions we make that link us all together.

For Giddens, reflexivity has come to affect self-identity all the way down through intimate relationships. In his book The Transformation of Intimacy (1992), Giddens provides a study in the transformative power of reflexivity on self-identity. With the slackening of tradition, people now have greater choice over who they get into relationships with, and what kind of relationship they have. The basis for this increased choice is social reflexivity, that people choose what kind of self they want to be, and come to choose what kind of relationship they want. So while many social critics decry the high rate of divorce in Western societies, Giddens argues that there is something reflexive and positive here. Couples are now engaging in what he terms “pure relationships,” that is, they are engaging in and staying in relationships to the extent that they desire to. The bonds of love are not anchored by societal demands, but by reflexive choice. Reflexivity is integral to the creation of the pure relationship in that these changes do not happen in a vacuum. When a couple walks down the aisle, they know that they have only about a 50 percent chance of staying married. The arrangement of marriage is undertaken with an awareness of what is happening socially.

Social science is affected by the reflexive state of affairs as well. Sociology, for Giddens, will always be reflexively a part of the world that it attempts to study; subject and object are intimately and reflexively linked. Natural scientists, Giddens argues, try to understand the world from a single point of interpretation, that is, the “world” which they are studying has clear parameters. Social scientists on the other hand are studying a world which they have influence over, and at the same time a world which influences them. Giddens writes:
The social sciences operate within a double hermeneutic, involving two-way ties with the actions and institutions of those they study. Sociological observers depend upon lay concepts to generate accurate descriptions of social processes; and agents regularly appropriate theories and concepts of social science within their behaviour, thus potentially changing its character.

(1987: 30)

The double hermeneutic relates back to Giddens’s view about the constitution of society as built upon the practical consciousness of social actors. The double hermeneutic affects the social scientist as much as the “contents of the research” for the social scientist is changing from the attitude and responses of the “subject” as quickly as the subject is changing in response to the social scientist. The findings of social science have the possibility of altering social life far beyond the immediate context of the research.

Ulrich Beck has developed an account of reflexive modernization and the effect on individual identity that is similar in many ways to Anthony Giddens, yet critically different. Much like Giddens, Beck argues that there is a major structural shift in society that pushes individuals into a position where identity is their task. Not simply any more do individuals rely on old social categories to provide meaning, but individuals need to become who they are. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim put it, “Life loses its self-evident quality; the social ‘instinct substitute’ which supports and guides it is caught up in the grinding mills of what needs to be thought out and decided” (2001: 7). Thus, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that reflexive modernization is driving reflexive individualism, that individuals are becoming pushed to negotiate their place and identity.

The central claim, for Beck of reflexive modernization lies in the development of “risk society” which he outlines in his book Risk Society (1992). In a risk society, individuals become freed from structural forms of social life. Initially, the shift from traditional societies to industrial societies was the paradigm of industrialization. For Beck, the key characteristic of reflexive modernization is that modernity “modernized” itself. He makes a distinction between first modernity and second, or reflexive modernity. The first modernity was characterized by heavy, stable industrial capitalism, marked by the presence of the welfare nation-state. Personal life and identity were created through well-structured and bounded forms of collective life.

The second modernity has disembodied these ways of life. Primarily the side-effects, or unintended consequences of first modernity have lead to an unsettled and highly reflexive second modernity marked by risk. This second modernity is marked by a criticism of science for the ill effects of technology such as atomic disasters (in particular Chernobyl), polluted environment, a nation-state that has lost the ability to ensure welfare, and a working life that is marked by flexibility. Above all, society is marked by a new problem of risk. While risk is seemingly nothing new, Beck argues that in first modernity, there were dangers, but they were readily apparent. You worry about the danger of getting hit by a car crossing the road for example. A risk, by comparison, is the danger of chemicals leaching into your bottled water. There is less transparency, the problems are part and parcel with scientific knowledge, and distinctly out of the control of the individual.

For Beck, reflexive individualism does not mean more reflection. He argues that this shift to risk society is out of control of individuals. He writes of how reflexive modernization comes to exist in the shift from first to second modernity:

In view of these two stages and their sequence, the concept of “reflexive modernization” may be introduced. This precisely does not mean reflection (as the adjective “reflexive”
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Beck is not arguing that industrial society has necessarily disappeared, but rather that the dynamic of industrial society undercut itself. Reflexive modernization means self-transformation more than self-reflection.

One the side of reflexive individualism, Beck makes a similar argument. For Giddens, reflexive self-identity, as a response to ontological security, means a renegotiation. While there are many out of control parts, this seems to be a way in which people successfully renegotiate their identity. Hence relationships detraditionalized through reflexive awareness have led to “pure relationships,” ones that are marked by people actively engaged in relationships that matter to them. Reflexive individualism does not mean that people are more conscious, but rather they are more aware that control is impossible (Beck et al. 2003: 3).

For Beck, there has been a complete erosion of stable collective identity. The old social categories of life in industrial modernity were, as Bauman puts it, simply facts of life. However, Beck argues that in second modernity, the individual becomes the central point of organization for his life. He writes, “This ‘self’ (the contour) of industrial modernity gets lost in the modernization process, which shifts its own foundation and coordinates; it is replaced by another self which must be reconstructed, theoretically and politically” (Beck 1997: 25). No longer does one simply fit into the old categories, but the self is different, one that is negotiated. This process is one that is forced, and conflicted, for the old categories such as nation-state, family, class, Beck calls “zombie categories” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). They are still around, but they have lost the definition that they once had. “You may and you must lead your own independent life, outside the old bonds of family, tribe, religion, origin and class; and you must do this within the new guidelines and rules which the state, the job market, the bureaucracy etc. lay down” (ibid.: 11).

Main criticisms of reflexive identities

One of the general charges against reflexivity is that it encourages narcissism. Excessive individualism, and focus on the self, is generally seen as a negative moral quality. In the context of the global world, Richard Sennett has argued that the qualities that make individual strong performers in a culture of new capitalism, which includes above all flexibility, is leading to a decline of moral values. The reflexive capacities of effective functioning in the global economic marketplace are not the values that make for good character. In his book *The Corrosion of Character* (1998), he details ways in which the ability of individuals to reflexively form identity does nothing to help them weather the effects of short-termism. For Sennett, reflexivity is an inherent part of maintaining an identity, but that there are transcendental values that remain fixed.
and outside of the capacity of reflexivity to change. He writes, “The maintenance of oneself is a shifting activity, as one’s circumstances change and one’s experience accumulates; fidelity to oneself, as in being honest about one’s faults, out to be constant, no matter where or what age one is” (Sennett 1998: 145). People, in modern capitalism, are treated as disposable, and they are fundamentally individualized, pushed to become flexible, but are cut off from meaningful shared narratives.

Scott Lash (Lash and Urry 1994) asks why it seems that reflexive individualization seems to be happening in London, but not in the relatively less wealthy north of England. There is an implicit class divide in the possibility of increased reflexive identity, those with access to new communication technologies, and those that are already in a socio-economic position to renegotiate identity. Anthony Elliott expands this point to encompass the globe. He points out that in the contemporary era of radical and global instability, there is a rise of social behavior that is distinctively not reflexive:

Much of Beck’s work has been concerned to emphasize the degree of reflexive institutional dynamism involved in the restructuring of personal, social and political life, from the reforging of intimate relationships to the reinvention of politics. But there are disturbing dimensions here as well, which the spread of cultural, ethnic, racial and gendered conflict has shown only too well, and often in ways in which one would be hard pressed to find forms of personal or social reflexive activity.

(Elliott 2002: 301)

Elliott’s point is a sharp one for the concept of reflexive identity in both personal and social dimensions. In Sennett’s account, individuals are isolated from shared narratives, but in various ethnic or cultural conflicts, there is a sense in which individual identity is dominated by the cultural and material circumstances of birth.

With regards to the theory of reflexive individualization, one of the major points of contention is the relationship of the reflexive individual to broader social structures. Zygmunt Bauman points out that there is not enough in the concept of reflection to explain how self-mastery leads to change:

We are all engaged in “life politics” – we are “reflexive beings” who look closely at every move we take and are seldom satisfied with its results. Somehow, however, that reflexion does not reach far enough to embrace the conditions which connect our moves with the results and decide their outcomes.

(2001: 19)

How is it that radicalized self-identity actually comes to alter social institutions? In a similar vein to Bauman, Jeffrey Alexander (1996) asserts that contemporary society is marked by a greater separation of the individual from cultural forms. Alexander argues that reflexivity is inherent in social action, but cannot be separated from it: “Typification, invention and strategization are simultaneous moment of every social action; they cannot be separated and compartmentalized in a historicist way” (1996: 136).

All accounts of reflexive identity, from Mead and Goffman through to Giddens and Beck, seem to present an individual that is able to effectively monitor social behavior and then to change their own behavior accordingly. In the accounts by Giddens and Beck, social actors have the capacity to make transformative choices. But if we take seriously psychoanalytic theories of the self, the reflexive individual might not be fully conscious of all the factors in play. Certainly
Anthony Giddens does include some aspects of the work of Erik Ericson on trust, but Beck makes no allowance at all for the fact that as social agents, individuals are not able to access their own feelings and information reliably. Beck and Giddens certainly do allow that there is much beyond the control of the individual, but they have no allowance for the idea that the individual herself might not be accessible to herself. Thus, Anthony Elliott (2007) argues that there is little room for psychoanalytic concepts of the self with regard to reflexive individualism.

Furthering this line of critique against the component of cognitive self-mastery in theories of reflexive individualism, it could be added that reflexivity only seems to be seen in times of crisis. As already noted, for Goffman, individuals show great practical competence in the reflexive production of the self, but they do not seem to show much discursive awareness of reflexive self-identity. What is the role of the cognitive capacity of self-reflection? Beck argues that reflexivity is about reflex. It is not that there is more individual reflexivity, but that there is systemic reflexivity. The capable acting agent really only seems to be reflexive because of globalization and increasing structural connectivity. Which is a structural connection, not one that has anything to do with cognitive capacity of self-reflection. There are in essence, no changes that the acting agent makes that are themselves reflexive. Alexander takes the line of critique one step further by arguing that this type of structural embeddedness is distinctly non-reflexive. He writes, “Rather than reflexivity being understood in term of scientific, rational mastery of spatially separated environment, social self-control can successfully emerge only when modernist actors and institutions are embedded in relations of non-reflexive trust and commitments of a decidedly traditional kind” (Alexander 1996: 136).

Manuel Castells tends to agree with Giddens that contemporary identity is marked by a new emphasis on identity-building. However, he argues, “the network society is built on the systemic disjunction between the local and the global for most individuals and social groups” (Castells 1997: 11). He goes on to say that most new identities are actually structured in opposition to the networked and global changes. Because of increasing amounts of information, the control of meaningful representations critical to Giddens’s idea of self-identity is beyond individual and local actors, and thus the possibility of reflexive self-mastery remains beyond the reach of individuals. Additionally, he argues that it was a robust civil society that provided the basis for individuals to engage in the kind of reflexive politics that Giddens foresees, and thus the possibility of increased self-reflexivity is decreased here too.

One of the more serious charges against the theories of reflexive individualism is that they elide the true workings of power. Beck argues that the traditional categories have lost their power. But take a look at the earning power of men and women in Western society, and there is a pretty clear picture that there is not equality between the genders. Habermas argues this point saying that there is even a “reflexively produced discrimination” of women. Policies meant to move women toward freedom have actually produced and normalized a more covert system of discrimination. Thus reflexivity actually aids in eliding the working of power.

In contrast to the theories of reflexive individualism presented by Giddens and Beck, Margaret Archer (2007: 4) argues that reflexivity is an “unacknowledged aspect” of social life. She argues that the reflexive individual portrayed by Giddens and Beck is too free floating. Identity for Archer is not so free floating. She defines reflexivity as “the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relations to their (social) contexts and vice versa.” In Archer’s version, reflexivity is part of an internal dialogue held by people in the construction of identity. Her argument is that reflexivity can be seen in the myriad ways that people negotiate the social world. In this way, we are not wholly determined by outside forces, but can have causal power as agents in a relatively structural world, but constructing ourselves as projects.
Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) argue that the theory of reflexive individualization of Beck and Giddens is overly cognitive, and that reflexivity actually lies in processes of production and accumulation. They argue that individuals are not always empowered to take control of self-identity and of life narrative (p. 314). They argue “that reflexivity is not merely a matter of cognition or of ethics, but also for aesthetics” (p. 322). Individuals are increasingly reflexive, but they are also embedding in systems, which are themselves reflexive.

The future of reflexive identities

Reflexivity is a critical concept in theorizing social identity, and thus will not be dislodged from its role. However, Archer (2007) might be right that not enough has been done to understand how reflexivity functions in the creation of self-narratives. Mary Holmes (2010) argues that the debate over reflexive identity has left out emotions. Not only do people draw on rational, or information accounts of the social world, but they also draw on emotional resources. She writes, “more work is needed in order to understand how emotions are involved in reflexivity” (Holmes 2010: 148). Social identity cannot just be defined through the reflexive monitoring of social action, and the requisite adjustment to the self without making reference to how it feels. Additionally, there is very little reference to the body in the literature on reflexive identity.

In this author’s mind, the most interesting direction for reflexivity is suggested by Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert (2005) with their concept of the new individualism. They are at pains to distance the new individualism from reflexive individualism precisely because reflexive individualism does not take into account the unconscious. Life in the fast paced global world does indeed lead to higher reflexivity, and there is more attention to the self, and self-mastery, but for Elliott and Lemert, self-identity has turned to self-reinvention. Giddens argued that reflexive self-identity was partially a response to feelings of ontological insecurity, the failure of social structures to sufficiently anchor our identities. But in the theory of the new individualism, as opposed to theories of reflexive individualism, processes of reinvention, which are certainly driven in part by reflexivity, foster only more fear and anxiety. More can be theorized and researched in this vein, trying to fuse together reflexivity with some robust account of the unconscious.

Large global questions, such as climate change, are forcing individuals to renegotiate identity in a social and ethical sense. In the absence of grand societal narratives, this process of finding new identities for a new world order can only be a reflexive one.

References

Reflexive identities


