



Identity as a category of theory and practice

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review of

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Identity has emerged as a major theme in management and organisation studies. This is perhaps unsurprising since questions of who one is or who one might become are particularly important in organisational settings (Watson, 2008). An insightful and widely cited introduction to a special issue in the journal *Organization* by Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas note that 'Identity has become a popular frame through which to investigate a wide array of phenomena ... linked to nearly everything: from mergers, motivation and meaning-making to ethnicity, entrepreneurship and emotions to politics, participation and project teams' (2008: 5). They suggest that the concept's adoption reflects an academic fashion but argue that its popularity is predominantly due to identity's widespread application and its value for a range of different perspectives, including functionalist, interpretivist and critical approaches. Given its widespread and varied use in management and organisation studies, the concept of identity itself seems worthy of consideration and critical reflection.

Generally, the adoption of identity to understand organisations and develop organisation theory has been taken up unproblematically. This is in contrast to other areas of study such as ethnicity where questioning identity has a longer and more powerful tradition (see e.g. Brubaker and Cooper, 2000; Gleason, 1983). *Identity and capitalism* by Marie Moran represents a fascinating review of a range of these literatures, drawing out some of the often unquestioned or obscured

limitations in identity scholarship that may also be of relevance and value to management and organisation studies. This review will follow Moran in outlining a contested history of the concept of identity before highlighting key debates and discussing what emerges from this critique, which is, for Moran, the need to consider identity as a category of practice.

A genealogy of identity

The core claim at the heart of Moran's book is that the increasing focus on identity reflects not simply a fashion in the social sciences but the creation of the concept of identity itself. The book is based on Moran's PhD thesis and draws on Raymond Williams' work to suggest that identity is a contemporary keyword. For Williams (1973: 15) keywords are 'significant, binding words in certain activities and their interpretation; they are significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought'. Moran suggests that identity is a keyword that is deployed in making sense of the self and society. She emphasises the need for a 'recognition of the novel and conflicting ways in which the word began to be used in its history, despite the concealment of this shift by the nominal continuity of the term' [5]. By tracing this history and contesting the concept's present deployment, Moran suggests valuable insights into its character and influence.

Moran begins by focusing on how identity was understood prior to the 1960s. The historical change she highlights in the usage of the word identity is well-illustrated through discussion of texts traditionally associated with the concept's development. For example, Moran discusses Mead's *Mind, self and society* and observes that the word identity is absent altogether. Moran therefore disputes the traditional heritage of the concept, pointing out that a 'closer reading of these original texts reveals the startling fact that none of these theorists, scientists, activists or writers credited with discussing or explaining identity ever actually used the word identity themselves' [14]. Where identity is used, Moran suggests that, prior to the 1960s, the word referred to a sense of sameness. For example, she presents the case of William James whose work is often seen as important to the development of the concept of identity (Brown, 2015). However, Moran argues that James's use of identity is part of a very restricted discussion on sameness and continuity of the self that differs from the word's modern usage.

Identity as sameness contrasts clearly with the modern, more active sense of identity that is familiar in the management and organisation studies literature. For example, Brown's (2015: 20) definition, from a literature review on the topic, defines identities as 'people's subjectively construed understandings of who they were, are and desire to become'. Alvesson et al. (2008: 6) also define identity

loosely as referring ‘to subjective meanings and experience, to our ongoing efforts to address the twin questions, “Who am I?” and – by implication – “how should I act?”’ They suggest that, viewed in these terms, personal identity draws together feelings, values and behaviour such that group identities become resources in its development (see also Watson, 2008). As opposed to early considerations of maintaining a sense of self-unity, identity has therefore come to mean something more active, dynamic and self-reflexive, with a strong component of normativity in terms of what constitutes a desirable self.

Moran describes three key ways that identity is currently used: (1) legal, which is closer to the original sense of identity as sameness, in terms of the official recognition of the continuity that facilitates personal responsibility, reward and punishment; (2) personal, the core of a sense of self that is more about difference and what makes one unique; and (3) social, referring to membership of social groups. Moran suggests that the shift in the meaning of identity is in both the sense of personal identity as about how one differs from others but also in social categories as identity markers. This is captured in the work of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson who suggests that identity ‘connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others’ (1959: 109; cited on [95]). Moran suggests that this shift, first captured by Erikson and other of his contemporaries, is markedly different from the history of identity as it is usually traced.

The difference in what Moran proposes can be seen through comparison with an essay by Hall (1992) where he traces three conceptions of identity: the Enlightenment subject, the sociological subject and the postmodern subject. While Hall’s conception of the Enlightenment subject is similar to the sense of identity as sameness, the sociological subject is a description of an emerging sense of identity. It is ‘formed in relation to “significant others”, who mediated to the subject the values, meanings and symbols – the culture – of the worlds he/she inhabited’ (Hall, 1992: 275). Key to the sense of self as rooted in social interactions are the works of Mead and Cooley, and Hall argues for their relevance because the development of the modern concept of identity is not about the word identity but, instead, about how one answers the question ‘who am I?’.

While Moran notes no mention of the word identity in the familiar work of authors such as Mead that focus on self, this risks over-simplification. If identity is about the self and its construal, then the insights gained from this early work are important to understanding identity in its current form. While the specific *word* may not appear, a heritage for the *concept* of identity, expressed by Hall in his talk of the subject can be traced to the earlier work of Mead and the symbolic interactionists. This route has been frequently traced through Goffman’s insights

into the presentation of the self in the 1960s (see e.g. Brown, 2008; Gleason, 1983; Walby, 2001). Moran fails to clearly refute this line of argument, frequently relying on textual searches for the word identity as opposed to tracing its genesis as a concept. The modern concept of identity, suggested by the attempt to answer the question 'who am I?', may be traceable to alternative words and ways of thinking about the self that elude a fixation on the particular word.

The change in the emergence of a modern sense of identity that Moran detects is, for analysts such as Brubaker and Cooper (2000), noticeable in the lack of precision in the word, which, together with its cognates, can be found throughout the history of Western philosophy. In the 1960s the concept of identity was being developed in different ways by psychoanalysts, psychologists and sociologists. As Brubaker and Cooper note, this period also saw the concept's emergence in social analysis and public discourse, partly in response to the weakness of class politics in the United States. This led to the popularity of identity but also to the later diffuse usages of the word and lack of conceptual clarity. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) suggest, if identity no longer refers to sameness, but now refers to, for example, a fragmented, multiple sense of self, then identity may not be the correct or even a useful concept to deploy for this range of different contexts and objectives. However, even if the changes after the 1960s are not definitive, they remain important and, more specifically, for Moran they also remain tied to the influence of capitalism. The key contribution of her book therefore lies in questioning the concept of identity and this is where the keyword approach is particularly valuable in tracing what identity does.

Disputing difference

What Moran is particularly concerned with are the ways in which the concept of identity 'is itself bound up with the possibilities for subjectivisation in contemporary western societies' [5]. She argues that the changing nature of what we talk of as identity, and the expectations associated with this, constitute a disciplinary mechanism derived from the broader capitalist system. This can be related to debates around the self and control (see Rose, 1996), for example in examining the managerial regulation of identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). However, Moran also draws upon broader debates that have received less attention in the management and organisation studies literature that critique the implications of the concept of identity itself. Moran provides valuable overviews of relevant debates around consumerism and political identity as well as class and identity, the latter of which is worth detailing here in relation to some of the literature that Moran draws upon.

Moran highlights the work of Gimenez (2006: 430) who discusses the ways in which ‘individuals construct themselves as subjects – making sense out of nonsense – out of elements they themselves have not entirely produced but have encountered through the combined effects of ideological interpellation and of their material conditions of existence.’ For example, difference, and therefore a sense of our unique selfhood, partly relates to social distinction and differentiation through forms of consumption. For Moran, one of the key ways in which the concept of identity emerged was in parallel with the modern prominence of consumerism. Consumption not only commodifies and bolsters our sense of personal identity but is entwined with the concept of identity itself which can, in turn, promote an emphasis on consumption. It is through the marketing of an idea of selfhood, that we discover our ‘true self’ and construct our personal identity, through our consumption.

The use of identity in the social sciences is too often treated as apolitical, producing research that may, as its influence amasses, distort the focus and insights of our understanding of the social world. Because the concept of identity is not itself examined, underlying assumptions may be retained in its analytical usage. Moran examines this potential through a discussion of the rise of identity politics. She describes the ways in which many marginalised, excluded and discriminated groups have reframed their identities in these group terms (for example by race, gender or sexuality) in order to understand their oppression and to find ways to challenge it. In this way, the concept of social identity has been deployed ‘to subversive and counter-hegemonic effect in a new political model – identity politics’ [114]. However, while accepting the significant gains made in the name of identity politics, Moran argues that they play into a politics of difference and can come to ignore social relations, principally in ignoring or obscuring class.

One of the risks in a focus on identity that Moran outlines is that it may minimise or ignore structural constraints. Moran draws on the work of Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren (2004) who have argued that the focus on identity in terms of difference as the primary means of understanding society and disadvantage has obscured our understanding of structural constraints. Such forms of analysis lead to answers involving greater understanding and representation, supporting an individualistic, rights-based society rather than significant structural change. Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren suggest that this has damaged what they term leftist theory and practice. They argue that ‘much of what is called the ‘politics of difference’ is little more than a demand for inclusion into the club of representation – a posture which reinscribes a neo-liberal pluralist stance rooted in the ideology of free-market capitalism’ (Scatamburlo-D’Annibale and McLaren, 2004: 186). They see in this the

extension of market ideology to encompass a willingness for all to be represented in the marketplace, without questioning the underlying flaws within this system of social relations. Moran provides the example that neoliberal capitalism can accept anti-discrimination measures that provide more women or ethnic minority CEOs, as long as the fundamental inequalities of society remain unchallenged.

For Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren (2004), such identity politics of difference and inclusion have led class to be included with other categories such as gender and race, removing any critical value in the concept of class outside of the resulting cultural or discursive understandings. The potential problems this might raise for analysis of management and organisations have yet to be fully explored. For example, Alvesson et al. discuss how, for more critically-oriented management and organisation researchers 'gender, race, nation, class, sexuality and age, become co-articulated by people "crafting selves" amid the resources and demands of particular work settings' (2008: 12). Scatamburlo-D'Annibale and McLaren suggest that such an analysis 'has had the effect of replacing an *historical materialist class analysis with a cultural analysis of class*' (2004: 188). The treatment of class as an additional form of identification and difference may suggest a potential limit to the critical, emancipatory approaches proposed by Alvesson et al. that focus upon identity as a means to understand power relations and to reveal means to 'liberate humans from the various repressive relations that tend to constrain agency' (2008: 9). For Gimenez, the focus on identity embodied in dominant ideologies seen in multiculturalism or diversity removes attention from the shared problems that transcend these differences, constraining and excluding involvement in 'educational, social and economic opportunities [that] could be the base for collective mobilization and organizing' (2006: 431).

Just as labour process theory has often failed to engage with individual identity and subjectivity, the 'missing subject' of Marxist analysis (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001), studies of identity in management and organisation studies have too often failed to engage sufficiently with 'the part that is played by the social structures, cultures and discourses within which the individual is located' (Watson, 2008: 122). An excessive focus on identity can leave us unable to observe or engage with class-based, structural understandings of social relations. Class becomes simply another form of difference, a subject position that helps us to frame identity in terms of the subjective construal of one's self; obscuring the questions of power and exploitation that class has traditionally been used as a means to address. For example, Gimenez (2006) suggests that, with the heterogeneity of many populations in advanced capitalist economies resulting from labour migration, these questions continue to gain in urgency. She argues

for the need to overcome the artificial divide between class and identity politics, developing analyses with the potential to 'break the hold of identity politics upon common sense understanding and social science theorizing of the realities of class, ethnicity and race' [424]. Without such a move the focus on identity may support forms of power and exploitation, even amongst those who seek to challenge them.

Moran engages in detail with these arguments for a more class-based politics, though she also draws attention to their limitations. She highlights, for example, critics such as Walby (2001) who argues for the politics of equality in terms of both race and gender, seeing class as predominantly the domain of white men whose social analysis has tended to privilege the interests of their own race and gender. Nonetheless, such class-based arguments against a potentially individualistic, rights-based identity lens on society suggest some of the ways in which this approach may obscure or distort our understanding of social relations, power and exploitation. These debates demonstrate the need to engage critically with the concept of identity itself.

Identity as a category of practice

Moran's insight into these debates is the failure of class-based, Marxist analyses to explain *why* the modern concept of identity emerged and has been taken up in the ways that it has, other than observing that it appears to serve the interests of capitalism. To question the concept itself, there is a need to consider identity not only as a category of analysis but also as a category of practice. Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 4), following Bourdieu, define categories of practice as 'categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysts'. What Moran suggests is that more traditional forms of resistance failed those who were excluded and discriminated against in identity-based terms (even if this was in addition to their class position) and saw the potential for resistance in forging particular identity claims. For Moran, while such means of resistance were legitimate and, in some instances, successful, the concept of identity principally served to bolster a sense of stability to particular personal and social understandings. She therefore suggests that, as opposed to challenging the status quo, 'certain contemporary forms of identity politics positively reinforce elements of neoliberal ideology, especially where they converge in their promotion of cultural relativism, freedom of expression and the celebration of difference and diversity' [172]. It is this point of convergence and its implications that is worthy of greater study and reflection.

Moran therefore effectively argues for greater attention to and critical consideration of identity itself, as a category of practice. She builds on her analysis to argue that ‘the use of the term identity to express essentialist understandings of individuals and groups only came at a point in history when those very essentialist understandings were significantly challenged or emphasised via their politicisation and commercialisation’ [155]. Identity in its contemporary sense is shaped by its context. Moran argues that our current understandings of identity and, through this concept, wider society, are particularly well-suited to neoliberalism and to consumption, that ‘We have reached a time when identity operates primarily to facilitate consumption on a global scale, while at the same time informing a version of politics that remain compatible with the architecture of neoliberalism’ [174]. If these implications go unquestioned in management and organisation studies the discipline risks failing to fully understand or to provide the possibility to critique contemporary organisations and economic life.

Identity-based approaches continue to provide valuable insights. However, the concept of identity is not apolitical. Through its individualistic focus on difference and its obscuring of social relations, class-based analysis and, potentially, other structural issues, identity risks distorting our understanding of society and our selves. Moran compellingly raises these issues, relating her arguments to existing interdisciplinary debates not only on the history of identity but its implications for consumption, group-based politics and class. However, further research and debate is required to more fully understand this concept and its implications, especially in relation to management and organisation studies. For Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 3), ‘The “identity” crisis [is] a crisis of overproduction and consequent devaluation of meaning [that] shows no sign of abating’. Through the extensive adoption of identity to analyse an increasing range of social phenomena, which does not appear to have abated in the past 15 years, the concept may have become over-extended and lost its analytical value. Moran’s book valuably suggests that the concept of identity continues to require questioning and critique.

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