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Learning Identity: A Sociocultural Perspective

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Abstract: This study examines the sociocultural perspective as the initial step to discovering an appropriate theoretical framework for describing how people learn identity. By illustrating the relation between the sociocultural perspective and identity, it suggests implications to overcome the limitations of existing adult learning studies to understand identity construction.

Problem and Purpose Statement

For individuals studying in the human and social science fields one of the most familiar concepts is identity. Identity is predominantly used and discussed in both scholarly and practical discourses. It is also a much-discussed topic in adult education (Axelsson, 2009; Crowther, Maclachlan, & Tett, 2010; Kim & Merriam, 2010; Nasir & Saxe, 2003; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). The studies analyzing and interpreting the relation between identity and learning in adult education field are mainly based on individual and cognitive psychological models by regarding identity as a product such as a cause/mediator of learning or a learning result. Also, many of them focus on formal educational settings to see the factors that influence identity of adult learners. However, these studies miss the critical features of identity; identity is not static, but dynamic; it evolves and constantly develops in various social practices. Identity is not an objective feature of a person, but a discursive one constructed continually by social interactions in daily situations in which an individual lives (van Oers et al., 2008).

The dynamic and changing feature of identity can be elucidated by focusing on the historicity of identity, that is, the process of identity construction. Thus, to reflect the nature of identity in research, a new approach is necessary, one that describes how people construct identity within their daily life, considering the developing and changing aspects of identity. In this regard, this study begins to review the intrinsic features of identity. It then examines the sociocultural perspective as the initial step to discovering an appropriate theoretical framework for describing how people learn identity in everyday contexts. By illustrating the relation between the sociocultural perspective and identity, this paper suggests implications for developing adult education area to overcome the limitations of existing adult learning theories and studies and lead to a better understanding of the notion of identity.

The Intrinsic Features of Identity

While the concept of personality or nature has been occasionally considered as a natural given or determined biologically, identity is thought of as a man-made through a person's participation in social practices (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). By participating in social practice, people come to learn the norms, roles, and culture of the social context and it allows them to develop their identity from investing themselves with intrinsic self-meanings within daily activities in social situations (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Since humans construct their identity by interacting with external circumstances (Holland & Cole, 1995; Stryker & Serpe,

1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), identity is subject to change according to social and cultural factors (Brandt, 2001; Hall, 1997). As the social context in which an individual involved changes, identity is reconstructed and developed as well. Thus, identity is not static (Foucault, 1979; Hall, 1990), but continuously developing and changing under the influence of social contexts that involve individuals on a daily basis. The intrinsically social and cultural feature of identity can be traced back to early discussions about the notion of identity.

Erikson (1968) focused on the notion of identity being profoundly shaped by historical circumstances. The core questions of searching for a self-concept are a sense of continuity and sameness over time, such as "Who am I?" or "Where do I belong in today's society?" (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007). The primary concern in Erikson's definition of identity is the choices individuals make in response to sociocultural, historical, and institutional actualities. He defined identity as "a process 'located' in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture" (p. 22). Also, he saw identity as the "conscious sense of individual uniqueness… and unconscious striving for a continuity of experience…solidarity with a groups ideals" (p. 208). He focused on the processes to achieve identity in social life and interaction between individuals and their social environment. To his notion, an individual, as a social and historical entity, is constructed in a social context and, in this regard, the identity of individuals is not a given "thing" or a "product." He emphasized the process of becoming and offers a more complete account of how individual functions develop from sociocultural processes, considering the transforming aspect of sociocultural processes and how these shape individual choices (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995).

Mead's notion of identity (1934) is grounded self-formation in social coordination of activity through symbolic communication and it is negotiated through daily social interaction (1934). People form their identities in relation to their linguistically recognized social positions and other roles in their ordinary living circumstances. Mead saw identity as essential to conducting social activities and relationships, because social reality is created and negotiated by people as they attach names and meanings to things as they communications with others. Mead's concept of identity focuses on the means by which individuals form in their relation to roles, statuses, and cultural persona, and how these identities organize affect, motivation, action, and agency. This concept has a meaningful implication for the link between self and society, using the notion of mediations such as the social roles and positions.

Vygotsky (1978) noted the social origins of mental functioning; all human mental functioning is socioculturally, historically and institutionally situated. As a higher-order psychological function, identity is formed in sociocultural practices. Like Mead, the concept of identity in Vygotsky is produced continually in individuals and by their interactions with others and social practices. However, while Mead focused on the outcomes of sociogenesis, the resulting linkages formed between self and society, Vygotsky emphasized mind development as sociogenetic products. Namely, identity is continually changing and developing. In addition, Vygotsky expanded the dimension of mediation, regarding both symbolic and material artifacts in social and cultural structures. The examples of Vygotsky's mediations are not only conventional technical and material tools but also "language; various systems of counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings, all sorts of conventional signs and so on" (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 137).

The central focuses of each scholar's discussions about identity were different; Erikson highlighted the notion of identity constructed within sociocultural and historical circumstances;

Mead emphasized the role of mediations such as social positions and roles in identity construction; Vygotsky concentrated on the aspect of continuous development and expanded the dimension of the mediation in identity construction from symbolic to material artifacts. However, these original ideas about the identity had a common ground that the self cannot be context-free and is developing and changing under the influence of social context in which an individual involve.

Sociocultural Perspective of Learning on Identity Construction

According to Vygotsky (1978), to encompass the process of development fundamentally means to discover its nature. Thus, the dynamic and changing nature of identity in daily social situations can be explained by seeing the process of its construction. Perceiving identity as a product are limited in explaining the process of identity construction, because it is based on cognitive and psychological perspective to the development of human cognition that basically regard mind as being located in the head, apart from the world. Dualism that strictly demarcates individuals from the world is supported with a deficient explanation of the influence of social interactions on knowledge development. Dewey (1966) noted that "the identification of the mind with the self, and the setting up of the self as something independent and self-sufficient, created such a gulf between the knowing mind and the world that it became a question how knowledge was possible at all" (Dewey, 1966, pp. 293-97). The challenges that dualist ontology faces arose the sociocultural foundations of human consciousness that are situated in a broader cultural and historical social context.

Unlike the cognitive and psychological perspectives, the sociocultural perspective considers mind to be located in the individual-in-social-action, taking non-dualistic ontology. Reflecting the interactions between diverse social and cultural factors and individuals, the sociocultural perspective shows how human cognition develops. The basic concept of this perspective is to include the external conditions of life in which human beings live to explain the highly complex forms of human consciousness. Cognitive processes are subsumed in social and cultural processes and the person is constructed in a social context, formed through practical activity, and shaped in relationships of desire and recognition. The sociocultural perspective considers that self-consciousness arises not from the individual but from social relations with others and "the individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and secondary" (Vygotsky, 1979, p. 30). Thus, the perspective emphasizes social participation, the relationship and interaction with others, the settings of activity and historical change (Scribner, 1997).

The key aspects of human cognition identified in the sociocultural perspective are as follows: human cognition 1) is mediated by cultural artifacts such as tools and signs, 2) occurs in human purposive activity ("human action-in-the-world") and 3) develops historically as changes at the sociocultural level impact psychological function (Scribner, 1997). In other words, social interaction has primacy in human development. Social participation can activate diverse interactions between social practice and the self. Participation in a wide variety of activities becomes a significant social source of development. Cultural artifacts as "carriers of sociocultural patterns and knowledge" (Wertsch, 1994, p. 204) play a significant role in connecting human cognition and cultural and historical circumstances. Also, social conditions are constantly changing, and this gives rise to changed contexts and opportunities for the development of human cognition.

Learning, in the sociocultural perspective, is situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and occurs continuously through collaboration between the person and the social context through cultural mediations, and is transformed within sociocultural history. In particular, the sociocultural

perspective of learning focuses on the interdependence of social and individual process in the co-construction of knowledge. The knowledge, however, includes not only intellectual aspects, but knowing oneself, in a broader sense, knowing one's identity. In this sense, realizing oneself, that is, the process of constructing identity, is learning as a sociocultural phenomenon.

Since identity originates through daily activities and "experience of engagement" (Wenger, 1998, p.151) in social practices, reviewing lived experiences and activities within daily life plays a critical role in understanding the concept of identity and examining the process of identity construction. Therefore, the sociocultural perspective which focuses on social interactions at living situations and activities can suggest the initial step to discovering an appropriate theoretical framework for examining the process of constructing identity.

In particular, the concept of activity can be employed as the unit of analysis to describe how people construct their identity in daily life. In the sociocultural perspective, people learn within human actions-in-the world activities. Through dynamic and continual interactions in activities, people act in and on the world, learn, develop and become (Sawchuk, 2013). Namely, as socially constituted beings, humans develop their personalities, skills and consciousness by participating in activities. Thus, activity as the minimal meaningful context can provide directions for describing how people carry out their lives (Sannino, Daniels & Gutierrez, 2009; Sawchuk, 2013) and how they learn their identity in daily life.

Implications and Contributions to Adult Learning

Many researchers in adult learning studies have discussed the relation between learning and identity. However, many of these discussions are limited in how they understand and reflect the intrinsic nature of identity for adult learners. First of all, most of the approaches primarily see identity as a product, considering identity as an effective cause/mediator that improves learning performance (e.g., Axelsson, 2009) or an outcome to examine effectiveness of adult education programs (e.g., Crowther, Maclachlan, & Tett, 2010) or a learning result (e.g., Kim & Merriam, 2010). Even though these studies provide meaningful implications for understanding the role of identity in adult learning, they have scant understanding about the dynamic and changing nature of identity, based on adult learning theories emphasizing cognitive and psychological perspectives of learning and development.

Also, some studies in adult education discuss only the influence of formal education settings in identity construction, ignoring the diverse learning settings such as informal or non-formal learning circumstances (e.g., O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Such studies fail to reflect the features of identity construction, especially of adults, that primarily occurs outside educational settings, that is, in everyday contexts (Wenger, 1998).

Several researchers have taken to examining diverse sociocultural influences on identity construction in informal or non-formal learning settings (e.g., Nasir & Saxe, 2003). These researchers have employed broader sociocultural approaches in analyzing the relations between sociocultural factors and identity construction. However, they have also shown the limitation of explaining the process of identity construction, because without an appropriate theoretical framework many studies predominantly explain "what" sociocultural elements affect identity construction, not "how" they work in the process of the identity construction.

Since identity is continually changing and developing according to the influence of everyday social contexts, to understand and reflect the features of identity requires a consideration of the process of how identity is constructed in sociocultural circumstances within daily life. The sociocultural perspective allows us to understand identity construction in social

practices. In particular, from the concept of human actions in activities it provides an opportunity to discover an appropriate theoretical framework for describing how people learn identity. Given a situation where many approaches to adult learning studies primarily focus on individuals' characteristics, cognitive change and development, or formalized educational settings, the sociocultural perspective is able to give new insight and theoretical framework into learning identity as a sociocultural phenomenon arising through dynamic and continual interactions between individuals and society in everyday contexts.

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