

# Lifelong learning, identity and the moral dimension: The 'reflexive project of the self' revisited<sup>1</sup>

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## 1.

In his book *Modernity and Self-Identity* Anthony Giddens has famously claimed that in the context of the post-traditional order of late-modern societies 'the self becomes a *reflexive project*' (Giddens, 1991, pp.32, *emph.* in original). According to Giddens this is not simply an option, i.e., something that individuals can decide to engage with or not. He takes the stronger view that in late-modern societies the self '*has to be reflexively made*' (*ibid.*, pp.3, *emph.* added). Self-identity is thus no longer seen as something that is given but appears as something 'that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (*ibid.*, pp.52).

Although questions have been raised about the empirical adequacy of Giddens's diagnosis, his views have contributed to the idea that late-modern societies require a new kind of lifelong learning that is concerned with the ongoing reflexive construction of the self in response to ongoing uncertainty and risk (e.g., Hake, 1998; 1999). Such learning is highly individualistic and individualised as it is focused on 'self-actualisation' and 'self-realisation' (Giddens, 1991, pp.214). Despite Giddens's use of the phrase 'life politics,' the individualistic nature of such learning processes suggests that his depiction of the reflexive project of the self is rather a-political. Thus the work of Giddens and other sociologists (with the exception of Bauman) has contributed to an understanding of a dimension of lifelong learning in late-modern societies that seems to be at odds with the social purpose tradition of adult education in which learning about the self has always been conceived as a collective and hence a thoroughly political process. The work of Giddens can therefore be seen as one of the factors that has contributed to the rise of the 'learning paradigm' (Martin, 2006) and the 'new language of learning' (Biesta, 2006) in the field of adult education.

In this paper we want to raise some questions about Giddens's ideas about self-identity and the reflective construction of the self and present the outlines of a different way to understand self and identity, one which emphasises continuity and permanence over change and adaptation and one which highlights the moral and relational dimensions of the self. We also indicate what this might mean for lifelong learning.

## 2.

One of the key ideas in Giddens's analysis of late-modern societies is that the reflexivity that is characteristic of such societies 'extends into the core of the self' (Giddens, 1991, pp.32). This is why he argues that identity can no longer be seen as 'something that is just given' but has to be understood as 'something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (*ibid.*, pp.52). The main reason for this is that late-modern societies no longer provide stable 'anchor points' for the self. Society and the self are both 'in flux' which is why Giddens writes that 'the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social

change' (ibid, pp.33). This is at least partly in order to respond to the anxieties raised by rapid social change. In this regard we might say that the reflexive construction of the self is aimed at keeping these anxieties at bay. It is, in other words, a particular response and way to deal or 'cope' with the uncertainties of rapid social change. Thus, the reference points for the construction of the self have to be set 'from the inside,' i.e., 'in terms of how the individual constructs/reconstructs his or her life story' (see ibid, pp.80). As Giddens explains, the 'first loyalty' of the individual becomes a loyalty to himself (see ibid). The morality underpinning this is a morality of authenticity, i.e., being true to oneself, which plays an important part in self-actualisation. As Giddens writes: 'In so far as it is dominated by the core perspectives of modernity, the project of the self remains one of control, guided only by morality of "authenticity"' (ibid, pp.225).

At one level Giddens's analysis has plausibility if we think of such late-modern societies as post-traditional societies. If it is granted that post-traditional societies can only exist reflexively, then it is also not too difficult to follow Giddens's suggestion that this reflexivity extends to the self and that precisely for this reason the late-modern self can only exist in a reflexive manner, in a process of continuous and never-ending making and remaking of the self. There are, however, certain assumptions in Giddens's view about self and identity in late-modernity that raise questions. We wish to make five brief observations.

The reflexive construction of the self is a way to deal with the anxieties caused by a world in flux, a world of contingencies and insecurities. To the extent in which the reflexive construction of the self becomes a matter of life-planning which implies a mastery of uncertainties and, in a sense, a 'colonisation' of the future, it raises the question whether it is indeed possible to 'plan away' the contingencies of life or whether by trying to do so one actually denies that such contingencies are part of what it means to lead a human life. Stressing control and mastery of the future and highlighting self-actualisation through calculable thinking and reasonable life-planning might actually *mask* the contingencies and uncertainties of life.

Secondly, by emphasising that the self constantly needs to be remade, Giddens seem to forget that something can only be remade if it already exists in some way or form. Before reconstruction one's identity one must acknowledge that there is already something 'there' that can be reconstructed (and also 'something' that can 'perform' the reconstruction). In Giddens's ideas the recognition of this appears to be absent.

Thirdly, Giddens presents us with a picture in which the self is constantly engaged in a process is adaptation to eternally changing circumstances. Anxiety, as Giddens argues, is not only 'caused by disturbing circumstances, or their threat' but can at the very same time 'mobilise adaptive responses and novel initiatives' (ibid, pp.13). In Giddens's view individuals appear to have no choice but to change themselves in order to adapt to changing circumstances. The question here is not only whether this is indeed inevitable – which is firstly an empirical question. There is also the normative question whether this depiction of the individual as flexible and constantly adaptive is a desirable way of understanding the individual in late-modern societies. Here we can think, for example, of Sennett's claim that the adaptive and flexible self actually expresses a 'corrosion of character' (Sennett, 1999) rather than a desirable way to exist under late-modern conditions.

This raises a more general point. Giddens seems to assume that the conditions of late-modernity are incompatible with morality and tradition as forces that shape identity and the self. Empirically we may want to look at countries such as Japan and, increasingly, China

which seem to provide evidence that morality inherited in tradition can well have a place within such societies. From a normative point of view we can also ask at the level of society whether it is desirable to assume that there is no place for morality and tradition in such societies.

This, in turn, relates to a particular issue regarding morality and ethics in Giddens's view. By locating the reference point for the construction of the self within the self and by making authenticity the main criterion for the reconstruction of the self, Giddens runs the risk of advocating a hyper-individualism where the individual seems to be unaffected by others and by relationships with others. This not only raises questions about the moral 'position' of the self but also reflects back upon the self to the extent that even Giddens argues that there is a looming threat of personal meaninglessness lurking behind this (see *ibid*, pp.201).

Whereas Giddens's depiction of the condition of the self in late-modern societies may therefore appear plausible, further inspection of his views indicates that Giddens operates with rather specific assumptions about the self – assumptions that are not merely descriptive or factual but also seem to imply normative views about what a desirable way of leading one's life in late-modern societies is. Giddens sees the self as adaptive and flexible – and thus seems to assume that such flexibility is a good thing rather than a weakness of character; he sees life as something that can, in principle, be mastered and 'colonised' instead of something that we have to come to terms with; and he sees late-modern societies as secular societies that are antithetical to societies based upon traditions and (collective) morality, rather than being able to give tradition and morality a place in his understanding of late-modern societies, thus suggesting that there is only one 'template' for what a late-modern society might look like.

What interests us particularly is the question whether it is possible to think identity and the self differently, i.e., in a way that might overcome some of the deficiencies of Giddens's view. For this we turn to the work of Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor.

### 3.

Within the confines of this paper we can only indicate how and where the question of identity and the self might be conceived differently. We will do this by addressing three questions: (1) Are we what we make of ourselves or are we what we are?; (2) Is our identity merely to be seen as a response to the dynamics of late-modernity?; (3) Are the reference points for the construction of the self merely internal?

#### *(1) Are we what we make of ourselves or are we what we are?*

The question of identity is one of the major themes in Western philosophy. For a long time philosophers have tried to answer what identity 'is' and how it might be understood. A helpful distinction has been made by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur who argues that there are two forms of identity: permanence in time in sameness (i.e., the idea that something remains the same with itself over time) and permanence in time implied in selfhood (i.e. individuality, uniqueness, mineness over time). He refers to the first form of identity as *idem*-identity or *sameness* and to the second form as *ipse*-identity or *selfhood* (see Ricoeur, 1992). Ricoeur uses this distinction to understand the multi-faceted character of personal identity, i.e., the fact that we should understand personal identity both in terms of selfhood (*ipse*-identity) and sameness (*idem*-identity). Ricoeur argues that with regard to personal identity there exists a dialectic relationship between *idem*-identity (sameness) and *ipse*-identity (selfhood). On one pole of this dialectic relationship *ipse*-

identity and *idem*-identity overlap and Ricoeur calls this *character*. According to Ricoeur character is made up of both *habit*, which is a result of interaction between what he refers to as 'innovation' and 'sedimentation', and *acquired identification*, which is the result of the internalization of otherness through self's interaction with human world (e.g. significant others, norms, morals, values, cultures, models and heroes and so forth) (see *ibid*). *Self-constancy*, e.g. articulated in keeping one's promise, is another pole where *ipse*-identity stands alone without the aid of *idem*-identity.

Ricoeur's approach thus suggests that personal identity is not merely made and remade all the time, but has an element of permanence which is 'articulated' in what he refers to as 'character,' and which can be understood as self-constancy in time of the self as a being in response to others. Personal identity in this view is therefore not simply made or constructed by an 'unencumbered' agent. This is first of all because character is not merely the outcome of the innovation of the self but is (also) the outcome of 'sedimentation', that is of the settling of the 'effects' of innovation over time. Any innovation thus requires awareness of this sedimentation as well. Secondly Ricoeur emphasises that character as 'acquired identification' is an identification with existing framework(s), rather than something that is created *ex nihilo*. Personal identity is therefore more 'bound' than what is suggested by Giddens.

An important element of Ricoeur's thinking about personal identity is his suggestion that 'narrative identity' functions as a mediator in the dialectic between selfhood (*ipse*-identity) and sameness (*idem*-identity). This suggests that narrative as a form of self-understanding contributes – or can contribute – significantly to understanding and examining one's self (see also Biesta *et al.*, 2008). In this regard we might conclude with Ricoeur that we are not merely what we make of ourselves but also to a large extent – and perhaps first and foremost – that we are what we 'are'.

## (2) *Is our identity merely to be seen as a response to the dynamics of late-modernity?*

There is a tendency in Giddens's work to understand identity and the self mainly in response to social dynamics, i.e., to the ever-changing nature of society. Identity thus becomes a question of re-defining oneself in relation and response to this. The question is, however, whether we should understand this merely in terms of a social dynamics, i.e., in terms of one's *place* in the social fabric, or whether the quality of the relationships that define one's place and position matter as well. We have already seen that Ricoeur's notion of 'acquired identification' suggests that personal identity as character is partly gained through the internalisation of significant others, norms, values and cultures, rather than merely a 'placing' vis-à-vis social institutions and positions. In the work of Charles Taylor we can find a more detailed exploration of the moral dimensions and 'co-ordinates' of personal identity.

Taylor has argued that the self fundamentally exists in a moral space and that the co-ordinates of self-identity are therefore fundamentally moral. He writes: 'To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary' (Taylor, 1989, pp.28). This means that for Taylor our identity is defined by what he refers to as 'strong evaluation' (see Taylor, 1985, pp.34). Strong evaluation 'plays the role of orienting us, of providing the *frame* within which things have meaning for us, by virtue of the qualitative distinctions it incorporates' (Taylor, 1989, pp.30). Identity thus can be understood in terms of the horizon 'within which we know where we stand, and what meanings things have for us' (*ibid*, pp.29). Taylor argues that without such a moral framework we will suffer disorientation and an identity crisis. He

argues: 'The condition of there being such a thing as an identity crisis is precisely that our identities define the space of qualitative distinctions within which we live and choose' (ibid, pp.30). Unlike Giddens, Taylor thus highlights the essential role of moral assumptions and orientations in the ways in which we position ourselves.

Taylor further argues that if one wants to live up to one's strongly valued meanings of one's life and identity, one can articulate one's moral assumptions through self-interpretations of one's strong evaluations. This he refers to as the question of *self-concern*. To articulate one's strong evaluations may help to bring oneself closer to what one values and sees as good. He writes: 'A formulation has power when it brings the source close, when it makes it plain and evident, in all its inherent force, its capacity to inspire our love, respect, or allegiance. An effective articulation releases this force, and this is how words have power (ibid, pp.96). For Taylor narrative as a form of self-interpretation is an important tool for this.

### (3) Are the reference points for the construction of the self merely internal?

Both Ricoeur and Taylor emphasise that there is an important moral dimension to self and identity. Moreover, they stress that this moral dimension is not internally generated but should be understood as a kind of 'orientation' towards existing *moral* frameworks. Whereas for Giddens there is only one criterion that should guide individuals in late-modernity – viz., the criterion of authenticity – Taylor has argued that authenticity is one moral framework amongst a variety of available moral frameworks. Taylor suggests that in modern, plural societies the self has the opportunity to orient itself and its evaluations in regard to a multiplicity of moral frameworks. Again he sees a role for narrative as a way in which individuals can combine different aspects of moral frameworks in a unique manner. He therefore seems to be in agreement with Giddens about the plural nature of late-modern societies but unlike Giddens he does not see this as an absence of (opportunities for) moral orientation but rather as a different context for moral orientation, one which does put the individual in a more active role in using his or her practical wisdom in navigating moral plurality.

## 4.

Our brief discussion of some of the ideas of Ricoeur and Taylor suggests that it is at least possible to think differently about the constitution of identity and the self than in terms of Giddens's ideas on the reflexive project of the self under late-modern conditions. To understand self and identity differently also has implications for the role of learning, which we briefly highlight in this section.

Ricoeur's (conceptual) analysis of personal identity provides an indication of the aspects of personal identity that might be open for kinds of learning that are relevant for identity and the self. Following Ricoeur one can learn, for example, about the degree of stability of one's personal identity by sensing the proportion of the sameness of the self; one can learn the degree of individuality of one's personal identity by sensing the proportion of *ipse-identity*; and one can learn to what extent one's personal identity is imputed by others by sensing the proportion of self-constancy. Second, habit as the result of the *interaction* between sedimentation and innovation, where *ipse* is *overlapped* by *idem* and acquired identification as the result of internalisation of *otherness* over time, where *ipse* and *idem concord* with each other, suggest that developing and innovating one's character is actually based upon one's work on sedimentation and internalisation with the involvement

of 'otherness' in life. This process of identity formation implies a role of learning concerning sameness and coherence of the self guided by a sense of 'wholeness' of life. For Ricoeur it is narrative which facilitates such learning through its capacity to mediate between *idem*-identity and *ipse*-identity. Finally, self-constancy expressed as what Ricoeur refers to as 'keeping one's word' also indicates a learning process in relation to others, a learning about showing who I am and where I stand in response to others and otherness (see Biesta, 2006).

In Taylor's theory of identity the articulation of moral frameworks and how they 'operate' within one's self can be conceived as a learning process. This can make implicit 'strong evaluations' more explicit so that they can be used more deliberately. Taylor also suggests that there is learning to be done in relation to what he refers to as the invention of the meaning of one's life – a process that again has to do with selection, evaluation and judgement of the variety of moral frameworks available in modern society. *Narrative* plays an important role in these learning processes, since narrative as a form of articulation can offer an unfolding story based on one moral framework and can arrange and organize different goods over time in one's life. Practical reasoning about the variety of moral framework can also be conceived as a learning process. For Taylor these learning processes are not simply about individuals responding to social change; they are moved and guided by the moral goods one aspires to reach.

## 5.

There can be no doubt that late-modern societies are different from modern and pre-modern ones and that this not only affects individuals and their lives, but also has an impact on how we see and constitute ourselves in relation to this and how this affects our identity and our understanding of our identity. These changes also have an impact on learning through life and thus on the understandings and configurations of lifelong learning. The main point we have tried to raise in this paper is that the implications for lifelong learning crucially depend on one's understanding of the self and identity. In contrast to Giddens's views we have indicated that it is possible to think differently about the constitution of the self and that thinking differently about identity and the self raises different questions and tasks for lifelong learning in late-modern societies. The particular contribution of Ricoeur and Taylor in this regard has to do with highlighting the moral and ethical dimensions of the self and the role of narrative in exploring how these dimensions matter for self and identity in late-modernity.

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## **Notes**

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