Identity Rigidity

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Etymology

As a social pathology, *identity rigidity* refers, broadly speaking, to stuck or inflexible ways of understanding and relating to oneself, which become problematic when they interfere with an individual's or a group's capacity for either autonomy or learning. Decomposing the notion from an etymological perspective, however, leaves us with two Latin-derived words whose meanings are not far from one another.

Rigidity derives from the Latin verb *rigere*, "to be stiff" and its adjectival form *rigidus*, which can be translated as *hard, stiff, rough,* or *severe*. Orthographically and semantically, this term has seen little movement over the last two millennia.

Identity, on the other hand, has taken on important new meanings in the last century. Deriving from the Latin word *idem,* meaning "the same", and passing through the middle-French word *identité,* this term originally refers to the unchanging nature of something that remains identical to itself over time.

If we stick to the notion's etymological roots, *identity rigidity* would then seem to describe not a pathology but rather a redundancy: something that endures identical to itself must indeed be "stiffly the same". However, *identity* has come to refer more broadly to the way that people understand and relate to themselves. Paul Ricœur's (1990) account of narrative identity famously begins by tackling the issue of the permanence of the self through time by untangling what have become the two major uses of the word identity: sameness (*idem*) and selfhood (*ipse*). For Ricœur, the narrative act is what dissolves the contradiction between these two aspects of identity by instigating a dialectical movement between them: this dynamic prevents selfhood from collapsing into sameness (in the repetition of acquired habits) and yet links together disparate life experiences through a feeling of self-continuity. From this perspective, our capacity for continued development and autonomy is contingent on our capacity to create meaning through creative acts of narrative construction, which create new relationships of intrigue between experiences and other identity components.

And yet, the continual success of the narrative act is by no means guaranteed. Sometimes we end up understanding and relating to ourselves in ways that become so inflexible that they inhibit our growth and even our capacity to act autonomously – that is, our capacity to effectively give ourselves for action and be motivated to follow them. Rigid frames of self-interpretation can spring from substantive identifications (e.g. introvert, vegetarian, football fan), group identifications (e.g. Christian, American), or even narrative identifications, such as a pre-conceived story that we are convinced to be playing a specific role in. These rigid frames can then in turn bias the way we listen to those around us, to the extent that we are driven to have our self-understandings confirmed through others' words. In the worst cases, they can spur us to act in such a way that our ethical identifications lose their motivational primacy. In such cases of identity rigidity, being "stiffly the same" is indeed no longer a tautology but a form of pathology.

Topology

The notion of *social pathology* stems from Axel Honneth's work in critical theory. For a syndrome, or a coincidence of symptoms, to be pathological, it must deviate from some sort of ideal. Honneth rejects the idea that, in the treatment of *social* pathologies, this ideal could be either a "natural" human state or a projected future state (Freyenhagen, 2015), arguing instead that specific ethical criteria must be formulated, but that these must be inclusive enough so as to support each person's own understanding of the "good life" (Honneth, 1992/1996). Two such criteria are frequently put forward, both in Honneth's foundational work and in the surrounding literature. The first is that of *self-realization* or *flourishing*, which refers to individuals' capacity to cultivate those unique qualities that make them see themselves positively through the eyes of their fellow citizens. The second criteria is that of moral or reflexive freedom (autonomy), which refers to individuals' capacity to give themselves rules for action based on ethical deliberation, and to experience intrinsic motivation to act according to the perceived ethical demands of a situation (Honneth, 2011/2014). In other words, moral freedom refers to an ideal process by which the convictions that form one's moral identity spontaneously spur one to act in their image.

At the heart of *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth's landmark publication that has set the tone for the last 30 years of discussion within recognition theory, is the thesis that both autonomy and self-realization are fundamentally dependent on individuals maintaining a positive relationship with themselves. When we relate positively to ourselves, we experience ourselves as full members of a legitimate moral order, which defines the space of reasons (Forst, 2015/2017) through which we make decisions about how to act. Similarly, when we relate positively to ourselves as members of a community, it makes sense to invest our energy in developing those abilities and traits that have "unique value for the surrounding social world" (Honneth, 1992/1996, p. 87), since we can convincingly anticipate a future community's appreciation of them.

However, many obstacles may be encountered in the process of relating positively to oneself over a long period of time. As Honneth describes in extensive detail, experiences of injustice can destabilize our identities in such a way that undermines our capacity for both autonomy and self-realization. In the experience of injustice (or more broadly the "moral experience" (Honneth, 1992/1996, p. 161), we see ourselves through the eyes of our supposed perpetrator as someone 1) who does not enjoy full bodily autonomy, 2) who is not a full member of the moral order of reciprocal rights and duties, or 3) whose particularities are not of value to a reference community. A systematic repetition of such experiences is thus said to undermine autonomy by distorting individuals' practical relationship with themselves.

The social pathology of *identity rigidity* is closely connected to, yet distinct from, the concerns central to Honneth's work. Honneth's ethics of recognition focuses on *external* shocks that threaten to destabilize the positive relationship one has with oneself: these are intersubjective experiences to which identity is vulnerable, due to its fundamentally relational constitution. The notion of *identity rigidity* refers, instead, to similar damages that can occur in the absence of systematic moral experiences.

In his book *L'expérience de l'injustice*, Emmanuel Renault (2004) argues, against Honneth, that the valance (positive/negative) of one's relationship with oneself is inextricable from one's conscious, narratively-woven self-representation. Following this view, we could say that the development of a *sustainably* positive relationship with oneself requires flexibility with regard to other components, such as substantive and narrative identifications, or attachment to specific collective identities. While the self-narrative is what helps us articulate the various identifications that populate our self-understanding – including those deliberated ethical identifications on which autonomy is predicated – every story takes place in a context, and every life context is potentially subject to change. When changes in one's life context complicate the antecedently harmonious narrative articulation of identity components, we are forced, consciously or not, to revise our self-understandings. In order to maintain a feeling of positive coherence with our moral identity, and thus to uphold the basis of autonomous action, our ethical identifications must take precedence over whatever facets of our self-understanding no longer fit with them.

What's more, our self-understandings do not merely *motivate* us to act, they also influence the range of actions that appear possible to us, through the attribution of meanings (Brockmeier, 2009). Human meanings are indeed indicative of action-possibilities, that is, they inform our perception of the ways in which we can relate to the people and objects that populate our environment. The attribution of meaning is not a neutral process, however, and it cannot be divorced from the narratives by which we explain to ourselves who we are. The actions that are possible for *me*, in a given context, depend crucially on the story I see myself playing a role in. It is by virtue of this that the narrative imagination can be said to be at the heart of human agency (Kearney, 1995; Von Wright, 2002). The downside of this is thus that stiff or stuck ways of recounting one's self-narrative can blind one to action-possibilities that would best enact one's ethical identifications within a given action context.

With these elements in mind, we could say that identity rigidity reaches a pathological stage when *a stuck facet of one's relationship with oneself* (an identification or self-interpretative habit) *1) undermines the motivational primacy of deliberated ethical identifications, 2) severely restricts the perceived range of possible actions, or 3) impedes one's capacity to learn*. When cultural habits and institutional configurations become environmental factors that systematically exacerbate the prevalence of these “morbidities of inflexible selfhood”, identity rigidity then rises to the level of social pathology.

Symptoms and social manifestations

When analyzing the symptoms and social manifestations of identity rigidity, we must be careful to distinguish between two levels of pathological expression. The first concerns the rigidification of *individual* identities, occurring within a population at a rate high enough to justify its qualification as a social ill. The second concerns the stiffening of *collective* identities, which can then have adverse effects on the collective action of whatever group has adopted a fixed image of itself, but also on the individuals for whom this collective identity represents an important landmark or reference in their relationship with themselves.

To examine the expression of this social pathology on the individual level, it is useful to return to Honneth’s early model of identity damage. Honneth (1992/1996) famously divides the “practical relation-to-self” into three spheres: love, rights, and solidarity. Each of these is intersubjectively constructed through formative relations, each constitutes an element of autonomy and self-realization, and each is vulnerable to “moral experiences”, wherein an individual’s relationship with himself is adversely affected by the way he sees himself through the imaginatively reconstructed perspective of his interaction partner(s). To each sphere is thus associated specific damages, namely, a decline in bodily autonomy, a loss of motivation to act according to the perceived ethical demands of a given situation (a drop in the motivational primacy of one’s moral identity), and a loss of motivation to develop one’s unique traits and abilities. While Honneth focuses on the traumatic genesis of such symptoms in experiences of injustice, denigration, and violence, the notion of *identity rigidity* reorients our attention to either the non-traumatic development of similar symptoms or to the prolongation of symptoms following their traumatic development.

In the first case, problems arise when, for whatever reason, an individual becomes so strongly attached to an identity that they become motivated to protect it at all costs. The desire to have a specific identity component recognized in social space can motivate a range of behaviors that can end up causing serious damage to one’s relationship with oneself. For example, one might seek out interaction partners that confirm this facet of one’s self-image (even if they contribute negatively to one’s well-being) or act in such a way as to receive self-confirming feedback (Swann & Read, 1981). If those strategies don’t work, one might interpret the words of others differently or selectively remember aspects of their speech, so as to support the jealously-guarded aspects of our self-understanding despite a disconfirming reality (Swann, 1999). The motivated distortion of others’ words is especially dangerous for moral freedom, since our deliberated ethical identifications need to be continually fed with an open understanding of the needs and interests of others. When our rigid self-conceptions develop a “semantic immune system” that “blocks incoming meanings, or alternative ways of thinking, which are potentially destabilizing” (Gillespie, 2015, p. 106), we lose an important source of moral reasoning. On a more basic level, non-negotiable identity contents can be directly harmful when they undermine the motivation to learn, either unconsciously, as with the defensive pessimism of the student who identifies as ‘intelligent’ and refuses to study as a preventative excuse for potentially poor grades, or explicitly, when academic diligence clashes directly with some other identity component (Bracher, 2006). At the extreme end of this spectrum are those identity components whose maintenance involves directly harming oneself or others.

In the second case of this pathology’s expression on an individual level, identity rigidity refers to the prolongation of symptoms following the externally-provoked collapse or spoliation of a once-healthy self-understanding. While it is to be expected that traumatic event destabilize people’s autonomous capacities for a period, this period can extend itself, sometimes indefinitely, when the victim of a real or perceived injustice adopts the victim-identity as a central pillar of their relationship with themselves. Psychologists (Gray & Wegner, 2009) have demonstrated an inverse relationship between the perception of oneself as a moral patient and as a moral agent: he who refuses to take himself as anything but the victim whose damages are to be repaired will, unsurprisingly, have more difficulty to activate his own agency, and thus to act from the basis of his *moral* identity.

In sum, on the individual level, identity rigidity causes harm when the desire to have specific identity components confirmed through the eyes of others overtakes the motivation either to learn or to act in such a way that best embodies one’s deliberated ethical convictions.

On the level of collective identities, the harm to collective action processes can be quite similar. When a collective identity becomes rigidified, the socially-coordinated actions that are filtered through it become constrained by the inflexibility of the interpretative lens that the identity imposes. For example, social movements with rigid identities may have a hard time opening the dialogue necessary to effect change, if they require other groups to recognize their identity in a certain way before pursuing an issue of common concern (Maesschalck, 2005). A brief glance at two other examples, involving political parties and unions, will give us a broader view of the problems that can occur on the level of collective identities.

Like social movements, political parties are generally formed or re-articulated on the basis of shared interests or ethical convictions. Sometimes a political party will explicitly align itself with a religious group that endorses an explicit moral worldview and ethical compass, and individuals’ identification with the political party may hinge directly on this shared ethical orientation. However, such parties can mutate over time, holding onto to the religious rhetoric that brought in their base, all while distancing themselves from the concrete policy positions that would best embody the ethical convictions unequivocally promoted by the religious group. In such cases, a consolidation or stiffening of the party’s collective identity can give rise to political actions spanning nations and decades that, despite their religious-ethical genesis, have become fully disconnected from the values that led to their creation.

Finally, some collective identities can hinder the effectiveness of collective action simply by constricting the perceived range of possible actions. Unions, for example, have played specific roles throughout their history, defending the collective interests of various labor groups in precise political and governmental settings. As with any group, the way a given union understands itself and its role in society will affect the range of collective actions that strike its members as either plausible or legitimate – including the dialogue partners it chooses to engage with, the populations whose interests it defends, and the types of leverage it yields. However, as Lenoble and Maesschalck (2010) demonstrate in their analysis of work with the Belgian energy sector, by acting on a union's self-conception so as to make it more supple – a feat that is achieved primarily by getting the group to retrace the historical genesis of its self-image so as to draw attention to the contingency of this identity – their collective actions may prove more effective not only in defending the interests of the labor group but also in advancing more public forms of interest.

Possible mutations

While the notion of *identity rigidity* is broad enough to include a variety of phenomena beyond those already identified, we will focus here on one particular arena that has seen a surge of activity in recent years, namely ideological manipulation and propaganda.

But first, we need to take a step back and look at the factors that contribute to identity rigidification processes, or protect against them. These factors fall into two main categories, namely, the mastery of skills involved in identity work (or "identity skills") and a specific form of attention (Cuneen, 2019). Skills are high-level forms of practical know-how that can be exercised, trained, and eventually mastered (Perrenoud, 1998). Autonomy-oriented identity iteration engages a number of relevant skillsets, related to the narrative imagination, emotional expertise, critical thinking, and communication. However, skills themselves are insufficient to ensure the orientation and success of reflexive processes capable of derigidifying stuck identity components or self-interpretative habits. Crucially, the fruitfulness of such skills is dependent on *attention paid to the self's non-essential character*. This can also be expressed as the self's transformability, the constitutive non-identity of selfhood, or simply the fact that every person can always change the relationship they have with themselves. Without such attention, the trainable skills that could otherwise facilitate autonomy-oriented identity work may instead impede it: when our attention is drawn to the *fixed* nature of social categories, personalities, or some other immutable essence at the heart of selfhood, the skills we master can be employed to consolidate and protect a fixed image of ourselves.

We will return to the beneficial potential of these factors in the final section. Here, we will give a brief glimpse of how the attentional determiner of identity rigidity can be affected by ideological structures and even exploited by bad actors.

For a long time, it was largely assumed that ideology functioned through the dissemination of declarative knowledge that would act on pre-formed subjects in order to influence their behavior. This changed with the publication of Louis Althusser's (1976) seminal text "*Idéologie et appareils idéologique d'État*", in which he developed the idea that the action of ideology was actually one of *forming* subjects, though subjection to the 'big' or 'great' Subject. In this text, Althusser paints a scene in which state apparatuses exercise their ideological function by "interpellating" individuals into subjects, that is, by beckoning them into a form of submissive subjectivity. For Althusser, this constant and ubiquitous process does not necessarily represent a perversion, but is in fact the condition of subjectivity: it is because we are ideologically interpellated into subjectivity that we are able to be subjects at all.

While this thesis has gained much traction in social philosophy, it does significantly weaken the notion of "ideology". With this in mind, Marc Maesschalck and Fabio Bruschi (Maesschalck, 2014) resharpen the notion's contours by arguing, through a critical reading of Althusser, that the (historically invariant) action of ideology is not one of *forming* subjects, but rather of hindering their development by producing an illusion of identity plenitude. In their view, ideological interpellations summon individuals to a "sure" order of things, in which each actor has a place defined by their essential identity, and the world makes sense as it is. No matter the representational content, ideological interpellation would then function as an "identity suture", filling in the gaps or inconsistencies in individuals' self-representations and thus absolving them from working on the relationship they have with themselves. In this view, by drawing attention to essential nature of all identities, ideology inhibits growth by producing an illusion of movement while getting people to "run in place" (Maesschalck, 2014, p. 110).

This approach provides a crucial lens for appreciating the connection between identity rigidity and the themes of online propaganda campaigns whose intensity has reached a fever-pitch in recent years. Identity polarization has been identified as one of the key goals behind state-backed disinformation efforts aimed at toppling Western democracies (Howard, Ganesh, Liotsiou, Kelly & François, 2018). In this effort, two major strategies and deployed in tandem. The first aims, indeed, to draw social attention to essentialized caricatures of ethnic groups, nationalities, economic statuses, and political parties (to name a few), in order to feed an *us-vs.-them* mentality (Schafer, 2018). The second is to feed a generalized "epistemological crisis" (Jeangène Vilmer, Escorcia, Guillaume & Herrera, 2018) in which the very notion of truth is at stake. These strategies work together because, when everyone is aware of the proliferation of "fake news", it becomes easy to discard any information that doesn't fit within one's existing interpretative framework. As such, with attention drawn to the fixed nature of identities across the board, there are fewer obstacles to the establishment and sedimentation of essentialist categories, according to which the other's identity – but also one's own – is pregiven, immutable, and thus an *object* to be apprehended instead of a *task* that requires work and effort. The "cult of authenticity" that originated from Western individualism (Le Bart, 2012) has therefore now found a powerful accomplice in the changing landscape of 21st century geopolitical conflict.

Potential "antidotes" or alternatives

Fortunately, identity rigidification processes are not irreversible, and their structural determiners do not all push in the same direction. In this last section, we will briefly cover a palate of potential vectors of resilience, giving greatest attention to the lever that, in our view, holds the greatest potential as a long-term, sustainable "antidote", namely, education governance.

Like any social pathology, identity rigidity refers to a process, and not a fixed state of affairs. With that in mind, we could refer to the inverse process as either *autonomy-oriented identity work* or simply *identity reflexivity*. As mentioned above, this developmental movement relies on both a series of skills and a specific form of attention. When looking for educational "antidotes" to the pathology of identity rigidity, we might then first look to the training of "identity skills", or *the skills involved in developing a sustainably positive, and thus continually transformative, relationship with oneself*. Working on one's relationship with oneself requires many such skills. In order to recreate new relationships of meaning between identity components, a mastery of narrative tools and a practiced capacity for imagination are among one's most precious resources. Similarly, a refined capacity for identifying one's emotions and understanding the complexity of affective dynamics is crucial for engaging in the less cognitive aspects of one's identity. However, in order to work on an aspect of one's identity, one must first become aware of its contingency, and so openness to otherness through communication and dialogue also appear as necessary elements of one's identity skillset. Finally, sharp critical thinking skills are vital to ensure that work on one's identity does not devolve into fantastical self-styling that is disconnected from reality.

These skill-based aspects may be tackled in an educational setting from a pedagogical perspective, but it is a mistake to think that they must be trained individually. Indeed, the five abovementioned fields of competence (narrative, imagination, emotions, dialogue, and critical thinking) can all be developed in a holistic, group-focused approach to teaching. An excellent example of this is to be found in Kieran Egan's (1986, 2005) Vygotsky-inspired educational philosophy, which, in very brief, calls on teachers to rethink the structure of their lesson plans through the story-form.

While the skill-based aspects of identity work may be trained and mastered, attention to the non-essential character of selfhood is itself not a skill. Indeed, any attentional orientation must be supported by environmental factors, which exercise influence on the macro-level of global media, on the meso-level of institutions, and on the micro-level of one's immediate surroundings and interaction partners (Citton, 2014/2017). Without attention to the self's constitutive non-identity, the skillsets mentioned above may prove useless, or even counterproductive, if they are mobilized to protect one's fixed image of oneself. The narrative imagination can be employed to protect one's identity image by furnishing ad hoc connections that explain away perceived incongruences; the mastery of emotional skills can be used to repress and not explore; dialogue can be exploited to obtain self-confirming feedback; even critical thinking skills can be aimed at the careful dismantling of opportunities for growth.

The most vital ingredient to any "antidote" lies therefor in the shaping of social attention. While individuals and media groups can influence social attention in the short term, drawing our eyes to the theme of the self's transformability through cinema, art and literature, long-term societal identity health is perhaps best supported by drawing as much attention to human developmentality within educational settings. This is most possible when teachers are able to 1) reflect back students' own developmental nature by drawing their attention to past instances of development as well as zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1934/1962), and 2) themselves become living models of the non-essential nature of selfhood through continual personal and professional development.

Teachers' work is fundamentally oriented towards growth, but their own attention is often impeded by institutional factors that *direct* their attention to something else, *deform* the way they pay attention to something in particular, or *distract* them entirely from the core of their job (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). These same factors inhibit the more emotional and moral dimensions of teacher reflexivity, thus stunting their personal and professional growth (Zeichner & Liston, 2014). As such, it could be said that, in order to cultivate attention to the self's transformability within educational settings, an accent must be placed on teachers' attentional autonomy, or their ability to direct their attention to what *they* (and not their institutional superiors) deem to be most important. Furthermore, since schools' institutional and physical structure forms an attentional environment that inescapably shapes teachers' attention, teachers' attentional autonomy must, in the end, be guaranteed by their collective control over workplace conditions. Indeed, it could be argued, this type of teacher-led institutional control must be at the very core of any conceptually coherent teacher professionalization program (Maroy & Cattoner, 2002). More than that, to the extent that it favors long-term social attention to the developmental nature of selfhood, such a shift in education governance – giving teachers control over the conditions that shape their attentional environment – constitutes perhaps the most sustainable antidote to essentialist thinking and thus to identity rigidification processes.

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