

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF IDENTITIES

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■ **Abstract** In this chapter I review the social psychological underpinnings of identity, emphasizing social cognitive and symbolic interactionist perspectives and research, and I turn then to key themes of current work on identity—social psychological, sociological, and interdisciplinary. I emphasize the social bases of identity, particularly identities based on ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender, class, age, and (dis)ability, both separately and as they intersect. I also take up identities based on space, both geographic and virtual. I discuss struggles over identities, organized by social inequalities, nationalisms, and social movements. I conclude by discussing postmodernist conceptions of identities as fluid, multidimensional, personalized social constructions that reflect sociohistorical contexts, approaches remarkably consistent with recent empirical social psychological research, and I argue explicitly for a politicized social psychology of identities that brings together the structures of everyday lives and the sociocultural realities in which those lives are lived.

“Identity . . . is a concept that neither imprisons (as does much in sociology) nor detaches (as does much in philosophy and psychology) persons from their social and symbolic universes, [so] it has over the years retained a generic force that few concepts in our field have.”

(Davis 1991:105)

“[I]dentity is never a priori, nor a finished product; it is only ever the problematic process of access to an image of totality.”

(Bhabha 1994:51)

INTRODUCTION

“Identity” is a keyword of contemporary society and a central focus of social psychological theorizing and research. At earlier historical moments, identity was not so much an issue; when societies were more stable, identity was to a great extent assigned, rather than selected or adopted. In current times, however, the concept of identity carries the full weight of the need for a sense of who one is, together with an often overwhelming pace of change in surrounding social contexts—changes in the

