

Adult Learning and Pragmatic Identity Theory

Davin J. Carr-Chellman
Penn State University, djc194@gmail.com

Joseph Levitan
Penn State University, levitan@psu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Carr-Chellman, Davin J. and Levitan, Joseph (2016). "Adult Learning and Pragmatic Identity Theory," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2016/papers/7>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Adult Learning and Pragmatic Identity Theory

Davin J. Carr-Chellman and Joseph Levitan
Pennsylvania State University

Abstract: The interaction between identity and learning has been under theorized. American Pragmatism offers important insights into identity and learning. With new educational experiences, adults take on new identities. Pragmatic Identity Theory will be an analytical lens allowing us to better understand the identity negotiation within learning experiences.

Keywords: American pragmatism, adult learning, identity

Introduction

While the scholarly concept of identity is a relatively recent development of the 20th Century, its roots can be traced to much earlier literature. From Plato's concept of self as psyche around 500 BCE, to Hamlet's soliloquy on his identity in the 1400s CE, the deep questions about 'who I am' have continued to spark curiosity and controversy. Identity is not only a metaphysical concern of understanding one's place in the cosmos, however. On a more concrete level, it has important implications for social justice and personal wellbeing (Holland & Lachicotte 2007; Stets & Serpe 2013). In the wake of Sigmund Freud's ego psychology, George Herbert Mead (1934; 1925; 1913) and Erik Erikson (1968; 1980) began to investigate and write about individual identity at a concrete level. For them, questions about the self and identity assumed a high priority for understanding psychological health. Subsequent scholarship has invoked identity to understand social interaction, social reproduction, and human development (Butler, 2011; Davies, 2006; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1996). Consequently, researchers and practitioners began utilizing and developing powerful analytical approaches based in identity to better understand human experience.

Over the years, dozens of different conceptions of identity have appeared in scholarly literature in almost every academic discipline (Stets & Serpe, 2013; Palmer 2010; Olsen, 2008; Brenwell & Stokoe, 2006; McLean, 1999). Some researchers utilize the construct of identity in simple, perhaps simplistic ways (Swann & Bossom, 2010). For example, the identity constructs of race (Latino, Black, White) are utilized to help explain economic and social inequalities in U.S. society. Other identity theories look at the construct in more complex ways. For example, they delve into the unconscious structures that subtly guide behavior (Wilson, 2004). Different "camps" of theory rely on a range of epistemological and philosophical underpinnings, such as social-constructivism and postmodernism (Olsen, 2008; Wilson, 2004; Mclean 1999). The many different orientations often compete with each other, and even the term identity seems to be insufficient to really capture the idea that it refers too. However, it is the best term scholars currently have and one that has become indispensable (Bottero, 2010).

Despite the expansive use of the term identity, we think that there is still a gap in our collective understanding and utilization of identity as an analytical construct as it applies to empirical phenomena. We see identity as a practical issue in personal development and learning. We think there are possibilities to utilize identity in an integrated way to examine adult learning in more depth and subtly, addressing questions such as: Why do some adult learners feel compelled to challenge everything a teacher says, or disengage from learning with that teacher? Why do other learners uncritically adopt whatever that same teacher says? Why do some new or

second-career teachers seem to slide right into the teaching role, while other equally talented and intelligent people struggle to find their teacher selves? Why do some teachers have difficulty transitioning to new curricula and pedagogies? Why do some adults see environmental conservation as a hoax or a conspiracy while others buy-in to the idea wholeheartedly? On a different level, approaching questions of identity as they relate to gender, race, and class might benefit from the Pragmatic Identity Theory perspective.

More substantively, a pragmatic identity theory can also address key issues about agency in growth and change. For example, how is it that we remain open to the possibilities of change and growth even in the midst of overwhelming social force to reproduce existing relations of power in our development? Understanding identity as a relational, multifaceted, and holistic concept that runs through the individual, in other words, understanding identity pragmatically, can provide insights into these types of pressing questions. In this paper we discuss identity and American Pragmatism, the contribution of Pragmatic Identity Theory as a method of analysis that can contribute to learning literature and introduce the theory as four premises for discussion.

American Pragmatism and Pragmatic Identity Theory

This paper is meant to introduce a theoretical/analytical orientation for discussion and development. Due to space an in-depth review of literature and the many epistemologies that need to be discussed is not possible. Instead, in this section we focus on making a case for why a pragmatic epistemological foundation for understanding identity is best suited to its study of learning and social phenomenon. The fundamental insight that American Pragmatists offered scholars was the experiential nature of knowledge—the understanding that knowledge, and identity (or self-concept), like everything else in human experience, is contingent, relational, and in constant process.

Charles Peirce is a less well known, but seminal figure in American Pragmatism. Peirce's (1869; 1995) text *Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man* lays out an integrated orientation towards identity and learning. Instead of thinking that the internal world of an individual is radically separate from the external, Peirce argues that in fact we are intimately connected to the world and a part of it. We came from the world, and we are a living being necessarily situated within the environment of the world. Arguing against Descartes' (1998) claim that we have an absolute insight into our internal states and lack knowledge about the external world, Peirce argues that in fact we are not so sure about either our internal experiences or our senses. However, he claims we can become more aware and more knowledgeable of both our internal life and the external world through interaction, questioning and testing. This is most often learned through experiencing unexpected error and the subsequent correction. These actions lead to learning through experience.

William James approaches issues of the development of self-consciousness slightly differently than Peirce. Though James' conclusions share pertinent similarities with Peirce. In his seminal book *Principles of Psychology* (1890), James argues that the development of self-consciousness and self-identity are intimately connected, but not quite equivalent. The self as self-identity is, as a phenomenon, the creation of many mutable selves. The development of self-consciousness is, in some sense, the creator of these many selves. Self-consciousness, then, is seen as an agential process, and can be understood as the river from which the tributaries of identity are fed.

When James discusses the process of becoming self-conscious in Chapter XXII of the *Principles of Psychology* he claims: "Another of the great capacities in which man [sic] has been

said to differ fundamentally from the animal is that of possessing self-consciousness or reflective knowledge of himself as a thinker.“ (1890, p. 250). This self-consciousness, James claims, is a key component to a sense of “our own personal identity.” (ibid.). Like Peirce, James thinks that the creation of this self-consciousness comes from a kind of separation or dissociation of the thinker from the thought.

According to James, the development of self-consciousness requires a kind of separation, dissociation, or reflective distance, between that which is thought about and the thinker. This capacity of creating distance happens most readily when an individual becomes aware of error (1890, p. 250). So, like Peirce, James sees the awareness of error as a key and important step in the development of self-consciousness.

The development of self-consciousness according to James is a learning process. It is the ability to reflect upon one’s thinking and experience thinking as separated from that thinking or experience (1890, p. 250). This process of discovering an instance of one’s thinking that is mistaken, and then generating the inference of separation between the self and the instance of the experience of error allows for an abstraction of self to occur. Finding discontinuity between our thoughts and the world creates an opportunity for reflection, which can then uncover a level of difference between the thoughts and the thinker who is experiencing those thoughts, thereby creating an awareness of self and identity.

Peirce and James are two thinkers representative of the subjective, experiential processes of identity development. Another figure related to American Pragmatism, WEB Dubois, offers insights into the social influence of identity development in his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903, 2007). Instead of the agential aspects of identity development, Dubois discusses the oppressive influence of having someone see him, not as the Dubois he knows in himself, but as a stereotype. Dubois’ real sense of self is weighed down or “hidden behind a veil” by the oppressive perceptions and actions of others, and their valuation of blackness as dangerous or less-than. This oppressive perception from society creates a double sight, an internal and external sense of reality, one that is dis-integrated and disjointed, painful and unhealthy, instead of integrated into a healthy whole.

All of these thinkers are anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist. They see the starting point of the self as a process, and their theory of knowledge is based on ontological change and growth, as well as relationship. Understanding the multiple and varied identities that develop as inherent in that experiential, valuative, and relational process can offer us insight into how self-making and transformation does and does not happen in adult learning.

The Contribution of Pragmatic Identity Theory

This paper introduces a theory of identity development that relies on the epistemology of American Pragmatists to address the dichotomous perspectives that have recently developed in this area: identity formation has come to be understood as either a psychogenetic process (a rigidly cognitive process, strictly inside the skin or *a priori*) or a sociogenetic process (a material process, strictly outside the skin or *a posteriori*), but there is a third way that denies the dichotomy. With the American Pragmatists’ insights along with W.E.B. Dubois and Lev Vygotsky, a more holistic and empirically accurate representation of identity development is possible.

When identity development is seen as a learning process embedded in experience we cast a different light on the subtle but profound nuances inherent in human learning experiences as they relate to self and environment. We see a pragmatic identity theory to be especially useful for

a deep and grounded understanding of learning and change. Uncovering more nuance in the complex relationship between learning and identity formation is particularly useful as the move away from psychogenetic identity formation to sociogenetic self-making continues to emerge in the empirical literature (Bartlett 2005, Van Meijl 2002). Pragmatic Identity Theory is a way to break out of dichotomous thinking between social (sociogenetic) and internal (psychogenetic) influences, generating a theory that places identity in an integrated, dynamic conceptual framework, effectively bridging the social and internal origins of identity. It is an interpretive lens that allows researchers and practitioners to uncover the role of identity in learning, while also appreciating that identity development is itself a learning process.

Identity plays a particularly important role in adult learning. Mature people have already developed identities that influence their attitudes and perceptions. When adults delve into new education experiences, it is often to take on new identities or develop existing ones. At times taking on a new identity is the driving motivation for adults in educational settings (Mezirow, 2000; Tisdell, 1998, 2001, 2006). We hope that after fully developed, a Pragmatic Identity and Learning Theory will provide a framework for practitioners and researchers to better understand how to facilitate learning opportunities that better connect to, and are sensitive to, adults' identities, to help facilitate more profound growth.

The core argument of Pragmatic Identity Theory is that identities are essentially in complex relationships with each other, both internally and intersubjectively, and in complex relationships with the social and physical world. It is conceptually valuable to recognize and not lose sight of this fundamental observation: existence is relation. To *be* is to *relate*, symbolically, intersubjectively, and affectively. A necessary corollary to this observation is that an individual's interpretation and internalization of her existence is founded on and formed through those symbolic and intersubjective relations--emotionally, cognitively and physically. Hence, the development and formation of identities is a fundamentally relational process. In other words, understanding distinct identities is valuable, but only when those distinctions are conceptually integrated into the transactional whole.

In Pragmatic Identity Theory, identity is seen as a plastic (in the sense of malleable but not fluid) and semi-explicit part of experience that touches all aspects of human life. In this way, identity under our conception is an umbrella term that describes the conglomeration of aspects of self that are constructed, negotiated, and imposed, as well as those aspects of self that lie at the core of human experience: the aspects of self which are 'uncovered' through experience and reflection throughout life.

Even more, the questions often associated with one's identity, as we alluded to at the start of this paper -- who am I and where do I belong? What is my place in the world? Am I true to myself -- may remain the crucible of self-making, but the move toward a third way, a pragmatic interpretation, forces us to broaden our search for the sources of these questions. As Holland and Lachicotte say,

...these are questions which individuals often become embroiled in answering. And the answers people come up with affect their subsequent actions and understandings of the world around them. But, research is equivocal about the source of these questions: do they come (unbidden) from within or from questions and challenges lodged by dialogic partners. Are they psychogenetic or sociogenetic or both? (2007, p. 132).

In Pragmatic Identity Theory, the focus is on removing the binary of psychogenic and sociogenic sources to understand identity as relationship, internal and external, flowing, and embedded in environment. This has found expression in Mead's social psychology, as well as Vygotsky's

sociocultural psychology, but has foundations in the epistemology of American Pragmatism.

According to Holland and Lachicotte, Mead and Vygotsky share the concepts of active internalization (self-authoring), dialogic selves (self-other dialogues), and the semiotics of behavior. These shared concepts, “coupled with Vygotsky’s notions of semiotic mediation, higher psychosocial functions, and agency, constitute a powerful sociogenetic vision of how individuals come to be inhabited by, and yet co-construct, the social and cultural worlds through which they exist” (p. 134). The important move for Pragmatic Identity Theory is that, in the midst of internalizing and co-constructing her social and cultural world -- the sociogenetic vision -- an individual also plays an essential synthetic role -- the psychogenetic vision. Necessarily, we borrow and appropriate concepts from both visions, while continually grounding them in the epistemology of American Pragmatism.

Pragmatic Identity Theory

Pragmatic Identity Theory contains 4 major premises. These four premises highlight the relational, integrated nature of identity with the environment and the facets of self that make up our human uniqueness and connection with others.

Premise 1: Identity is constructed through the synthesis of three influences: a) self-concept, b) the responsive subconscious, and c) societal meanings or the collective understandings of identity. These influences have different powers at different times, so they are not listed in a specific order.

Influence a) is how individuals see themselves, their self-concept (James, 1890; 2013). Self-concept is defined as a set of meanings attached to the “self” (Stets and Trevettevik, 2014). The ‘self’ is defined as the individual’s cognitive awareness that “this” person is distinct in perceptive access (i.e. burning this hand hurts, but burning that stick does not) than other aspects of the environment (Peirce, 1885; 1998; James, 2013; Heidegger, 1927; 1996). The self-concept is learned over time, usually part of our explicit understandings, and is fluid. The sense of “self” can be extended to one’s possessions, one’s prestige, or a family member, because perceptive access is actually a fluid ability. For example, if your child cuts herself, it might give you a kind-of-feeling of pain once you realize that she hurts. Embedded in this idea is the assumption that perceptive access is not necessarily immediate.

Influence b) is called the responsive subconscious. It can be defined as the semi-conscious impulses that affect emotion, perception and “gut feelings.” Other scholars have labeled this aspect of self the adaptive unconscious (Wilson, 2004). However, the rigid designation and binary of conscious and unconscious does not do justice to the human experience of consciousness and the fluid nature of our awareness. The indefinable nature of consciousness and unconsciousness (Wilson, 2004) is mitigated to some degree to talk about the subconscious. The responsive subconscious is the part of the identity that make up the “core” self--those parts of the self that one “discovers” from time to time. It is that aspect of self in which one enters a state of being that feels like being “really me”--what you love to do and how you love to be. That subtle feeling or whispering voice inside that sometimes speaks loud enough to hear. The responsive subconscious integrates cognitive, emotional and physical aspects of the biological being that we continually discover and create.

Influence c) is how others (“society,” culture, significant others, strangers) see the individual and impose their identity perceptions on the individual. This integrates the normal orientation of science as focused on individual organisms to ‘human science’ as that of relation (Van Mannen, 1979). Human Science looks at humans as both individuals and members of the

larger social and physical environment. The primacy of others' perceptions, definitions, and evaluations affect identity construction from the time a person is born (Dubois, 1902; 2007; Stryker & Serpe, 1994; Kim 2012). Therefore, to discuss identity as isolated is misleading. Identity is both "subjective" and "intersubjective," "constructed" and "inherent" depending upon context and the relative power of each of these influences. It is more important to be sensitive to these multiple facets of identity development when interacting with actual people and thinking about learning than trying to generalize about "identity" writ large. The theory is flexible to orient the researcher or practitioner to look at certain areas of self in relation in order to map their own unique identities. Distinctions are important in this theory, but we think that distinctions in isolation are misleading. Thinking about relative distinctions and the amount of influence each aspect of a person has, is a more useful orientation to examining identity.

Premise 2: An individual's identity is made up of many sub-identities that have different levels of salience, prevalence, and longevity that manifest in different contexts (Stets & Serpe, 2013).

These sub-identities are integrated into the self, but they may not be consistent. For example, a person might see herself as very peaceful in work and at home, but also have no problem seeing herself as aggressive on the sports field. These many different selves have different characteristics: salience, prevalence and longevity. Salience is defined as those sub-identities that have stronger feelings associated with them (other scholars use the term 'centrality' i.e. Stets and Serpe, 2013). Prevalence is defined as sub-identities that are more likely to be present in any given situation. For example peaceful is more prevalent than aggressive for the person mentioned above. Finally, longevity is the length of time certain identities last. For example, some identities last a lifetime (e.g. being part of this family, having these parents), while there are other identities that only last for a short time (e.g. teenagers being "punk" and coloring their hair purple for a week).

Sub-identities also have three different types: 1) Role identity [professional identity and other identities like 'parent', 'caregiver', 'sibling', 'etc.' as defined by McGall and Simmons (1978) and Stryker (2002), 2) group identity, the groups with whom one identifies (NAACP, NRA, Republican, Democrat, etc.) (Burke and Stets, 2009), and 3) personal identity, the characteristics of the self in relation to others (Burke and Stets, 2009).

Premise 3: Inherent in identity is an emotional affect (Stets & Trettevik, 2014; DuBois, 2007) and physical embodiment. The value individuals and others place (or do not place) on the characteristics that make up their sub-identities affect individuals' self-concept, efficacy, mobility, access to social goods, and overall wellbeing.

Healthy self-concept plays an important role in overall health, motivation, mental wellbeing, and willingness to change (Stets & Trettevik, 2014; Stets, 2005). It is difficult to separate emotions from identity. Some scholars have thought of identity as purely a cognitive construct (Wilson, 2004). Instead, we highlight the integrated centrality of emotions in identity and the fundamentally embodied nature of identity. The emotions are part of the responsive subconscious that reacts to negative, positive, or neutral characterizations of sub-identities. Emotions also react to the amount of attention that each sub-identity receives. There are many influences that can hurt people's overall explicit self-concept. These influences also are able to undermine their implicit identities from the responsive subconscious.

Premise 4: Identities and Identity values can be fluid, but certain parts of identity are stable and difficult to change.*

* This paper was shortened due to page limitations. For additional information, please contact the author.