

Constructing and Negotiating Identity: The Evolution of Identity as a Power Structure and its Ethnic, Cultural, and Situational Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the multi-faceted nature of identity through a theoretical lens, examining its evolution, power dynamics, and situational contexts. The concept of identity has undergone significant development, shifting from a static notion of self to a fluid and context-dependent construct. The discussion begins by tracing the historical development of the identity concept, highlighting its transformation into a critical socio-political tool. The role of identity as a power construct is then analyzed, emphasising how dominant groups shape and maintain social structures through identity narratives. The article further explores the situational and contextual dimensions of identity, asserting that identity is not only shaped by external categories but is also actively negotiated in situational contexts. A detailed examination of categorisations of identity follows, focusing on how labels such as ethnicity and cultural dimension of identity intersect to form collective identities within ethnic groups. By synthesising these perspectives, the article aims to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding identity as both a personal and social construct influenced by historical, cultural, and political forces. This theoretical exploration contributes to ongoing discussions on the dynamic and layered nature of identity in contemporary society.

Keywords: identity Conceptualisation, Power and Identity, Contextual identity, Cultural Dimension of Identity, Ethnic Groups.

INTRODUCTION

Identity has long been a focal point in social sciences and humanities, functioning as a conceptual framework to decode the complexities of individual and collective behaviors. Traditionally, identity was approached as a static and inherent attribute, tied closely to unchanging traits such as ethnicity or nationality. However, with the evolution of theoretical paradigms, contemporary scholarship increasingly views identity as a dynamic, multi-dimensional construct, shaped by socio-political contexts, cultural influences, and situational factors. This theoretical shift necessitates a closer examination of the mechanisms through which identities are constructed, maintained, and renegotiated in varying social contexts.

A term of “identity” is widespread and is used in a multitude of ways across disciplines, topics, and contexts. The term generally is attributed to both - individuals and groups, and can be used to refer to the religious, political, private, cultural, or ethnic realms. Identity is considered a source of cohesion and violence as well [1]. It is a key term in anthropology and relates, on the one hand, to categories of the individual or sameness with oneself and, on the other, to collective distinctions of otherness. It is fluid and transcends boundaries but, to a certain

degree, has to be stable in order for others to identify one as theirs [2, p.p. 3091-3103]. Thus, identity is a dialectic between similarity and difference, which considered to be main models in the identity construction process.

An individual has a variety of identities, such as ethnic, religious, national or gender, and usually one dominates over the others but this domination is not static and can vary. A British sociologist Anthony Giddens and Philip W. Sutton defines identity as “the distinctive aspects of a person which relate to who they are and what is meaningful to them. The main sources are gender, sexual orientation, nationality or ethnicity, and social class” [3, p. 1002]. So, certain attributes have to be important to the individual in order to become part of his/her identity, which is the sum of personal and collective¹ identities.

Grounding this study in established theoretical frameworks provides a systematic basis for exploring the intricate nature of identity formation across different societal contexts, particularly in the context of the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. This theoretical orientation facilitates a comprehensive examination of the ways in which identities are defined and redefined in response to evolving cultural and social influences. Additionally, it situates these processes within broader theoretical discourses, enhancing our understanding of identity as a socially embedded and contextually contingent construct. Such an approach ensures that the analysis remains both theoretically robust and contextually relevant, thereby yielding insights crucial to comprehending the complexities inherent in identity formation.

In this light, the present study explores the evolution of identity as a conceptual and power-laden structure, analysing its implications across various socio-cultural dimensions. A central focus is given to the categorization of identity and its intersections with ethnicity and culture, revealing how these constructs shape group dynamics and social interactions. By situating identity within its historical, cultural, and political frameworks, this study aims to contribute to ongoing scholarly discussions on the fluidity of identity and the mechanisms that underlie its construction and negotiation in contemporary societies.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF IDENTITY CONCEPT

Basically, discussions of identity take two major forms: psychodynamic and sociological [4, p.p. 328-329]. A research of identity concept started from the psychodynamic tradition, which mostly concerns with Austrian neurologist and the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud's theory and with second author - a German-American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Homburger Erikson, who's concept determined identity as located in the core of the individual. The particular term of “identity” came to anthropology precisely from the works of this author. This tradition is not the concern of our study, therefore will not be further analysed.

The second form of identity discussions is sociological tradition of identity theory, which is linked to “symbolic interactionism and emerges from the pragmatic theory of the self discussed

¹ Two concepts should be distinguished here: collective identity and social identity. These two terms are often used as synonyms, but to our point of view, collective identity is a broader concept, covering social identity term as well. Talking in Giddens and Sutton terms, social identity covers secondary identities, while collective identity include both: primary and secondary identities. Thus, in this study these terms are used based on this perception.

by William James and George Herbert Mead. The self is a distinctively human capacity that enables people to reflect on their nature and the social world through communication and language. Both James and Mead see the self as a process with two phases: the “I”, which is knower, inner, subjective, creative, determining, and unknowable; and the “Me”, which is the more known, outer, determined, and social phase. Identification, here, is a process of naming, of placing ourselves in socially constructed categories, with language holding a central position in this process. In the later works of Erving Goffman and Peter Berger, identity is stated clearly to be “socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed” [4, p. 329].

The anthropological concept of “identity” has been built up over time and enriched by studies on interethnic relationships, ethnic borders and ethnicity. Anthropologists have contributed to identity research by shifting the focus of research: one of the first challenges for the researcher wishing to carry out empirical research in this area is to identify an appropriate analytical tool [5, p. 368]. The concept of boundaries is useful here for demonstrating how identity works. As a Norwegian social anthropologist Fredrik Barth in his approach to ethnicity advocated, the critical focus for investigation is “the ethnic boundary that defines the group rather than the cultural stuff that it encloses” [6, p. 15]. This was a significant finding and his approach will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

Late modern social theorists have developed a particular sociological perspective on selfhood in ‘new times’ [8, 9]. A generally held assumption of late modernity suggests that identity matters more now because we have more choice. Postmodern XXI century implies, that “no identity, including ethnic, can be considered essential, the palette of identities is always arranged relevantly, situationally, historically contextually, and they should be assessed only in that context” [10, p. 19]. The notion of “strong” or stable, inner identity has largely been replaced with recognition that identities are beset with contradiction, fluidity, and contestation, and can be identified as “weak”. These identity-based tensions are often conceptualised as being products of globalisation, post-colonialism, transnationalism, and the formation of diaspora [1]. As a category of analysis, anthropologists have tended towards a ‘soft’ or ‘weak’ account of identity as contextually constructed or negotiated [5, p. 368]. As a result, anthropologists increasingly have examined the “hybridity” of identities, in which the idea of rigid group boundaries has given way to the sense of movement between multiple identities (ibid).

Clearly, identity research beginning with a psychodynamic position with personal identity and personality in concern, acquired an anthropological idea of weak identity as a multiple concept in the postmodern era. Anthropologists left self-perception as personal identity analysis to psychologists and started analyse collective identity using boundaries that define groups as a tool and finally moving to the concept of multiple identities.

IDENTITY AS A POWER CONSTRUCT

Power has been defined in a great variety of ways by anthropologists, but to be talk of power at all, one must be speaking of distinctions: usually between an individual and a group, as in the power legitimised through acknowledged, often redistributive, leadership; or one group and another group, as in colonial domination [11, p. 565]. Whereas, from an anthropological perspective, identities are not static, it is useful to look at the process of identity construction in order to find out how power (politics) influence this process.

Talking about identity and power relations two concepts become important: “identity politics” and “politics of identity”, as they are defined by American anthropologists Jonathan D. Hill and Thomas M. Wilson. Identity politics refers mainly to the “top down” processes and is perceived through the prism of culture and identity. Hill and Wilson suggest to view identity politics in a way “how culture and identity, variously perceived to be traditional, modern, radical, local regional, religious, gender, class, and ethnic, are articulated, constructed, invented, and commodified as the means to achieve political ends” [12, p. 2]. Identity politics is seen as discourse and action within public arenas of political and civil society. Here culture becomes a tool to subvert, protect, support and attack, and identity is understood with recourse to “wider theorising and comparisons of the institutions, practices, and ideologies of national states, governments, political parties, transnational corporations, nongovernmental organisations, and international and supranational organisations” (ibid).

The “top down” processes indicate various political, economic, and other social entities attempt to mold collective identities into frames, in other words, collective identities based on ethnicity, race, language as well as place, are drawn as “primordial” and are used for understanding political action and the body of politics [12, p. 2]. That means, power constructs identity and solidifies its own position through it and is understood here as having a form of governments, parties or corporate institutions.

Second concept is “politics of identity”, which overlaps with the first concept literally. This term “refers more to issues of personal and group power, found within and cross all social and political institutions and collectivities, where people sometimes choose, and sometimes are forced to interact with each other in part on the basis of their shared, or divergent, notions of their identities [12, p. 2]. Generally, this is the opposite pole to “identity politics”.

The “politics of identity” refers to a more “bottom up” process through which “local people challenge, subvert, or negotiate culture and identity and contest structures of power and wealth that constrain their social lives” [12, p. 2]. In fact, this concept demonstrates that local people can influence identity politics from the bottom.

Certainly, both concepts are related to each other: one does not exist in isolation from the other, and both hinge on power relations [12, p. 2], so raises the question, if there is a meeting point of these two - “top down” and “bottom up” concepts. “Power is regarded as generated in and through the reproduction of structures of domination” [13, p. 4], so dominating power is the ratio between two and always wants to expand in space and time.

However, if one of these two - personal and group power, or ruling structures’ power is significantly bigger than another, the power is approaching zero and these two poles cannot coexist. Certainly, in order to escape this collapse, each should continue to possess a level of its own agency and act in fluctuating relationship with another.

All in all, in identity research from anthropological perspective, the concept of power (politics) can be functional in understanding the nature of a particular identity, especially marginal, and defining a broader context of the research field.

IDENTITY IN SITU

As identity is contextually constructed and negotiated, there are several issues associated with this feature. Firstly, if identity is segmented, i.e. divided into different parts or consisting of different parts, so individual in particular situations and contexts can demonstrate different attributes of one's identity. Which aspect is going to be emphasised and which is going to be concealed depends on the certain situation and social factors, that means, how identities or certain aspects of it emerge depends on the circumstances and there is no chronological order. So context is an important point to consider in identity research and becomes problematic when trying to define a particular identity.

One of the central theorists of identity Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen defining the meaning of context to individual's identity and behaviour explains the "segmentary model":

"Any person thus has many complementary social identities, and the context decides which of them is activated at any time. The model of segmentary identities serves as a reminder that identity is not fixed, is not 'innate', but is fashioned in the encounter between an individual and a social situation. The segmentary model may enable us to describe the social identities of a person as, say, citizen of the world, African, Kenyan, Kikuyu, someone from the Murang'a area, member of clan X, member of lineage A. However, individuals also have other identities which cut across a system of concentric circles. For example, a person may be 50 years old, a man, a spouse, a lawyer, a socialist, a stamp-collector and so on. He or she is a member of many groups with only partially overlapping membership. Which identity is assumed in a situation of conflict, when an individual must choose, say, between loyalty to the party and loyalty to the nation or ethnic group, is an empirical question". [14, p. 272]

According to segmentary model, we see that identity is fashioned in the encounter between an individual and a social situation, and "identity is always actual - created here and now" [10, p. 16]. That means, "no identity can be an essence, and no identity has, per se, progressive or regressive value outside its actual and historical context. <> How, and by whom, different types of identities are constructed, and with what outcomes, cannot be addressed in general, abstract terms: it is a matter of social context" [15, p. 6-12].

Here comes the question of the boundaries of each identity itself that individual has. Possibly, under the influence of different contexts, two identities of the individual can converge and create new aspect of identity, or be overshadowed by third identity. Indeed, some identities have stronger boundaries than others and this is due to their divergence, or oppositely convergence if they are blurred. "Some may argue that 'identity' is no longer conceived as necessarily unitary, and no longer perceived as a match between inner experience and outer acknowledgment, but as a kind of mastery of multiple narratives of self-presentation" [16, p.p. 532-536].

Secondly, trying to define certain identity, we encounter difficulties, due to the fact that there are different, competing visions of any identity. This is not only the result caused by the difference of individuals, but mainly because there are different discourses within the society,

of what certain identity should be like or about. If every culture is the shared characteristics of a group of people, and encompasses such aspects as place of birth, language, religion, social behaviours, literature, music, and etc., that means, at the same time there are many different ways of conceptualising and acting out one's own identity. As Eriksen argues: "one important point to be made here is that the interrelationship between culture and identity is subjective and intersubjective, not objective. A social identity, whether ethnic, national or something else, can be created in a variety of ways" [14, p. 310]. According to this, we can state that, for instance, being a muslim women in Europe for one women could mean to wear no scarf in the public and have a work, for other - to avoid public spaces, keep following islamic regulations and doing primary child-care activity. Both of these women would share same identity, but have different discourses of what this identity should be like. In most cases, a particular approach is compatible with the prevailing discourses in their setting.

Moreover, identity is not only constructed but also can be re-constructed. Barth discusses the problem of how and under what circumstances, the characteristics associated with an ethnic identity are maintained, and when they change. As he argues, people sustain their identity through public behaviour, which cannot be directly evaluated. He provides Pathans example, saying that different forms of Pathan organisation represent various ways of consummating the identity under changing conditions [6, p. 132]. The space and organisation are relevant here as an assumption to create new way of being Pathan as well as any other identity of any person. As Gupta and Ferguson argue, "in the pulverised space of postmodernity, space has not become irrelevant: it has been re-territorialized" [17, p. 37], in other words migrants and refugees are good examples showing that it is possible, for instance, to find same pre-revolutionary Tehran in Los Angeles, where, most probably, Iranian people re-construct their identities.

Thus, such features are inherent in identity: being segmentary, absence of strict boundaries of each identity, and different discourses of the same identity in the society, as well as such a feature of identity as ability to be reconstructed complicates identity research. As a result, each identity has to be observed *in situ*, i.e. in the original place and situation, as well as cannot be seen as absolute.

CATEGORISATIONS OF IDENTITY

The multiplicity of identities necessitates some kind of division. There are several point of views how identities could be categorized. American anthropologist Jonathan Friedman stresses, that there are two types of identity: internal to person and external to person. "Personal identity is constituted. Certain kinds of identity are marked on or carried by the body. They are defined as internal to the person. Others are external to the person and marked in the forms of social practise or symbols employed by a population. There is, of course, a degree of overlap, especially in the domain of external symbols, but the difference is more important" [18, p. 29].

Another categorization is made by Anthony Giddens and Philip W. Sutton (2017), who stratified identities on the basis of socialisation process. They single out primary and secondary identities:

"identities are multi-layered, consisting of several sources, but a simple distinction can be made between primary and secondary identities, which are connected to the

processes of primary and secondary socialisation respectively. Primary identities are those that are formed in early life and include gender, race/ethnicity and perhaps also disability. Secondary identities build on these and would include those associated with social roles and achieved statuses such as occupational roles and social status positions. Social identities are quite complex and fluid, changing as people gain new roles or leave behind old ones” [3, p. 305].

As we see from these examples, anthropologists and sociologists focus on the distinction between collective identities. In general, collective identity refers to how population identifies itself in terms of ethnicity, religion, nationality, or other basis, so taking to account definitions, identities could be divided into religious, national, cultural, gender, and others, there is no exhaustive list of them. Also, as was discussed before, they frequently overlap and reinforce one another, so sometimes it is not so easy to separate them. As a result, it would not be entirely fair to classify identities by definition, socialisation process or human body alone.

Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells Oliván (2009) marks, “the social construction of identity always takes place in a context marked by power relationships”, as a result he makes a distinction between three forms and origins of identity building: legitimizing identity, resistance identity and project identity [15, p. p. 7-8]. Such distinction should be discussed more broadly.

Talking about legitimizing identity, it is necessary to emphasize that it is introduced by the dominant institutions of society (government, parties, church(es), unions, cooperatives, civic associations, and so on) to extend and rationalise their domination vis a` vis social actors (subjects in its broader sense), so it generates a civil society in its original conception. That is, “a set of organisations and institutions, as well as a series of structured and organised social actors, which reproduce, albeit sometimes in a conflictive manner, the identity that rationalises the sources of structural domination” [15, p. 8]. This identity building fits with various theories of nationalism and is perceived as “the most static type of identity” [10, p.p. 15-16]. While it is treated as losing its valued and relegated to the second plan in European studies, it can become a useful tool in the studies of Middle East identities.

The next distinguished identity type is resistance identity and is precisely described by the author: “it leads to the formation of community. It is generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatised by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society” [15, p. 9]. That means, “it constructs forms of collective resistance against otherwise unbearable oppression, usually on the basis of identities that were clearly defined by history, geography, or biology, making it easier to essentialise the boundaries of resistance” (ibid). Resistance identity is described as probably the most important type of identity-building in “western” society.

The last one type is project identity which “produces subjects” [15, p. 10]. Subjects here are perceived not as individuals, even if they are made by and in individuals. They are the collective social actor through which individuals reach holistic meaning in their experience. When social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity

that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure. Castells gives an example: this is the case when feminism moves out of the trenches of resistance of women's identity and women's rights, to challenge patriarchy, thus the patriarchal family, and thus the entire structure of production, reproduction, sexuality, and personality on which societies have been historically based (ibid).

Thus, there is no single categorization of collective identities. In this case, would it be primary or secondary identities, internal to a person or external, or categorised by the different aspects of identity building process, categorisations by themselves are not significant as long as they do not provide a practical tool for identity research, but in any case, broadens the researcher's perception of this field and deepens understanding of the context.

ETHNICITY, CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ETHNIC GROUPS

Ethnicity is understood as having great effect in the process of identity formation, is one of the basic concepts in anthropology, and, to our point of view, is a required line of the research of the identities of the Middle East. However, there is no single common approach to this term. As a result, Russian anthropologists Sergei Sokolovskii and Valery Tishkov distinguish three main approaches: primordialist, instrumentalist and constructivist: "roughly speaking, primordialist theories assert that ethnic identification is based on deep, 'primordial' attachments to a group or culture; instrumentalist approaches treat ethnicity as a political instrument exploited by leaders and others in pragmatic pursuit of their own interests; and constructivist approaches emphasize the contingency and fluidity of ethnic identity, treating it as something which is made in specific social and historical contexts, rather than (as in primordialist arguments) treating it as a 'given' " [19, p. 190]. The last approach could be seen as a main in postmodern identity research.

Jonathan Friedman (1994) discusses ethnicity in the context of cultural identity, which is understood as a complex phenomena and can vary between four forms. Ethnicity is defined between the forms of cultural identity, i.e. modern ethnicity and traditional ethnicity. J. Friedman talking about modern ethnicity as a set of achieved features. They are external to the person and marked in the forms of social practice or symbols employed by a population. As well as can be expressed "as heritage, or as cultural descent, learned by each and every individual and distinctive precisely at the level of individual behaviour" [18, p. 29]. Ethnicity can be a very difficult concept to pin down, although perhaps its largest determinant is language.

Next to Western (modern) ethnicity, Friedman mentions traditional ethnicity which is inseparable from congregation:

It is based on membership defined by practise of certain activities including those related to descent. Ethnic affiliation can be easily changed or complemented by geographic mobility or by change in reference. Where a member of a group changes residence he is adopted or adopts the local ancestors and gods and becomes practising member of the new community. <...> Personal identity in such societies is not independent of the social context but almost entirely defined by it. The person is individual into a number of components (for example souls) that are directly linked to higher-order forces that lie beyond the control of individual [18, p. p. 30-31].

Means, individuals in such societies are interdependent to context and other members of the society. Traditional ethnicity leads to radically different perceptions of individual, comparing with the perception common in the “West”. However, in some cases, it may be useful for reflection of identities in Middle East context, for example.

In the context of cultural identity, inherent features are ascribed and can be defined as race, or biological descent, so next to modern and traditional ethnicities, is defined race. “Certain kinds of identity are marked on or carried by the body. They are defined as internal to the person” [18, p. 29].

Finally, the weakest form of cultural identity he calls “lifestyle”, or way of life, which may or may not have a basis in tradition [18, p. 30]. “A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” [9, p. 82]. As A. Giddens states, lifestyle is not a term which has much applicability to traditional cultures, because it implies choice within a plurality of possible options, and is ‘adopted’ rather than ‘handed down’. Lifestyles are routinised practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favoured milieux for encountering others; but the routines followed are reflexively open to change in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity. In conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so - we have no choice but to choose” (ibid)².

Fredrik Barth treated ethnicity as a continuing ascription which classifies a person in terms of their most general and inclusive identity, presumptively determined by origin and background [6, p. 13]. His essay and article in the book “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries” marked the transition to a new era of ethnic studies. Generally, people sharing same ethnicity form an ethnic group and, to Barth’s point of view, this term is intended to “designate a population which:

- is largely biologically self-perpetuating;
- shares fundamental cultural values, realised in overt unity of cultural forms;
- makes up a field of communication and interaction;
- has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order” [6, p. 10-11].

Among the characteristics listed above, the sharing of a common culture is generally given central importance [6, p. 11]. The main Fredrik Barth’s argument is that cultural stuff of ethnic group is not as important, as the ethnic boundary that defines this group:

It is true that ethnic groups are distinguished by a number of cultural traits which serve as diacritica, as overt signals of identity which persons will refer to as criteria of classification. These are specific items of customs, from style of dress to rules of inheritance. On the other hand it is equally obvious that the ethnic dichotomies do not depend on these, so that the contrast between Pathan and Baluch would not be

² It would be useful to think about the concept of lifestyle in terms of Iranian *ta’arof*, which is the object of our doctoral thesis.

changed if Pathan women started wearing the embroidered tunic-fronts used among the Baluch (ibid).

Barth's analysis shows, that "the nature of continuity of ethnic units depends on the maintenance of a boundary. The cultural features that signal the boundary may likewise be transformed, indeed, even the organisational form of the group may change - yet the fact of continuing dichotomisation between members and outsiders allows to specify the nature of continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content" [6, p. 14]. To put it differently, social interaction between insiders and outsiders defines ethnic groups they belong to. Via interaction members of the group emphasises dichotomy to others, and show their otherness.

In general, ethnic group can be defined, when identifies itself, and is identified by others as such, as well as has its social practises. As Barth states: "cultural difference can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence" [6, p. 10]. So social groups achieve an identity by defining themselves as different from other such groups and by erecting boundaries between them (ibid).

Thus, ethnicity, or ethnic group, is important part of the identity construction process in general, not only cultural identity is relevant here. Its relevance is further enhanced in terms of the Middle East identity and culture research.

CRITIQUE

Critiques of identity research have largely focused on broadness of this conception and the things it tries to cover. One of the most known criticism articles is "Beyond identity" by American professor of sociology Rogers Brubaker and American historian Frederick Cooper (2000). It is primarily centered on critiquing the notion of identity as an analytical term:

The concept is deployed to do a great deal of analytical work - much of it legitimate and important. "Identity," however, is ill suited to perform this work, for it is riddled with ambiguity, riven with contradictory meanings, and encumbered by reifying connotations. Qualifying the noun with strings of adjectives - specifying that identity is multiple, fluid, constantly re-negotiated, and so on - does not solve the Orwellian problem of entrapment in a word. It yields little more than a suggestive oxymoron - a multiple singularity, a fluid crystallisation - but still begs the question of why one should use the same term to designate all this and more. Alternative analytical idioms, we have argued, can do the necessary work without the attendant confusion. <> It is time now to go beyond "identity" - not in the name of an imagined universalism, but in the name of the conceptual clarity required for social analysis and political understanding alike [20, p.p. 34, 36].

Clearly, authors analyzed what work the concept of identity is supposed to do, and how well it does it, and they state that the concept is "universalist", means it is flat and undifferentiated. As a result, this is not the right concept to describe variety of the ties people have, such as particularities, self-understanding stories, trajectories, histories, predicament. Means, this is not the right option to include such pervasive particularity under one term.

Another author questioning the concept of identity is Ingo Schröder. He follows Brubaker and Cooper, and defines the analytical concept of identity as unclear and polysemantic. His article "Against identity" (2009) argues against the soft understanding of identity as an analytical concept currently prevailing in the social sciences:

Social scientists should focus their attention on the historical contexts that produce narratives of identity and engender the social relationships at the base of processes of collective identification, rather than take emic reifications of identity for granted or treat identity as an almost ephemeral matter of taste detached from the constraints of social relationship in the real world. The way the concept of "identity" has been employed by social scientists in the recent decades of booming identity claims across the globe and all walks of life has paid much too little attention to the social facts and processes behind the narratives [21, p. 89].

As a result, Schroeder suggests that it would be significantly better and useful to focus attention to the social contexts under which folk understandings of identity become reified as a resource of identity politics. He determines identity as a political construct, and understands culture as a product of shifting political projects of collective identification. To his point of view, by "simply taking people's claims based upon their folk understanding of identity at face value without at the same time studying the social relations behind such statements deprives social scientific investigations of much of their scientific value" [21, p. 88].

Next critique, which may be relevant in the research in Middle East identities, is related to identity research as a practise of studying and making judgements about other societies in terms of one's own cultural assumptions or bias. Richard Handler (1994) criticises the use of "identity" on the grounds of its ethnocentrism. In his article "Is "identity" a useful cross-cultural concept?" he argues that western notions of identity presume qualities of sameness and boundedness that are not sustained across other societies 'understandings of person and group.

Identity has become a salient scholarly and cultural construct in the mid-twentieth century, particularly in social-scientific scholarship in the United States. Its prominence in that context, however, does not mean that the concept can be applied unthinkingly to other places and times. To the contrary, its use as a cross-culturally neutral conceptual tool should be avoided, for, as historical analysis and ethnographic data suggest, the concept of "identity" is peculiar to the modern Western world [22, p. 27].

Even where 'identity' does not mean the same as it does in 'the West', it is still often a dominant political category; a category of practice. As such, it should demand our attention, through work that examines not only how identity is constructed in diverse contexts, but also what 'identity' means within different groups. This would entail a move from 'politics of identity' to politics of 'identity' [5, p. 368].

All in all, Brubaker and Cooper, Schroeder, and Handler critiques how, that it is time to let go of the concept of identity altogether, and distinguish it in separate scientific conceptions, as well

as not to apply the relevant terms of one culture to other cultures and analyse each case individually.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the theoretical framework informed by the works of Fredrik Barth (1969), Thomas Hylland Eriksen (1993, 2001), Jonathan Friedman (1994), Manuel Castells Oliván (2009), and Anthony Giddens (1991, 2017) provides an interdisciplinary foundation for analysing identity construction. These scholars' contributions offer critical insights for comprehensively examining the contextual dynamics and negotiation processes involved in identity formation. Given that identity is conceptualised as fragmented, fluid, and contingent upon varying socio-cultural contexts, it is essential to approach its analysis with careful attention to the specificities of each context in empirical research to accurately capture the complexities of identity construction and transformation. Several conclusions emerge from this research:

1. The study re-conceptualises identity as a dynamic construct continuously negotiated within power structures and socio-cultural contexts, highlighting its dual nature as both a product of external influences and an outcome of individual agency in a dialectical interplay between self-perception and external ascription.
2. The study positions intersectionality and power dynamics as central to identity formation, demonstrating that identities are shaped by overlapping power structures and social narratives, necessitating comprehensive analyses that consider the simultaneous influences of ethnicity, gender, class, and other intersecting factors.
3. The research demonstrates that globalisation and transnationalism foster increasingly hybrid and fluid identities, challenging essentialist categorisations and advancing a theoretical discourse that views identity as perpetually negotiated and transformed, thus necessitating a more flexible understanding of identity formation in late modernity.
4. The findings reinforce the view that ethnic and collective identities are primarily shaped by social boundaries and mechanisms of distinction, supporting F. Barth's emphasis on ethnic boundaries over cultural traits and suggesting that future research should focus on the social processes that construct and sustain these boundaries rather than static cultural markers.
5. The study advocates for a methodological shift toward *in situ* and longitudinal analyses to capture the contextual and fluid nature of identity, enabling a deeper understanding of how identities are dynamically negotiated within socio-cultural environments and rapidly evolving socio-political contexts, such as those in the Middle East, where identities are constantly renegotiated against historical and contemporary influences.

In summary, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of identity by situating it as an evolving construct that emerges through continuous negotiation with social contexts and power structures. This perspective not only advances theoretical discussions but also proposes new directions for empirical research, focusing on the contextually, intersectionality, and dynamic interplay of identities in a complex and interconnected world.

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