

CONTEMPORARY IDENTITY CRISIS AND SOCIALISATION

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ABSTRACT

The identity crisis can be added to the long list of crises faced by individuals in today's societies, having serious and not entirely known or anticipated long-term consequences for both the individual and the society. This paper analyses the process through which individuals construct their self-identities and what is the role of socialisation in acquiring the culture, building social identities and gaining social status. At the same time, the paper presents some of the problems faced by the agents of socialisation in helping new members of society acquire a self-identity, define themselves and occupy social positions within the social structure. Not understanding the relationship between self-identity, status and culture, and how status is "created", can determine individuals to adopt maladaptive behaviours or adhere to harmful ideas, with destabilising potential both for society and for their own social identity and position in the groups they belong to.

KEYWORDS: *crisis, social identity, socialisation, socialisation agents.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Starting from the questions formulated by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1998), one could ask what, if anything, have in common phenomena such as the degradation of the natural, economic and social environment and the 'tragedy of the commons', individualism and the exclusive orientation towards material gain, the consumer society and the reconfiguration of the traditional bases of society, the disappearance of rural space and agriculture and the loss of identity of some traditional social classes. Continuing the argumentative line of the famous British sociologist, it is easy to come to the conclusion that all these undeniable social phenomena are at least in part the result of a current post-'reflexive' modernity (Beck, 1992), which gives birth to a whole series of risks and even dangers to society and the individual.

On the one hand, it is worth asking why, although these phenomena pose serious risks to the individual and society, and scientists consider all of them to be the result of human actions (Beck, 2009), they are not perceived as such by the individual and, therefore, do not prompt responsible and 'corrective' behaviours. On the other hand, it is equally worth questioning whether the individuals are incapable of perceiving these risks because society has trained them to pursue only their own self-interest and to act in the direction of maximising utility, as the rational agent theory in economics pretends. Exactly as the French sociologist and anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1966) pointed out a century ago, it might be that the individuals were turned into "economic animals" only recently by the society, "as in both lower and upper classes pure irrational expenditure is in current practice: it is still characteristic of some French noble houses. *Homo æconomicus* is not behind us, but ahead of us, like the moral man, the man of duty, the scientific man and the reasonable man. For a long time, man

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was something quite different; and it is not so long now since he became a machine – a calculating machine” (Mauss, 1966, p. 74). The idea that emerges from this remarkable insight of Marcel Mauss is that the individual has not always been an ‘economic animal’, i.e., a selfish being, animated by the desire to gain as much as possible in a consumerist society, which shows that the notion of *Homo oeconomicus* does not represent a constant of the human way of being, but only a contemporary invention that can therefore be further modified and altered.

2. SOCIALIZATION AND SELF-IDENTITY

2.1 The process of socialisation

In the social sciences, socialisation refers generically to the process by which the individual becomes ‘what he/she is’, i.e., an active member of society, having specific beliefs, values, knowledge, even desires and preferences. Beyond this general objective, each discipline comes with its own perspective on the stages that individuals go through in their personal and social development and in building their own self-identity. In anthropology, for example, socialisation is seen as ‘enculturation’, namely the process by which new generations acquire the culture of a society from older generations, through a continuous intergenerational transmission of the cultural elements that define a specific society and are necessary for the individual in order to integrate and survive (Vigilant & Williamson, 2007).

Psychology, on the other hand, focuses on how, through formal and informal education, individuals gain control over their own impulses. Without excluding the participation of ‘newer’ members in the process of their own socialisation, psychology emphasises the mechanisms by which individuals are ‘helped’ to become members of society or, within it, of social groups, including by acquiring “rules, roles, standards, and values across the social, emotional, cognitive and personal domains” (Grusec & Hastings, 2015, p. xi).

For sociology, the most important aspect of socialisation is the individual’s training to assume future roles and participate in social life, by internalising the norms already existing in a society and adhering to them so that social order is ensured and reinforced. According to sociologist Dennis Wrong (1961), in sociology this concept even has two meanings, because socialisation generally means “the process of becoming human” by acquiring and developing the qualities and skills necessary for interaction with others, but it also means the process of “transition of culture” specific for the society in which the individual is born (Wrong, 1961).

In addition to the physical, mental and social skills and abilities necessary to survive in a certain society, through social interaction, in the process of socialisation the individual acquires, or rather builds, a self-identity, generally defined as ‘the totality of beliefs and feelings’ about one’s own person, which can be grouped into four broad categories: the physical self, which refers primarily to aspects related to appearance; the active self, regarding individual preferences and activities; the social self, which refers to how an individual relates to others and develops and manifests interpersonal relationships; and the psychological self, i.e. the system of individual beliefs, values, and convictions (Kendall, 2012). The concept of self-identity or the self-concept develops in childhood, when the emphasis is on the physical and active components, and is consolidated in adulthood, when the other two components, namely the social and the psychological self, become central to one’s being.

Of all the components, the social self is of particular importance because it has a major impact on all the others. The social self refers to what the individuals believe and know about themselves and is derived from social relationships, the recognition and appreciation they receive from their peers. As William James, the founder of American psychology, wrote more than a century ago, the human individual is not only a ‘gregarious’ being but also exhibits an ‘innate tendency’ to stand out and be noticed. And the ‘most diabolical’ punishment one can receive is to “remain absolutely unnoticed by

all the members thereof. If no one turned round when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead,' and acted as if we were non-existing things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would ere long well up in us, from which the cruellest bodily tortures would be a relief; for these would make us feel that, however bad might be our plight, we had not sunk to such a depth as to be unworthy of attention at all" (James, 1950, pp. 293-294).

2.2 The process of building a self-identity

The social identity of the individuals, that is, the sense of who they are in society, their knowledge and beliefs about themselves in general and in particular situations, is shaped by their social interactions (Gilovich et al., 2016). There are a wide variety of theories about the stages of self-identity formation, some of them psychological, some sociological. Among the latter, two theories, although simplistic, stand out for the fact that they manage to stress the importance of social interaction for the human individual, a social being *par excellence*.

The first of these theories, formulated at the beginning of the last century by the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley (1902), is the 'looking-glass self' theory, which describes how the sense of self is derived from the perceptions of others. According to him, the social self, which "is simply any idea, or system of ideas, drawn from the communicative life, that the mind cherishes as its own" (Cooley, 1902, p. 147), develops in three stages. During the first stage, the individual imagines how he appears in front of others, with reference to both appearance and dispositional characteristics. In the second stage, the individual imagines how others judge his appearance and personality. In the last stage, the individual will build a 'sense of self', which is reflected in 'pride', which is an 'enhanced self' if the attitude of others is seen as favourable, or in 'mortification', which is a 'diminished self', if the attitude of others is perceived as unfavourable. In other words, self-image is constructed not by the "mere mechanical reflection" of one's own image, but by an "an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind" (Cooley, 1902, p. 152). The way in which the individual sees his/her image reflected in the minds of others, i.e. the 'social mirror', together with the feelings, positive or negative, that he/she develops as a result of what he/she imagines in relation to others, forms the concept of self. Therefore, without society, individuals could not build their self-concept because there would be no other, no mirror in which their image could be reflected.

The second one, proposed by George Herbert Mead (1967), is the 'role taking' theory, and is built on the idea that individuals construct their self-identity by mentally assuming the role of another person or of a group as a whole in order to understand the world from the other's point of view. According to Mead, although the physical self or "physiological organism" exists from birth and "is essential", an individual is not reducible to it, and his/her self "is essentially a social structure and emerges in social experience" (Mead, 1967, pp. 138-139). The self, or social identity, is constructed during three stages as the individual develops and accumulates experience through interaction with others. The first stage is the 'preparatory' one, and takes place during the first years of life, being based mainly on observation and imitation, on children taking on the roles of those around them, mainly the roles of their parents, without understanding their meaning. The second one is the 'play' stage and occurs during early childhood when children have already acquired language and are able to operate with symbols and therefore to assume specific roles. In the third stage of 'game', or of 'awareness', children begin to differentiate between their own position and that of others, understand the need for rules in social interaction, and become aware of the demands and expectations of others. Relative to the expectations of others, the individuals relate to close people, i.e., to the 'significant other', but they are fully socialised only when they adjust their behaviour according to the expectations of all other people in the group, or the 'generalised other'. What gives the individual the 'unity of self' is the 'generalised other', which represents the "organised community or social group" to which he/she belongs. Without relating to all others and their expectations, the individual will not develop "a self in the fullest sense" (Mead, 1967, pp. 154-155).

The two theories, as well as many others, stress the essential role of culture and socialisation in the construction of self-identity. Throughout their life, but especially in the first part of it, individuals learn from those around them and internalise what, generically, is called culture, which becomes part of their ‘own personal identity’.

2.3 Self-identity, status, and conspicuous consumption

In sociology, status is defined as the socially determined position that the individual occupies in a group or society, characterised by certain expectations, rights, and obligations that exist independently of the people who occupy a status (Kendall, 2012). Two fundamental elements of status emerge from this general definition. First of all, it is not the individual but society that determines, defines, and recognises a social status. For example, the status of a student brings its possessor a series of rights and obligations in modern societies because they include such a position in the social structure, define it, and allocate resources and patterns of action to it, but this status has no relevance in hunter-gatherer societies simply because it does not exist. Second, the existence of a status in the social structure of a society does not depend on the particular individual occupying that position, the status being recognised even if, temporarily, there is no one to occupy it.

The totality of the statuses that individuals occupy at a given moment represents their set of statuses. All these social positions are part of the self-identity of individuals and allow them to define themselves. To answer the question ‘Who am I?’ any individual appeals to the social identity derived from the set of statuses held, from which it follows that an individual is what he/she is based on his/her membership in a society that recognises certain attributes and abilities.

In terms of proximate objectives or immediate and conscious motives of human action, the social positions occupied by the individuals in the groups to which they belong are essential because their self-identity is largely, if not entirely, derived from the statuses recognised by other people. In terms of ultimate goals, social statuses are essential because they ensure evolutionary success translated into survival and reproduction. Therefore, members of all species, particularly males, are interested in displaying their complex range of abilities in order to gain the highest possible position within the group and, once gained, to display elements that indicate their status to others, mainly to deter potential rivals and attract partners.

The human species makes no exception to the status display behaviours, although it presents neither extraordinary capabilities, nor eccentric traits, or extravagant behaviours. The human individual is not naturally endowed with strong muscles, is not able to sprint with dizzying speed or fly, has no fangs, horns, or other spectacular means of defence, no tail or beautifully coloured fur, and, with some exceptions, no harmonious voice or even ‘musical ear’. However, the human species invented culture, a phenomenon that carries it into a world of extravagances that even the peacock, with its impressive tail, could not have dreamed of.

The natural tendency to display status symbols has always existed in human societies, even egalitarian ones or those that promoted a certain form of social control, whereby those who exceeded the measure of self-praise were brought back to reality by ridicule or exclusion. However, individuals in pre-modern societies had a limited number of status symbols at their disposal. However, today, the human species lives in a ‘culture of consumption’ that makes available to the individual a wide variety of goods and, at the same time, promotes the idea that people are what they buy and that the acquisition of certain goods is directly related to the expression, display and improvement of social status.

Consumption is a universal human behaviour, being necessary for survival in the first place, but consumerism, defined as “a way of living that revolves around the wanting of things, the longing for things, the purchasing of things, a way of life in which having, desiring, and wishing for more and more things have become significant preoccupations for late modern subjects whose identities are increasingly bound up with what and how they consume”, is a modern invention or rather an innovation (Smart, 2010, p. 5). If, until recently, excessive or extravagant consumption was specific

to the so-called 'luxury class' or 'leisure class' (Veblen, 2007), today it has become a common feature among the majority of individuals. Conspicuous consumption, manifested by the purchase of luxury goods, flashy jewellery, unnecessary accessories, expensive clothes, etc. is no longer a rare phenomenon specific only to the very rich individuals, as many poor young people around the world are more than willing to consume their limited resources and even give up food, shelter or health in order to purchase goods that do not have any survival value.

3. THE CRISIS OF SOCIALIZATION

3.1 The problems of socialisation

Regardless of the size and complexity of the society in which an individual lives today, socialisation remains the same fundamental process in the construction of self-identity and in his/her formation and development as an active member of society. But there are at least two major differences from the socialisation process of the past eras, which seem to have become two problems of today's society, although the consequences are still difficult to fully anticipate.

The first problem is related to self-identity and the stages that an individual goes through to build it. As follows from sociological theories, the construction of self-identity is a long-lasting process that depends on the individual's membership in the group. In western societies, one of the messages that is repeated obsessively and that appears even in inappropriate contexts, such as advertising for the consumption of alcoholic beverages or for children's toys, is that individuals must always and constantly redefine their identity, even daily, at breakfast, otherwise they would not be themselves. Until recently in human history, people needed a lifetime to build their identity and define themselves, yet today it seems that they only need inspiration or a good night's sleep. But, as the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (2008, p. 3) suggests, even in a society characterised by 'reflexive modernity', by a "diversity of options and possibilities", identity presupposes "continuity in time and space" and coherence, individuals whose sense of self is fractured or crippled are, among other things, "ontologically insecure" (Giddens, 2008, p. 53). Therefore, isn't precisely the call to redefine self-identity actually an invitation to 'mutilate' the self?

Furthermore, the construction of self-identity requires the fact of belonging to a group or society because, as Anthony Giddens says, "all identities are social identities", that is, they are socially created, in social interactions. And despite everything people may feel, and no matter how solidly they feel, their "identity is, in highly significant ways, shaped by other people" (Giddens & Sutton, 2021). So, no matter how the individuals define themselves on a given Thursday, for example, it is necessary for those around them to recognize and validate their assumed identity, and here two difficulties can arise. On the one hand, the belonging group, or society as a whole, confirms individual choices, and if the group is not ready or willing to accept identity changes of its members, they become, at best, insecure and anxious. However, people in many societies, especially western ones, have "lost a clear sense of belonging" and, therefore, their relationships with others and their social interactions are being called into question. Giddens states that although they have lost their solid sense of belonging, individuals have "gained more freedom of choice" (Giddens & Sutton, 2021), but it is not clear how the gained freedom of choice can compensate for the loss of group affiliation and belonging, especially when the average individual does not do very well either when he/she has too many options, or when he/she is excluded from the group or marginalised (Kenrick & Griskevicius, 2013).

The second problem concerns the agents of socialisation and their role in the formal and informal education and the growth of the individual. For 99.9% of the time since the appearance of the human species, the individual's life has been organised around the family. Living with the extended family, which included several generations, ensured the individual's reproductive success by passing information and knowledge from the elderly to the young. Family members are socialisation agents

who enjoy the highest level of trust, since their ultimate goal has always been to ensure the survival of new generations. Thus, the information transmitted by the family is valuable and useful not only because the family seeks the survival of its members, but also because the cultural elements transmitted, both practical knowledge and values and beliefs, have been tested over time and are usually the result of a process of cumulative selection.

Of course, in modern societies, characterised by increasing complexity, the information transmitted by parents is no longer sufficient to ensure the integration of individuals into society, so other agents of socialisation, such as school, have taken over the task of educating them. Although family remains the first socialising agent, which must build the foundations on which personality will be built later, it seems that in today's society even this role has been outsourced to other agents, such as the group of friends or the mass media.

Today, the group of friends may have become more important than the family in the socialisation of children, and the authority of parents towards children 'slips through their fingers', the missing element in the parent-child relationship being "not love or knowledge or commitment or skill", but "power" (Neufeld & Maté, 2005, p. 48). Certainly, belonging to the group is essential in the development of the individual, but loss of the parent's authority leads to child's orientation toward friends, who become "the most important source of truth", despite the fact that the group of friends, in most situations, "is immature", so what the child learns "is often inappropriate" (Williams, 2023). Equally harmful is the influence of mass media, especially in the online environment and social networks, through which a false image of reality, sensational and attractive but incorrect information, risky behaviours and harmful ideologies can be promoted. The online environment can represent an inexhaustible source of knowledge, but the excessive use of social networks has predominantly a negative role in educating individuals, and moreover, it is addictive and leads to a number of specific problems of this century, such as anxiety, depression, self-harm tendencies and suicide attempts, and even physiological conditions or cognitive and emotional disorders (Twenge, 2020).

The family "matters [today] more than ever" in the socialisation of young generations (Neufeld & Maté, 2005), but as it loses its 'at home' authority, it becomes more and more involved in the processes carried out by other agents, especially school. In other words, the family, as the first agent of socialisation, appears to know what the school should do, generically speaking, but parents no longer know how to be "natural mentors for the young, as always used to be the case with human beings and is still the case with all other species living in their natural habitats" (Neufeld & Maté, 2005, p. 5).

3.2 The problems of self-Identity

Value, or what is cherished and deemed desirable in a society, does not have an independent existence, although the human brain is naturally endowed with neural circuits to evaluate stimuli and ground preferences, motivations, and patterns of action. However, the evaluation process is "intrinsically content sensitive" (Tooby et al., 2005, p. 316), and content, in terms of status, is established by society through culture which, beyond its practical and aesthetic aspects, is a means of status symbolization. Culture is "embodied in the products, behaviours, styles, meanings, values, and sensibilities that make up the human experience", whose "creation, production, and diffusion" are guided by status, while "status shapes aspirations and desires, sets standards for beauty and goodness, frames identities, creates collective behaviours and morals, encourages the invention of new aesthetic sensibilities, and acts as an automated motor for permanent cultural change" (Marx, 2022). The problem, in modern societies, is that mass media, especially the online networks, have changed not only the way in which culture or certain trends are created and promoted, but also the way in which the human individual has access to culture, gains status and uses status indicators to signal his/her social position in the group.

Not less important is the fact that the 'status alchemists', those who re-create its content based on the principles of the market economy and consumerism, have at their disposal countless possibilities for destructuring and restructuring human values and desires that are derived, at least in part, from the conventions of society, so internalised through the process of socialisation that they can no longer be distinguished from instincts (Marx, 2022). In addition, they have at their disposal a huge "global industry" of creating, promoting and selling status (Thompson, 2023).

Therefore, not knowing and understanding the relationship between status and culture and how the content of status is created, can make human individuals enter a 'carousel' of status without exit and adopt maladaptive behaviours or adhere to nefarious ideas, with destabilising potential both for society and for their own social identity and position in the groups to which they belong. For example, future 'trends' in terms of status and prestige no longer demand conspicuous consumption of material resources, but of time and energy and, necessarily, participation in social activism and support of 'progressive causes' as extravagantly as possible, considering the fact that a "busy and overworked lifestyle, rather than a relaxed [and pleasure-based] lifestyle, has become an aspirational status symbol" (Bellezza et al., 2017). To the same category belongs also the promotion of the paradoxical idea according to which prestige is accessible to everyone and "exclusivity is for everyone" (Thompson, 2023). The urge to be 'unique', accompanied by the idea that 'all human individuals are equal and the same', far from solving the problem of hierarchies or social inequalities, leads to serious problems for the individual and society. In most social species, there are social hierarchies that firmly establish the place of each individual according to various criteria. Such hierarchies also exist in all human societies, including the more egalitarian ones, and although they are rarely considered fair by all members of the group, they are nevertheless necessary because they provide order and predictability. The individual must know what his/her social position is within the group, how he/she must relate to others, and what he/she must do to improve his/her status. But if everything is equally good, if the high status is for everyone, of course, with a stopover and an expenditure at the 'status alchemists', why would anyone bother to do anything, for example, study to get a degree, work for a better standard of living, improve their knowledge, etc.? The individual must also know who he/she is, and self-identity is largely derived from all the social statuses he/she holds. Or, if the same status is equally accessible to everyone, what makes an individual 'unique'? In such a society, it is no wonder, therefore, that an epidemic of 'identity crises' is increasing ever faster and more prominently!

4. CONCLUSIONS

Socialization, a concept whose technical meaning differs substantially from the one used in everyday language, refers to the process by which the individual becomes 'human', i.e., becomes an active and integrated member of society, capable of defining his/her self-identity, interact and communicate with others, set goals and assume roles, occupy social positions and enjoy the associated resources and benefits. The human individual is, with certainty, a product of evolution through natural selection and, like any organism, is driven by the desire to achieve evolutionary success, translated through the two ultimate goals of all living beings, namely survival and reproduction. However, the biological component is not sufficient to achieve evolutionary success, and therefore the acquisition of culture through the process of socialisation is also necessary. Any living organism is the product of the interaction between genes and environment, and in the case of the human species, the environment is physical, social, and cultural.

In addition to the two ultimate goals or ultimate causes of human existence, the individual is motivated by a number of proximate causes, of which the most important is perhaps the acquisition of status because self-identity is derived from the statuses held, and because the position occupied in the group directly influences the chances of achieving evolutionary success. The higher an individual is placed on the social ladder, the easier and faster is his/her access to desirable resources, among

which prestige and the appreciation of others occupy a paramount place. In such circumstances, the current public messages and exhortations that maintain that self-identity is fluid and can be continuously reconstructed, even daily, and that high status is within reach of anyone because all individuals are ‘equal’ no matter how hard they try or not to achieve more, whether or not they have skills acquired through genetic inheritance or diligent effort and hard work, seem at least surprising.

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