

Identity, Plurality and Education -- A Pragmatist Complement

Kathy Hytten

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty coins the phrase "final vocabulary" to refer to the set of words which all human beings "employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives."¹ One's individual sense of identity is articulated through this final vocabulary. Despite his calling it "final," this vocabulary is not static or stable but forever changing in response to external conditions and events, new knowledge and understandings, and through interactions with others. Rorty argues that selfhood is "contingent," that is, there is no human nature, essence or core human self, rather, an individual's sense of identity is constantly in the making. This view of self creation is undergirded by pragmatist notions of openness, continual growth and change, and their conception of the social quality of individual minds. These pragmatist ideas can serve to complement and enrich Professor Wardekker's project of offering a theory of identity that deals with plurality in a positive way and one that preserves autonomy.

Professor Wardekker's argument has three parts. In each part, he offers a different view of identity, essentially progressing from what can be seen as a classical view, to a modern view, to a postmodern view. First, he summarizes the "classical view." In this view, identity is formed through the transmission of communal knowledge and values, through education, to the youth of society. Because of the "cultural consistency" of traditional societies, this transmission is assumed to be enough to ensure the creation of individuals with stable identities and coherent personalities. He then suggests that this classical conception of identity formation is significantly problematic in our present society (by this I assume he is talking about western countries) due to the fact that culture is not consistent, but rather pluralistic. This pluralism calls for a different theory about the development of identity which is more suitable to modern society. Here, he argues that based on the realization that in our society there are many different cultural identities which are not often commensurate, educators have placed significant emphasis on avoiding indoctrination into one particular world view, and instead have accented personal autonomy and agency as primary educational aims. Yet he suggests that, underlying this exaltation of autonomy and freedom of choice, there is still something consistent, namely universal rational principles, which supersede personal choices. In this "modern" view of identity, while there exist a diversity of world views, through education individuals learn ways of thinking, understanding, and behaving which transcend these concrete particulars and are subsumed by rational principles and forms of thought which have universal validity. In both the classical and modern views of identity, a "harmonic world view" is assumed and education is construed to provide consistency and universality. Autonomy results from the ability to use these rational principles to critically evaluate prejudices and biases, to make rational choices, and to act free from ideological coercion and indoctrination.

Significantly, Wardekker argues that because we live in a postmodern world, both the classical and the modern views of identity are inadequate. In such a world, differences, inconsistencies, and pluralities cannot and should not be collapsed into universal principles, but instead should be considered integral to the development of autonomous identity. Plurality itself becomes the source of identity because individuals are not simply passive recipients of cultural transmission, but rather continually negotiate and participate in the making of meaning, and thus individual identity is in continuous production with only temporal, local stability at any given time.

Wardekker's argument is compelling. While at times he seems to oversimplify very complicated issues and positions, this is somewhat inevitable when taking on such complex ideas in a short paper. Nevertheless, several issues seem important to consider in tackling the larger project of offering a postmodern theory of identity. First, in order to give justice to classical and modern perspectives, the theorists who hold these views need to be attended to more directly. While making important points about these perspectives, Wardekker's strokes may be too broad, perhaps over-generalizing the viewpoints of a number of different theorists. Perhaps choosing only a couple of examples, positions and people and discussing them in more detail would help. Second, it would be useful if what is meant by a "semiotic reading" of Vygotsky and how this contributes to a "discursive" theory of identity was more explicitly defined, as these significant notions remain underdeveloped. Third, the issue of the somewhat unproblematic blending of disciplinary fields/traditions is a consideration. In addition to relating his argument to German critical theory and Foucauldian structuralism, Wardekker seems to conflate philosophical and psychological perspectives on identity. While this is not inherently problematic, it is important to deeply examine what theorists working within different disciplinary fields mean when they talk about identity, in order to ensure that their use of similar vocabulary reflects commensurate understandings. Finally, it might be useful to investigate the potential contribution of pragmatism to this project, as incorporating pragmatist perspectives on identity could help to provide a philosophical underpinning for a theory of identity which also accentuates plurality and preserves autonomy. This addition would enrich Wardekker's basic position.

Like Vygotsky, pragmatists argue that identity is understandable only in connection with social relations; that there is no core human essence but rather individuals are continually changing, developing and growing; and that autonomy results from the creative participation of individuals in the making of culture. Pragmatist John Dewey usefully discusses these connections in *Democracy and Education*, where he argues that individual minds are developed through social intercourse,² that humans are characterized by their plasticity, which ensures the possibility of continual growth³ and that autonomy results from individual redirection, reconstruction and revision of societal understandings and beliefs.⁴ Neopragmatists, particularly Rorty, build on these ideas of self creation and continual growth. Further, Rorty shifts the emphasis on the self to language, suggesting that no core essence or identity exists which lies behind the language individuals use to describe themselves and their world. He thus argues that individuals should constantly be on the look out for better final vocabularies than the ones they are currently using, a search which is "dominated by metaphors of making rather than finding, of diversification and novelty rather than convergence to the antecedently present"⁵ suggesting that "we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary."⁶ Autonomy results from the ability to deal with plurality and change in a constructive way through the continual redescription of one's past, and thus one's understanding of themselves and the world around them. It is through this process that individuals autonomously and creatively participate in cultural production, which in the end is the ultimate goal of a postmodern theory of identity.

1. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73.

2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 295.

3. *Ibid.*, 44-45.

4. *Ibid.*, 296, 305.

5. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 77.

6. *Ibid.*, 80.