

## **'There's more than one 'I' in identity': an etymological search for the link between identity and identification.**

I have half noticed, often enough, when I am reading the theoretical literature on identity and identification that an elision of meaning is made from the former to the latter that leaves out the '-ific' that differentiates between identity and identification. Actually, what this means is that the two words do not entirely share an etymology, although they do share parts of it. So I was excited to find, turning to the SOED, that there were two more words that retained the 'ific': *identifically* and *identificality*. They are both obsolete. However, their usage straddles two and a half centuries, so the common meaning that they share obviously lasted a long time in the English language (from the late fifteenth to the early eighteenth century). So, I followed the etymological trail. At first the trail seemed likely to be short. *Identificus*, in Medieval Latin, meant 'doing the same' or 'concurring in action' and from there, it seems, 'identical' came to mean 'identical'.

But there seemed to be a clue that *identical* and *identical* did not have identical (self-same) meanings because the SOED points out that 'same' was often used with *identical*, for example in the 1613 usage 'the same identical path'. So I started pursuing the difference between the ancient roots of identity and *identificality*.

Identity is fairly simple (etymologically, that is). It is formed from the Latin *idem*, meaning 'same' and *entitas*, meaning entity. Even this is nuanced by the possible influence of *identidem*, meaning 'over and over again'; that is a process of identity developed over time through repetition. Perhaps from a convergence of both these meanings, by 1638 identity's primary meaning was 'individuality' or 'personality' (with a tantalizing reference to the possibility that its meaning of 'individual existence' was perhaps obsolete by that time). The second, algebraic, meaning reinforced the sameness angle, as in an identical equation. However, the third and fourth meanings kept the *identificus* root in them: 'the condition of being identified in feeling, interest etc' (1868 and now rare) and 'as an attribute that serves to identify the holder' (for example, an identity card, 1900).

Perhaps the dominance of the idea of individual in identity by the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a sign of the beginnings of the modern individual, as produced and reproduced by philosophy and later psychology; the individual that, in the late twentieth century came to be so vigorously criticised by social science, after the turn to emphasise the social construction of individual identity. While modernity might have overemphasised individuality – the conscious, rational, separated kind – at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century use of identity recognised the uniqueness of identity and its being in time. This is rather different from the language of late/postmodernism that emphasises identity as a multiplicity of socially constructed identities.

But what kind of an identity might have been connoted by the earlier history of identity which incorporated the 'ific' of identification? For ages, I have felt that identification is the key concept for helping to theorise identity – hence this quest. And I have been unsatisfied with the many theorists who routinely stress the meanings of *identicality* or 'self-sameness' in the act of identification to the extent that difference and differentiation are construed as a problem in the use of theories of identification (often called the problem of otherness).

So what about the etymology of 'identification'? In the 16th century it meant 'concurring in action', or 'doing the same'. In other words, the sameness was of actions or practices, rather than of essence or entity. I concluded that the 'ific'

part of the root seemed to supply something active, performative and dynamic; this in two ways. First it incorporated a historical dynamic, so was no longer static. Second it incorporated a connotation of practical agency, or actively doing something. I thought of other words that had 'ific' in them: pacific, soporific. Yes, I was right: 'making of', or 'tending to the making of', or 'inducing'. '-ification' means 'bringing into a specified state, causing or producing'. Examples like beatification, sacrifice stressed the agency. So there is evidence for my conclusion about the active and dynamic connotations of 'identification' and, as per the etymological elision, also in identity.

But, historically, what were the earlier derivatives of 'ific'? It turns out that its Latin derivative is from 'ficus': 'making' or 'doing' (as in modern French, faire and Italian fare). The 'i' on the beginning adds the meaning of 'with'. It comes from 'y-', the Old English prefix, also 'ge-' (as in German and Dutch). Yfere means ... identical. But, wait, we are not back at square one with the Latin root *idem* meaning same. This is *yfere*, and the 'y' in Old English has the strong meaning of 'with', 'together' or 'in common', so much so that it connotes an association, something suitable, even a collectivity. (This is starting to remind me of Social Identity Theory). When this 'y' is found with 'ficus' (as forms the 'ific' in identification) it means an active making or doing in common. The 'y'(or 'ge') prefix is also found with 'fere' or 'fora', meaning 'going' or 'way', to make a cognate Middle English word combining the 'going' and 'together'. This produces 'a companion or mate, (either male or female)', 'a husband or wife' or – a nice touch – 'an equal' (nice for my feminist sensibilities, finding a Middle English word that held meanings of spouse and equal at the same time).

Now I have found out about 'ific', I want to go back to see what it connotes when I put it back into the word 'identical' or 'identity', as in those obsolete English words 'identical' and 'identity' that I was so pleased to find. It does two very important things. First it puts the 'with' back into the 'same' of *idem*. It speaks of a relation, rather than an essence: it speaks of several rather than one, and of doing rather than passive being. So 'identity', still holding its older connotations of 'identificus', contains the active relationality that is now so emphasised in psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity. It suggests that critical social theory should not reduce identity to sameness or identity. If so, it would stop having a problem with theorising difference as part of identity. The word 'identical' contains the doubleness of meaning suggested by 'same' and 'with'. 'With' insists on more than one. It involves sameness within difference, because, if identity were really only self-identical, it could not include the other implied by 'with' or 'together'. (Is this why the 'identity' got collapsed into 'identity', a symptom of individualisation of the concept of identity that parallel modernity?)

Second, the 'ificality' gives identity back its dynamic character and this is the other facet that psychoanalytic theorisation of subjectivity has understood so well, as to some extent have the biographical and narrative traditions in identity theory. Identification is dynamic, continuous and flowing: this captures that old connotation of 'over and over again' in *identidem* and also the movement, the development, in the *fere* in *yfere*, meaning going or way. So identity is also a process, a way, forged through action. Identicality is the succession of identifications of sameness in difference jointly made in relation to those together with whom we go and make. A succession of experiences of sameness within difference: the buried significance of the link between identity and identification: the way we experience, intersubjectively, who we are in our uniqueness.

Wendy Hollway, September 11<sup>th</sup> 2004.