Identity and Social Roles: a Relational Perspective

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Identity and Social Roles: a Relational Perspective

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Abstract

Starting from the hypothesis that identity is the result of interactions between the self and others, that it is, so to speak, their emergent effect, this article aims to identify the critical points of this bipolar relationship (ego-alter) that emerge in today's society. In particular, by focusing on the identity function of social roles, it emphasizes the complementary synergy needed in order to acquire them: recognition (by the individual with authority to do so) and acceptance (by the agent). In line with relational theory, we conclude that the reduction of personal identity to the more or less successful acquisition of social roles is likely to reduce the individual and his/her relationships to a simple instrumental function. We reaffirm, on the contrary, the need to restore a super-functional relationship between people that is able to preserve the social system and, at the same time, individual necessities.

Keywords: Identity process, social recognition, identity relationships, over-functionality, relational theory.

Identity and relationships

Identity is the meeting point of an extremely rich variety of stimuli, reactions, provocations, reflections and decisions that come about as a consequence of the impact people experience with the natural and social environment surrounding them. For this reason, it has been analysed according to research perspectives differing widely in approach and

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methodology, such as philosophy, anthropology, psychology, psychiatry and sociology. We intend to make this latter discipline our starting-point in an attempt to identify the principal problems encountered today constructing an identity, the difficulties involved and the potential psychosocial processes needed to enable its complete actualization.

Let us begin by stating the elementary assumption on which the entire development of our enquiry is based: *identity is the result of interactions between the self and others*; it is, that is to say, *the emergent effect of relationships*. This observation may seem almost banal today, but the full scope of its application can be all too easily underestimated. Even as it is, the concept, while based in its explicit formulation on intuitions and reflections that stretch back to ancient times, is linked to recent discoveries by social psychology – now accepted by all the human sciences – according to which "we are what we are as a result of our relationships with others" (Mead 1934, back-translation from Italian edition, 1966, p. 364). For this reason, therefore, "if the Ego-Alter relation is not activated, a person may not complete the steps necessary for the development of his/her nature" (Donati and Colozzi 2006, p. 104), given that identity is "an expression of a time and place, a system of interpersonal relations" (Murphy 1959, p. 83).

When defining this strange situation, writers often employ more or less effective metaphors. Thus we find the human condition described as a reality that can be seen always and only "through a veil" (Allodi 2008), in accordance with how others see us (Gattamorta 2008). Knowing whom I am therefore becomes tantamount to "knowing where I stand" (Tønnesvang 2005, p. 54).

Individuals cannot define themselves, that is to say "identify themselves", except by starting from a reference to the relationships that have made them what they are. Simply saying my own name amounts, basically, to saying where I come from, to revealing who the people are that gave me this name. All that is most personal to a person – their own name – therefore becomes the most obvious and commonplace witness to the fact that the *ego is a reflected entity*. This situation means that one's identity always appears as a dynamic, and at times conflictual, reality. It is the result of a problematic compromise between what I feel myself to be and what others are willing to recognize that I am. For this reason, "I can never be sure that my identity as I see it coincides with my identity as others see it. Identity is never given, it is always built and (re)built in a greater or lesser and more or less durable uncertainty" (Dubar 1996, back-translated from Italian edition, 2004, p. 130).

We might define this as the "bipolar" and – in its fundamental components – the *irreducible* structure of the identity. It is practically established that, for each one of us, the individual is not, "under certain aspects, an element of society" (Simmel 1908, re-translated from Italian

edition, 1989, p. 32) and is not, therefore, reducible to an intrusive set of social pressures. It is also true, however, that we can discover ourselves only through others (Berger and Berger 1975). "Without this other-relating root", therefore, "the individual will lose the reference point for valuing his experience" (Tønnesvang 2005, p. 56).

Let us make it clear that the theoretical framework we will adopt to investigate the type of interaction taking place between personal identity and social role, is that of the relational theory, in its specific formulation by Pierpaolo Donati. The "relational subject", whose features we identify on the basis of the roles that he/she "acquires" or "undergoes", "does not exist if the relationship does not contribute to constituting the personal identity of the participants" (Donati 2012, p. 170). Let it be understood, therefore, that we wish to see how the relational dimension (more facilitated in certain social roles than in others, but never impeded by them) enables the creation of an explanatory framework showing how social roles cannot remain something "external" or merely "instrumental". We wish to show, rather, how they fulfil a complete function as creators of identity.

Let us begin, then, by affirming the evidence that individuals inevitably perceive themselves as beings existing both inside and outside society (Berger and Luckmann 1966): individuals are "humanized", therefore, "not in solitude, nor in total social involvement, but in their interaction with society" (Archer 2003, back-translated from Italian edition, 2006, p. 39).

One of the psychosocial procedures that most clearly demonstrates this situation is one linked to a process that is often underestimated or reduced to a simply emotive level of human experience; the *recognition* procedure. Far from being a mere source of psychological satisfaction, reciprocal recognition may be defined "as the axial principle in human relations […] the precondition for optimal self-realization" (Houston 2010, p. 846). The need to be taken into consideration (that is to say respected, esteemed), is in fact "an enabling condition for our existence as persons" (Sparti 2008, p. 113): recognition, therefore, is "a vital human need in order to make sense of one's self." (Willig 2009, p. 355).

It is worth reflecting carefully on this exquisitely social human dynamism. To all effects, it is this that gives rise to the possibility of a concrete approach to the self and to the world around us. It is fundamental to us that we are recognized, that is to say respected, because this coincides with the perception of a *non-instrumental sense* of our existence, as a "fundamental part of our being-in-the world" (Houston 2010, p. 853). It can be understood, then, in the light of what has been said so far, how extremely worrying the phenomenon is that has led postmodernity to "wither away" "that very context within which the

individual can exist and be recognized" (Seligman 2000, back-translated from Italian edition, 2002, p. 188).

Let us note, lastly, that recognition is only one of the two poles of the bipolar identity-creating process we have mentioned. It is the pole resulting from the social context in which the individual is immersed. If we limited ourselves to just this one dynamic process, we would find ourselves in agreement with the perspective of what has recently been described as "social plumbing", according to which individuals consist of what society decides they are. In reality, the process enabling the ego to emerge can only be the *dialogic* process. The "dialogic self" must be considered "the task of each person to become what he or she is by means of dialogic relationships and practices" (Gattamorta 2008, p. 228). A dialogue which, to be well understood, must not be considered "as a relationship between already-formed entities, but rather the essential relationality that is the only possible starting-point for the construction of individual entities" (Crespi 2005, p. 8).

Identity and social roles

Let us now attempt to describe more precisely the features of the two poles of the identity-creating relationship (Ego and Alter) in the light of elementary experience. For each one of us, other people are not all the same. That is to say, ever since our childhood, we are induced to identify among the people surrounding us those who, from one occasion to another, *are* (in our opinion) *worth more than the others*. Each one of us identifies immediately with the people who influence us, we assume the roles and attitudes of those who are "important" for us. It is "as a result of this identification that the child becomes capable of identifying his or her own self" (Berger and Luckmann 1966, back-translated from Italian edition, 1969, p. 182). This "identification" is no mere façade. By identifying with his or her parents (or those acting for them), the child also appropriates their world, their vision of the world, their hierarchy of values. The child therefore assumes their way of distinguishing "good" from "bad".

The fact that "we are not all the same" is what brings to the surface not only processes of an emotional or psychological character (dictated, that is to say, by sentiments of respect, fear, disgust, fellow-feeling, idiosyncrasy and so on), but also more strictly social processes. Being different (socially) means *having different roles*. In our case, it is clear that the role of father and mother are traditionally linked, from the psychological angle, to recognition of the *importance* of these figures (which can normally acquire positive connotations, though it may in some cases be highly negative). But, whatever the effective configuration of a person's concrete personal experience, the development of

the social roles has a fundamental part in the development of their identity. Without a social role, "man cannot be what he is" (Allodi 2008, p. 126), because the path of self-realization is interwoven with the performance of the social roles (Douglas 1983).

It is in the acquisition of the social role that the bipolar nature of identity-building emerges most clearly. While it is not possible to state that people "are" their roles, it is equally evident that "they are what they are only when they play a role" (Spaemann 1977, translated from Italian edition, 1996, p. 82). For this reason, it is impossible to go beyond appearances and grasp the full depth of the person if we do not come to terms with their strictly "superficial" aspect. It is necessary, therefore, to "begin from the individual's exterior and work towards their interior" (Goffman 1959, back-translated from Italian edition, 1969, p. 124).

In Goffman's well-known theatrical framework, the role can be considered as a set of signals, symbols and attitudes. In short, it is "the dress one most frequently wears, the dress in which one displays oneself" (Venturelli Christensen 2000, p. 89). Our personal identity takes concrete form and differentiates itself from that of others in the unique way in which we fulfil the same role as our "colleagues". It is interesting to note that the ancient function of the theatrical mask was that of making the voice resonate. It is therefore the tool through which I "exist for others", I appear, that is to say, briefly, "I am" for others (Ferrara 2008) and, at the same time, I begin to "be for myself". Indeed, "it is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves" (Goffmann 1959, p. 31, back-translated from Italian).

The paradoxical centrality of the "surface" aspect (that of our public and social "appearance") for the construction of our identity (and for our self-consciousness) is linked to the fact that individuals, when assuming the responsibility of their social roles (son/daughter, student, worker, spouse, parent, elector, consumer, religious believer etc.), are "faced with 'fundamental' choices. They must deliberate internally on that which they hold most dearly. In a word, they must define and take positions on their *ultimate concerns*" (Donati 2007, p. 22).

Parsons's thorough systemic analysis does not neglect the fact that the acquisition of roles is one of the foremost functions of the process of "socialization", an acquisition that starts in the family (through the distinction between paternal, maternal and, vice versa, filial functions) and is completed when the individual enters the world of education and of work. To all effects, most roles, in adult experience, "are directly or indirectly linked to work-sharing" (Berger and Luckmann 1966, back-translated from Italian edition,

1969, p. 191). Above all, it is through the choice or the imposition of work that "a specific place in the world is assigned to me" (ibid. p. 184).

As we have already stressed, the process of assuming a role brings very clearly to the fore the bipolar dimension of the identity-creating process. If on the one hand, in fact, assuming a role coincides with "a man's identifying with something that is not his by nature" (Allodi 2008, p. 126) (roles being "social" and so "non-subjective"), it must be recognized, on the other hand, that "in the end, it is we who choose our 'mask'" (Belardinelli 2008, p. 22) and, above all, it is we who decide how to wear it.

A last aspect to be underlined regards the roles. While it is true that their acquisition has always defined the individual's social identity, it is also true that nowadays, as never before, they have become the most effective strategy for what is defined as "social mobility" or, in its more athletic definition, "storming the heights" or social "climbing".

Before the advent of modernity, in fact, "practically everyone took it for granted that their dreams would never be anything but dreams" (Berger and Berger 1975, back-translated from Italian edition, 1995, p. 174). With the affirmation of democratic principles and systems, the availability (at least in theory) of social roles to all those who succeeded in achieving them competitively, became the principal means of adjusting the "mistakes" of the "ascribed status". The function of the latter was superseded by the "acquired status". Theoretically, social origin no longer brands individuals indelibly; it is no longer a constraint to their identity-related aspirations. Individuals can, with dedication and skill, "change themselves", at least to some degree.

If this dynamism represented, at the dawn of modernity, an authentic social revolution, arousing hitherto unimaginable aspirations at planetary level, the speed with which it has come into being has, on the other hand, opened up unforeseen problems. Social change, linked principally to the availability of roles, has imposed rhythms that risk transforming opportunity into its opposite. Durkheim, in fact, had already noted that the professional models transmitted from our ascendants "refer, not to the individual's current conditions, but to those of his ancestors" (Durkheim 1893, back-translated from Italian edition, 1962, p. 303). In swiftly-evolving social contexts, past models risk appearing old even while they are still in use. "Do the official social categories still provide relevant points of reference? What are the 'aspired-to identities' that enable future projects upon which action can be based?" (Dubar 1996, back-translated from Italian edition, 2004, p. 143). In this framework, it is increasingly easy for the individual to struggle to acquire skills called for by the world of labour, only to find that the requirement for the skills "is outlasted by the time it takes to acquire them" (Bauman 1999, p. 37).

This is not merely, as can be well understood, a problem limited to labour organization and therefore resolvable with a restructuring of the professional categories. The fallout on identity creation, in fact, is a much more taxing corollary. "How do we build our identity when mobility, imposed or voluntary, has become the rule?" (Dubar 1996, back-translated from Italian edition, 2004, p. 152)

Let us conclude this brief reflection on the centrality of roles in defining social identity with a final observation. The social role is something that is, so to speak, "recognized". In other words, acquisition of a role implies *recognition by those with authority to grant it*. We cannot, at this point, avoid coming to terms with a concept and a reality that are strongly contested but which are nevertheless necessary for the survival of the social – and also the individual – order. "Authority and the need for authority are inseparable aspects of the human identity and condition. This remains true even after a period lasting more than a century of faith in the worldly and democratic message of modernity" (Seligman 2000, back-translated from Italian edition, 2002, p. 7). Indeed, the child's almost natural recognition of other "important" individuals implies (however unknowingly) a tacit admission that these individuals are *more authoritative* than others.

The concept of authority (and that of its congenital relation, power), has always been an argument of great concern for sociological inquiries. This is because it represents an essential element in the configuration of systemic and social organizations, on the one hand, and of the single individual's identity creation on the other. Authority, in fact, "is inseparable, nay indistinguishable, from society structure. Without authority, man is bereft of a sense of duty and lacks even real liberty. The individual perceives group interests only weakly and indistinctly, and in some cases does not perceive them at all" (Nisbet 1966, back-translated from Italian edition, 1987, p. 210).

Authority – and this is the aspect that concerns us here – has the prerogative of recognition. Consequently, when authority is unrecognized or weakened, "it becomes impossible to aspire to reciprocal recognition, and we find ourselves trapped in increasingly solipsistic forms of self-recognition, which often amount to no more than acclamation" (Seligman 2000, back-translated from Italian edition, 2002, p. 190). In this perspective, "the decline of authority was the first step towards disorganization and the constitution of new forms of power with a range of action and a capacity for penetration previously unknown in history" (Nisbet 1966, back-translated from Italian edition, 1987, p. 116).

The historical origin of this process of the gradual erosion of otherness, of this steady slide from "outside" to "inside" is identified by Seligman in the exaltation of the inner conscience and the introspective self of Augustine,

Luther and the pietistic sects of the protestant reform. This, "our way of thinking becomes 'protestant' to such a degree that we find it difficult to understand the importance of the outside world, of a self other than our own, in the deeds that constitute the self" (Seligman 2000, back-translated from Italian edition, 2002, p. 110).

More than a century and a half ago, for that matter, Tocqueville had identified in the American lifestyle the prototype of an ideological interpretation of the concept of equality: the distorted concept of diversity meant that citizens, "having become almost equal, look at each other from close-up and, failing to find in any of them signs of an indisputable greatness and superiority (…), each one of them retreats within himself and claims to judge the world for himself" (Tocqueville 1835-40, back-translated from Italian edition, 1957, p. 424).

Towards a new paradigm of implementation

If building one's own identity amounts to "each person's duty to become what he or she is", we can say, by analogy, that building an identity coincides with the individual's attempt and effort to find happiness. Each of us seeks to construct the self we retain (or imagine) best suited to our aspirations. There exists, in fact (in the collective imagination), a strict link between the experience of self-realization and that of "happiness"; they seem almost synonyms. It is for this reason, in the last resort, that the social sciences are committed to analysing a dimension that would seem, mistakenly, to hark back to the childlike phase of existence, that of dreams. The search for happiness (or, if we wish to express it more prosaically, for "perpetual betterment"), however much it may prove in contrast with experience, continues to drive all human actions.

One of the facts to emerge from social research is that "there seems to be no strict correlation between real living conditions and the relative satisfaction expressed by the individual" (Gadotti 2000, p. 472). Even from the point of view of economic well-being, once "a society's level of per capita wealth crosses a threshold, further increases have almost no effect on happiness" (Schwartz 2004, p. 106). We can interpret this situation in the light of the classic "motivational pyramid", created in the 1950s by the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, the *Hierarchy of Needs* published in 1954 in his book *Motivation and Personality*: it envisages a rising scale of desires with the gradual conquest of five distinct levels: physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization. In this pattern, each successive conquest induces man to consider the previous one an acquisition; once hunger is satisfied, one can live as if hunger did not exist, and so on.

However it is represented, man's motivational process, once its path is exhausted, comes up against the wall of an essential question. "But if money doesn't do it for people, what does?" (Schwartz 2004, p. 107). The American psychologist Barry Schwartz, as a result of observations made in the field, concludes that "close social relations" are the most important factor for happiness. "People who are married, who have good friends, and who are close to their families are happier than those who are not. People who participate in religious communities are happier than those who do not. Being connected to others seems to be much more important to subjective well-being than being rich" (ibid). Epidemiology, too, following its specific research methodologies, identifies the factors favourable to psychophysical wellbeing. "Having friends, being married, belonging to a religious group or another association, being able to count on other people's support, are all factors that safeguard health" (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, back-translated from Italian, 2009, p. 86). These observations seem to lead to a paradoxical, or "counter-intuitive", final fact: "what seems to contribute most to happiness binds us rather than liberates us" (Schwartz 2004, p. 108).

It is worth noting, at this point, that contemporary culture – what is known as postmodern culture though it too (some say) is nearing its end – seems to have imposed a completely different actualization perspective. For today's man, "salvation is not a collective matter" (Seligman 2000, back-translated from Italian edition, 2002, p. 161), and "the stabilization of personal identity has become a private enterprise." (Luckmann 2006, p. 11).

Consequently, the Alter, in postmodern identity-building processes, has begun to appear an increasingly distant element, becoming an object of aesthetic rather than moral evaluation, a question of taste and not of responsibility. It is therefore losing its most dislikeable connotation, that of authority. Thus the dominant impulse of our culture is becoming the "suppression of the moral impulse", because following that impulse means assuming responsibility and "leads to involvement in other people's destiny and commitment to their wellbeing" (Bauman 1999, p. 50). It is necessary, instead, to commit to the relationship taking care not to involve the person globally, defining precisely as the object of the relationship a selected aspect of the Alter. We need to guard against getting involved and we need to limit our gaze strictly to the surface of things. In the city streets, people become part of the "surface"; "each 'city traveller' moves in a permanent parade of surfaces, and keeps each one of them constantly in mind while walking" (ibid. p. 92).

It is worth recalling that Comte had already found individualism to be "the sickness of the western world" (Nisbet 1966, back-translated from Italian edition, 1987, p. 377). More recently Norbert Elias, analysing the elements constituting personality, distinguished an "I-identity" and a "we-identity",

defining the former as the forename and the latter as the surname with which the individual appears before others. Western societies have increasingly emphasized the "I-identity" at the expense of the "we-identity", giving rise to the illusory idea that "adult, healthy and wealthy" people have of themselves (Elias 1980).

According to the relational theory, *individuals are realized when the social context favours, supports or at least does not impede their freedom to pursue their structural demands*. It is worth emphasizing, among these latter, the centrality of non-instrumental relationships as an urgent priority for the person. From this point of view, "a social pattern is human when the social relationships produced by individuals are oriented on the basis of a super-functional sense. It is not human when the sense of the actions is solely functional" (Donati and Colozzi 2006, p. 95). This perspective results in a refusal to use the other only because he/she has the power to recognize and assign the roles to which the individual aspires. Once the role is obtained, the relationship ceases, since it was motivated by a purely instrumental perspective.

It is not merely a question, therefore, of overcoming (to use the classic sociological categories) "mechanical solidarity" with a victorious and decisive affirmation of "organic solidarity". A free and effective allocation of human resources in the most suitable roles is not enough because real organic solidarity "does not correspond to the functional sharing of tasks, but to a relational sharing of tasks" (Donati 2012, p. 173).

An exclusively instrumental approach to relationships, in the long run, harms not only the Alter (used, consumed, discarded) but also the Ego, since "the human being cannot find completion in himself/herself, given that they achieve this 'with' others and 'for' others" (Donati 2011, p. 77). In this perspective, therefore, identity building becomes "a relational endeavour": "only such self-realisation-in-connectedness deserves to be called self-realisation in a genuine sense" (Tønnesvang 2005, p. 54).

The relational theory does not aim to reduce or to annul the utilitarianism present (to greater or lesser degree) in all social relationships. Rather, it wishes to limit economic utilitarianism to its proper place, "since utility cannot function as (and does not have the requisites for) an ultimate purpose. Utility's place is merely that of the advantages to be obtained in social exchanges considered from the instrumental angle. It cannot connote the quality of the relationships on the borderline between the 'You' and transcendence. By definition, what is instrumental cannot become a final end in itself" (Donati 2007, p. 23).

Given that social roles have a strong and reasonable "instrumental" connotation, we can fairly deduce that they can never become "ultimate ends in themselves", sufficient means for individuals intending to build their

identities. They constitute, if anything, the "means of one's own immediacy" (Plessner, 1960, translated from Italian, 1974).

We realize that the actualization paradigm proposed here is completely new with respect to both modernity and post-modernity. *Actualizing the self means, to some extent, actualizing (also) the relationships that constitute us*. Vice versa, *neglect of the relationships that constitute us becomes an impediment to our actualization.*

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