

The UK in a changing Europe initiative

Identities

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Executive summary

Overview

Research on identities has not only been amongst the most vibrant in the past decade, but also amongst the most ‘naturally interdisciplinary’ in scope and methods, which makes it a very intuitive priority for the ESRC. However, it is really the context of the current and unprecedented economic, social, and political crisis (at least since the war) faced by European nations which makes it essential for the social sciences to completely rethink their approach to the study of identities in Europe.

Because of the crisis, identities are no longer an abstract concept but at the heart of our understanding of whether a wealthy nation is likely to accept to pass the acid test of solidarity and contribute billions to a bailout plan to help another member state of the European Union (EU), and whether it is likely to accept hundreds of thousands of citizens from poorer regions and effectively make them part of the community. We need to understand identities to figure out how likely it is that a country will accept a decline of its gross domestic product (GDP) of 25 per cent and most social benefits to remain part of the European family and the eurozone. We must look into how increasing integration has shaped our image of ourselves, and if the crisis has altered regional, national, and European identities – redefined or perhaps even threatened them. Finally, we must crucially understand how identities affect civic behaviour, distrust, the very nature of nationalisms, support for European integration or euroscepticism, inter-generational tensions, and the way citizens vote and through which psychological and political mechanisms.

In this scoping piece, we argue that identity studies need to ‘change course’ in view of the new insights that research has uncovered over the past two decades but also of the current economic, social and political crisis (crises) facing European nations and the new questions they raise on the link between identities and solidarity (be it inter-state, inter-generational, or migration-related), and the changing relationship between citizens and their democratic political systems. We first summarise some of the key findings from the various approaches to European, national, and regional identities in recent years (conceptual, methodological, sociological, psychological, discursive, historical, political and external among others). We then look into some of the funding priorities of key national and European funding bodies to date. Finally, we highlight key avenues from further research which we divide into conceptual, analytical, methodological, and modelling perspectives.

The key message is that it is time to move from research that only sees identities as a dependent variable to a more global system which treats them as endogenous independent variables. Only in that way can we fully understand the political and psychological mechanisms that underline the consequences of identities, the way emotions work as

mediators to affect political behaviour in apparently counter-intuitive ways, and evaluate what may be a strong impact on such key elements as solidarity, intergenerational dynamics, law compliance, social and welfare policies, constitutional robustness and the vote.

Main Trends

We identify a number of key bodies of literature on identities and notably (but not only) European identity and its interaction with national and sub-national identities:

- a body of research on the conceptual nature of identity emerged primarily in the fields of philosophy and discourse analysis
- a predominantly (but not only) holistic approach to the emergence and consequences of identities has been developed predominantly by the fields of anthropology, sociology, history, and some part of political science
- methodological individualism presided to different research queries on the nature and meanings of identities across individuals in social psychology and another branch political science
- part of international relations and communication studies have focused on the 'reverse' side of identities and perceptions and misperceptions of others
- finally, a separate mostly methodological discussion has been taking place across social science disciplines on the question of how best to characterise, operationalise, and measure identities, whether they can be measured or only expressed, and what are the implication of research design on identity theories.

While research on identities is already largely inter-disciplinary and while those approaches have led to major progress in the field in recent years, those five 'trends' have largely ignored each other and between them leave a number of crucial research gaps unanswered.

Main Gaps

The current state of our knowledge of identities in Europe, while far greater than it was twenty or even ten years ago, still leaves a lot of critical questions open. We see them as fitting into four different kinds of challenges.

Some have to do with inconsistencies in existing findings to the extent that despite extensive research, scholars still disagree on the true strength of political identities, their meanings and, crucially, their implications. This first challenge suggests some conceptual issues. Twenty years into a fast progressing literature, and we still have disagreements between scholars who claim that European, national, or regional identities are strong, and those who claim that they are effectively weak.

Another series of issues have to do with a need to further integrate insights from various approaches. Indeed, despite numerous attempts at cross-disciplinarity, it sometimes feels that joining dots between disciplines is not necessarily the same as joining dots between different approaches and that the latter might conceivably be harder to achieve. Here we are considering analytical issues of crucial importance.

A third series of issues is methodological. Again, methodological disagreements between scholars seem to go beyond the relatively frequent dissent between quantitativists and qualitativists or field observers and experimentalists which are traditional in the social sciences. In the context of identity studies, those methodological conflicts seem to speak to the core of the conceptual debates on what identities mean, how stable they are, how conscious they are, and what are their behavioural and policy implications. The 'stakes' seem so high that it sometimes seems that we have often chosen to "agree to disagree" and maintain parallel methodological frameworks that lead to different results. Arguably, the very stakes are precisely a key reason why we should embrace those methodological debates and their implications to the full.

Finally, a last series of challenges to identity studies has to do with the true extent of the implications of identities, that is, cases in which identities are not the dependent but an independent variable. While some specific policy consequences (migrations, minorities, etc) have been studied, other implications in terms of behaviour, political participation, democracy, and other policy issues such as solidarity and welfare that could arguably be influenced by political identities have been ignored.

Conclusions

While research on identities has been very dynamic and increasingly multi-disciplinary and empirical over the past two decades, there is now a need for it to reach a new dimension. This will imply a need to move from a unification of disciplines to a unification of approaches and innovate methodologically. Crucially, however, it will mean that we will need to move from a situation where we have collectively had to mostly describe and understand identities to one where we investigate their civic, political, and policy consequences, including aspects of solidarity, welfare, law complying, civic attitudes, attitudes towards institutions, and global political behaviour.