

Abstract

This paper develops a sociological perspective on the concept of *social identities*—that is relations of membership recognised as significant by members and outsiders. Social identities encompass face-to-face groups and local communities, as well as large groupings that transcend any conceivable form of direct interaction, as do ethnic groups, social classes, and nations. As collective creations, social identities help to shed light on individual behaviour as well as social outcomes, and are especially critical when analysts seek to understand the chances of collective action. A variety of actors and processes are involved in the creation and recreation of social identities, including commonalities that link up with major life interests; recognition by others, both wanted and unwanted; social conflict with outgroups; initiating entrepreneurs and continuous organisational support; links to socialisation and upbringing; the systematic cultivation of ritual and symbols; and the temporal order of all these processes. Conceptualised this way, social identities crucially link cultural patterns of allegiance and solidarity (as well as of discrimination and rejection) to the actions and dispositions of individuals, groups and organisations and to macro-background conditions such as comprehensive cultural patterns, social inequality, and overarching institutions.

Keywords:

Social identities, Institutions, Organisations, Collective action, Culture, Social inequality

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