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Beyond Othering: Towards a Theory of the Content of Identity

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Abstract

Contemporary theories of identity have frequently explained identity formation through processes of difference, relationality, and othering. From poststructuralist and postcolonial theory to influential work in gender studies, identities are commonly understood to emerge through distinction from an external other. While this insight remains indispensable for explaining boundary formation, it offers a less complete account of what identities subsequently contain and how they are reproduced through everyday social life. This article argues that the principal content of most identities is not externally relational but internally organisational. It introduces the concept of the content of identity to distinguish between the relational mechanisms through which identities become intelligible and the normative, institutional, narrative, and economic structures through which they are maintained. Drawing on Identity Group Theory (IGT), the article proposes that identity groups function primarily as internal systems of coordination in which members negotiate norms, recognition, authority, obligations, symbolic meanings, and scarce resources. Out-groups remain important for defining social boundaries, but the ongoing reproduction of identity depends predominantly upon interactions among members themselves. By shifting analytical attention from boundary construction to internal organisation, the article offers a complementary framework for analysing gender identities and other forms of collective identification. It concludes that understanding the content of identity provides a richer account of social continuity, institutional change, and the everyday practices through which identities acquire stability and meaning.

Keywords: identity theory; othering; gender identity; Identity Group Theory; identity content; identity groups; social identity; identity economies; internal organisation; recognition