Re-Imagining Economic Sociology

Edited by
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10

Phenomenological Identity Theory in Economic Sociology

Patrik Aspers

Introduction

This chapter makes an argument for identity as a basic explanatory concept in economic sociology. The concept of identity has been used in economic sociology (e.g. White 2002; Zuckerman et al. 2003), but it is theoretically less clear. In this chapter I use identity to address the following empirical question about motivation of economic action: How can we understand and explain how people spend so much time and effort trying to become what they want when the risk of failure is high? This question is concerned with work, which, despite its central role in the works of Marx and Durkheim, has not been well integrated in new economic sociology. That today more and more people must work for free before, eventually, getting paid or hired for a job, is a hypothesis about what is becoming common in contemporary capitalism. Empirically, this chapter looks closely at people trying to become fashion models, fashion photographers, and yet other careers. These cases exemplify the large trend of work for free.

The chapter, however, is mainly making a theoretical contribution, and much space is used to explain and develop the theoretical approach that I claim offers a structural analysis of existential questions. Focusing on the economy, it is shown that competing theories do not account for the motives and context of action that is needed to explain why people work for free and are engaged in activities that, for most, are economically futile.

Action in Economic Sociology

Identity theory is an underdeveloped theoretical approach in economic sociology today. Although some texts focus on structure and institutions, most

economic sociologists, as sociologists at large, see "traditional" action theory as the natural point of departure. It is the starting point of Weber (Swedberg 1998; Swedberg 2003), and it has been a central theme since Parsons (1968). Network theorists (e.g. White 1992) and those who build on the notion of culture (e.g. Zelizer 2011) also have stressed the role of action. Economic sociologists, thus, agree with mainstream economists, and with proponents of more recent developments, such as behavioral economics and economic psychology, that action is central.

This agreement stems from the common root of action theories. Economic sociologists tend to use a theory that is best described as a refined version of "folk-psychology" (Hausman 1992).¹ Despite the fundamental agreement on action, economic sociologists have often criticized the idea of Economic Man for being atomistic, simplistic, and essentially presuming man's preferences and motivation rather than understanding and explaining his actions (cf. Taylor 1993: 319).

Much effort has been spent by economic sociologists and others on rectifying the egoistic Economic Man, mainly by adding flesh and blood to its skeleton to create a more realistic model of a human being. But to just add "social" to this man neither alters how we view action nor man.

Mark Granovetter's attempt to present a sociological starting point of man is the most notable example of how network theory deals with the issue of rectifying Economic Man. Granovetter argues that economic action neither is as fully embedded as the over-socialized man, nor as independent as is suggested by neoclassical economics. He points out that both approaches, "have in common a conception of action and decision carried out by atomized actors" (Granovetter 1985: 485). Granovetter's famous statement is that actors' attempts of "purposive action are instead embedded in a concrete, ongoing system of social relations" (Granovetter 1985: 487). This ongoing system is made up of "concrete personal relations and structures (or 'networks')" (Granovetter 1985: 490). But although Granovetter mentions "identity" (1985: 491) as one aspect to be included when analyzing action, it is still man as an atom, although related to others, that is the point of departure.

Relation to Existing Identity Approaches

Action theories tend to presume actors, and explain their behavior using preferences, relations, or structure. To use the notion of identity, I propose a

¹ These action theories tend to assume autonomous agents, and at least the economic rational action theory (Coleman 1990; Elster 1989) is essentially a decision theory turned into an assumption of real actors. This theory boils down to the notion of Economic Man. See also Joas (1997) for a detailed discussion of action theory.

much stronger thesis than that the atom is embedded in relations, namely that one is these relations. Actors do not first exist as atoms, who only later become embedded. It is rather the other way around: one becomes what we today call a subject *as a result* of relations.

The research on identity spans from micro-oriented studies, often using social psychology, to macro-oriented studies, such as analyses of social movements.² This research on identity is of course largely found outside of economic sociology. It covers much empirical ground, but as Brubaker and Cooper point out: "If identity is everywhere, it is nowhere" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 1). If their review is taken together with Karen Cerulo's (1997) large review of "identity construction" and Howard's (2000) review of the social psychology of identity, we get an overview of identity work in sociology and adjacent fields. Ideas of identity and self, as presented in the works by Cooley (1998) and Mead (1934) or other symbolic interactionists, such as Goffman (1968), are largely integrated in contemporary research. Integrated, too, is Erik Eriksson's theory of identity focusing on ego, the distinctions making egos different from one another, and the social roles of actors. See Burke and Stets (2009) for a more extensive presentation of a strong version of the social psychological approach. Relationally oriented research on identity is also found in economic sociology, such the works of White (1992) and, Zuckerman (e.g. Zuckerman et al. 2003). The ideas of this chapter draw and connect mainly to this structural sociological literature.

The economists Akerlof and Kranton have used the term identity, which they value because it "yields predictions, supported by existing evidence, that are different from those of existing economic models" (2000: 716). But their theory, however, is only a proxy for what is reduced ultimately to the utility calculation (Akerlof and Kranton 2010). Their usage, in other words, is merely a form of imperialism that dilutes the term of its unique meaning.

Unfortunately, much work using the notion of identity lacks precision and it is rare to find a precise and useful definition of identity, which is the

² Identity means that A is A. This refers back at least to Hume who claimed that one (being) is the same (being) over time. To say that A is A, is different from saying that A is the same as A (Heidegger 2006). Identity in the first sense means that, for example, the long-time friend I have in front of me is the same as the one I met yesterday, and the latter refers to the fact that my friend and I are both Swedish and may share this identity. Although each of us is an instance of a given class over time, it is, strictly speaking, the class that is the identity; the class is the same class over time. There are a set of traits that constitute the collective identity, which remains similar enough over time to speak of an identity. Sameness is thus the condition that more than one can share a collective identity, but it does not refer to identity itself. The actors, so to speak, are just instances of an identity. Identity stands in contrast to difference, that is that A is not everything. Much identity theory has forgotten that identity presumes difference. Only given that A is not everything else, but that there are many things which A is not, does the notion of identity make sense. That A is A does not mean that A cannot change. Over time, A can change, but it at least is more stable than its environment; identity refers to a form of relative social constructivism rather than an essential condition, which suggests that an identity is only stable in relation to the stability of the environment.

condition of a full theory. This is the first problem with existing identity approaches.

A second problem is that the social psychological approach to actions overemphasizes actors' control over their identities, and a social identity is said to be "a person's identification with a social group" (Burke and Stets 2009: 118); but what if others identify "a person" with a social group although that person is not? To focus on the psychological state of ego means that the structural conditions of identity are played down.

A third problem is that identity "theories" are not general enough. The majority of studies are about identity, person, and self, which means that, for example, organizational identities are neglected. A consequence is that the research does not combine the level of organizational identity with personal identity. Although organizational identity as such is discussed by several authors (e.g. Hatch and Schultz 2002, 2004), it is not well theorized.

The fourth problem is that almost all works presume what they claim to explain, namely the self. This may not be apparent, but even some symbolic interactionist theories implicitly start with an ego, who reaches out and interacts with the world—including other egos. The important point of Mead, that the social precedes the individual, is not clear. These theories try to explain person-ality rather than seeing identity as a structural condition. Despite the attempt to construct a relational identity approach, even Harrison White's work on identity and action boils down to egological assumptions (Aspers and Kohl 2013).

If we look at the current social psychological literature on identity, and let Stryker and Burke be the paradigmatic example, identity is seen as parts of a self, "composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in differentiated contemporary societies" (Stryker and Burke 2000: 284). They claim to combine the identity approach of Stryker that focuses on how structure affects self, and the approach of Burke that focuses on internal dynamics of self-processes. In both traditions, however, the self is central, and essentially assumed.

The approach that Burke has developed assumes the actor, and sees social structure as a consequence of actions: "The task we have set out for ourselves in this book is to introduce a basis for understanding social structure, in the sense that we have begun to outline, as arising from the actions of individual agents or actors and as a feeding back to those agents to change them and the way they operate" (Burke and Stets 2009: 6).

What they offer is a psychological and egological approach to identity: "Identities are the set of meanings people *hold for themselves* that define 'what it means' to be what they are as persons, as role occupants, and as group members" (Burke 2004: 5; italicized to emphasize the psychological stance). The approach is not inherently relational, and plays down the role of others, and how they ascribe meaning to the self.

The above-mentioned problems should be addressed by a useful identity theory of action. I offer an alternative, first by grounding identity in ontology, which opens up for existential questions which must be understood in relation to structure, then by showing how this ontology offers a foundation for a fine-tuned approach of identity.

Relational Ontology

I present a phenomenological identity approach grounded in the work on ontology of Martin Heidegger (Aspers and Kohl 2013). Heidegger stresses the role of relations at the ontological level. Ontology, to follow Heidegger, is a matter of man, or to use his German term, *Dasein*, which means being-there. Man is essentially with other men in-the-world; this is constitutive of man (Heidegger 2001a: 84–5). Heidegger's point is that being together (*Miteinandersein*) is the condition of understanding oneself (Heidegger 2001a: 87). This inherently relational understanding of man rejects egological approaches that start from the already existing subject or ego. In other words, the psychological approach (Heidegger 1978b: 190) and its classical epistemic distinction that can be traced back at least to Descartes, between subject and world—*res cogitans* and *res extensa*—is replaced with an ontology in which man already is in the world. Man (*Dasein*) is constituted as being in-the-world (Heidegger 2001b: 81), involved with different practices and meeting others. An additional advantage is that Heidegger opens up for questions of existentiality, which is rarely done in the social sciences.³

I focus on these necessary relations to other men and things, and what makes man (*Dasein*) what he is.⁴ It is thus not so that things exist first, and then man; things exist first of all in a relational structure of possible activities for purposes (*Um-zu-Zusammenhang*) through which we understand the world (Heidegger 1975: 231ff). *Dasein* is born into an already existing world. This is an ontological condition; and, as will be shown, is “translated” into empirical identities.

The relational structure refers to the inherent “social” dimension of *Dasein*. It is in this way that Heidegger turns the epistemic-ontological perspective around and rejects the atom as the starting point. *Dasein* is always with others.

³ Existentiality is here not to be confused with Sartre's (2003) interpretation of Heidegger.

⁴ Given this in-the-world-being of man, there is a fundamental difference between the man-to-man relation and the man-to-thing relation. This is an ontological difference, and Heidegger identifies two different forms of relations; the “categorical,” which refers to man-thing relations, and the “existential,” which refers to man-man relations.

It is this “relational ontology,” to repeat, that is its constitution.⁵ Heidegger says, moreover, that one is given to one's self (Heidegger 2001b: 129). It follows that the “subjective” feelings, empathy and much more are only derivatives of the more basic *Mitsein* relation. Heidegger says that the “I-You” as well as the sex-relation presupposes the we-relation of *Mitsein* (being with) (Heidegger 2001a: 145–6). This represents a “taken for grantedness” of others, or in Heidegger's (2001a: 84–5) words “Being and Being are together” (“*Dasein und Dasein sind Miteinander*”). It is, hence, because we first are together that we can be alone.

Man's constitution with others is noticeable in a direct way and in an indirect way (Heidegger 1979: 45). In a direct way we meet others when they, for example, are involved in work while being in-the-world. This can, for example, be a booker of fashion models. But it can be any type of activity, even if it just means to do nothing, that is hanging around.

In an indirect way, man is constituted in relation to they (*das Man*). As a person, one reads the newspaper as one does, presents oneself as one does, argues as one does, and, in most cases, behave as others do. The ontological condition implies that one's activities are always related to others; but how this is empirically played out differs. For example, the person who is eager to appear as a fashion model, must be updated on how fashion models dress. Heidegger's phenomenology grounds also one in they (*das Man*); one is always part of they. *Das Man* is primary and represents the public (*öffentliche*) world—a genuinely shared world.⁶ The idea of “they” resembles the notion of generalized other as presented by Mead; Heidegger's perspective, however, is ontological; it is not an empirical finding. It is the foundation for empirical findings, serving as a starting point for sociology.

It is, Heidegger argues, the dispersion (*Zerstreuung*) of the different activities in which man is thrown (*geworfen*) that makes up man (1978a). *Dasein* is not only ontologically dispersed, it is also dispersed in its own activities: to care (*sorgen*) for something, doing something, questioning, and other kinds of activities (Heidegger 2001b: 56–7). According to Heidegger, it is not that man (*Dasein*) first is what many today would call self, and then falls apart as a result of social interaction (Heidegger 2001a: 333). It is rather the other way around: the dispersion is the condition of the self. Self and I are different from *Dasein*, but are not the product of atomistic reflection (Heidegger 1975: 226). Man, as it were, is the consequence rather than the cause of

⁵ It should by now be evident that Heidegger does not ground his view on man's constitution by referring to man's capacity to speak, think, or other forms of philosophical anthropology or biology.

⁶ This public world Heidegger contrasts with the intersubjectively constructed world (Heidegger 1979: 339).

identities.⁷ Man, according to Heidegger is this "conglomerate" who finds himself "dispersed" in settings, relations, and activities. Reflection is something that is a consequence of actors gaining many different identities.⁸

I argue that Heidegger's ontological position, in contrast with much social science theory that draws on the actor as a unit, presents a way of thinking that starts with relations and actors being in the world. Man, thus, is trading, working, competing with others in a market, or is involved in other activities. Heidegger puts the searchlight on the social constitution of man, and its concomitant existential predicament.

Heidegger, to be clear, discusses ontological relations, but does not explain how relations empirically "appear" or condition man concretely. This means that he has nothing specific to say to the empirical researcher. What Heidegger offers is ontology of an inherently "social" world.⁹

From Ontology to Empirical Identity

The empirical question, when starting from a Heideggerian point of view, is not *if* man is relational, but *how*. Heidegger's ontology is a powerful statement; it suggests that man is not "merely" embedded in a set of relations but *is* these relations. This is to say that man is, given the "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), a consequence of relations. Thrownness refers to the fact that man is in the world. One is always thrown into a set of relations rather than having built them.¹⁰

⁷ This idea is expressed most clearly in the following quote by a philosopher who influenced Heidegger, namely Nietzsche: "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed" (1994: 45).

⁸ Reflection is a condition, but in contrast to the egological approach (Tengelyi 2012), I see reflection as a result of the dispersion of identities (cf. Heidegger 1975: 226). Mead (1934: 354–79) proposes similar ideas.

⁹ Heidegger was aware of Weber's work on interpretative sociology (Heidegger 1978a: 189ff).
¹⁰ Even Mead's concept "I," if interpreted as a consequence of "me," has a subjectivist touch. To do ontology is yet a different activity, and sociologists have neither studied nor practiced ontology, and it is better to describe what they do as empirical or ontic (Heidegger 2001b), that is, as the conditions that must be fulfilled for their theories to be valid. Mead does not do ontology, but acknowledges the social constitution of empirical actions, self and individuals: "The process out of which the self arises is a social process... implies the pre-existence of the group" (Mead 1934: 164). Mead's explanation stresses the "psychological side" (i.e., concepts like "I," "me," and "self"), but he clearly underlines the relational aspect. Mead points out how the "primary socialization" implies that the child's self is growing out of others' behavior towards him. The child may "... passively accept the individual that the group about him assign to him as himself" (Mead 1934: 370). As the child grows older, many identities are ascribed to her, an idea we can extrapolate to later phases in life. It is in the direction of Mead (cf. Joas 1993, 1997: 187–91) and other relational sociologists (Emirbayer 1997) that we may also look to develop an empirically viable identity approach that can be an alternative to traditional action theory. The focus is thus not on metaphysical notions like person or individual, but on the analytic notion of identity.

The starting point of the phenomenological identity approach I present is the recognition of identities' relations. An actor's identity is constituted by its relations as they are recognized. To account for the sociological questions of empirical variation and concrete cases, I define identity as *recognized similarity bound by a narrative pegged onto something*. This something can be a person, a firm or any other type of organization, social form, thing, tool, or a market. The narrative, which of course does not have to be a long recorded story, implies temporality, as it binds the "thing" together over time so that we can speak of it as one (identity), as discussed by, for example, Arendt (1988) and Ricoeur (1992). *Recognized* identity is the phenomenological starting point, and it means that one can perceive one's "own" identity, others' identities, and that those can recognize "mine." The centrality of recognition points at being, intentionality, and practice; it is always someone who recognizes, either mentally or in practice, and thereby reinforces, questions, or challenges an identity. One is relations ontologically, but it is the empirical recognition that determines what one "is."

Heidegger is clear that there are both direct relations and indirect relations (*Das Man*). Following this idea, I identify two types of relations that make up empirical identities, reciprocal and one-way directed. Some relations with human beings, organizations, things, and other meaningful units are reciprocal, as a tie between two traders, but others are one-way directed. One-way directed relations can be exemplified by one person who wants to become a successful artist, or when someone is perceived to belong to a certain category or group. Another example of a one-way relation is when a certain organization is not seen as a competitor by other firms. This firm, in the eyes of other firms, is thus a non-competitor, which has no influence per se over how it is recognized by others. In this example, the categorization is public and affects the identity of the firm. Other examples are when people orient to a reference group (Merton 1957) or to a specific fashion. It is not possible a priori to know which form of relation explains human action.

The identity approach proposed differs from egocentric action theory because it explains being and action via man's recognized relations, and not only via—often assumed—preferences or motives. The starting point is what man is and wants to be, which results from recognition of relations. Network theory only accounts for and explains reciprocal ties of network (Fuhse 2009), but does not include one-way relations. In contrast with the social-psychological identity theory that originates in the works of Mead, the focus here is much more on the fact that one is already being-in-the-world. A central element of this is an account of how relations are made and not made in processes of selection.

I will now turn to the empirical questions: how to explain why actors try to become fashion models or fashion photographers. This will also lead us to the question of how they are affected by being involved in this undertaking. I concentrate on explaining their behavior, focusing on their motives. These actors operate in the context of what is called aesthetic markets, such as markets for models (e.g. Entwistle 2009; Mears 2011b), fashion photographers (Aspers 2006), musicians (Faulkner 1971), and authors (Bourdieu 1996), to mention a few. These markets are characterized by a situation in which "nobody knows" (Caves 2000), lack standards for evaluation of quality, and empirically we find both self-employed and employed in these markets—two forms that increasingly are becoming mixed in real life. In these markets there is an increased tendency to have "unsalaried" people involved in the production. The identity approach is by no means limited to this specific domain, but in cases of unsalaried work in combination with the absence of standards, relations to others become central.

Three Types of Identity and Their Interrelations

The approach uses three interrelated types of identity to account for empirical variation and theoretical scope: preferred, unique, and collective identity. For each collective identity, such as being a fashion model, there is a unique identity that refers to what makes one different from others sharing the same collective identity, for example by being a known fashion model who has done campaigns for certain brands. And for each unique identity, there is a preferred identity that refers to what each individual model wants to be. The collective and unique are essentially determined by others. It is out of what I call "structural" identities—collective and unique identities—that we can understand the existential level of man and the corresponding reflection of one's preferred identities.

Reflection and awareness of identities reside at the existential level of what one prefers to be. This is to say that man is concerned with the deepest existential questions, of who one is, how to live one's life, how one came to be what one is, and what to do with life. But the actor "is" everything but a completely free agent, the actor is rather the switchboard of many different identities. The capacity to reflect and to prefer one thing over another is largely a structural condition of having been ascribed many different unique and collective identities (cf. Heidegger's notion of dispersion, "*Zerstreuung*").¹¹

¹¹ Although there is always "someone" recognizing an identity, not all identities are human. When speaking of organizational identity, there is no one mental directedness, but often social

Collective and Unique Identities

Although man is living in the world, and although the preferred identity is the practical and existential starting point, it is not the starting point for empirical explanations as the existential questions of what one is can only be understood in light of one's recognized relations by others. This is to say that what I call collective and unique identities are central for a complete understanding also of the existential questions. I will therefore study the structural conditions of action of models and those who want to become models, who have a given identity, starting with the model agencies.

An organization, such as a model agency, is an instance of the collective identity of model agencies. As an example, it has a unique identity in relation to other, typically competing, model agencies that also offer models to the market. In neither case are actors in control of their identities, whether collective or unique in markets (cf. Aspers 2010; White 2002). One model agency has its own preferred identity, which may or may not be what it currently is. Actions, moreover, must account for the structural identities that conditions what one is and what one can become.

Identities in markets, many of which are stable (Burt 1988), mean that model agencies are in-the-world, engaged in the production of products or services, related to suppliers, employers, customers and potential customers—all of whom are recognized and affect the identity of the model agencies. White's market theory (White 2002) is a good case in point. Those who are in a market are, White says, seen in the light of the collective market identity and their corresponding unique identity in a particular market, such as the market for models. These identities are in the "eyes of consumers," such as those hiring models for fashion campaigns. White describes a general context of unique identities that have been formed in the market as a result of interaction between producers and consumers; in his theory, producers' identities are in focus. There is a collective identity made up of the "handful" of producers in the market.

There is normally an underlying value of a collective identity, based on which all unique identities that "compose it" are evaluated. The unique identities are differentiated on the basis of what constitutes the similarity of the collective identity. The value may be "quality for money," "style," "taste," "look," "stature," or more subtle value-combinations that are difficult to express discursively. Hence, commensuration, that is, "the transformation of different qualities into a common metric," (Espeland and Stevens 1998: 315) occurs regularly. Each of these model agencies must, when acting, relate what

arenas at which "reflection" on the identity of the organization takes place (Burt and Carlton 1989). In the case of a firm, it is usually the CEO together with other executives, and the board that is supposed to deal with these matters.

they want to be, that is, their preferred identity, to their unique market identity.

The unique identities, as stated, are not just different. The central point is that their differences are reflections of the value of the collective identity. In the market for fashion models, each model agency is positioned in relation to its models. Strictly speaking, model agencies are gaining unique identities via their models' customers. Models have high status because of having been contracted by high status clients—big fashion brands and important designers' catwalks. As the life cycle of models is short, and as the status of agencies is an effect of models' relations, it is important to have a flow of new incoming models who can maintain the unique identity of a model agency in relation to the other agencies who share the collective identity of being model agencies. The collective and unique identities are made up of empirical relations primarily to customers and models (corresponding to what Heidegger refers to as existential relations). These identities are recognized by other—competing—model agencies, customers, and models.

Figure 10.1 depicts the typical recognition of identities in the eyes of buyers of model agencies' services; with one large circle representing the collective identity of model agencies to be seen in relation to other collective identities, and many small circles, representing the unique identities of individual agencies.

The rivals, suppliers, customers, and models who recognize these identities, behave towards these agencies in ways that reflect what they perceive them to be, not according to what the model agencies prefer to be. In cases of, for example, mistreatment of models, agencies cannot control how potential models, customers, or political activists perceive them and how they behave to the agency. An agency becomes what activists think it is, and they will act accordingly, which means that the structural position enables and constrains

Figure 10.1. Graphic illustration of identity differentiation. Unique identities of model agencies (small circles) of a collective identity (large circle) of "model agency" that is shared by all unique identities

the actor. The firm will, according to Heidegger, find itself dispersed in activities over which it does not have full control.¹²

The different unique and collective identities are the result of the practice of others, and the officers that lead the agency must acknowledge this and relate to it. Differentiation of unique identities is ultimately the result of an "audience" that bestows value on what is recognized. For example, "Editorial jobs [i.e., jobs for the section of fashion magazines over which the fashion editor is in control] generate image and hype for an agency" (Mears 2011a: 131) in the eyes of those working at model agencies, but also in the eyes of their customers. To have these jobs (compared with agencies with no such jobs), and particularly to have them at a high level is a value according to which agencies are differentiated into different unique identities. Evaluation or valuation of identities, hence, is integrated in recognition and a crucial aspect for understanding the preferred identity.

Preferred Identity and Action

What I have stressed so far is the necessity of the with-other-relations (*Mit-sein*): an actor's being is always related to others. Evaluation or valuation, or for short e/valuation by the "audience," largely customers, is an important element in differentiation of unique identities and has implications for those evaluated.¹³ The consequence for the audience, in contrast, is rarely that large. Models are selected and geared by the agencies to cater to different market segments, such as "catalogue," "plus-size," "catwalks," and the like. Mears explains the difference between models doing showrooms and catalogues, on the one hand, and editorials, on the other: "Showroom, it's more body oriented... you have to show the clothes. It's, I guess, less 'prestigious,' ... less editorial, whatever [rolls eyes]" (Mears 2011b: 131). This valuation is simply the everyday business of the Booker, but it may have a great impact on the career of the model. This is a typical example of how the Booker, representing the agency, is in a position to gear the model to a type of market segment that will give him or her an identity (over which, hence, the model will have little control).

¹² Control of public recognition of identity is a difficult form of impression management (Goffman 1971), especially in status markets (Aspers 2010). However, status, via the Matthew effect (Podolny 2005), tends to facilitate the operation of high status firms. A firm, for example, may think that the "wrong" customers are using its models and that their relations give the company another identity than what it desires. In such cases an agency may block certain customers.

¹³ Evaluation refers to a process based on an existing standard (institutionalized value) and valuation implies that there is no such standard (Aspers 2009).

A model may "get" several different identities, as s/he may be evaluated or valued for many different "things" by different "audiences." She may be a terrible person to work with, but have a look that is desirable. A model finds herself in the intersection of these structural and dispersed identities in which she is "thrown" into a position according to Heidegger. How she then acts, and what she can do, is a result of her identity—what she is in the market for models. Her identity may be high-status with a very personal look. What she then does, as a deliberate decision or in practice, is hence not the starting point, but the consequence of what she is, and what she wants to be.

The approach suggests that action is triggered by the apprehension of her recognized unique or collective identity and preferred unique or collective identity. If the collective identity is different from the preferred, this perceived tension is a reason for action. It goes without saying that the preferred identity may be the same as one's perception; tension is hence not necessary.¹⁴ Furthermore, the existence of tension or the lack of tension has nothing to do with whether an actor does or does not act; also, actors who are what they want will act.¹⁵ It should be noted that discrepancy may be the result of a change in the preferred identity, the perceived identity, or both.¹⁶ But regardless of the reason, any explanation must account for the perceived and preferred identities.¹⁷ The concrete actions for a booker at a model agency may then be, for example, to "try to sell the model for catalogues," "to cut the expenses that is used to promote a model," "to change style," or similar strategies that a booker, that is, the actor who performs on behalf of the model agency, can use to reduce the tension between the model agency's perceived identity and preferred identity. Explanations of actions are made in relation to either collective identities or unique identities, but understanding requires that we know the preferred identity.¹⁸

¹⁴ The reason that actors would prefer a certain identity is not the focus of this chapter. It is enough to know that actors may orient to become an identity. Each preferred identity exists only in relation to a structural identity, but not every structural identity implies that an actor has a correlated preferred identity. An actor who is typecast (Zuckerman et al. 2003) is likely to have an idea of exactly what roles s/he prefers (i.e., a preferred identity).

¹⁵ Anxiety is a tension between an actor's wish and its structural predicament of not yet being or being unable to become what one wants to be. It may become an illness, especially if the tension is great. The structural predicament can be affected by the actor, but he is never in control of it—which is a reason for a more fundamental anxiety that lacks directedness. The explanation of the tension is fundamentally structural, although one must of course be open to cases in which persons' perceptions of tensions are abnormal and where psychology has a place.

¹⁶ One or more of these may have changed as a result of various "causes," such as socialization, interaction, influence by others, structural reconfigurations, and much more. I will not pursue the matter of "causes of causes" in detail here.

¹⁷ A purely "objective" account of both "perceived" and "preferred" identity (as we have in rational choice theory) can never claim to "explain," as the explanatory capacity is merely the capacity of the scientist's invention of reasons dressed up in the language of intentionality.

¹⁸ Thus far I have described the underpinning of the theoretical approach and its idea of action. In empirical research, the ontologically rooted identity theory proposed here explains using ideal

All that we need to explain is covered by the two activities already described: actors who act to become what they prefer to be (their preferred identity), and others who ascribe identities.¹⁹

To Become

So far I have mostly discussed model agencies, that is, organizations that do not have an existential level. Nonetheless, they may have preferred identities. Let me now turn to individuals, and thus to existential matters. I will focus on fashion models, but it is important to point out that the predicament they face is in no way unique. In many countries, there are a great number of people who would like to be (come) novelists, fashion photographers, models, stylists, art directors, actors, artists, film directors, musicians, or anything of a similar nature that allegedly revolves around aesthetic creativity. To achieve the preferred identities would mean that actors are "producers," that is, participants who no longer have to pay to be part of the aesthetic activities.²⁰ The "starting point" of an attempt to become a producer is normally either that one is part of the audience or is an apprentice in the field.

Those who want to succeed in cultural industries not only have to spend much time on, but also commit themselves to the task emotionally (Bourdieu 1996; see also Bandelj, Chapter 9 in this volume, for an account of what it could mean to work on relations²¹). The art world in which they act is demanding, and it is difficult to survive economically in aesthetic markets, even for many of those who actually become producers. More importantly, the number of those who make money in these economies is clearly smaller than those who orient to them. This has been known for a long time, and

types as average actors, but it can also be used for explaining historical specific and concrete cases in the way Weber (1978) defines these two ways of explanation in Chapter 1 of *Economy and Society*.

¹⁹ It is useful to draw the distinction between actions that orient to one's own identity and those that orient to the control of the environment. Attempts to control one's unique and/or collective identity can either be done by single actors, or, more likely, and probably more effectively, in concerted form. Organizational research offers much evidence and excellent tools for how collective identities can be formed, used to propel change of their own and others' conditions, and, of course, to change the structural conditions of action for themselves and others (Ahme and Brunsson 2008; Fligstein 2012).

²⁰ Producer, thus, is not defined in terms of profit, or means of living, but as one who among those engaged in cultural industries is considered to be a "producer."

²¹ Models are clearly performing emotional work, a type of work common in the aesthetic sphere. The personal engagement to write novels often means that authors are mentally exposed to the audience. Performance art is another activity that is deeply existential for those who want to become seen as performance artists. According to those who recognize identities—other performance artists—performances have to be authentic to be accepted as performance art, which means to be serious about one's bodily presence, as studied in an ongoing project by Edvin Sandström.

Howard Becker (1982: 53) refers to research from the early 1970s and informs us that 15 percent of theater tickets were sold to drama students. That there is an entire pre-industry that supports the cultural industry with employees is evident, and Becker gives one example: "the thousands of people who study photography every year produce few professional photographers, people who make their living from the practice of photography" (1982: 53). This group constitutes a reserve army for cultural production, in addition to being important consumers. Menger showed fifteen years ago that "Employment but also underemployment and unemployment have been increasing steadily and simultaneously over the period. Obviously, fluctuations in supply and demand of artistic labor do not provide a satisfying explanation of what appears to be highly unbalanced growth" (Menger 1999: 542). The trend has not stopped.

There is thus an oversupply of people who want to enter artistic labor markets, such as markets for film, theater, dance, and markets that more often are populated by self-employed persons, like directors, photographers, models, musicians, novelists, and painters, to note a few examples. The oversupply of people in many aesthetic fields is also noticeable, for example, in Swedish polls showing that a great number of people would like to publish a novel.²² All of them share a high risk of failure. This means that the income distribution is extremely skewed (Menger 1999).

It is this reality that should be considered against what mainstream economics presumes about work. In economic labor market theory, it is assumed that actors are interested in money, and work is assumed to be a negative utility. Hence, the economic rational action theory predicts that few would attempt this work given the uncertain conditions, low success rate, and, for the majority, less economically beneficial outcome. Let us look closer empirically at aesthetic markets, zooming in on the market for models.

The majority of those trying to become, or in the terminology of this chapter, to gain the identity as, "producers" in aesthetic economies will experience hard work until they fail. Those who try often persist for many years, starting with costly and time-consuming exercises. If they, then, get some work, it is more or less for free, or even "work" that they in real terms have to pay for. This means that candidates, for example, are doing internship, for which they rarely receive money. They are asked to work for free to get exposure and experience. For models (Frisell Ellburg 2008) this may be to do shows, for which they get clothes in return. The rationale is that they will be seen by customers who eventually will hire them. Mears has also studied models and she tells us: "The catwalk is a case of economic hardship. For all

their prestige, Fashion Week show can be costly ventures for hundreds of unknown faces competing for a break, especially in London, where each show pays, on average £280 (less than \$500). The estimated cost of participation for a foreign model is considerably high..." (Mears 2011a: 67). The amount of work for free to get reputation is increasing. Added to this is the neverending supply of new faces in an industry with hardly any entrance costs, which itself is subject to fashion and its concomitant uncertainty. The result is fierce competition even to work for free to get experience, which is cost-cutting for producers. In the case of fashion modeling, it is clear that the prices have gone down over time for models (Frisell Ellburg 2008), leaving less money to be divided in fewer hands. In this industry, the notion of exploitation may not be far from the truth, especially as this industry attracts, and is actively attracting, the very young, especially girls (some of whom are younger than 15 years of age), whose experience of work and life in general is limited.

We can now pose the main question of the chapter: how, given the difficulties and hardship they endure, can we explain the actions of those trying to become aesthetic workers or self-employed in the aesthetic economy? People do not try to become artists because of boredom. It is instead commitment and great joy in the activities that characterize those who try. One model interviewed by Mears explains it: "When you are walking on the runway, it's the best! Like other rocky careers in glamorous industries, for instance photography and new media industries, modeling blurs the boundaries between work and leisure" (2011a: 116-17). This commonly held attitude suggests that it is neither correct to describe what they do as an investment nor as sacrifice. An investment requires some kind of calculation of alternatives, and expectancy of a given outcome in relation to the alternatives. Based on a rational calculation, even if the goal is simply to survive economically, fewer would try. A sacrifice would imply giving up something of a higher value to become professional. Few would stand the pressure if the sheer act of trying itself was not joyful. Added to this is the actors' emotional and fundamentally existential commitment. It is a form of work that resembles consumption, which we may call work-consumption, that is, that actors enjoy their "work" so much that it is a form of consumption (for which they may even be willing to "pay").

Those who want to become models have little or no influence with regard to their being included in the collective identity of models. Neither can those who actually become included do very much to affect their unique identity. Nonetheless, their actions must be understood in relation to their preferred identity. It is only if we understand their wants for becoming models that we can explain their actions.

Empirical evidence, in conclusion, speaks against the prediction of economics. Thus, the current situation cannot be explained by an idea of an actor who

²² Henrik Fürst analyzes this in an ongoing study.

pursues a goal based on a rational calculation.²³ There are two additional reasons speaking against an economic rational interpretation. The first is that the success rate is low. Nonetheless, it is clear that the time spent and the money that is used for education is considerable. I have explained the activities as an outcome of their preferred identities, what they want to be. The actors want to become artists or any other artistic identity. But actors cannot decide their identity; it is a decision that is in the hands of others, and the outcome for the actors, given the lack of standards, is highly uncertain.

To Be Defined

Despite the difficulty models face, some achieve their preferred identity; becoming models places them as producers in an aesthetic market. This means that they are what they want(ed) to be. To be recognized as a model, that is, to be seen by others as being one of many models, is to gain a unique identity within the collective identity. The collective identity, thus, is not composed of identical twins, but of differentiated identities.

The evaluation of models is a consequence of how the models look in the eyes of scouts or bookers at model agencies. Bookers have become socialized into the role of the gatekeeper who evaluates potential and models already included in the system, which means that they themselves have embodied the preference of the market. One scout, that is, a person who spots models, cited by Mears, explains what it takes to recognize models: "You really have to have an eye to be able to pick them apart . . . I have done this so long, that I can see a girl in two seconds and decide if she is right for me or not . . ." Another scout explains what she is looking for in models: "The first thing you look for is the height . . . the next thing you look for is their nose . . ." (Mears 2011a: 132–3). The outcome is a rating, which includes some and excludes (most) others. Those selected will be ranked in competition for different jobs.²⁴

Bookers are "gatekeepers," selecting those who are given the opportunity to work for the top magazines and do the catwalks for the most prestigious designers. But as there is no existing standard, but size of body, that could inform those who want to become models to adjudicate if their look is "good enough," potential models can keep trying and keep hoping that they will get the chance. There are, in addition to the "real" models, different segments of "people models," that is, models who look "ordinary," who simply are too short or for other reasons are not seen as having the potential to make it in the

"real" market by scouts and bookers at the agencies. There are also agencies that charge "models" to be on their sites, and sites that let people upload their pictures as "models." These people, who try to become models, who constitute a far larger group, are a necessary residual against which the collective identity of "real" fashion models is formed. These two categories do not necessarily differ in terms of preferred identity, but in how the other side has evaluated them.

Let it be clear here that it is the recognized relation—in this across the market—from the identity of the model agency and the jobs they give the model, to the person who thereby is seen by others as a model that is decisive for the model's identity. Thus, it is pointless to look at only those who say they want to become, or even claim that they are, models, almost regardless of how "rational" they act. To accept such claims from a "model in being" requires that at least some of those at the other side of the market have selected the actor. In reality, this means that the model appears in pictures in fashion magazines or appears on the runway so that everyone can recognize this particular relation.

Furthermore, any personal relation, such as friendship, that a person who would like to become a model has with people at model agencies will not change the person's identity—s/he is still only someone who wants to become a model. To become a model is to overcome the competition, for which friendship of course can be useful as a form of social capital. It is nonetheless the selection by the other side that matters. In these convaluations, that is, forms of valuation and evaluation inside the economy (market) and their non-market equivalents, the outcome of selections generates identities; of models and of those who still are not models. This selection, first of those who are deemed as "potential models" and those who are not, and later, the ranking among the models, structures their identities and action possibilities.

But as I have repeatedly stated, the chance of success is low. After numerous attempts, hours and hours spent walking at castings, showing one's picture, building a portfolio, being rejected, and often running out of money, many simply have to give up this career path, and turn to something else as they will never be recognized as models. An aesthetic worker will encounter numerous rejections. One way to handle rejections by models is to "deliberately disengage one's emotional involvement and to not take rejection of one's body personally" (Mears 2011a: 115). Failure is to accept a long array of rejections and never-established ties to those "in" the industry. Failure is not uncomplacated to handle, and it may be severe in the cases in which people have made it explicitly "public," as when they tell everyone they know that they aim 100 percent to be a dancer, singer, or any other aesthetic worker, and fail. When one realizes that the chances to achieve one's preferred identity are close to null, it may come as surprise and a life crisis may even erupt. It is easy to imagine the same happening outside the aesthetic sphere. Failure is central

²³ The alternative, as Akerlof suggests (Akerlof and Kranton 2010), is to turn everything that actors want into the utility function. This means that you have accomplished nothing as everything the actors does or wants by definition is utility, and the theory then discriminates against nothing.

²⁴ See Espeland and Sauder for a discussion of ratings and rankings (2009).

because it is about identity; it is not about a goal that is just missed and which leads actors to aim for another goal. Identity is an existential affair.

Concluding Discussion

In this chapter, I present an approach that explains economic action using identity. The main idea of relational ontology is that recognized relations, often maintained over time, are constitutive for identities. Identity is defined as a *recognized similarity bound by a narrative pegged onto something*. For human beings, identity refers to what an actor—individual or organization—is and wants to be. Three analytic layers of identity are presented: the preferred, the collective, and the individual. At the core of the approach is the relation between what one is (collective and/or unique identity) and what one wants to be (preferred identity). A central insight is the structural conditioning of what one is and what one can become as one's identities are to a large extent determined by others. This, in Heidegger's language, means that one is "thrown."

Existentiality and the concrete question of what one "is," consequently, is largely a result of the structural conditions, conceptualized in the forms of identities. Identity is a notion that combines an understanding of the structural determination of actors and actions with an understanding of actors' meaning. The approach is grounded in the ontology of Martin Heidegger. The ontology offers a view on what to do empirically, but also what not to do. The atomistic view of actors is rejected as a starting point, and Mead's theory becomes a useful point of departure when we do empirical research.

I stated that relations can either be reciprocal—such as a tie of a network—or one-way, such as when an actor orients to a given collective identity. The idea of identity is grounded in relational ontology, but is not restricted to ongoing and manifest relations, as described by network theory. In fact, network theory can neither deal with "orientation to others" (Swedberg 1999) nor decision that means rejection. I have highlighted both these aspects in the previous discussion. There are other theories that account for one-way relations. The theory of reference group (Merton 1957), for example, does not require reciprocity. It may in some cases be a better explanation than the network approach that stresses the embeddedness of action (Granovetter 1985). This is to say that we cannot a priori give one explanation priority over the other. By rejecting the narrowly defined network theory, which explains everything in terms of ties, to include identity, and also the central selection process of markets, I have shown how identity is a profound social science concept that is not restricted to one single theoretical approach.

I have used the proposed approach for an investigation of economic action in aesthetic labor markets (see Thévenot, Chapter 8 of this volume, who

discusses profit and exploitation, and Dobbin, Chapter 7, on power). It is shown that much work is going into production, but much of it is unsalaried. The short answer is that people do it because they hope to become producers in the future, although this is statistically unlikely. The empirical finding highlights the relation between work, identity, and existential matters. Identity is useful to explain the large number of, often young, people who try to make it in the aesthetic economy, but who in most cases will not be recognized by others, that is, they will not succeed. The value and relevance of the approach is shown in an analysis of motives and meanings of economic behavior in aesthetic markets. It is argued that what they do must be explained by what actors want to be in relation to what they can become.

There are several issues that are worth pursuing more in detail empirically. One aspect is to look at how identities may enact rational choice and under certain conditions behave as suggested by the neoclassical theory (see Nee, Chapter 6 of this volume, for an analogous argument, departing from exchange theory). Another aspect to pursue further is to look more at non-economic forms. The approach presented is not conceptualized for economic analysis only; quite the contrary. Another aspect for further study is the relation between the unique identity of an organization, which may be the collective identity of its members, regardless of domain.

The ontological approach to identity addresses several of the problems and shortcomings of action theories in economic sociology. Some advantages come from the turn to ontology, others from using identity. Ontology guides empirical research by pointing at what is, and what is not. The first advantage is that identity brings up the much neglected existential dimension of economic sociology by addressing the question of what an actor is. Secondly, by using identity, we can avoid the psychological fallacy, the need to go into depth about each person's preferences or psychological states to explain the way identities are conditioned by the structure. It also avoids the structural fallacy—that actors' meanings are superfluous as everything they do and are is to be explained by their position (cf. Burt 1992: 190–2). In other words, the approach suggested in this chapter rejects the Cartesian epistemic egologism that economic sociologists have adopted from economists and which has haunted the field since its dawn.

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