

## Key Concepts in Processes of Sustainability Transformation

# IDENTITY

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## DEFINITION

Identities are the sets of meanings people hold for themselves that define “what it means” to be who they are as persons, as role occupants, and as group members (Burke 2004: 5). With the social psychological perspective stemming from symbolic interactionism identities not just play out as self-meanings, but are fundamentally social processes, where individuals’ identities are formed in social interaction. “Identity is inextricable from the understanding of the self and is central to the participation in meaningful patterns of social and political action” (Mabel 2010:221). On a subsequent level, identity is a process acknowledging the inherently social nature of human beings, emphasizing the social interactions that form and confirm identities. The self-image of a person is organised in different identities. Those identities are not stable but always shaped by social interactions and therefore fluid. The process of identification is connected to other(s) and self, thus the individual is reflective of the self in a social situation. The different parts of identity are tied to different aspects of social structures and are activated and played out differently. The identities of an individual can be organised in different dimensions, such as a hierarchy. Because the idea of self is inherently important for an individual and identity is performative in everyday action, it serves as a deep leverage to understand behaviour.

## CONTEXT

Identity is a concept widely used in Psychology, Sociology and Social Psychology and respectively conceptualized in these fields. It refers to personal conceptions and expressions, as well as group expressions and affiliations. Philosophy also uses the concept of identity in order to muse the question who am I. Identity politics uses identity to analyse identity forming, exclusive and political alliances, such as race, gender, religion, ethnicity and religion. In that respect, it is concerned with social injustices aiming for freedom (Heyes 2016).

## RELEVANCE

Identity offers deep insights to the internal and external processes of individuals and their resulting behaviour, as well as a way of understanding groups via the identity dynamics taking place. In Processes of Sustainability Transformation, individuals are seen as active agents creating and influencing social structures and therefore essentially linked to and actively shape society. Thus, understanding individuals’ identities allows us to understand the emergence of wider social structures. For instance, the self-reinforcement of emotional commitment to certain behavioural patterns (enforced through e.g. social environment) builds and reinforces a respective identity (“this commitment is our identity and the more we are committed the stronger is our identity”). Commitment to an identity can be used in order to reinforce environmental behaviour, but could also lead to an identity trap hindering transformation. Thus, the concept of Identity trap, used within organizational research (Sydow et al. 2005) holds great potential for better understanding barriers to change. From a political perspective, identity can also be used to frame political claims or stimulate and orientate social and political action. This occurs usually in a larger context of inequality or injustice, where identity is used to achieve recognition, group distinctiveness and belonging, all of which can potentially guide transformation (Neofotistos 2013).

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