CHAPTER 2

Identity studies in Africa
Notes on theory and method

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2.1 Introduction

Most societies at the beginning of the new millennium are caught up in seemingly never-ending processes of social transformation. One consequence for members of these societies seems to be increasing insecurity about ‘fitting in’ and belonging. Debate and collective action on these issues have moved to the centre of politics, and it is accordingly unsurprising to observe that identity has become a key concern within the social sciences and humanities. Identity has become, in fact, ‘the watchword of the times’ (Shotter, 1993b: 188).

Various disciplines have addressed issues of identity in various ways and have produced a substantial, albeit disparate, body of theory and research. It appears in fact that the flexibility of this notion has enabled researchers to use it to frame questions that are of particular interest to them. This has led Goldberg and Solomos to argue that the question of identity has ‘taken on so many different connotations that sometimes it is obvious that people are not talking about the same phenomena’ (Goldberg & Solomos, 2001: 5). Furthermore, alongside conceptual debates on identity, empirical research has drawn on diverse methodologies. It is therefore appropriate to introduce this book with a number of conceptual and methodological tools commonly used by its various contributors in their studies of identities in urban Africa.

2.2 Exploring the notion of identity

Conceptions of identity have changed dramatically over time. Identity in pre-modern (traditional) societies was perceived as undifferentiated, socially derived, fixed to a position, and unproblematic. Change then took place, from the absolute
certitude of traditional or feudal forms of social and economic organisation, culture, and thought, to notions of autonomy, openness, and questioning. Contemporary theorists concede that a stable and coherent cultural context no longer serves as a base for a stable identity and acknowledge the role played by contingency and uncertainty in collective and individual representations. In the words of Bauman,

[Postmodernity is the point at which modern untying (dis-embedding, disencumbering) of tied (embedded, situated) identities reaches its completion: it is now all too easy to choose identity, but no longer possible to hold it ... Postmodernity is the condition of contingency ... nothing seems impossible, let alone unimaginable. Everything that 'is', is until further notice. (Bauman, 1996: 50–51)]

Identity formation in ‘late modernity’ is indeed influenced by a multiplicity of factors, as Driessen and Otto point out: ‘[g]lobalising markets and media, the flow of people, ideas and values, ethnic revival and the redrawing of political frontiers, all contribute to identity questions ... at all levels of socio-political integration and differentiation’ (Driesen & Otto, 2000: 12).

In opposition to former notions of all-encompassing and essential identities, postmodern formulations of identity emphasise the notion of subjectivity and reject ‘grand theories that attempt to incorporate the totality of social experience’ (Prinsloo & De la Rey, 1999: 72). Gilroy describes a postmodern attribute of identity as follows:

[Identity] offers far more than an obvious common-sense way of talking about individuality, community, and solidarity and has provided a means to understand the interplay between subjective experiences of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which those fragile, meaningful subjectivities are formed. (Gilroy, 2000: 98)

With the notion of subjectivity, individual agency in identity construction is recognised. As Giddens points out, loosening social ties, fluidity of social relations, increasing individualisation, narcissism, emphasis on the self and reflexivity in modernity facilitate the opportunity to choose between lifestyles (Giddens, 1991).

Simultaneously, it is now widely acknowledged that individuals draw meaning from belonging to more than one group. They construct and maintain multiple identities that emerge under different circumstances in their daily lives. According to Agger (1998: 53) ‘people are seen as dispersed into a wide variety of subject positions from which they speak polyvocally about their experiences and meanings ... and multiple subject positions’. Although identities can overlap, the significance and nature of each possible identity varies over time and not all identities are equivalent or interchangeable. It is in their social relations that individuals manage
their identities according to their significance and nature.

Identity is therefore 'socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed' (Berger, 1963: 116). It is neither essential nor immutable but a social construction open to change as circumstances, strategies and interactions fluctuate. Since identities do not transcend space and time, they need to be situated historically and relationally. Accordingly, identity is best viewed as a process rather than a property. Viewing identity as a process problematises the notion of an already existing fixed identity. Indeed, as a process, identity is emergent, never complete, finalised, or fixed, but rather always in the making (Castells 1997; Shotter, 1993b). It is something we ‘do’ rather than something we ‘are’.

The notions of agency, subjectivity, and multiplicity in identity formation remain contested within the African scholarship. They are at the heart of a debate between ‘a younger generation of “postmodern” scholars and Africanist intellectuals claiming loyalty to the anti-colonial and nationalist struggles’ (Robins, 2004: 18). While Western media continue to portray the African continent and its people according to a framework of ontological difference (Pottier, 2003; Nyamnjoh, 2000), the struggle against colonialism and continued economic imperialism has produced a legitimate discourse on African identity, based on the unity of African people, the commonality of the experience of subjugation and the authenticity of African culture. However, according to postmodern scholars, the Pan-Africanist ideal constitutes the substitution of one hegemonic discourse by another and fails to take into account ‘the enormous differences within Africa and amongst Africans that inhabit the continent; differences that express themselves along the lines of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion, language, region, nationality, and so on’ (Robins, 2004: 24). Mbembe, in particular, argues that

Marxism and nationalism as practiced in Africa throughout the twentieth century gave rise to two narratives on African identity and experience: nativism and Afrod-radicalism. .... When analyzed closely, these two orthodoxies are revealed to be faked philosophies (philosophies du travestissement). (Mbembe, 2002b: 629, original emphasis)

While the former (re)asserts the uniqueness and authenticity of African culture and calls for the establishment of ‘an African interpretation of things’, the latter stems from a ‘reified vision of history’ whereby ‘the present destiny of the continent is supposed to proceed not from free and autonomous choices but from the legacy of a history imposed upon the Africans – burned into their flesh by rape, brutality and all sorts of economic conditionalities’ (Mbembe, 2002a: 243). Postmodern scholars call for a re-evaluation of such historical, economic, and cultural determinism. They draw attention to the fact that ‘postcolonies are radically unalike’ and to
the need to study ‘the disparate identity strategies emerging in everyday life’ (Werbner, 1996: 2). Criticisms of African postmodern scholarship, on the other hand, contend that postmodern theories are Eurocentric and ‘insist upon the need for theory to continue to draw attention to the material consequences of imperialist and colonial legacies in contemporary Africa’ (Robins, 2004: 22).

2.3 Constructing identity: Discourses and social representations

In researching identity, researchers implicitly and explicitly pose questions on the nature of social reality and open debates on epistemology. According to Hughes and Sharrock, ‘the emphasis on meaning as the distinctive characteristic of human life brought language very much to the fore in social science concerns’ (Hughes & Sharrock, 1997: 161). A key premise is that social reality is knowable through discourse. This does not imply that social reality is discourse; it is an epistemological, not an ontological claim. Identities are closely related to social representations and, as representations, they are not neutral independent reports on a pre-given reality. They are shaped by an exchange and interaction process (Moscovici, 1988). Since alternative accounts are possible, representations are always partial. Discourse therefore actively constitutes reality, drawing on cultural constructions. If discourses work to produce rather than merely to reflect ‘reality’, they need to be considered against the conditions forming the backdrop for their enunciation. Two interrelated levels – the socio-cultural level, which structures everyday discourse, and the interactional level, at which meanings are negotiated in everyday communication – are acknowledged in an attempt to navigate between the Scylla of a determining discourse (culture) and the Charybdis of a constructing discourse (agency). This prevents falling into the trap of either relativising or reifying the discourse. Therefore, discourses can be read and understood in terms of both the interactional and the social context in which they occur. Striking a balance between the two prevents extreme positions – characterising the subject as a product of the social structure or overemphasising variability (Harré, 1998; Shotter, 1993a).

The linguistic turn led to a shift in research practice from collecting accounts of objects or things in an objective detached manner towards acknowledging an involvement in a social context of both researcher and respondent. The notion that lived experience can be reported independently by a subject and directly captured in research has been problematised by researchers influenced by this methodological assumption. In these debates, the unparalleled powers of a knowledgeable subject providing authentic access to a pre-existing static reality, and a neutral researcher detached from the context in which this information is dispensed, are questioned. However, the linguistic turn, with its emphasis on
the constructed nature of knowledge and on the notion of reflexivity, potentially holds the danger of a retreat to abstract theoretical discourse and debates in which researchers become trapped within a hermeneutic circle.

Contextualising the narrator
The assumption that interviewees are knowing subjects benefiting from full insight into their experiences and that they passively reveal this privileged access they have to researchers has been questioned by Becker, who argues that research subjects are not simply ‘carriers of the conventional world’s thoughts’, serving as a source of information (Becker, 1998: 8). Accordingly, Hall (1996) argues that, in addressing questions of identity, what is needed is a theory of discursive practice rather than one of a knowing subject. Through a focus on discursive practice, subjects are not treated as simple repositories from whom information can be extracted. Subjects are seen as being reflective, since their accounts respond to an active intervention by a researcher and are constructed within an interactional context. Through their interaction, a researcher and subject create and shape their understandings of the world. Accounts therefore construct rather than merely describe social reality, and knowledge is situated and open to contestation and revision (May, 2002; Parker, 2002; Seidman, 1998; Silverman, 1993). Subjects are therefore active participants in the research process, in which they express and articulate positions, contributing to the complexity of studying reality.

Narratives cannot be treated in a simple referential way with subjects unproblematically knowing, remembering, and telling. Memory is not a passive store of facts, and discourse does not provide a simple description of experiences in an unmediated fashion. Changing contexts may lead to a reinterpretation of the past. Accounts provide indeed a hearable description of experience, revealing what a narrator is willing to share with others. It is a social practice in which accepted and familiar modes of telling are appropriated from a cultural repertoire and moulded into personal stories. According to Sacks (cited in Lepper, 2000: 110), accounts are ‘worked up for the occasion’ and may be told differently to different persons and on different occasions. This variability of accounts does not imply that they are untrue. Poststructuralism has played a key role in establishing an awareness of the constructed nature of knowledge claims and notions of what counts as truth. This results in a contextualist, rather than absolutist, seeking of knowledge. Truth is not seen as a foundation or ultimate definition of reality, but rather as a product of language games and power (Parker, 2002; Riessman, 1993).

Discourses that in the past were considered legitimate and normal are now considered unacceptable. Subjects may be careful in the way they express themselves, as social change brings about new norms about what is deemed acceptable
practice. Such influences function within the public domain, and may reflect what is permissible and impermissible discourse, what is politically correct, and what is not. Discourses are ultimately self-representations, and attempt to project a positive image. Accounts are constructed retrospectively and contain justifications to make them credible, especially with interview-based research where they are displayed for public consumption. As Michael (1996: 22) points out, there is always the concern to appear as ‘good accountable persons whose actions are warrantable’. This demonstrates how identities are publicly occasioned and socially negotiated, in interaction, albeit in a specific context. The fluidity and incompleteness of accounts do not imply distortion of a ‘true’ identity. People live in changing contexts, and the narratives they develop about their lives provide structure and meaning for these changing contexts. Lives are restored within a particular context, taking both past experiences and future orientations into consideration.

**Contextualising the researcher**

The notion of the researcher as a neutral observer has also been questioned. Researchers need to be reflexive about the impact they have on their research. Being reflexive implies probing the relationship between the researcher and the subject, and, in particular, sensitivity to the multiplicity of identities and the relationships associated with them, as well as to the way in which data are generated and analysed (Fine, 1994; Smyth & Shacklock, 1998). The researcher influences the research process both during field research and during the analysing process.

During field research, subjects categorise the researcher as belonging to particular groups in society and embedded in collective social relations. Sharing some characteristics with subjects may facilitate initial access. However, in spite of establishing a relationship, full access is seldom attained as the self is carefully guarded within the public realm (Kram, 1988). Punch (1994) argues that a researcher’s category inscriptions both open up (enhance) and close down (intrude on) particular lines of inquiry. There is fluidity to insiderness and outsidersness, with each position holding benefits and costs as far as research is concerned. While the latter can cause feelings of cultural and social alienation from the subject, raising the possibility that a researcher may be misled by a subject, strangeness may be an advantage, in the sense that subjects may be more willing to discuss matters with researchers they are not likely to meet again.

When discussing sensitive topics, one of the difficult decisions confronting a researcher concerns the degree of self-disclosure, participation and distance maintained. Since the researcher expects openness from the subject, some reciprocity is expected in return. Letting the balance of power shift by allowing
subjects to ask questions may be a beneficial strategy. Answering questions of
the research subject may facilitate frank exchange, although there is some debate
on the extent that it does. Weber and Carter (1998) argue that disclosure implies
reciprocity. However, this reciprocity does not necessarily require a counter-
disclosure. Weiss (1994) warns that extensive disclosure by a researcher shifts
attention away from the subject.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) argue that each researcher is historically, socially,
and academically located and therefore speaks from within a distinct interpretative
community. The perspective of the researcher therefore guides the research
process. Researchers do not only describe, they interpret the social world through
theoretical frameworks available to them. They construct representations of social
life, by engaging in a dialogue between theory and evidence. Besides hearing
subjects, the researcher frames these responses within an interpretative context
in order to get a grasp on social phenomena. The challenge, then, is to place the
discourse in a context – historically and socially – while retaining the integrity of
the accounts (Denzin, 1989; Fine & Weiss, 1998; Ragin, 1994).

Contextualising the topic
Research, as a public activity, is not conducted independently of a political
context. A researcher needs to attend to questions about whose interests are
served by conducting the research and how its data can be used. The openness
and flexibility of qualitative research makes it impossible to anticipate research
outcomes fully. Researching sensitive topics often requires some ambiguity about
the purpose of the study in order to gain access. The guidelines of informed
consent and confidentiality assist researchers in negotiating dilemmas that are
posed by research as an intrusive activity. Managing risk and avoiding harm are
crucial where research intersects with alignments and/or tensions in society. A key
concern is how to deal with what Fine and Weis (1998: 20) term ‘treacherous data’:
discourses that do not flatter either the research subjects or those ‘othered’ by the
data. Such data potentially solidify stereotypical perceptions. In this regard, the
politically charged context in which research is conducted and the way in which
findings may be used should be taken into account.

Contextualising research in Africa
Identity studies in Africa pose specific challenges in terms of research
contextualisation. Cross-cultural research is difficult in societies marked by deep
class, racial, or ethnic cleavages, since the researcher will be categorised as a
member of a specific group. The ability to conduct comparative studies across
different communities is therefore limited.

In societies under authoritarian regimes, talking about sensitive issues (research on social conflict for instance) carries risks for both the research participant and the researcher. Fears of retaliation may influence the level of dissent expressed and therefore the truthfulness of responses. Self-censorship may also be necessary on the part of the researcher.

In a context of extreme inequality and injustice, it is difficult for the researcher to maintain a neutral stance. Partisanship may in fact become essential to establish trust. It was certainly the case during apartheid in South Africa, as Schutte aptly argues: ‘during the heydays of apartheid … under conditions of oppression the fieldworker, more than in any other situation faces the question: “On whose side are you?”’ (Schutte, 1991: 127). This, to a large extent remains true today. The challenge here is to find a balance between ‘action’ research and political activism.

The issue of partisanship reaches beyond the interaction between respondent and researcher. In South Africa, and at the continental level, it conditions to a large extent the theoretical and interpretative framework of identity studies. As was mentioned before, the struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism produced a legitimate discourse on African identity, leading postmodern scholars to argue that the study of identity in the African context confuses ‘what is’ and ‘what should be’ the dominant identity of Africans. Accordingly, ‘the urgency today is to restore a separation on an intellectual level between the desire to know and to think and the urge to act. The two moments are both legitimate, but there needs to be a line of autonomy between them’ (Mbembe, 2002b: 636, original emphasis). This position, however, remains contested by scholars such as Zeleza, whose contention is as follows:

African scholars, surrounded by material poverty and political tyranny, by underdevelopment, to use a once popular term, are [more] preoccupied with questions of development and democracy than about gazing at sexuality that seems to titillate the intellectual imaginations of some of our colleagues in ‘postmodern’ societies. (Zeleza, forthcoming, quoted in Murunga, 2004: 29)

In the context of South Africa, social research during apartheid was intrinsically ideological: In broad terms, it was used either to provide scientific legitimation for government policy or to denounce it (Schutte, 1991). Although political democratisation lifted those boundaries within social inquiry, there is still a resistance among certain academics against studying ethnic identities or any identity that might distract from what they perceive as a progressive agenda.
2.4 Qualitative research methodology

How is discourse accessed operationally? Selecting a method requires careful reflection on the purpose of research and type of analysis envisaged. There are numerous research techniques that can be used to study identities. McAllister has been particularly harsh in his critique of survey-type interview research, arguing that questionnaires have a descriptive rather than an explanatory value, and that they ‘disguise … the assumptions and presuppositions of those who design them’ (McAllister, 1999: 181), hence ‘we can never learn anything totally new from questionnaire studies’ (1999: 182). A significant proportion of social science research is based either fully or partially on data generated by individual or collective interviews. Interviews are often chosen for pragmatic reasons by researchers such as ‘ease of access’ to data. Such an orientation may undermine the ‘investment’ in time and effort required by an adequately conducted interview-based study.

**Sampling and representivity**

Sampling decisions draw boundaries for research. At the most basic level, the location or setting is decided. Within such a setting, research subjects serve as sampleable units. The immense amount of data generated in qualitative research places a restriction on sample size. Such qualitative studies do not conceptualise representivity in an empirical or statistical sense. Bauer and Aarts (2000) suggest a selection for diversity as an attempt to typify unknown attributes. They compare this strategy to random sampling, which depends on selecting from known attributes. In a qualitative study, a matrix of characteristics can guide the selection of subjects to ensure diversity. This strategy is termed maximum variety sampling, and allows for the exploration of commonalities and differences. The selection of sampleable units is based upon a relevant range of characteristics linked to the population without representing the population directly in a statistical sense. Weiss (1994) recommends using a matrix to guide the selection of sampleable units purposively when drawing small samples. The dimensions of such a matrix reflect potentially different social locations, resources, and experiences. The characteristics used purely as criteria for determining selection ensure access to subjects who have diverse experiences.

**Interviewing**

Methods are not self-validating (Hughes & Sharrock, 1997). Interrogating the relationship between a method used and the data generated by it reveals both
contributions and limitations. In line with the arguments made for a social constructionist perspective, a qualitative approach relying on account-centred methods provides an appropriate way to study processes of identity construction. Social constructionism leads to a concern with charting the way in which the meaningfulness of the social world is constructed. Interviews provide opportunity for recording conversations between the researcher and subject and between subjects themselves, where more than one is involved. Such an approach enables a researcher to pay close attention to what is said in social interaction and to ways in which meanings are constructed.

In-depth interviews provide an opportunity for subjects to describe their lives. Such accounts are based on recollections as well as statements about their feelings and perspectives. However, researchers should be mindful of an exchange developing where the researcher does all the asking and the subject all the answering. In-depth interviews are social events where researchers consciously facilitate a conversational style, to create a more ‘natural’ and less intrusive context. The assumption underlying such a strategy is that subjects talk more freely about their perceptions and feelings in such an atmosphere. The data generated in this way cannot be separated from the social interaction that produced them (Denzin, 1989; Fielding, 1993).

Focus group interviews generate collective accounts that emerge from interaction between subjects within a social context. To facilitate communication, participants need to become acquainted with one another and should be selected, to a degree, on criteria of homogeneity. Focus-group interviews provide the researcher with an opportunity to observe interaction between subjects sharing, negotiating, and socially constructing their viewpoints within a group context. They provide subjects with an opportunity to draw comparisons, reflect on what others say, and re-evaluate their own understanding of their specific experiences. While this deflects attention from the researcher, it introduces other dynamics. The researcher needs to take the impact of the group processes into consideration when analysing these data. Although group influences lead to collectively shared discourses, these are not more or less authentic. They provide insights that would otherwise not have been accessible (Gaskell, 2000; Morgan, 1997; Macun & Posel, 1998). In particular, since by its very nature focus-group research is open ended and cannot be predetermined, it is often able to provide exploratory insight (Gibbs, 1997).

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has argued against the notion that interview data reflect an external reality, unproblematically. The term data generation is more appropriate than data
collection, since it captures the broader range of relationships between researcher, social world, and data. The researcher and subject are recognised as active rather than passive, and as parties with particular interests rather than being detached (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Subjects have certain preconceptions about what researchers do, what their expectations are, and what role to play (‘identity’ to take on), and this affects their responses. In this respect, an interview, as a social encounter in its own right, becomes an object of study. The exchange between the researcher and subject is a conscious social performance, with each one aware of the other’s presence and intentionality, mutually orientating to one another (Cicourel, 1964). In this respect, ‘interviewers must hear not only what the subjects say, but also how they say it.’ (Berg, 1995: 49, original emphasis). Ten Have (1999), citing Alasuutari, argues that interviews are part of the reality studied rather than a means of obtaining statements about, or reflections on, reality. The purpose of social inquiry into discourse is to uncover the meaningfulness of interaction. In this regard, interpretative procedures or conversational practices occurring within an interview should be taken into consideration as the knower becomes part of what is known. Simultaneously, overemphasising the interview’s interactional context reduces everything to that and sets a hermeneutic trap. Balance is required to avoid being ensnared within constructions at the expense of what is communicated about social reality (Chase, 1995; Collins, 1998; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Silverman, 1993).