

1 Introduction to the social construction of identity and authenticity

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Authenticity is a timely topic, having steadily saturated various dimensions of everyday life for the last few decades. As examples, authenticity is now a sought-after characteristic and marketing claim in the culinary sphere – imbued into local foods, craft beverages, traditional recipes, and “ethnic” cuisines (Ceccarini 2014; Lu and Fine 1995; Sims 2009; Thurnell-Read 2019). Travelers seek to locate authenticity when they visit heritage sites, regional festivals, and theme parks (Connell and Rugendyke 2010; Lovell and Bull 2017; Waysdorf and Reijnders 2018). Whether or not someone is an authentic member of some social group or subculture often evokes spirited debate, sometimes even outright conflict (Hannerz 2015; Palmer 2007; Weninger and Williams 2017). Authentic self-expression is a concern within the confessional cultures associated with social media, memoir, and reality television (Abidin 2017; Aslama and Pantti 2006; Edwards 2014). Across these domains and others, authenticity typically connotes a coveted status, a “positive value, revered and sought without ambivalence” (Lindholm 2013:364).

Attempts to theorize the authenticity of people, objects, places, and experiences is now widespread as well. Scholars across the social sciences and humanities have increasingly incorporated the term into their vocabularies, associating it with a range of synonyms including “sincere, true, honest, absolute, basic, essential, genuine, ideal, natural, original, perfect, pure, real, and right” (Lindholm 2013:362). We see authenticity research in the fields of sociology (Brekhus 2003; Grazian 2003; Peterson 1997), anthropology (Fillitz and Saris 2013; Theodosopoulos 2013), archaeology (Jones 2010), history (Brædder et al. 2017), art (Anthony and Joshi 2017; Fine 2004), folklore (Bendix 1992; Feinberg 2018), museum studies (Varutti 2018), consumer studies (Carroll 2015; Koontz 2010), tourism studies (Cohen 1988; MacCannell 1973; Wang 1999), communication studies (Androutsopoulos 2015; Duffy 2013), and education (Cumming and Maxwell 1999; Darling-Hammond and Snyder 2000), among others. Such work moves beyond the colloquial use of authenticity as an everyday word and instead addresses authenticity as a social science concept that requires both elaboration and specification. Such work has also helped to clarify the extent to which issues of authenticity appear to be “a pervasive part of our culture, our institutions, and our individual selves” (Erickson 1995:121).

While many scholars are interested in authenticity, it can be a challenge to use a concept “so broad and elusive” (Bendix 1992:104) and “so bloated with meanings that the hope of true definition is nearly futile” (Martin 2014:14).¹ Indeed, the difficulty of delimiting its meaning leads Straub (2012) to ask whether “authenticity [is] still a productive, substantiated concept, or has it become obsolete and redundant – a mere husk of a word?” (p. 11). On the one hand, it is the richness of potential meanings that fuels authenticity’s broad usage in scholarship. On the other hand, employing a concept this pluralistic in one’s own work requires care and analytic focus.

As the title spells out, this book is not intended to deal with authenticity in a broad way. Rather, it is specifically about authenticity as it relates to identity, a concept that has similarly experienced tremendous theoretical expansion since the early 20th century (Lemert 2019). A century ago, Freudian psychoanalysis posited the existence of hidden or repressed identities, which shaped a tradition of developmental psychology via Erik Erikson in which identities became seen as essential parts of ourselves that develop in stages across the life course (Frosh 2019). Scholars such as William James and Charles Horton Cooley influenced a cluster of social-psychological and micro-sociological perspectives interested in the social basis and significance of the self, including symbolic interactionism (Burke and Stets 2009), social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004), and conversation analysis and its associated strands (Antaki and Widdicombe 1998; Hester and Eglin 1997). Working from a neo-Marxist perspective, cultural studies scholars position identities as discursive constructs embedded in modes of power, as popularized by Michel Foucault (see Hall 1996). Similarly, for theorists attentive to the postmodern condition, identities have been framed as increasingly self-determined rather than ascribed and subject to ongoing revisions amid rapid societal changes (Bauman 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Giddens 1991). Like authenticity, “identity straddles this terrain of inside and outside, self and other, subjectivity and objectivity” (Elliot 2019:3) and scholars must therefore be mindful when using either term.

This volume offers readers insight into social constructionist approaches to identity and authenticity, a paradigm that credits Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) landmark text *The Social Construction of Reality* as a sociological forbearer and is today engaged across a number of disciplinary traditions. Collectively, the contributors illuminate the myriad ways through which identities are authenticated (or inauthenticated) across a range of social milieu, from yoga communities to social media settings to biomedical research. There are no attempts to settle what authentic identities are. In fact, all the studies collected here demonstrate that neither identities nor their authenticity have a single or fixed meaning. Instead, authentic identities are seen as “a fluid set of cultural ideals that people in different situations and groups construct through interaction” (Williams 2013:105). In this introductory chapter, we equip the reader with some of the necessary background information relevant to our perspective. After providing a brief historical sketch of authenticity, we distinguish between critical realism and social constructionism as paradigms, linking the former primarily to psychological studies of the

authentic self and the latter to sociological studies of authentic identities. We then raise three methodological considerations for social constructionist research related to representation, informant selection, and conceptualization. Finally, we introduce the remaining chapters in the volume, highlighting their theoretical and empirical significance.

The rise of authenticity

Authenticity is often traced back to ancient Greek philosophy, where scholars were preoccupied with discerning the nature of reality as created or “authored” by the gods. This early view of authenticity was unrelated to human beings or their subjective understandings of the world. On the contrary, authenticity was something transcendental, such that “regardless of the individual’s intellectual capacities or virtues, they can only ever hope to reflect an authenticity that is wholly external to the individual person. Authenticity resides elsewhere, out there in the immaterial realm of idealized forms” (Fordahl 2018:304). During the European Enlightenment, however, the deterioration of institutional frameworks that had once supplied authorial meaning (e.g., the church, the monarchy) resulted in new conceptualizations wherein authenticity came to be regarded as an essential aspect of the human condition rather than as a supra-human concern. Philosophers such as Rousseau placed trust in the consciousness, autonomy, and morality of the individual self and framed authenticity as “wholly contained within the sphere of human action” (Fordahl 2018:304) and “existing outside of, beneath, or beyond the social framework” (Lindholm 2013:371). Fordahl (2018) argues that authenticity’s meaning has shifted successively inward during the modern era: “whereas Plato’s authenticity had been *external*, and Rousseau’s *individual*, the authenticity of the twentieth century would be *personal*” (p. 305, emphasis added). This can be seen clearly in the development of existentialist philosophy, in which Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre maintained a “focus on the individual as the locus of concerns about authenticity” (Pierce 2015:437). Their work highlighted the significance of free will and placed a strong emphasis on the obligation to search for, awaken, and engage with one’s authentic self. The advent of industrialization and mass consumer culture and the alienation it supposedly engenders have only accelerated this inward turn (Arnould and Price 2003).

To balance the inward turn, other contemporary scholarship has increasingly recognized authenticity’s relationship to social and cultural forces. Pierce (2015), for example, demarcates “subjective” or “first-person” authenticity from “inter-subjective” or “second-person” authenticity, while Weninger and Williams (2017) differentiate “self-authenticity” from “social authenticity.” Carroll (2015) further delimits the concept’s social and cultural features by distinguishing between “moral” and “type” authenticities. Such work helps reveal that there are multiple theoretical trajectories in authenticity research, that “the conceptualization of authenticity is inextricably linked to the relative significance attributed to *personal* versus *social* dimensions of human existence,” and that these approaches have

led to diverse empirical questions and answers (Bessant 2011:18, emphasis in original).

Paradigmatic approaches

While the focus of this book is on the social rather than the personal aspects of authenticity, we nevertheless need to discuss both approaches in more depth to highlight their differences. To do this, we begin with the concept of paradigms. All social science research is guided by paradigms, even if scholars don't realize which paradigm is guiding their work. A paradigm is the broadest framework in the philosophy of science and refers to:

A set of *basic beliefs*. . . . It represents a *worldview* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world," the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts. . . . The beliefs are basic in the sense that they must be accepted simply on faith (however well argued); there is no way to establish their ultimate truthfulness.

(Guba and Lincoln 1994:107, emphasis in original)

Because paradigms frame understandings of the social world, they also comprise the ontological and methodological assumptions that shape research practices. Here we will discuss the ontological bases of two paradigms – critical realism and social constructionism² – to illustrate distinct approaches to the study of identity and authenticity.

Critical realism in the social sciences subscribes to some of the main points of positivism as practiced in the natural sciences: furtherance of scientific knowledge is the goal; theory often comes before observation; falsifying hypotheses whenever possible is seen to improve subsequent hypotheses, which ideally leads to more comprehensive theories of and generalizable claims about the social world (Danermark et al. 2002). Unlike positivism, however, critical realism acknowledges that human beings do not behave automatically or instinctually; they act based on interpretations about the meanings of things. Consequently, critical realism does not propose that the social world can ever be fully apprehended or predicted. Yet many critical realists do believe that social science can strive for objectivity by reducing phenomena to variables, specifying rigorous protocols for measuring those variables, and limiting researchers' influence on the research process (Liebertson 1991). Thus, by following principles of logic, critical realism aims to provide improved *approximations of truth* (Fox 2008). In recent decades, critical realism has increasingly incorporated qualitative or mixed methods in the search for emic understanding, yet it treats such understanding as data that "assist in *determining* the meanings and purposes that people ascribe to their actions" (Guba and Lincoln 1994:110, emphasis added). In this sense, the meanings people give to reality, their own experiences and their actions are secondary to the meanings imputed by the informed researcher (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba 2018).

In social constructionism, there is no singular, absolute, or verifiable “truth.” In contrast to critical realism, context-specific knowledge is given credence over generalizable findings, and theories are developed inductively rather than deductively. Because the nature of reality is seen as constructed instead of “really real,” research does not begin with hypotheses about the potential significance of isolated or correlated variables. The goal of inquiry is to understand how individuals and groups produce relevant knowledge about their social world. Some scholars fear that adopting a social constructionist approach requires “succumbing to the humanist dogma that everything *is* socially constructed and *only* socially constructed” (Munro 2011:2, emphasis in original). This is not the case, though social constructionism is more explicitly hermeneutical than some critical realists prefer because the significance of social phenomena is rooted in the meanings that *participants* hold, not just in what *researchers* decide is significant (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba 2018). Social constructionists do not deny the existence of objective reality, but they often set it aside in favor of studying subjective meanings. Such bracketing occurs “when feminist scholars [distinguish] between biologically determined *sex* and socially constructed *gender*” and “when medical sociologists [distinguish] between biologically determined *disease* and socially constructed *illness experience* or *disability*” (Weinberg 2014:7, emphasis in original). Rather than treat social phenomena as social facts, social constructionists, “to the best of their ability . . . enter the phenomenon, gain multiple views of it, and locate it in its web of connections and constraints” (Charmaz 2014:342). Social constructionists more readily accept that their interpretations are themselves social constructions, and as a result, they tend not to make assertions regarding their own neutrality or the generic applicability of their findings.

What does all this mean for the study of identity and authenticity? Critical realism looks upon these notions as “actual” or “durable” phenomena (Moya 2000; Porpora 2015) and tends to examine the effects of identification on subsequent behaviors and self-feelings, including experiences of (in)authenticity. Social constructionism, instead of assuming their existence, focuses on the processes in or through which identity and authenticity become important to people in situations. In the following sections, we look in more detail at how identity and authenticity have been developed within these paradigms.

Authenticity and the psychology of the true self

As noted earlier, Western philosophers have long viewed identity and authenticity as intrinsic aspects of the human self that exist independently of social processes, a position that continues to hold purchase within contemporary scholarship. Introducing the “basics of identity” for a popular audience, Heshmat (2014) adopts the view that:

Few people choose their identities. Instead, they simply internalize the values of their parents or the dominant cultures (e.g., the pursuit of materialism,

power, and appearance). Sadly, these values may not be aligned with one's authentic self and create an unfulfilling life.

This claim is representative of developmental, clinical, and psychoanalytic psychologies, in which authenticity is often conceptualized as “the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise” (Kernis and Goldman 2007:79). Critical realist assumptions facilitate the scholarly belief that, because identity and authenticity are essentially real, they can be translated into variables for use in survey and experimental research. For example, Seto and Schlegel (2018) premise that individuals' subjective sense of authenticity is positively associated with measures of well-being, and operationalize the “true self” as: “the characteristics, roles, or attributes that define who you really are – even if those characteristics are different than how you sometimes act in your daily life” (p. 313). Indeed, the extent to which individuals feel that they behave outwardly in accordance with their perceived personality traits is a typical measurement of authenticity in psychological fields.

Social psychologists interested in how authenticity manifests in interpersonal relations typically maintain critical realist assumptions regarding authenticity's internal basis, even when considering its socially mediated dimensions in research. Ryan and Ryan (2019) discuss the cultural, institutional, and interpersonal “obstacles” that may interfere with one's sense of authenticity, for instance. Other examples can be found in the literature on “authentic leadership,” which distills authenticity to “being true to oneself” (Weischer, Weibler, and Petersen 2013:478) or “being true to yourself” (Steffens et al. 2016:727). In these two studies, scholars argued that followers attributed authenticity to leaders whom they judged to be acting in ways that reflected their inner selves. Social-psychological research broadly emphasizes that authenticity is perceived and interpreted. Yet it rarely questions the underlying assumption of whether authenticity exists in the first place.

Popular literature on self-empowerment is similarly flush with the idea that people can become authentic, and in tandem, a proliferation of guidebooks supply readers with practical steps and exercises to assist in realizing one's true self. The idea that there exists an authentic core to one's being (often hidden or untapped) may inspire and encourage, but may also propel individuals “on an endless journey of selfhood, in which authenticity is always just out of reach, like the mythic apples of Tantalus” (Fordahl 2018:305). In some circumstances, the elusiveness of self-authenticity may also be problematized. Inspecting the social discourse surrounding depression, Petersen (2011) considers whether “the normative demand for self-realization” and the “expectation of lasting fulfilment” in modern society are tantamount to a “chronic stress factor” (p. 5; see also Varga 2011). Psychotherapy and clinical psychology have become powerful palliative fields that tend to characterize self-authenticity as obstructed or constrained by social institutions, cultural norms, and personal inhibitions – rendering inauthenticity a candidate for therapeutic intervention (Brazil 2016; Goldman and Kernis 2002).

Identification and authentication as social processes

Who people are is rarely concrete or settled – a point demonstrated by “the range of theories, levels of analysis, methods, and types of empirical sites employed” within identity studies (Brekhus 2015:19–20). For scholars who approach identities as distinctly social phenomena, it may first be helpful to think about identification and authentication as processes, rather than identity and authenticity as things. On this point, Altheide (2000) notes that people “exist as social beings in the midst of process. We do not ‘have’ or own an ‘identity,’ but rather, identity emerges and is acknowledged in situations; we live in the identity process” (p. 4). Williams (2019) further clarifies that while personal identities are self-referential, social identities identify the self and others simultaneously: “identities come into being as individuals announce themselves, place others, or get placed as social objects or members of social categories, all of which happens in situations” (p. 609).

Of course, we are not simply interested in the social construction of identities, but more specifically in the *authentication* work often embedded in it. As previously discussed, authenticity functions in particular ways for particular individuals and groups in particular circumstances. To understand the methods and meanings of authentication, empirical studies need to “document the particulars: which aspects of an [identity] are highlighted at which times, what stories are used to justify them, how different groups interpret them, which interests seem to benefit most (and least) from these interpretations,” and so on (Carroll 2015:7). Asking such questions can illuminate how individuals might claim or reject identities for themselves or for others through interactional, discursive, embodied, or performative mechanisms.

Identification and authentication are predicated on collectively held meanings. Many people assume to know when and how to apply identity labels such as “queer,” “black,” “immigrant,” or “nerd,” though most will also recognize that there is no single definition of any of them. Such ascriptions may appear descriptive but are often value laden, employed to praise or harm. Identities are also authenticated through highly situational or idiosyncratic sets of criteria that are “understandable only for an exclusive small circle of people” (Ventsel 2014:272), as in the cases of marginalized or non-normative subcultures. Sometimes, possessing the knowledge of relevant identity criteria or the ability to decode identity symbols authenticates one’s own insider status or credibility. Either way, identity criteria are not based on essential or objective characteristics; they are the product of social and cultural processes.

Many studies highlight the negotiation of identity authentication. For example, Greenebaum (2012) shows how “ethical vegans” differentiated themselves from “health vegans” and “plant-based eaters” who fall short of the moral criteria they put in place to establish themselves as authentic. Yet when some of those “ethical vegans” wore leather shoes, ate honey, or used pharmaceuticals, they afforded their transgressions some leeway, as reasonable concessions in a world where “pure” veganism is practically impossible. Similarly, Williams (2006) found

that, as the internet opened up new social spaces for self-identifying straightedge punks from around the world to interact with one another based on their collective rejection of alcohol, drugs, and promiscuity, other individuals found these online forums and subsequently began to claim a straightedge identity. A struggle ensued over who could be called an authentic member of the subculture, with many participants being inauthentic through labels such as “drug free,” typically by punk participants who claimed that participation in a local hardcore punk music scene was also a requirement.

Individuals may authenticate their own social identities by positioning themselves through the use of pairs of contrastive symbols. Based on interviews with hip-hop artists, McLeod (1999) identified six semantic dimensions that relied on such binaries: remaining true to oneself versus parroting mass trends, emphasizing racial blackness versus whiteness, making music independently versus “selling out,” conveying masculine versus feminine or effeminate attributes, hailing from the “inner city” streets versus the “bourgeois” suburbs, and affiliating with an “old school” tradition of hip-hop versus a commercialized mainstream version. It is not surprising that interviewees constructed a set of criteria for authentic hip-hop based largely on their own characteristics, since those criteria immediately function to ratify their self-conceptions as authentic members of hip-hop culture. In other research settings, individuals set themselves apart from a variety of inauthentic others (including imposters, outsiders, and the rest of mainstream society) by creating foil-like characterizations, like when underground country musicians define themselves as artists through the denunciation of “Nashville” (Eastman 2017) or when jazz musicians define themselves as “hip” in opposition to mainstream “square” audiences (Becker 1963).

Other studies have explored the relevance of within-group demarcation, where the use of hierarchically juxtaposed labels – “burners” and “ravers” (Austin and Fitzgerald 2018), “girls” and “dykes” (Jones 2011), “*sasaengpaen*” and “K-pop fan” (Williams and Ho 2016) – reveals additional layers of categorization practices, including the reclamation of pejorative terms. Kadir’s (2016) ethnography of the squatter movement in Amsterdam portrays within-group and between-group demarcation in combination, though the author focuses on how participants assigned inauthenticity labels to those clearly external to the group (police, anti-squatters, and yuppies) as well as to other subcultural members who squatted in a different manner (wild squatters, crusty punks, and baby punks).

While cultural group members often authenticate their own identities at the expense of others, individuals sometimes confer authenticity upon those whom they believe better or best exemplify the ideals of a categorical identity. This can be seen in Gong’s (2017) interviews with Chinese women who self-identified as fans of European football but who attributed “true” fandom to their male counterparts, some readily accepting the diminutive position of “semi-true” fan. These women’s willingness to self-identify as less than other fans bears some similarities to Satterlund’s (2012) participant observation in an American boxing gym, where the author found that (mostly white middle-class) recreational boxers often distanced themselves from (mostly black working-class) competitive

boxers, whom they recognized as “legit.” While Gong’s (2017) work highlights how female fans based their self-deprecating identifications on a single (male) ideal, Satterlund’s (2012) middle-class participants implicitly drew on two different reference groups in their self-evaluations. On the one hand, the recreational boxers sought an authentic boxing identity and experience characterized as “manly” and involving risk, but they also sought to avoid being seen by their own middle-class culture as “hyper-macho” boxers who were mentally “lower caliber.”

As all these studies demonstrate, social constructionism differs from critical realism when it comes to studying identity and authenticity. Critical realism is chiefly concerned with *explaining* how human beings behave and relate to one another – presuming that scholars *discover* knowledge – while social constructionism endeavors to *understand* their meaning-making – presuming that individuals and groups *produce* relevant knowledge (Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba 2018). Critical realist perspectives bolster the view that identity and authenticity are internal to individuals (e.g., the notion of a “true self”), while social constructionism upholds identification and authentication as distinctly social processes that are intertwined with cultures and contexts. *How* people identify and authenticate themselves and others is one of the key insights that the chapters in this book collectively explore.

Methodological considerations

Because paradigms encapsulate people’s understandings about the nature of reality, they necessarily also frame the methodological choices that scholars make when studying identity and authenticity. In this section, we organize a discussion of social constructionist methodology around three broad questions: how might researchers represent disparate ontological stances; who might researchers approach for insight on the authenticity of identities; and how or why might researchers choose and incorporate identity and/or authenticity into their work? Our interest does not rest with study findings per se, but in the productive tensions scholars may encounter during their unfolding. Paying attention to these issues is a fruitful exercise for understanding how authenticity is conceived, taken up, and utilized within the process of social constructionist research.

Representational tensions

How do scholars represent the socially constructed nature of identity and authenticity? Even if scholars adopt a social constructionist approach in their research, participants may hold more realist or essentialist conceptions. Essentialism is “the attribution of certain characteristics to everyone subsumed within a particular category (or the category itself)” in ways that “presume a homogenized and unified group” (Phillips 2010:49). While essentialist thinking is often problematic (leading to stereotyping and generalization), it is also a cognitive shorthand that develops early in life and shapes how individuals make sense of the world around them (Gelman 2004; Zerubavel 2009). Indeed, Bucholtz (2003) argues that

“the idea of authenticity *gains its force* from essentialism, for the possibility of a ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ group member relies on the belief that. . . [they] possess inherent and perhaps even inalienable characteristics criterial of membership” (p. 400, emphasis added). The goal of social constructionism is not to debunk, discredit, or dismiss individuals’ views relating to the realness of identities. To the contrary, it seeks to uncover how and why people essentialize and authenticate identities in particular sorts of ways.

Positioning authentication as a socially constructed process is not “equivalent to denying [the] existence” of identities, a misunderstanding that Best (2008:54) refers to as “vulgar constructionism.” Rather, social constructionism recognizes that constructed categories have “real” consequences, a point famously made in the Thomas theorem: “If men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928:572). We can see the political reality of authentication when Tasmanian Aboriginal groups petition to have their status as “authentic Aborigines” affirmed (Banks 2013) or when public opinion polarizes over what criteria are used to define who is or is not an authentic Turkish or American citizen (Açikel and Ateş 2011; Huber 2016). A social constructionist approach seeks to understand the processes in and through which such beliefs about authentic identities become real and functional for people in everyday life.

It is not uncommon to see social constructionists’ paradigmatic views on the nature of authenticity differ explicitly from those of research participants. In their work with self-identifying feminist youths, Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2017:786) explain:

We do not assume the existence of an essential, fixed self. . . . Instead, we are interested in understanding how participants construct feminism, the discursive resources they mobilize and the kind of feminist selves they create, inhabit, and resist.

In contrast, their interviewees unanimously pronounced authentic feminist identities rooted in their core sense of being; they described “excavating a feminist self who was always present but not known” (p. 788). Similarly, while Johnston (2013) adopts a social constructionist approach to narrative accounts, self-identifying Pagan practitioners spoke about their spiritual identity “as deriving from deep, inner desires and inclinations” (p. 559) and chronicled their conversion process as “the (re)discovery of what they *always were*” (p. 550, emphasis in original). Such examples demonstrate how research participants may conceive of the essential nature of self-authenticity, despite the researchers’ social constructionist approach.

Other research focuses on the authentication of group or category-based identities. For example, while Fox (2018) approaches the notion of authentic Jewish identity “as if in quotes each time it is employed, because it is a malleable, almost indefinable concept,” the author’s archival research into three strands of postwar Jewish summer camps reveals that educators in these settings “believed Jewish authenticity to be both definable and important for the future of Jewish life in

America" (p. 168). Here, the author adopts a social constructionist stance but works to contextualize the historical impetus for these groups' identity preservation efforts, which took on increased significance and urgency in the decades following the Holocaust. In other cases, research participants may hold some combination of essentialist and social constructionist views, as shown in Clycq's (2019) interviews with Belgians of Italian descent. Participants offered complex and sometimes contradictory understandings of their ethnic group identity, claiming at once to be "genuine Italians" (based on blood, kinship, and unique character traits), and at other times, "implicitly acknowledg[ing] that Italian identity construction is to a large extent a *construction*" (p. 373, emphasis in original). Such oscillation between essentialist and constructed modes of identification – including the inconsistent ways Italian-origin Belgians opted to identify and disidentify with the Flemish-Belgian majority, religious minorities, and *other* Italians in different ways on different occasions – provides insight into how identity authenticity may resist simple categorization and suggests that scholars should be alert to participants' essentialist and/or strategic use of identity authentication.

Informant selection

Scholars keen to understand authentication processes often begin by approaching individuals whom they identify as members of a category and checking whether the individuals themselves self-identify with the same category. Using this form of logic, Larsson (2013) embarked on a study of Swedish heavy metal fans by seeking the perspectives of individuals who referred to themselves as "hårdrockare" (hard rockers) and "who claimed to listen to or play heavy metal music, dress as a heavy metal fan or who would generally, through acts and visuals, help uphold or reproduce the heavy metal culture" (p. 99). This approach is common when researchers desire congruence between the identities they impute to study participants and the identities participants give to themselves.

When dealing with identity authentication, directly questioning key informants offers advantages and limitations. In an exploration of the social organization of a local punk community, Fox (1987) distinguishes multiple identity strata and presents them in descending order of perceived "commitment" to the scene, with "hardcore punks" occupying the most central status position, followed by "soft-core punks," then "preppie punks," and finally "spectators" and other "hangers-on" inhabiting the peripheries. A close reading of the ethnographic report reveals that participant quotations come almost exclusively from those situated in the "hardcore punk" and "softcore punk" categories, and these members then also had the privilege to define and inauthenticate the "preppie" and "spectator" categories through impressionistic (and largely negative) projections about their style, demeanor, and motivation. On the one hand, using labels and terminology introduced by participants themselves to classify the identities that circulate within a community is important because it sheds light on the politics of cultural identification. On the other hand, scholars must be cautious about taking such claims at face value without addressing their authorial nature and other issues of

positionality. While it is unsurprising that those self-identifying as insiders would situate themselves as the most authentic members of an identity category (similar to McLeod's study discussed earlier), from a social constructionist perspective, any resultant "typologies" would constitute *one* of multiple possible versions of identity authentication.

In response to such concerns, Hannerz (2015) surveys the literature on sub-cultural identities and asks, "who is *not* included in these studies and on what basis? What happens to those subcultural participants who do not fit the researcher's 'initial judgments'?" (p. 192, emphasis in original). As in the studies just described, Hannerz (2015) was also keen to speak with "insiders" who defined themselves as authentic subcultural members. Yet his interest is as much on the boundary work that occurs *among* members of the subculture as it is on the boundaries between cultural insiders and outsiders. The author's methodological technique, which he calls "reversed membership validation" (p. 9), captures the relational dynamics of authentication by purposefully approaching individuals other informants identified as inauthentic (for example, so-called "fashion punks" warned him not to bother speaking to the "stuck up political punks" and vice versa). This research prompts scholars to think carefully about the way individuals socially construct the authentic "core" as well as the need for alternative voices.

In some cases, researchers bestow authenticity upon individuals whom they believe to be members of the category under study. When Cronin, McCarthy, and Collins (2014) set out to interview insiders from the "hipster" culture, they confronted a sampling dilemma because "most members of this identity category shun the very label used to define them" (p. 8). Ultimately, the researchers selected individuals "who best expressed the hipster aesthetic – in their twenties, with sociable lifestyles, who drink alcohol, are interested in art and fashion, possess a certain look" (p. 8). While informants resisted the "hipster" moniker and classified themselves as "indie" instead, they nevertheless gave the researchers permission to categorize them using this term. Thus, participants were positioned as "reasonable" representations of the hipster identity for analytic purposes, even though they did not self-identify as such. This work highlights the negotiations that may occur between the researchers' etic definitions and members' emic perspectives, discussions which may themselves provide insight into the unexpected connotations individuals hold and attach to various identity labels.

The impetus behind identity inquiries may also stem from the researcher's own participation within a certain cultural field. Bickerdike (2014) credits personal history as a music fan and extensive experience in the music industry as antecedents of her study of rock idol fan culture and its pilgrimage sites. Hughey (2008) was similarly a longstanding contributor to the types of college fraternity internet forums he chose to study and contends that "much can be gleaned from scholars who *start where they are* by grounding their fieldwork in their own interests and experiences" (p. 536–537, emphasis in original). Member-researchers may benefit from increased access and ability to decipher in-group identity symbols and meanings (Leblanc 1999; Force 2009; Dupont 2020), but as Hodkinson (2005) points out, starting from the insider position may also limit the researcher to

their own preconceptions, including taken-for-granted modes of identification. To the fullest extent possible, social constructionist approaches advocate reflexivity and urge scholars “to acknowledge their own interpretative work as they analyze the social worlds they are researching and to recognize that in making sense of an actor’s sense making, they impose a second level of interpretation” (Fox 2008:661).

Concept selection

Finally, it is pertinent to consider how identity and authenticity come to figure as relevant concepts within the research process in the first place. Is the project designed with these concepts in mind or does their relevance emerge inductively over time? Does the researcher inquire about them directly or favor a more naturalistic approach?

In some cases, authenticity is pursued as an explicit research interest, intended from the outset as a meaningful concept to describe how individuals frame personal or social identification. Jaimangal-Jones (2018) explores how magazines and online media outlets report and represent the status and artistic credibility of electronic dance DJs while Kytölä and Westinen (2015) show how a celebrity’s communication style on social media affects audiences’ normative assessments of their online persona and hip-hop devotion. In both examples, the researchers were clearly interested in identification and authentication as discursive practices and thus planned how they would conceive, measure, and analyze them. Characteristic of many sociolinguistic approaches to identity and authenticity, the authors focus more on the organization of communication than on the cultural or cognitive structures that underlie it. In other cases, identity and authenticity may be concepts that emerge inductively during the research process. Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2017) originally intended to examine young people’s understandings of gender equality and sexism but were “struck by the prominence of ‘authenticity talk’” when reading transcripts. Over time, identity authenticity proved to be a “pivotal” concept; “it was not, however, a concept that [they] anticipated working with in advance of interviews – or even, in fact, in advance of coding the interview transcripts” (p. 786–787). Likewise, Perry’s (2015) focus groups with students at a non-uniformed secondary school initially aimed to investigate the significance of clothing for self-conceptions, however the author soon “encountered the exalted status that authenticity held for the students” (p. 915). Unlike the other studies just described (where a marked identity was already salient), the youths in Perry’s (2015) study were purposely selected because they expressed no particular group affiliation, yet authenticity nevertheless arose as an important mode of identification. These studies, both of which began with a unique analytical trajectory in mind, underscore the relevance and ubiquity of authenticity within identity discourses.

Regardless of whether the authenticity of identity is an explicit research interest, scholars may or may not inquire about such topics directly – it depends on other methodological considerations. Miller and Benkwitz (2016) sought to

document the discursive methods through which UK-based European football fans apply notions of authentic fan identity. Their interviews were unstructured and began with a broad, open-ended question (“So, tell me about your team?”) intended “to elicit a largely unprompted account of the matters at hand” (p. 43). This is because the researchers wanted a natural unfolding of talk that would produce emic perspectives on being a fan. Gong (2017) was also interested in the discursive construction of authentic European football fan identities. However, the author decided to directly question participants about “what qualities . . . they think are crucial to being ‘true fans’” and “who can be considered as ‘fake fans’” because a wealth of previous literature had established authenticity as a recurring motif (p. 825).

In this section we have raised some methodological considerations with regard to the study of identity authentication. As our review suggests, researchers may confront considerable slippage between their own and members’ understandings of identity, particularly in terms of authenticity’s presumed essential versus constructed characteristics. These identification and authentication processes are further complexified because individuals may “actively identify across multiple membership categories, formal organizations, and informal networks simultaneously” (Williams 2019:611, see also Brekhus 2015). Social constructionists commonly seek out local understandings of these processes and strive to represent them in emically valid ways. To avoid unintentionally lopsided accounts, researchers should be aware of where their data come from and specify how such accounts represent a particular subjective or cultural perspective. Lastly, while social constructionist research is “*pluralist* in character” and “mutual openness prevails,” scholars should take care to choose data collection and analysis strategies that fit with their own empirical and theoretical questions (Gergen 2019:264, emphasis in original).

Volume outline

The chapters that follow provide exemplars of contemporary research on identity and authenticity, with significant diversity among them in terms of the identities, cultural milieu, geographic settings, disciplinary traditions, and methodological approaches considered. Contributors introduce readers to a number of established and emerging identity groups from sites around the world, from yogis and punks to fire dancers and social media influencers. Meanwhile, their conceptual work stretches from the micro-analytic to the ethno-national as authors employ a variety of qualitative methods including ethnographic fieldwork, interviewing, and the collection and analysis of naturally-occurring interactions. Several of the chapters look directly at identification and authentication while others focus on the social and cultural backdrops that structure these practices – what unites them is the adoption of social constructionist sensibilities.

Much of the work on identity and authenticity comes from qualitative research on interpersonal or intergroup contexts, and the chapters in Section 1 continue in this tradition. Informed by ethnographic fieldnotes, interviews, and

naturally-occurring communication, the chapters deal with the socially constructed criteria through which people manage their own and evaluate others' identity and authenticity. On what criteria are individuals' identities judged to be authentic or inauthentic? Chapters 2 and 3 consider this question in terms of contemporary healthy lifestyle cultures. In Chapter 2, Erin F. Johnston asks whether anyone who practices yoga may claim the yogi identity. Based on a 15-month ethnography at a US-based Integral Yoga studio, Johnston argues that practitioners are socialized to associate authenticity first with a set of practice-based criteria – foregrounding its spiritual and philosophical tenets, adopting a serious and disciplined approach, exhibiting growth in one's physical and postural capabilities – and second with a particular style of identity management in which their yogi identities are at once high in salience and personal importance (enacted consistently and embraced as central to their sense of self), yet low in density and dominance (enacted in moderation and without overshadowing other aspects of the self).

Whereas Johnston studies authentication from the perspective of identity practitioners, Chapter 3 looks at the role audiences play in the production and management of such criteria. While previous research suggests that lifestyle bloggers craft authentic online personas to maintain and increase numbers of subscribers, Alexandra Rodney investigates how Canadian and American blog readers attribute authenticity to the healthy living bloggers they follow online. To do this, Rodney shows how readers socially construct the “healthy everywoman” identity and evaluate bloggers based on the content and extent of their self-disclosures as well as through three embodied criteria – eating styles, exercise habits, and body size. Here, Rodney depicts the idealization of the middle ground, as readers appreciate and reward (through continued readership) healthy living bloggers who they perceive as avoiding extreme measures. The author notes how such “calibrated” performances can be understood through a gendered lens that largely reflects and authenticates white, middle-class perspectives on contemporary femininity.

The next two chapters move from the context of health to the context of mobility. Authenticity has been a recurring concept in tourism studies, and in Chapter 4, Kaylan C. Schwarz illustrates how it figures within one specialized style of alternative travel. Her interview data, from multiple cohorts of UK-based international volunteers, allow her to examine how participants employ authenticity within their personal travel narratives as they describe their encounters with the “real Kenya.” Schwarz finds that participants authenticate their own identities through place-based mechanisms, by strategically highlighting the remoteness of the destination, their engagement in “everyday” Kenyan life, and their intimate interactions with local people. She also develops the concept of “dis-identification” to show how participants make within-group and between-group demarcations, distancing themselves from tourists as well as other types of international volunteers. This chapter thus centers on the “non-identities” participants take up to avoid being associated with certain unamiable aspects of Western mobility.

Chapter 5 also connects identity authentication to mobility, though with increased attention to the dynamics of social class and ethnicity. Tiffany Pollack and Bussakorn Binson look at how two generations of Thai and *farang* (Western) fire dancers struggle to forge a collective identity in a globalizing economy where its popularity as a tourist commodity has resulted in increased competition among practitioners, including between native Thais and Burmese migrants, who are willing to work for less money. While fire dancing is itself a cultural import rather than a historically Thai practice, dancers have nevertheless engaged in practices of authentication, creating hierarchical categories that partition dancers-as-artists from non-artistic dancers who perform for income. This is not a simple insider-outsider dichotomy; the authors identify a series of discursive labels such as “jugglers,” “performers,” “artists,” and “beach boys” to describe internal hierarchies within the scene. Fire dance practitioners use these labels inconsistently but also strategically, as they work to secure their own positions as skilled laborers while constructing their authenticity as artists. In the context of increased labor migration and tourist industry commoditization, the authors consider the economic and ethno-national forces that appear to shape how fire dancers relationally assess their own and others’ motivations, professional practices, and access to resources.

Chapters 6 and 7 deal with authenticity as it relates to subcultural identities. In Chapter 6, Philip G. Lewin builds on his earlier ethnographic work with US-based self-identifying punks and personal participation within the scene to argue not only that punk subculture supports narratives of self-authenticity (see Lewin and Williams 2009), but also that such accounts establish subcultural criteria through which punks judge the relative value and status of themselves and other members. Relying on in-depth interview data, he analyzes how narratives of marginality, criticality, and indifference to social judgment help young white punks differentiate themselves from bourgeois white culture, which they see as incompatible with their own social experiences.

In Chapter 7, Sue Widdicombe and Yarong Xie also draw on data from subculturalists, but instead of relying on in-depth interviews from larger ethnographic projects, their chapter inspects naturally occurring interactions. Applying a conversation analytic approach, the authors review data from older subcultural studies to highlight the discursive and linguistic strategies that individuals use to establish authentic identities. In “discursive psychology,” analyzing the identity work of individuals within specific interactional moments requires looking beyond the topics or content of their talk and instead focusing on the kinds of social actions through which identity and authenticity become situationally significant (see also Roulston 2019). Here, the authors specifically examine instances in which individuals attempt to avoid categorical ascription. Whereas most other chapters in this volume explore how individuals identify themselves as “real” members of marked identity groups, Widdicombe and Xie show how individuals sometimes define themselves as authentic by rejecting such memberships.

Where else might discourses on identity and authenticity be circulating in contemporary social life? Section 2 comprises three chapters, each of which offers an answer to this question by moving beyond traditional sites of interpersonal

interaction. Together, they represent the “growing interest in studying identity in all its complexity and multidimensionality, beyond analyzing the most sub-culturally dominant and visible expressions of group identity and authenticity” (Brekhus 2015:127). With a view toward conceptual expansion, these chapters offer alternative takes on how scholarship might study identity and authenticity.

In Chapter 8, J. Patrick Williams and Athena Ming Gui Khoo draw attention to the problematic qualities associated with the emerging “influencer” identity. The authors are interested in how social media content creators themselves negotiate the boundaries between who is and isn’t a “real” influencer. Using a case study approach, they identify and analyze a video by Singaporean content creator Dee Kosh, who is well-known for publishing humorous, cheeky, and critical commentaries on Singapore popular culture. Rather than studying the interactions among self-identifying influencers, and rather than interviewing their audiences, the authors offer a unique reading of the authentication work achieved through video design and content. Drawing from the humanities literature on parody, the authors conceive of Dee Kosh’s video as an ironic cultural production that criticizes aspects of influencer culture while simultaneously attempting to increase his own cultural capital as an influencer. To achieve this, he pits himself as an authentic influencer against an excessively vain and incongruously vapid character foil. As Williams and Khoo suggest, the dramatized scenario provides analytic insight into the cognitive ideal-typifications of “real” and “fake” influencers, as well as into the role that parody plays in contemporary authenticity work.

Chapter 9, by Yuji Sone, reflects on the authenticity of nonhuman robot identities in Japanese culture. Despite the recent inundation of AI technologies in everyday life such as Apple’s Siri or Amazon’s Alexa, humanoid robots are typically identified in Western discourse as human “copies,” a term that is antonymous with originality and thus authenticity. In Japanese culture, however, robots inhabit their own ontological category – one based on artificiality, but paradoxically also on liveliness – and thus have their own hybrid social identity. Citing multiple historical and contemporary popular culture examples, Sone shows how the Japanese concepts of *kawaii* (“cute”) and *kyara* (“a powerful symbol”) sit alongside the ubiquity of manga and anime to form parts of the cultural structure that support Japanese conceptions of authentic humanoid robots. Indeed, in this cultural setting, it is the robot’s *artificiality* that is often embraced and extolled. The chapter pushes readers to reflect on the Western cultural assumptions that underlie common understandings of real versus fake.

Finally, Ian McGonigle’s study in Chapter 10 is another important example of just how significant identity and authenticity discourses are today. Drawing on his training in both biochemistry and anthropology, McGonigle takes the discussion of authentic identity simultaneously into the molecular realm of genomic research on the one hand and to the macro-level of ethno-nationalism and regional politics on the other. Adopting an explicitly Science and Technology Studies approach, he analyzes data from a multi-year ethnography to document how biomedical research in Qatar is constructing an imagined, authentic ethno-national identity. This identity is to a large extent rooted at the genomic level

(where realist, objective definitions of reality pervade), though he also shows how authentic Qatarianness is disseminated through public information and education projects. The elephant in the room, so to speak, is the potential for such projects to take social and cultural understandings of identity toward more fixed and immutable understandings. Unlike politicized examples of such research (Azoulay 2003; Schramm, Skinner, and Rottenburg 2012), the chapter does not aim to directly interrogate the possible intent underlying these programs, though the findings suggest benign, if not benevolent, reasons aimed at solving contemporary health issues among the Qatari population.

* * *

In this chapter we have introduced a social constructionist conceptualization of identity and authenticity. We have disambiguated some key ontological premises, building up and upon an extensive review of the relevant literature. We have also offered a reflexive consideration of the methodological approaches adopted when studying identity and authenticity and the benefits, challenges, and insights that unfold from researchers' choices. Finally, we have provided a synthetic overview of the individual chapters that make up the rest of this volume. When read together, these chapters illustrate a rich constellation of cultural and geographic settings in which identity and authenticity are made meaningful in everyday life. They also collectively reveal not only the importance of these concepts as interpretive and evaluative frameworks, but the diversity of approaches through which authentic identities may be approached and studied.

Notes

- 1 We note hope for a "true" definition of authenticity with irony. Social constructionism highlights that there is no such thing, beyond that which people come to agree upon.
- 2 We present critical realism and social constructionism as separate ontologies in order to assist the reader in seeing some of the key differences; however, we recognize that both exist along a philosophical continuum and many scholars adopt them non-dogmatically.

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