Belonging and the many faces of social change

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Outline

• Belonging – what and why
• Different modes/sources of belonging
• The politics of belonging
Belonging: What and why
How does social change impact the self?

• The answer to this question depends partly on how self and society are defined
  – ‘to understand them [individuals and society] it is necessary to give up thinking in terms of single, isolated substances and to start thinking in terms of relationships and functions’ (Elias, 1991: 19)

• A relational approach to the self – the self as relationship (Elias, 1991)
  – We develop a sense of self in relationships (Mead, Cooley, Wiley, Gergen…)
  – Cooley’s (1902) ‘looking glass self’ – could be (metaphorically) extended to place (Tilley, 1994; Leach, 2002)

• A relational approach to society (Elias, 1991; Simmel, 1950)
  – Social reality (structures) in the making (Garfinkel, 1967)
  – Fixing in space and language relational forms and activities of the past (Burkitt, 2004)
  – Relations between individuals (and their relationship to more abstract ‘community’ and ‘culture’ as well their material surroundings)
What is belonging?

• ‘a sense of ease or accord with who we are in-ourselves’ and ‘a sense of accord with the various physical and social contexts in which our lives are lived out’ (Miller, 2003: 220)

• Inherently relational -- ‘a self in connection’ (Game, 2001: 228)

• The need to belong? (Cooley, 1902; Baumeister & Leary, 1995)
  – Some evidence that belonging correlates with mental and physical health (Young et al., 2004; Krause & Wulff, 2005)

• Universal?
  ‘it is impossible not to belong to social groups, relations, or culture’ (Calhoun, 2003: 536)

• Inclusion and exclusion
  – ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ distinctions (Weeks, 1991; Hall, 1996; Christensen, 2009; Meinhof & Galasiński, 2005; Cohen, 1982)
Why belonging?

- Fundamental aspect of the self
  ‘Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others’ (Weeks, 1990: 88)
- A sense of (not) belonging is one way in which the relationship between self and society manifests itself
  - A sense of (dis)ease and (dis)identification with oneself and one’s social, relational and material surroundings
- A person-centred way of examining this relationship between self and society (Smart, 2007)
- A multidimensional experience that offers a window into the different levels at which social change becomes apparent in people’s lives
  - Cultural
  - Relational
  - Material
The politics of belonging
Belonging and power relations

- Sense of belonging is to an extent socially structured
  - ‘Habitus’, ‘field’, ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu)
- Belonging allows us to view the *intersubjective* nature of habitus – a negotiated accomplishment, not a given in any situation (cf. Bottero, 2010)
- Belonging and power are closely related
  - Taking part in the reflexive arguments of a society ‘about what should be argued about, and why’ (Shotter, 1993: 193)
  - Who has the power to define who belongs? (Weedon, 2004; Wemyss, 2006)
- Distinction between belonging as an individual feeling and the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011)
The politics of belonging

• Belonging is an act claim-making for space and for recognition (Bell, 1999; Scheibelhofer, 2007; Miller, 2003)
• Mutual recognition a precondition for the ability to exercise capacities of personhood (Honneth, 1995[1992])
  – The ‘moral grammar’ of conflicts over recognition
  – Legal recognition of social relations of recognition
• The exercise of power – political projects of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2011)
  – Maintenance and reproduction of boundaries of belonging, but also contestation, challenge and resistance
  – Hierarchies of belonging (Wemyss, 2006)
• The affective dimension: disrespect, disgust, contempt -- suffering (e.g. Tyler, 2008)
• Role of nation states and politicians (official sphere) but also everyday interactions (unofficial sphere)
Belonging under threat

- Belonging tends to become politicized when under threat (Yuval-Davis, 2011)
- Social, political and economic powers have become ‘more diffused, decentred and desubjectified’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 19)
- Executive powers have strengthened at the expense of legislative branches of the state (and EU)
  - Re EU, World Bank, WTO and TNCs
  - Citizens have little influence on national and regional executive powers
- Interests of citizens pitted against the interests of the global financial market
- As a result, ‘many people feel that their entitlements as citizens who belong are under threat’ (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 34-5)
  - If collective, can lead to collective action (Honneth, 1995[1992])
Different modes/sources of belonging
Relational
- People
- From friends & family to strangers & acquaintances

Cultural/symbolic
- Language, practices/tradition
- Food, clothing, …
- Abstract groupings/’imagined communities’ (e.g. nationhood)

Material/embodied
- Body
- Space/place
- Material objects
Relational belongings

• The human need for stimulus and company (Cooley, 1902)

• More important than ‘identity’ or ‘citizenship’?
  ‘People tend to care rather more about the people they love than the definition of who exactly they are.’ (Miller, 2010: 125)

• People who are integrated in a social network are likely to experience a higher sense of meaning in life (Krause & Wulff, 2005: 82).

• Must not forget the social patterning of our relationships (McPherson et al., 2001)

• Interactions with acquaintances and strangers (Morgan, 2009; Lofland, 1998)
  – Can offer a sense of security and familiarity – or insecurity
  – Help determine the ‘feel’ of a place

• Impact of social change on our relational networks
Cultural belongings

- Culture, social category, ideal type, imagined community, ....
- Gender, ethnicity, religion, social class, ... nationality
- Role of cultural products (e.g. language, food, clothing)
- Complex mixtures of belonging and unbelonging (Christensen, 2009)
- Cultures are bounded (Cohen, 1982) – ‘Us’ vs ‘Them’
- ‘The way we are’ is the result of a process of remembering and forgetting (Williams, 1977; Sargin, 2004) – emergence of dominant narratives about a shared past, present and projected future
- Who is included/excluded e.g. from ‘European identity’ (Weedon, 2004; Wemyss, 2006)
- Ability to communicate an ‘acceptable’ self (Goffman; Mills, 1940; May, 2008)
Embodied belongings

- Belonging entails embodiment or physical closeness
  - Physical touch in intimate relationships
  - Singing national anthems, eating, wearing clothing, ...
  - Embodied experience of space and objects

- Interconnectedness
  ... the sensory is tangled with the social, cultural and political and it is unhelpful to separate the sensory from what we might think of as more abstracted sociological categories, variables or experiences, like social class, ethnicity and gender. The sensory is likely to be ‘classed’, ‘gendered’ and so on, and conversely we need better understandings of the ways in which class, gender and the like are themselves sensory. (Mason & Davies, 2009: 601)
Sensory belongings as constituting the self and society

• The sensory nature of our connections with the world – bodily presence and bodily awareness (Tilley, 1994)
  – Sensory geographies (Rodaway, 1994) or sensescapes (Degen, 2008)
  – Socio-cultural and relational shaping of our perception

• ‘Emplaced’ selves
  – Identity bound up with place; projecting/introjecting (Tilley, 1994; Leach, 2002; Savage et al., 2005; Edwards, 2000 and more)

• Material objects constituting our sense of self, e.g. clothing (Miller, 2010)
To conclude

- Belonging – a window into social change
- The politics of belonging – power and contestations of
- Complex belongings – the many faces of social change
References

• *Schütz, Alfred (1962)*


