



# Stretching Selves Through Empathy: the Role of Collective and Official Memories

Richard Ned Lebow<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 10 November 2018  
© The Author(s) 2018

## Abstract

Our identities consist of multiple identifications derived from roles, affiliations, and biographies, whose contents are shaped and reshaped as social resources. Nationalists and fundamentalists encourage us to construct vertical identities that emphasize the nationality of religion at the expense of other identifications. I explore mechanisms—including memorialization of collective memory—that can encourage us to reject horizontal identities in favor of vertical ones that emphasize our multiplicity and what we share with others in stigmatized groups.

**Keywords** Ethnic and national conflict · Identity · Conflict resolution · Tolerance · Solidarity · Self-fashioning

The contributors to this special issue share a commitment to overcoming prejudice, stereotypes, and the dehumanizing and acts to which they lead or offer support. They assume that official commemoration and memorialization have the potential to achieve, or at least facilitate, these positive ends. I think it is useful in this concluding essay to say something about the mechanisms that might be responsible for such a transformation. I believe they are very much connected to our conceptions of ourselves—what is commonly called identity. Official commemoration and memorialization must break down rigid constructions of “us” and “them” and encourage people to recognize what they share with others who have previously been stigmatized. They can do this at the group, national, or international levels. I will argue, contra the conventional wisdom, that stretching the circle of favored treatment to others at any level of aggregation is likely to have positive benefits at other levels.

Democracy requires tolerance and respect for other citizens no matter how different we perceive them to be. We must include them in the circle of those we think worthy of the same respect, benefits, and opportunities we claim for ourselves. This is best achieved by recognition that we are multiple, not single selves, and share much in common with other people—or

---

✉ Richard Ned Lebow  
richard.lebow@kcl.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Department of War Studies, King’s College London, London WC2R2LS, UK

other nations—who have been othered or demonized. Whatever features or beliefs, nationalists, racists, or religious fundamentalists emphasize to distinguish us from others only captures—if it does at all—some of our characteristics or beliefs. We are almost certain to share other characteristics or beliefs with the people or groups they are trying to demonize. Recognition of this social truth, and with it, our similarity with others is the best form of inoculation against stereotyping and prejudice. Official and collective memory in the form of commemoration and memorialization has the potential to build barriers between us and “others” or to break them down. It can strengthen our sense of vertical identity by emphasizing single identities and fostering negative views of others, or it can encourage horizontal identities by stressing our multiplicity and what we have in common with others and by doing so encourage empathy and respect for them.

## Multiple Selves

My starting point is identity. I challenge two myths about identity: that we have one, and that its construction and maintenance depend on distancing ourselves from others by fostering negative images of them.

The concept of identity has no ontological existence. Work in psychology and analytical philosophy calls personhood into question (Lebow 2012 ch. 1 for review on this literature). At best, a claim can be made for the so-called minimal self. We are, and always have been, beings with consciousness, but a consciousness that lacks continuity and consistency beyond the illusions we develop about ourselves. In lieu of thinking of identities, we should recognize that we are a composite of shifting, labile, multiple identifications. Some of these identifications are reinforcing and others cross-cutting. They derive largely from our affiliations, roles, relationship to our bodies, and our history. Roles and affiliations are central to our professional and emotional lives. They help define who we are in our eyes and those of others. Bodies, and gender in particular, are another important source of identification for most people, but so too are other physical attributes and skills, or the lack of them. Autobiographies are self-constructed but often on the basis of social cues and psychological needs. They may include the histories of families, groups, and nations to which we are attached. Autobiographies are the source of claims of continuity and uniqueness, are notoriously inaccurate, and frequently reworked in response to psychological and social needs (Lebow 2012).

Our various identifications rise and fall over time in their relative importance. This hierarchy is also affected by context and priming. The substance of these identifications is malleable and is invariably altered in response to external developments and internal needs. We tend to deny these changes and the extent to which many of our identifications are incompatible, in conflict, in generate different behavioral imperatives. We fear internal incoherence, have a need to consistency and continuity, and are thus liable to illusions fostered by ourselves and others. We are particularly susceptible to pleas to make certain kinds of group associations central to our identity and a source of continuity when they promise social integration and high self-esteem.

## Negative Others

Kant and Hegel argue that identities can only be constructed against negative “others,” although both envisage this differentiation as only a first step. Kant imagines a time when

people and nations can respond positively to one another and move away from rivalry by developing dialectical egos capable of recognizing and overcoming internal and external differences and thus able to recognize others without the kind of differentiation association with hostility. Hegel makes a parallel argument in his treatment of the master-slave relationship. With some important exceptions, many modern students of identity, drawing superficially on these thinkers, recognize only one kind of integration: affiliation and bonding with others in the same family, group, nationality, state, or religion.

Psychological research indicates that the creation of “others” and negative stereotypes about them are not necessary for group formation and solidarity. Such images are a special case and most likely to develop when groups compete for scarce resources (Mansbridge 2001; Feshbach in L. Huesmann 1994). This understanding of identity is shared in part by psychiatrists who study child development. Freud maintained that the ego emerges as a consequence of identification with others, and that the self arises from the resulting tensions within the child. Contemporary psychiatrists describe identity formation as biologically programmed and manifested early in life when infants struggle to understand themselves as beings in their own right distinct from parents and other caregivers (Mahler 1968; Mahler et al. 1973; Nelson 2008; Rochat 2011). Such recognition usually develops by the age of four (Martin and Barresi 2000; Bermudez et al. 1995; Gallup et al. 2011). Robust, confident identities are most likely in families where a sense of self develops in the context of positive feelings toward other family members and caregivers (Mahler 1968; Bird & Reese in Sani 2008; Fivush & Duke in Sani 2008).

Identity formation is best understood as a dialectical process in which we become ourselves by drawing closer to others while at the same time separating from them. At every level of social aggregation identity formation should be studied in the context of relationships, not as an isolated individual or group phenomenon. Other actors provide positive and negative role models as well as feedback about our behavior, all of which is essential to how individuals, institutions and states shape, maintain, and revise their sense of self.

## Overcoming Boundaries

Nationalists, racists, and others with exclusionary agendas take social and physical boundaries seriously and are keen to distinguish “their kind” of people from other less desirable other kinds. Nick Haslam suggests that we can dehumanize others in two ways: we can see them as less intelligent or less complex in their emotions. The former deprives them of culture, refinement, morality, and nationality, making them childlike and underdeveloped. The latter attributes coldness, rigidity, and passivity to them, making them robot-like (Haslam 2006). In *White Britain and Black Ireland*, I examine how both strategies were used to justify colonialism (Lebow 1976). In the 1840s, the decade in which racist stereotypes began to be applied to the Irish, *Punch* characterized them in text and cartoons as the missing link between the gorilla and the Negro (*Punch* 1849). Other racists sought to minimize the distinctions between Africans and apes, while maximizing those between Africans and Europeans (Fryer 1984 for a good review of the English literature on Africans).

There are sound psychological and philosophical reasons for rethinking our commitment to markers and boundaries. Such a novel approach to identity starts with the recognition, noted above, that constructing the self requires integration as well as separation. The central psychological dynamic of integration is empathy, defined as the ability to see ourselves through the eyes of others. From this outside perspective, we come to appreciate our

interlocutors as ontological equals and recognize that our understandings of justice are parochial. Aristotle argues that reason and affect combine to make us more respectful of others, more amenable to their points of view and more willing to compromise and accommodate (Aristotle 1984).

In modern times, Adam Smith makes a similar argument with his emphasis on sympathy. He reasons that “we have no immediate experience of what other men feel” so we need to exercise our imaginations to conceive of how “we ourselves should feel in the like situation.” Sympathy is a cognitive process, but also an emotional one because we must understand how someone feels, not only what they may think. According to Smith, empathy is almost like entering another’s body (Smith 1976). What these and other formulations have in common is the recognition that ability to experience the pain and pleasure of others, and our desire to have them experience ours, keeps us from being entirely selfish. Feelings are responsible for ethics because they provide the incentive to understand and evaluate our behavior as others see and experience it (Smith 1976). The reverse is probably also true. Hannah Arendt maintains that the absence of *philia*, and a resulting inability to see the world through the eyes of other people, is what made Adolf Eichmann into “one of the greatest criminals” of the twentieth century (Arendt 1964). Rousseau makes a somewhat similar point in *Emile*, where he reasons that a person who entered the world as an adult, without all the benefit of prior friendships and the feelings and reflection they encourage, would be a self-centered imbecile (Rousseau 1979).

I understand empathy as a two-way street. For us to put ourselves in the minds and bodies of others, we must feel that others can want to do the same with us. Empathy is different from sympathy, which we routinely feel toward animals and people, including those in comas who cannot reciprocate our feelings. As Plato understood, empathy is a product of friendship, and this is based on communication. Not all communication must be verbal, and we have many stories of friendships among people—even erstwhile adversaries—who share no common language. *Hell in the Pacific*, a 1968 movie starring Toshiro Mifune and Lee Marvin as shipwrecked Japanese naval captain and downed American aviator, makes this point nicely. Deeper friendships require more meaningful communication, and for this reason, language or telepathy is essential. The blind Helen Keller characterizes her mind and sense of self as undeveloped, and her relationships with people superficial, until she could communicate with them via symbols (Keller 1903; Mead 1962).

There is much to be gained from pursuing a “Schengen” approach to social relations that removes, or at least eases, the markers and boundaries we have erected to distinguish us from others. Open psychological borders make it easier to extend our moral circle to include even people Onora O’Neill describes as “distant strangers” (O’Neill 1996, 2000). There is undeniable movement in this direction in Western culture, more pronounced—and accordingly, more challenged—in the twentieth century. It has received a big boost from anthropology, biology, and sociology, which indicate common human origins and that all meaningful differences among people are social in nature. In international relations, the Eurocentric system has given way to an international one in which non-Western, non-Christian actors have gained legal as well as de facto equality. As Jens Bartelson observes, the political imaginary has increasingly raised the idea of a global community as a counter and offset to national ones (Bartelson 2009). Phil Cerny suggests that structural changes have rendered the distinction between international relations and domestic politics all but meaningless. The sovereign state has not withered away, but its borders have become increasingly porous and less significant as political, economic, and social relations extend beyond them and are better described as a set of

overlapping and expanding webs of relationships and identities (Cerny 2010). Future historians may look back upon the most fundamental conflict of the twentieth century as between those advocating greater inclusion and those demanding for greater exclusion. The political pendulum has swung back and forth between these goals, and at the moment seems to be moving in the direction of those favoring exclusion. Both sides of this debate represent different responses to modernity.

Molly Cochran, Fiona Robinson, Mervyn Frost, and Michael Walzer contend that anchoring ethics in local or national cultures does not preclude attempts to construct ethical systems with global implications (Cochran 1999; Frost 1996; Walzer 1994). There is, however, an unavoidable tension between the inclusiveness of a universalist, impartialist stance, and the commitment to “us” over “others” inevitably associated with communitarianism. Toni Erskine observes that cosmopolitanism and communitarianism involve different trade-offs between feasibility and inclusiveness (Brown 1992; Erskine 2008). Universalist strategies create a global “sphere of equal moral standing” but prove difficult to implement. People are less willing to sacrifice for those they do not consider kith and kin. For this reason, communitarian strategies have greater intuitive appeal, but necessarily narrow the circle of moral standing. They also facilitate the stereotyping of outsiders (Benhabib 1992).

In recent years, an attempt has been made to devise formulations that build on local loyalties but extend the circle of moral standing beyond them. They maintain that we can develop and retain loyalties to both *polis* and *cosmopolis* (Walzer 1983; Linklater 1990). In his constitutive theory of individuality, Mervyn Frost argues that a person is constituted as an ethical self by a state, but the state is constituted by the system of states, and citizens and states alike have responsibilities to others (Frost 1996). Toni Erskine elaborates the concept of “embedded cosmopolitanism,” also based on the premise that community membership is morally constitutive. Various communities transcend territorial borders, indeed, make them fuzzy, indefinite, overlapping, or dispersed. Such interpenetration provides the basis for bridging conventional boundaries and widening ethical horizons (Erskine 2008).

My argument sits nicely with these more syncretic approaches, especially the embedded cosmopolitanism of Erskine. Multiple identifications give rise to multiple identities. Such framings of identity sensitize us to a diversity of ethical perspectives and the communities in which they are anchored. Social, religious, professional, regional, athletic, and other identifications that cross individual, group, and national boundaries encourage us to question the value and legitimacy of these boundaries. They should also make us more susceptible to arguments that other members of these diverse communities should be incorporated into our moral sphere. This process is as much emotional as cognitive, as it rests on the personal ties we create with such people, which makes it easier, if not natural, to see them as friends and ontological equals. In effect, the tensions generated by multiple identities can be a source of angst but also of possible integration. They provide the emotional and cognitive foundations for extending our moral sphere, and by doing so, of subsuming our diverse identifications into a more universal one.

Put another way, our multiple, inconsistent, labile, and evolutionary selves have the potential to provide a new and critical perspective on the traditional binary between ourselves and others. Recognition of our own multiplicity and conflicts among identification can lead to the recognition that the self-other dichotomy lies at least as much within us as it does between us and others. Whichever self-identification(s) we highlight at any moment, of necessity, relegate are remaining identifications to the status of “others.” As the hierarchy of identifications vacillates in the short-term and evolves in the medium and longer terms, we have every incentive to respect these alter egos and to think of them as part of our identity. Recognition of

the need to include some of our own “others” as part of ourselves provides the foundation for extending this process to other actors. The more we think about the nature of our selves, the more we are likely to realize that other people and collectivities resemble us in having multiple, fragmented identities. They too contain alter and ego within themselves in the form diverse identifications, some of which are central to them at any given moment and others peripheral.

Mutual incoherence is an important communality that might help to bridge other differences. Toward this end, it must be theorized and widely accepted as a social reality. In the process, people would almost certainly discover that they share self-identifications with other actors. These identifications arise, of course, from their roles and affiliations. They provide the basis for communication, friendship, and empathy, and as a result, the stretching of our horizons to include other actors within the circles of memberships that we think of as defining ourselves.

## Conclusion

The theme of this special issue is administration of memory. The shared assumption among the contributors is that openness of the exhibits of this can arouse emotions, encourage reflection, and foster empathy. In doing so, I have argued, they stretch identities to include others in the same circle as oneself and help to overcome prejudice. This is most likely to happen, I suggest, when it prompts people to develop empathy for others and to some degree break free of vertical identifications that emphasize the virtues of the group to which they belong and the alleged negative attributes of those characterized as “others.”

This process can be done by individuals in isolation but is far more likely to happen—and have more lasting effects—if done as part of a group. Better still if the group has a pre-existing identity and a strong sense of solidarity. In these conditions, individual efforts to process information and feelings can be encouraged and receive reinforcement. I visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. shortly after it opened in 1993. As I went through the exhibits, I came upon a group of men talking softly in southern accents. I followed them anxiously to learn how they were responding to the horrors of Shoah and then chatted with them afterwards. They were retired postal workers from North Carolina, on holiday in Washington, and one of them had insisted that they include the Museum on their itinerary. They were horrified by what they saw and made connections between the German treatment of the Jews and slavery in the South. They emerged from the Museum more committed to support civil rights for African-Americans.

Groups also have the potential to dampen empathy and identity change, especially if dominant members oppose it and discipline or stigmatize those who question exclusive narratives. For administration of memory to have positive effects, its narrative is only the starting point. Those who design and run such exhibits or commemorations must pay equal attention to the social setting of people exposed to or participating in them.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

## References

- Arendt, H. (1964). *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil*. New York: Viking.
- Aristotle (1984). The complete works of Aristotle. In J. Barnes (Ed.), vol. 1. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bartelson, J. (2009). *Visions of world community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Benhabib, S. (1992). *Situating the self: gender, community and postmodern in contemporary ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bermudez, J. L., Marcel, A., & Naomi, E. (Eds.). (1995). *The body and the self*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Bird, A., & Reese, E. (2008). Autobiographical memory in childhood and the development of a continuous self. In F. Sani (Ed.), *Self continuity* (pp. 43–54). New York: Psychology Press.
- Brown, C. (1992). *International relations theory: new normative approaches*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Cerny, P. G. (2010). *Rethinking world politics: a theory of transnational pluralism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cochran, M. (1999). *Normative theory in international relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Erskine, T. (2008). *Embedded cosmopolitanism: duties to strangers and enemies in a world of 'dislocated communities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Feshbach, M. (1994). Nationalism, patriotism and aggression: a clarification of functional differences. In L. Huesmann (Ed.), *Aggressive behavior: current perspectives* (pp. 275–291). New York: Plenum.
- Fivush, R., Bohanek, J. G., & Duke, M. (2008). The integrated self: subjective perspective and family history. In F. Sani (Ed.), *Self continuity* (pp. 131–144). New York: Psychology Press.
- Frost, M. (1996). *Ethics in international relations: a constitutive theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fryer, P. (1984). *Staying power: the history of black people in Britain since 1504*. London: Pluto Press.
- Gallup Jr., G. G., Anderson, J. R., & Platak, S. M. (2011). Self-recognition. In S. Gallagher (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of the self* (pp. 80–110). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haslam, N. (2006). Dehumanization an integrative review. *Personal Soc Psychol Rev*, 10, 252–264.
- Keller, H. (1903). *The story of my life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Lebow, R. N. (1976). *White Britain and Black Ireland: Social stereotypes and colonial policy*. Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues.
- Lebow, R. N. (2012). *The politics and ethics of identity: in search of ourselves*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Linklater, A. (1990). *Men and citizens in the theory of international relations* (2nd ed.). London: Macmillan.
- Mahler, M. S. (1968). *On human symbiosis and the vicissitudes of individuation*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Mahler, M. S., Pine, F., & Bergman, A. (1973). *The psychological birth of the human infant*. New York: Basic Books.
- Mansbridge, J. J. (2001). Complicating oppositional consciousness. In J. J. Mansbridge & A. D. Morris (Eds.), *Oppositional consciousness: the subjective roots of social protest* (pp. 1–31). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Martin, R., & Barresi, J. (2000). *Naturalization of the soul: self and personal identity in the eighteenth century*. New York: Routledge.
- Mead, G. H. (1962). *Mind, self, and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nelson, K. (2008). Self in time: emergence within a community of minds. In F. Sani (Ed.), *Self continuity: individual and collective perspectives* (pp. 13–26). New York: Psychology Press.
- O'Neill, O. (1996). *Towards justice and virtue: a constructive account of practical reasoning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Neill, O. (2000). *Bounds of justice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Punch* (1849). XIX.
- Rochat, P. (2011). What is it like to be a newborn? In S. Gallagher (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of the self* (pp. 57–79). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rousseau, J.-J. (1979). *Émile, trans. A. Bloom*. New York: Basic Books.
- Smith, A. (1976). *The theory of moral sentiments*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Walzer, M. (1983). *Spheres of justice: a defense of pluralism and equality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Walzer, M. (1994). *Thick and thin: moral argument at home and abroad*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.