Chapter 14

Enhancement and Identity: A Social Psychological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Advances in human enhancement technologies raise the prospect that people’s identities may be altered so radically by enhancement that they will be essentially a different person after enhancement. To illustrate, some scholars of enhancement claim that individuals are unlikely to “survive” enhancement, in the sense that they continue to exist as one and the same person. Yet, others claim that enhancement is dehumanizing. Common to these claims is the assumption that enhancement affects a discontinuity between an individual’s pre- and post-enhancement selves. Although extant analyses of the relationship between enhancement and identity have yielded many useful insights into the possible effects of human enhancement technologies on identity, progress in our understanding is marred by conceptual imprecision, the use of excessively thin conceptions of identity, and the conflation of distinct senses of identity. With respect to the latter, the conflation of numerical and narrative identity is particularly problematic. However, although these senses of identity are distinct, the fact that they are conflated is nevertheless informative about how people untutored in the metaphysics of identity—that is, the vast majority of people—reason about the effects of enhancement on identity. In this chapter, the authors draw on psychological research into self-continuity and dehumanization, respectively, to offer insights into why numerical and narrative identity are conflated, and they argue that future analyses of the relationship between enhancement and identity must be more deeply grounded in psychological and neuroscientific research than has been evidenced to date.

INTRODUCTION

The human enhancement literature is replete with claims about the effects of enhancement on identity. Many of these claims pertain to the constitution of enhanced individuals in terms of characteristics and identities gained or lost. For example, advocates of enhancement assert that the augmentation of characteristics like intelligence is humanizing, perhaps superhumanizing, whereas opponents assert that the modification of human nature is dehumanizing. Relatedly, the literature is suffused with claims about the effects of enhancement on identity continuity. At issue
here is whether augmented individuals ‘survive’ enhancement, in the sense that they continue to exist as one and the same person.

The diversity of ways in which identity can be conceptualized has resulted in a plethora of insights into the possible effects of human enhancement technologies on identity. However, progress in understanding the relationship between enhancement and identity is often marred by conceptual imprecision and the conflation of distinct senses of identity. In some instances, the problem resides in the use of excessively thin conceptions of identity or ascribing distinct meanings to the same terms. Happily, errors of reasoning that stem from problems like these can be remedied fairly easily by, for example, explicitly defining identity rather than treating it as a primitive concept. However, in other instances, distinctions between conceptions of identity that are clear in theory are fuzzy in practice, especially when philosophical concepts mingle with folk concepts of human nature and human identity, as they do so incorrigibly in writings about human enhancement.

To illustrate, the distinction between numerical and narrative identity, which relates to an individual’s survival as a human being or as a person and her self-concept, respectively, is clear in philosophical analyses of the relationship between enhancement and identity. The claim that post-enhancement changes in an individual’s self-concept are unrelated to her survival as a person is eminently defensible (e.g., DeGrazia, 2005). Philosophically, identity-as-survival and identity-as-self-concept are distinct. However, psychologically, this crisp delineation between the two senses of identity does not always obtain.

Recent findings from self-continuity and dehumanization research blur the boundary between the content of identity (narrative identity) and the continuity of identity (numerical identity). To illustrate, self-continuity research, which emphasizes the contribution of autobiographical memory to the content and continuity of identity, buttresses claims that enhancement may threaten an individual’s survival as a person (e.g., Agar, 2014; Glannon, 2002). Further, dehumanization research, which emphasizes how the content of identity is associated with perceived ontological status, (i.e., as a human, animal or object) buttresses claims that enhancement may threaten an individual’s survival as a human (e.g., Kass, 2002; President’s Council on Bioethics, 2003; Somerville, 2006).

In this article, I offer a psychological perspective on the relationship between enhancement and the content and continuity of identity. In exploring reasons why the distinction between identity-as-survival and identity-as-self-concept is clear philosophically but fuzzy psychologically, I pay particular attention to autobiographical memory. Specifically, I argue that autobiographical memory contributes to both an individual’s self-concept and her sense that she continues to exist as the same entity across time. In addition to examining the link between autobiographical memory and identity, I examine insights from the study of folk psychology about the relationship between person perception and humanness attributions. Through this examination of the link between identity, memory and humanness, I explain why the analytic distinction between the numerical and narrative senses of identity is not inevitably drawn in everyday reasoning about human enhancement.

I begin with a brisk overview of the distinction between numerical and narrative identity. Next, I draw on developmental, social and neuropsychological research to describe the contribution of autobiographical memory to identity content and continuity. Finally, I draw on social psychological research into folk concepts of humanness and the subtle, often implicit processes of everyday dehumanization to provide an account of how changes in the content of identity, which may occur after enhancement, might lead to perceived changes in the continuity of identity.
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