Identity issues are addressed by various sciences. Identity is discussed by philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and representatives of other disciplines, more or less related to the above. However, while the question of identity and its role in human functioning is what various disciplines of social sciences and humanities share, the way this concept is understood quite clearly divides them. A philosopher, a sociologist, or a psychologist often have different things in mind when speaking about or studying identity.

Different ways of understanding this concept can also be found within psychology. A social psychologist usually speaks of identity in different terms, from a different perspective, and drawing on a different tradition than a developmental psychologist. To the former, the classic author to refer to in texts is, above all, Henri Tajfel (1974), and to the latter – Erik H. Erikson (1950, 1956, 1968).

Nevertheless, there is a certain common denominator of nearly all psychological conceptualization of identity. It is a kind of mental shortcut, which identity scholars frequently fail to notice and which sometimes considerably hinders communication with other sciences, thus preventing a synthesis or integration of knowledge. That mental shortcut stems from the specificity of psychology in general. Namely, when a psychologist speaks of identity, what he or she usually has in mind is identity from the subject’s perspective – which means it is a felt, perceived, or experienced identity: subjective rather than objective. Therefore, a psychologist does not usually speak of identity per se so much as about a sense, perception, or experience of one’s own identity. Psychology does not study identity as such at all, since it has no instruments to do that; the problem is rather specific to philosophy and some conceptions of sociology.

The texts presented in the current volume belong to the Eriksonian tradition of psychological research on identity (more precisely: on the sense of identity). It seems that two characteristic features of this tradition distinguish it from other psychological approaches. The first one concerns the conceptualization and the other one – the operationalization of the sense of identity.

The distinctive feature of this tradition at the conceptual level is the classic developmental approach. The object of interest is the development of the sense of identity, with development understood as progressive change from less to more differentiated states, from less to more optimal ones – that is, according to Erikson (1950, 1968), from the amorphous state of identity diffusion to mature identity: diversified, structured, and having flexible boundaries (ego identity).

At the operationalization level, the distinctive feature of this developmental approach is the construction of models and measures that more or less clearly relate to the two identity formation
processes proposed by James Marcia (1966) in his classic article, being an elaboration of the ideas set out in his doctoral dissertation (Marcia, 1964): exploration and commitment. In accordance with Marcia’s proposal, a mature sense of identity (in his terminology: identity achievement status) is a combination of the two processes: commitment (engagement, taking up obligations) following exploration.

The last decades of identity research have brought many interesting modifications of Marcia’s model. Still, these proposals continue to use his two basic categories. The most important ones, the most often used as the basis for research, include: the five-dimensional model by Koen Luyckx and colleagues (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, & Beyers, 2006; Luyckx et al., 2008), the three-dimensional model by Elisabetta Crocetti and colleagues (2008a, 2008b, 2015), and Michael Berzonsky’s (1989, 2011) model of identity formation styles.

The articles included in the current issue of Psychological Studies present the results of studies that belong to this tradition, not only continuing but also creatively enriching it. The greatest amount of attention has been devoted to the model developed by Luyckx and his team. Aleksandra Pilarska and Anna Suchańska (2015) made a successful attempt to integrate Luyckx’s (2006, 2008) five-dimensional model with their own conception of the sense of identity (Pilarska, 2012; Pilarska & Suchańska, 2013), describing the basic categories of experiencing and understanding oneself in the context of the capacity for closeness with another person.

The model developed by Crocetti and colleagues (2008a, 2008b) was the point of departure for the paper by Dominika Karaś and Jan Cieciuch (2015), who took over the three dimensions of identity formation proposed by Crocetti but broadened the range of domains in which identity is formed. The model and the instrument they proposed enable a precise study of the differentiation of the sense of identity in various domains in young adults, since the formation of a mature sense of identity in one domain does not necessarily mean its maturity in another.

Berzonsky’s (1989, 2011) model of identity styles became the object of analyses for Ewa Topolewska and Jan Cieciuch (2015), who demonstrated that both in person-centered and
in variable-centered approaches the diffuse-avoidant style is strongly internally diversified, which makes it a good idea to break it down into two substyls in analyses. This discovery may be of importance to the psychological assessment of problems in the functioning of young people in adolescence and on the threshold of adulthood.

In terms taken from the model by Luyckx and colleagues (2006, 2008), which is the most often used one in the articles prepared, it can be said that all the articles are an outcome of exploration in depth. This is because, together with the authors, we made basic choices – we adopted the tradition of Eriksonian understanding of identity as well as contemporary models rooted in Marcia’s operational proposals from 50 years ago. However, we did not adopt these proposals blindly; we subjected them to critical reflection, which led us to modify the original proposals. We hope that our proposals will contribute to the intensification of research on identity not only in the period of adolescence but also in the beginnings of adulthood and, as a result, to broadening the knowledge on identity formation.

REFERENCES


