

# The Impact of Biometrics on Identity Formation

Anita Kiricenko

anita.kiricenko@gmail.com

## Abstract

Both in academia and political decision-making, there has been a discursive explosion around the notion of identity that is particularly bound up with all possible risks present in a globalised, highly technological and overly mobile current system. Identity is constantly understood under the risk of fraud, crime, terrorism and so on (Ajana, 2010). Due to urgent need for its securitization, biometrics is seen as a solution for not only protecting identity from before mentioned risks but also managing social services in a highly objective manner.

This paper aims to delineate the relationship between identity and biometrics with particular reference to vulnerable groups such as immigrants. In order to understand what aspects of identity biometrics captures and how it affects identity formation, the paper starts with the analysis of identity itself. Taking Arendt stance on Modernity as the epoch where the line between private and public domain is blurred, paper covers both individual and societal dimensions of identity in order to capture its complexity. Drawing upon the work of Btihaj Ahana, some of the variations of identity have been explored. It was shown that identity on individual level should be seen through the combination of “who” and “what” aspects which helps to avoid simplification. The societal dimension of identity was based on Charles Taylor insights that emphasize the importance of historical context in identity creation. For that reason, current world order was defined as the structure based on relativism, individuality and neoliberal principles which together encourage the creation of flexible and constantly adoptable identity.

At a first glance it may seem that biometrics primarily concerned with “what” aspect of identity. However, it was argued that “who” aspect of identity is affected as well. By reducing and changing identity to readable, measurable and “objective” data, biometrics takes away the narrative of the person. This refined truth is being fixed to the person whose story is not taken into account. Fixed and externally created identity contradicts the dominant notion of social identity. Such practice particularly discriminates already vulnerable groups as their fixed identities constrain their ability to freely act and behave which are the tenets of current neoliberal society. Due to fixed identity, we are experiencing a transformation from a person who is both responsible for and capable of shaping his life to a desperate individual who is still responsible for but incapable of improving his condition under the current neoliberal framework.

**Keywords:** Ajana; biometrics; identity; narrative; neoliberalism; relativity; individualism

## Introduction

The concept of identity drew a lot of attention recently, both among the scholars and policy decision-makers. According to Btihaj Ajana, identity is closely related to the notion of crisis (Ajana, 2010, 238). Identity is seen under constant threat or, to be more precise, being at risk. Identity is at the risk of fraud, crime, terrorism and any imaginable sort of illegality. The question of “who is who” raises security challenges within current policy debates. The need for identity securitisation reflects Giorgio Agamben stance on our world as the world that functions according to the formula “for the security reasons” in every single domain of life (Agamben, 2014).

As a reaction to before mentioned problems, various techniques and measures were implemented to secure and protect the uniqueness of identity in a highly objective manner. Biometrical technology was ranked quite high on the list of possible solutions. Biometrics are informational technologies that permit the measurement and analysis of human body characteristics (Lyon, 2008, 501) such as fingerprints, eye retinas and irises, voice patterns and so on. It can be used for identification/recognition purposes to determine who the person is, or for verification/authentication to establish whether the person is who he claims to be (Ajana, 2011, 2).

The attraction of biometrics occurs from its ability to link bodies to identities across borders and databases and its capacity to provide quicker, more accurate and more reliable ways of verifying who somebody is. One can forge his name or documents. However, body cannot be forged. Therefore, it is a source of unprecedented accuracy and precision. Biometrics are seen as secure and convenient measures that are highly encouraged in a current mobile world.

9/11 and other attacks offered a number of new arguments in favour of rapid usage of biometrics in various areas of society (Ajana, 237, Lyon, 503). High technology solutions are particularly favoured in Western societies as they are seen sufficient enough to address dramatic risks such as terrorism. IT dependence helps to escape human fallacies and achieve objectivity. Also, there is an economic incentive for the proliferation of biometric technology (Lyon, 503). As a result, instead of reserving biometrics for particular purposes such as criminal investigations, now it covers a wide range of practices ranging from border control and asylum regulation to the management of social services and medical records (Ajana, 2011, 2).

The expansion of biometrics brought not only positive achievements within security domain but also a number of concerns regarding identity. This paper questions the aspects of identity biometric technology tries to capture as well as the affect biometrics has on identity formation. By posing such questions will enable us to prove that a widespread application of biometrics creates a new conception of identity that contradicts the dominant notion of it as well as such

practices discriminate the most vulnerable groups which will be shown through the examples of immigration and asylum. For the purpose of achieving these goals, the paper will start with the definition of identity.

## **Identity**

Identity, despite many attempts to define it, sustains its complexity, ambiguity, and ubiquity (Ajana, 2010, 2390). Additionally, there is an endless elusiveness around the individual and societal distinction of identity. In order to escape it, our paper will be based on Hannah Arendt insights on Modernity where confines between private and public domains are blurred. Therefore, private matters became public (such as economics), whereas public domain started to be used for private goals.<sup>1</sup> For the reason of achieving a complete picture of identity, firstly we will define identity on individual level which will be followed by the societal notion of it.

The question of “who someone is” constantly evades linguistic boundaries and challenges any attempts to define it. Marya Schechtman, responding to identity’s ambivalence, draws a distinction between the question of reidentification and self-knowledge (Ajana, 2010, 240). The former aims at ascertaining the notion of sameness over time and space, whereas the latter looks at the uniqueness of the person. Schechtman demonstrates this distinction through the example:

The question of “who I am” might be asked by an amnesia victim or by a confused adolescent. The crucial difference lies in the response. The amnesia victim tries to delineate the aspects of her life that remained unchanged over time and space [reidentification], whereas the second questioner knows her life story. Instead, she tries to capture the complexity of her values and beliefs, she tries to be true to herself, find how she is different from the others.

According to the philosopher, in a current analytical discourse, attention is drawn to the question of reidentification while disregarding the component of self-knowledge without which the picture of personal identity is incomplete. Despite her indispensable insights, her double-sided character of identity does not include the importance of exposure and otherness that can be found in works of Adriana Cavarero (Ajana, 2010, 241).

Before Adriana’s Cavarero definition of identity it is important to note that most of the time the question of “who someone is” leaches into the inquiry of “what someone is”. Person is seen as the totality of qualities and attributes such as membership, class or status instead of the complexity of his lived experience and unreducible uniqueness (Ajana, 2010, 239).

Cavarero’s attempt to define identity tries to avoid conflating the “who” and the “what” aspects and includes the importance of narrativity. The philosopher locates the “what” element within philosophical domain, whereas the “who” aspect within the realm of biography. The philosophical element has the form of universal knowledge such as individuality, agency, and control. The other, biographical element, is formed through the experience of storytelling. The first tries to find the similarity among individuals, whereas the narrative dimension captures the

uniqueness of each of us. According to Cavarero, the revelation of narrative self requires exposure to others. Charles Taylor claims that identity formation is formed in dialogue with others (Taylor, 45 – 46). The act of telling one's story is very much dependent on the existence of necessary others (Ajana, 240). Here Cavarero overcomes the problematic aspect of Schechtman's insight on the definition of identity by including the notions of exposure and otherness in the process of self-knowledge. Even the most private self is influenced by social and cultural dimensions.

Cavarero approach is not without limitations. The clear-cut differentiation between the "who" and the "what" aspects is not that clear. The "whoness" is influenced, to some degree, by the "whatness" of the person. The story and the attributes are mutually affected. According to Ajana, the assigned identity of a refugee that belongs to the sphere of "what" has an impact on the story and the lived experience of an individual. At the same time, the narration of the story forms the kind of attributions and status the person receives (Ajana, 2010, 241). All in all, analysed insights are very helpful in avoiding the reduction of the definition of identity merely to the notion of reidentification or the "whatness". Nevertheless, despite mentioning the importance of the social and political dimension in identity formation, neither Schechtman nor Cavarero talks about its effect on the creation of identity. For that reason, the next section will cover not only the importance of wider dimension in identity formation but also the main tenets of the current system.

### **Societal identity**

The role of social dimension is crucial in identity formation. Hannah Arendt in her major work "The Human Condition" describes modernity by the emergence of the social realm which is neither public (political matters) nor private (household) one. In Ancient Greece, there was a clear distinction between these two, whereas in our age the dividing line is entirely blurred. Political communities are seen in the image of families whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a nation-wide administration of housekeeping (Arendt, 29). For that reason, private life acquires new social dimension. Individual identity cannot be understood separately from the wider environment.

According to Taylor, identity arises from the context or, in other words, from historic community. Community values form the moral guidelines for personal identity formation. The development of personal identity cannot be analyzed separately from its social and cultural dimension. As van der Ploeg said, even the most private self is affected by the social and political realm (Ajana, 2010, 241). Moreover, identity is a modern concept. What is now called personal identity, prior was largely fixed by person's social position. Individual's definition of herself/himself depended upon the predetermined place in society (Bauman, 3). For that reason, the current world order with its moral ideals that gave rise to current notion of identity will be discussed.

The current modern society can be generalised on the grounds of authenticity (Taylor, 58). Such idea presupposes that each person thinks self-responsibly for him- or herself (Taylor, 25). Prior to that, personal self-fulfilment depended upon the connection to a moral source which provided with further action and behaviour guidelines such as God. According to the ideal of authenticity, morality means following our internal voice that denies any other idealistic sources. Everybody is called to live his or her life without imitation of anybody else. Such principle reflects the idea of soft relativism. Everybody's options are equal.

The structure that cherishes soft relativism and authentic self-creation is built on the earlier forms of individualism. Individualism that is understood as a moral principle or ideal claiming that everyone should have a right and capacity to be themselves and achieve their dreams. There is no higher or lower goals, the moral ideal is based upon the action of achieving the goal that is unique to everybody.

Individualist ideas have contributed to the widespread establishment of new political and economic forms that challenged pre-existed ancient hierarchies and gave a greater place to the market and entrepreneurial enterprise (Taylor, 58). However, there exists a crucial difference between liberalism in XVIII century and the neoliberal paradigm of governmentality in XXI century. It bases upon the status of economic freedom in relationship to the state's political structure. In XVIII century, the aim was to find the room for necessary economic freedoms for the purpose of nation's enrichment within already functioning and legitimate state, whereas in the aftermath of the II World War, especially in post-war Europe, the problem was to create a state based on economic freedoms (Foucault, 86). This difference is crucial as it indicates that neoliberal framework lies at the core of the post-war global structure, all moral principles and ideals arise from it. The modality of neoliberal framework is based upon the principles of freedom, choice and active entrepreneurship. Emerging practices undermine the importance of "welfarism" and collective solidarity while focusing on "autominomisation" and "responsibilisation" (Ajana, 2011, 3).

Mobility is seen as a key characteristic of current structure and one of the most prominent forms of freedom. In the neoliberal order of governing, mobility is considered as a vital quality and a necessary condition for actualising and optimising before mentioned principles of individualism and authenticity.

What kind of identity is formed under presented conditions? Modern identity replaced human nature that once seen as lasting and turned it into a never-ending task (Bauman, 3). The purpose of life became to self-create and self-construct, yet it has to be performed in an authentic and individual manner. Due to relativity of current structure, there are no facts the person can base her/his decisions on, therefore identity should always have the form of incompleteness. "Rational conduct in such a world demands that the options, as many as possible, are kept open, and gaining an identity which fits too tightly, an identity that once and for all offers 'sameness' and 'continuity', results in the closing of options or forfeiting them in

advance.” (Bauman, 8) Moreover, responsibility to shape one’s identity, to perform this task charges individual with the responsibility for the consequences of performing this task.

Identity is not a simply defined notion. It includes the “who” and the “what” aspects, is formed through the dialogue with necessary others and is influenced by the social and political domains. This picture is necessary for the purpose of understanding the aspects of identity biometric technology tries to capture as well as the affect biometrics has on identity formation.

### **Biometrics and Identity**

A number of questions arise from above mentioned deliberations. What is the relationship between biometrics and identity? Where does biometric identity stand? Does it merely capture the “what” aspect of identity?

In solely technological terms one might be tempted to argue that biometrics is concerned with the “what” aspect of identity and tries to define identity within the framework of continuity, sameness and coherence. Basically, identity aims to capture the bodily criterion which refers to the “sameness of body”. This notion sees the body as a constant that guarantees a certain degree of continuity, stability and permanency across time and space (Ajana, 2010, 242). “Sameness of personality”, on the contrary, seeks to achieve a coherent personality that is reliant on the continuity and coherence of subjective experience. Due to the problematic aspect of “sameness of personality” and complexity to grasp it, biometrics tries to avoid this ambiguity by focusing on the body and making it the stabiliser of identity.

The body cannot be entirely separated from the notion of personality. The body is an integral part of experience and living in the world. Body is both present within the “sameness of body” and the “sameness of personality”. The difference is in its relationship. In the former case, body has the relationship of an external object, whereas in the context of personality body is the subject through with the world is lived and experience as such becomes possible (Ajana, 2010, 242). By giving the body unprecedented relevance over the mind, biometrics disregards the irreducible connection between the mind and the body. Biometric body excludes the tale of the person without which the picture of somebody’s personality is lacking coherence and completeness.

The effect of biometrics on personal identity would not be a problem, if it was merely for identification reasons. Unfortunately, there is a relationship of interdependency between identification and identity. Through the process of identification identity comes into beings. (Ajana, 2010, 245). With the reference to the examples of immigration and asylum, it will be shown that the mere application of biometrics affects identity formation. The new type of identity contradicts the notion of current world and discriminates its most vulnerable layers. In order to illustrate the arguments, a few examples, namely, about the European Eurodac project and family reunification cases in Germany will be presented.

Eurodac project is a European Union initiative which aim was to facilitate the implementation of the Dublin convention concerned with the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for the examination of an asylum application. It is governed by the rule that the State of first entry would be the one and the only Member State that has total jurisdiction in and responsibility for asylum application (Ajana, 2010, 245). Such a decision was made to prevent exploitation of social system and benefits by asylum applicants in different countries. The Eurodac project is based on cybernetic network that contains the digital fingerprints of every person over the age of 14 who applied for asylum in any of the EU countries (Ajana, 2010, 245) for the purpose of checking whether or not he claimed asylum in another EU country. If this is the case, the applicant will be deported to the country of the first entry if not to the country of his/ her origin (Ajana, 2010, 245).

In Germany, there are more applications for family reunification than asylum (Heinemann and Lemke, 813). Even Europe-wide, family reunification was the most important form of immigration in 2011 (Heinemann and Lemke, 810) (due to situation in the Middle East and Northern Africa situation might have changed. However, it did not change the fact that there are a lot of applications for family reunification purposes). In 1990s Germany as many other countries introduced DNA analysis in order to cope with a significant number of family-related migrants as well as with incompleteness or insufficiency of traditional pieces of evidence such as documents, certificates and photos. The Federal Government of Germany and the Federal Ministry of the Interior stress that DNA tests are not to be seen as a constraint but as an opportunity for the sponsors and applicants to prove the validity of their application (Federal Government of Germany, 2008). Furthermore, the voluntary act of taking DNA test is emphasized. However, the results of Heinemann and Lemke research indicate that DNA testing for family reunification is not an ultima ratio but a standard tool for the verification of a family relationship in immigration cases (Heinemann and Lemke, 814). The rejection of “voluntary” DNA test results in suspicion from public officers. Therefore, it is almost an obligation to take one if he/she wants to reunite with the family.

The above mentioned examples indicate, in Ajana words, not mere verification but establishment of asylum seekers' /migrants' identity. It is especially seen through the Eurodac project where biometrics is used to scan bodies for the proofs of illegality. Based on collected data, the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate is being drawn. More organic proofs of identification are seen suspicious and not reliable enough. Pictures and memories are not sufficient to prove family ties. Identity comes into being through the practices that are distant from the person and undeniably belongs to him. Through technological procedures raw data is turned into refined one dimensional truth that is the basis for future analysis and decisions (Ajana, 2010, 246). The problem is that biometrically born identity excludes the “whoness” of the person and at the same time affects the lived experience of the person and his story. As it was mentioned previously, assigned attributes influence the way personal story is being told.

The newly established biometrical body contradicts the notion of identity present in current framework that is based on the principles of relativity, individuality and neoliberalism. There is no higher or lower standards, all choices are valuably equal and encouraged. Self-creation and self-fulfillment are the task of all human beings that are detached from their former beliefs and prejudices. Biometrics, on the contrary, emphasises the credibility of the body characteristics while disregarding other forms of personal self-identification. Under Dublin convention, immigrants and asylum seekers are seen through the data based on their fingerprints that reveals illegality and fraud. The social aspect of identity so widely supported around the world is being neglected. In case of family-reunification in Germany, the strong focus on a biological family contrasts with the social understanding and the legal framing of the family in Germany. Parenthood nationwide is not defined in terms of biological relatedness but rather as a social relation (Heinemann and Lemke, 816), whereas family reunification model endorses an understanding of family as a biological entity. Administrative practices of family reunification in Germany disregard the principle of relativity and display a substantial legal and social difference between and contradictory treatment of native citizens and immigrants (Heinemann and Lemke, 817).

Furthermore, biometrical identity constrains the ability of the individual to act under current system. Individualistic and neoliberal world order is based on choice, freedom and active entrepreneurship. Its cherished mobility allows through the performance of those principles to achieve individual aspirations and goals. Unfortunately, there is no place in this world for a static biometric body which story does not belong to him. Due to characteristics that prove his illegality and disobedience, the individual is unable to move freely, change places and follow his dreams. As from the examples above, the person is either constrained by Eurodac system or he is incapable of reuniting with his family. The free choice is not given to him as well as freedom to make it.

In the world where openness is highly encouraged due to unpredictability and ongoing change, where identity should be like a jacket that can be adopted to any situations, biometric body is excluded through its inclusion. One cannot behave freely due to constraints created by the application of biometrics and rejection of more organic forms of identification. Nevertheless, he/ she is still responsible for present and the future and for the consequences of his/ her actions. The actions of illegal immigrants and asylum seekers are seen as free and unaffected. The hardship, losses and pain are not considered as factors that contributed to their choices of crossing the Mediterranean Sea or becoming refugees. The idealistic image of our world order neglected the inequality, different conditions and legitimate need for protection. It became a pool of opportunities for some while exposing the most vulnerable groups to life-threatening experiences.

### **Conclusion**

It was never the aim of this paper to reject the application of biometrics in order to cope with the problem their widespread use brought about. It was intended to show the problematic



aspects of biometrics and how it affects identity formation. It was illustrated that identity is a very ambiguous and complex concept that can neither be reduced to specific attributes nor to the sameness of the body which is time independent. Moreover, identity as a concept cannot be realised outside its historical context as it gave the moral framework within which the creation of identity became possible. Identity is a modern concept that reflects the notions of relativity, individuality and neoliberalism.

Biometrics, with its strive for objectivity and accuracy, tried avoiding the ambiguous dimension of identity by focusing on bodily characteristics. Nonetheless, it undoubtedly affected the subjective and dubious personal experience and his story. Due to the one dimensional image of identity based on bodily features but excluding the story, beliefs and despairs, a new identity comes into being. It is not only separated from the person, but it also contradicts the notion of identity in current world and further discriminates the most vulnerable layers of our society.

Fixed and stable identity creates obstacles for actualising the tenets of the current world - freedom, choice and active entrepreneurship. It constrains the action of individuals without removing the responsibilities for made decisions. It is expected from them to act in a way to achieve their aspirations without taking into account the real picture of the world, where solidarity, community and support were replaced with competitiveness, selfishness and independence.

The failure of biometrics reflected the failure of our current system. The unquestionable belief in technology and constant willingness to simplify an existing complexity resulted in even bigger issues. Instead of taking the reasons of migration and asylum seeking into consideration, it was attempted to govern the results. The more-encompassing picture of the world would result in practices that would capture the reality behind personal choices and actions. The inclusion of stories and experiences in identification processes would allow to present a more complete picture of "who someone is" instead of simply reducing it to mere data and templates.

## References

- Aas, Katja Franko, *The body does not lie': Identity, risk and trust in technoculture*. *Crime Media Culture*, 2006, 2(2): 143 – 158.
- Agamben, *Giorgio*, *From the State of Control to a Praxis of Destituent Power*. Reflections on a Revolution. 2014 m. vasario 4 d. Internetinis puslapis.
- Agamben, *Giorgio*, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford University Press Stanford, California, 1995.
- Ajana, Btihak, *Biometric Citizenship*. *Citizenship Studies*, 2012, vol.16, no.7, 1 - 20.
- Ajana, Btihak, *Recombinant Identities: Biometrics and Narrative Bioethics*. *Bioethical Inquiry*, Springer, 2010, 7:237 – 258.
- Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*. The University of Chicago Press, 2nd edition, 1997.
- Bauman, Zygmunt , *Identity in a Globalising World*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004, 1 – 12.
- Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Harvard Univeristy Press, 1992
- Federal Government of Germany, *DNS-Abstammungsgutachten im Rahmen von aufenthaltsrechtlichen Identitätsfeststellungen*. Antwort auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Ulla Jelpke, Sevim Dagdelen, Jan Korte und der Fraktion DIE LINKE. Drucksache, 2008, 16/7698: 1–5.
- Foucault, Michel, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978--1979* (Lectures at the College de France). Picador, New York, 2010.
- Lemke, Thomas ir Heinemann, Torsten, *Suspect Families: DNA Kinship Testing in German Immigration Policy*, Sage, *Sociology*, 2012, 47(4) 810– 826.
- Lyon, David, *Biometrics, identification and surveillance*. *Bioethics*, 2008, 22(9), 499 – 508.

---

<sup>i</sup> According to Arendt, Antiquity was based on two orders of existence: private realm and political realm. Private realm associated with the household and family where human basic needs were satisfied, whereas political realm embodied in the city-state corresponded to the highest human capacities, namely, action and speech. Under the

---

household, one man ruled with despotic powers and it was considered pre-political means of dealing with human affairs. On the contrary, to be political meant to decide everything through words rather through violence where all men were equal and free. However, with the emergence of Modernity the line between two orders started to disappear. Political communities started to be seen in the image of a family whose everyday affairs were taken care by a nation-wide administration of housekeeping. Life became social (The Human Condition, 22-33).