

Introduction to Concepts

Identity

- A. Multiple meanings: here we are interested in individual and social identity
 - 1. Related terms: “self,” “I,” “person,” “personality”
- B. The French philosopher Derrida maintains that any identity is constructed in relation to difference
 - 1. There is no solid, pre-given center or simple presence; these exist only in relation to something else.
 - a. We will see that some anthropologists hold that this is how ethnic groups are constructed, too
- C. Westerners tend to think of identity as fixed
 - 1. **DISCUSS:** evidence supporting this assertion?
 - a. Birth certificates
 - 1) Names changed normally only at marriage
 - 2) Social Security numbers
 - 3) Other societies may assign new names at certain life stages
 - b. All countries fix citizens’ identity to some degree
 - 1) Census-taking and other record-keeping (health, etc.)
 - a) For all kinds of reasons: taxes, conscription to the military
 - b) Civil status (marriage licenses), tribal rolls for Native Americans
 - c. Other institutions as well:
 - 1) Your credit rating
 - 2) “Identity theft” sounds like an oxymoron until you understand what it is

- a) Its possibility demonstrates how bureaucratically constructed this identity is
 - d. The extensive cultural production focusing on themes of imposters and amnesia
 - 1) Reveal an interest, perhaps anxiety, about just how fixed and permanent personal identity is
 - 2. The self, of course, changes, but the West believes that a core identity remains
 - a. This is not universally true
 - 3. The notion that the self should change in proper ways is very widespread
 - a. “Life crisis” rituals transform the self, person
 - 1) Baptism, first communion, commencement, marriage, knighthood
 - 2) Other rituals: ordination, initiations
 - a) “Ye must be born again”
- D. Notion of a fixed core identity has been a foundational premise of Western social and behavioral science
 - 1. An interest in personality, which is seen as relatively stable
 - a. An “unstable” personality suggests pathology
 - b. Development—childhood seen as leading to a fixed identity
 - 2. Sigmund Freud (and many others) saw important links between how the body developed and how the personality developed
 - a. A biographer of Freud characterized him as a “biologist of the mind”
 - b. He saw the mind and emotions as developing the way the body develops
 - c. Necessary stages that all individuals have to go through
 - 1) In the proper manner, otherwise, pathology results

Cross-cultural variation in notions about identity

- A. Assumptions about the nature of the self, its relation to the body, the “identity” of, the nature of the body vary widely cross-culturally
1. In the West: a self, a person is an individual, physical entity
 - a. In the West: we are seen as humans; humans are an animal species, *homo sapiens*
 - b. Each one is very distinct from the others
 - 1) Bounded by skin
 - c. **DISCUSS:** exceptions?
 - 1) The trend to construct the fetus as a separate entity even though it is inside of another individual
 - 2) The notion of “past lives”
 2. Earlier in European history people’s bodies weren’t seen as so distinct
 - a. You could be possessed by another being
 - 1) Today, “disassociation” is seen as pathology
 - 2) But plenty of other places in the world have institutionalized ideas and practices concerned with another being taking possession of one’s body and mind
 - 3) Brazil’s candomblé religion, also Haiti, Bali, India
 - 4) Some curing traditions involve this notion
 - b. **DISCUSS:** any other examples of exceptions to this generalization?
 3. Cross-culturally: all sorts of ways the self and the body interact with other forces or beings
 - a. In a number of societies in the Americas a person possesses a spirit “familiar” in the shape of an animal

4. In the West (and elsewhere) a *person* is seen to consist of more than a body
 - a. But there's a huge variety of opinions about these other components
 - 1) "Mind," "soul," "spirit," "aura"
 - 2) **DISCUSS:** other notions?
5. Other examples of cross-cultural variation
 - a. Notions about paternity, maternity
 - 1) Among the Krikatí of the Central Brazilian Highlands
 - 2) Repeated acts of intercourse are needed to make a child, so a person can have several fathers
 - b. Earlier in Europe
 - 1) An individual was considered to be contained in the sperm; the woman contributed the bed on which the "seed" could grow
 - c. The Confucian model of personhood: the essential nature of humans is to be members of groups
 - 1) The family is seen as much more important than its individual members
 - d. Anthropologist Margaret Lock says that for the Japanese, the main opposition is between family and society
 - 1) The individual is assumed to be subsumed within the family
6. Ways the conventional Western view is being challenged?
 - a. Organ donation: a notion that a lasting physical "essence" remains in the recipient's body)

Social and individual identity as concepts

- A. Obviously the two concepts interact; the one constructs the other

1. Individual identity is seen as unique: pertaining to one person
 - a. Notion of psychological identity
 - 1) Personality, character
 - 2) While “male” or “female” may be seen as biological—a given
 - 3) Masculinity and femininity are seen as acquired
 - b. **DISCUSS:** other examples illustrating our notion of unique individual identity?
 2. Social Identity: membership in groups
 - a. Family
 - b. Race, gender, ethnicity, geography, generation, social class
- B. How identity is constructed
1. What are seen as the givens: one’s date of birth, sex, the nature of family one is born into, one’s social class, etc.
 - a. The notion of one’s unique genetic identity is currently getting a lot of play
 2. But the individual self is also constantly being constructed through cultural and social negotiation
 - a. Which is political—what your identity is in part reflects your status in the group and your ability to interact effectively
 - b. **DISCUSS:** examples from Pascoe?
- C. Questions arise about free will vs. being acted upon, having very little agency
1. To what degree are your actions, how your life plays out, due to the part of your identity that has been imposed by:
 - a. Biological inheritance, parents’ and family’s assets, etc.
 - b. Bad luck, fate, past lives, sins of the fathers...
 - c. **DISCUSS:** other examples?

- d. **DISCUSS:** this issue’s presence in fairy tales?
 - e. **DISCUSS:** genetic identity and normative issues?
2. Lots of cultural production in the West deals with this issue
- a. The self-made person
 - b. “Go West, young man”
 - c. **DISCUSS:** the American Dream
3. Such themes are widespread
- a. Mythology
 - b. The literary notion of *bildungsroman*—a story about the quest, most often involving a journey, to “find oneself”:
 - 1) The young man who left home “to seek his fortune” (it is always a he)
 - 2) A youth develops into a man partly through his actions, his agency—by actively engaging the world rather than being passive
 - c. **DISCUSS:** How have the plots of Disney movies changed over the years with respect to gendered agency?
- D. Related issue: relationships between the individual and group: how these are conceptualized and valorized vary widely cross-culturally
1. The West often posits the individual in opposition to group, culture, etc.
- a. An individual gives up their “true” self in order to conform to the group
 - b. Interest in the 19th century in feral children—reared by wild mammals
 - 1) It was believed they would show their “true” nature
 - a) Because no overlay of socialization

- c. It's clear, however, that humans need to develop within a cultural milieu to be normal
 - 1) Feral children are not normal—they exhibit very clear pathology
- 2. But the opposite idea exists, too: without culture we'd be monsters
 - a. **DISCUSS:** examples in books, movies?
 - b. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*

Conclusions

- A. "Self" implies "other"
 - 1. "I am" is defined by what "I am not"—Pascoe's book illustrates this with respect to masculinity
 - a. Example: the binary heterosexuality/homosexuality
 - b. Masculinity's relationship to heterosexuality is complex
 - 1) As it is to homosexuality: "The Machine" is a "leather" bar on Beacon St.
 - a) Drag queens
 - 2) "Diesel dykes" and "lipstick lesbians"
 - c. Masculinity as both a process and a field through which power is articulated (p. 13 Pascoe)
 - d. Pascoe's study shows that students see masculinity "as an identity expressed through sexual discourses and practices that indicate dominance and control" (p. 13)
- B. Identity is dynamic
 - 1. Pascoe: highly dynamic sexuality is an organizing principle of social life (pp.9-10)
 - 2. We'll be looking at how categories themselves are created/produced, maintained/sustained, and sometimes undone
 - a. Through practices, rituals, discourses

3. Example: we have the binaries female/male, masculine/feminine
 - a. But also transsexual, transgendered
 - 1) Which may support the binaries
 - 2) Or not: “I’m neither pre-op or post-op, I’m no-op”
 - a) “Take me as I am—I’m opting out of your tired, rigid sex/gender system”
 4. **DISCUSS:** whether women turn into women no matter what, but manhood has to be achieved
 - a. Unmanly man is a sissy
 - b. What is an unwomanly woman?
 - 1) Badly groomed? nun? lesbian? slut? aggressive? bad mother?
- C. Reification and essentialization of identity occur for many reasons
1. Social, political, cultural
 2. Pascoe on masculinity and femininity: the two are constructed to be opposing, complementary, unequal, and heterosexual
 3. Currently many areas of social science and psychology no longer see the self, the person, to have a basic identity that is characterized in terms of a core, defining essence
 4. Note: in this course we need categories
 - 1) And at times we’ll have to think of them as stable, opposing and discrete
- D. Identity is multiple, depends on context, relationships with other identities
1. Example: bilinguals will report being different “selves” in the two languages
- E. Identity happens in groups: it is relational and almost always public and institutionalized

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