

Constructing Identity: Self, group, and rites of passage

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- If you are in college, you are probably in the process of “finding yourself”
 - figuring out who you are, or searching for your identity
 - this is a process that anthropologists have looked into quite a bit...
- Identity is a social construct
 - To know how to respond to some one, you have to identify him/her
 - you place him/her in one or more socially defined categories
 - parent, sibling, classmate, professor, boss, potential girlfriend, etc.
 - these identities are arbitrary cultural constructs
 - then apply the socially defined rules about how your own type of person interacts with that type of person
 - this is another example of how we respond to the meanings we place on things (or people), as much or more than to the things or people themselves
 - say you identify a young man as a “skinhead”
 - based on dress, hairstyle, tattoos, etc.
 - you might then place the meaning “threatening person” on him
 - and interact with him accordingly
 - even if he has made no actual threat at all
 - these associated meanings and rules of behavior are arbitrary cultural constructs, too
 - for example, in parts of highland Peru, a girl who is interested in a boy taunts him, hits him with sticks, whips him in certain dances, etc.
 - or a great scene in *West of Kabul, East of New York*, by Tamim Ansary (pp. 156-157). He is on a bus in Algeria: “There was another American on the bus, too. To my eyes, his unshaven chin, his shitkicker boots, his hip-hugging Levi’s, and his bandanna said *tough mother-fucker*. In some biker bar in north Portland, he might well have intimidated me. Here in Algeria, surrounded by Arabs, he didn’t look so tough. The Arabs attached no meaning to his clothes and hair. He might just as well have been wearing Bermuda shorts. Power is a social construct, right down to the kick-ass level.”
 - As Robbins says, you are not born knowing who you are: you learn your own identity
 - From infancy, you learn your identity from others
 - You learn from parents and relatives who consciously and unconsciously teach you aspects of your identity
 - Consciously: your name, your family and ethnic background, what kind of clothes you should wear, how you should talk and behave, etc.
 - Unconsciously: modeling aspects of behavior, beliefs, etc. that others will use to define your identity
 - You infer what others think your identity is from how they respond to you
 - In addition, you try to project an identity as who you think you are, or want to be
 - you learn from people’s responses whether they agree that this is your identity, or not
 - so identity is learned and negotiated: it is constructed

- this is a social process, accumulating through many interactions
- a cultural process, involving shared, cultural ideas about
 - what kinds of identities are possible, normal, deviant, desirable, etc.
 - and an individual process, in that each person has or develops his/her own unique wants, abilities, etc.
- Even the concept of personhood (what a “person” in general is) is culturally constructed
 - the concept of “a person” differs from one culture to the next
 - some cultures have more “egocentric” concepts of personhood or self
 - this is NOT your usual use of “egocentric” to mean “selfish”
 - **egocentric concept of personhood:** persons are
 - independent actors, responsible for themselves,
 - with inherent personal characteristics that are relatively permanent as they pass through various roles in life
 - laziness, honesty, optimism, etc.
 - Example variants of egocentric concepts of personhood:
 - Nuyoo Mixtec (south central Mexico, near Oaxaca) personhood involves a “coessential animal” born at the same moment
 - the “coessential animal” could be any species
 - it lives in the forest while you live in society
 - things that happen to it affect you, and things that happen to you, affect it
 - your two parts are in especially clear contact during dreams
 - you can understand yourself (or others) in terms of your (or their) coessential animal
 - it explains your talents, interests, luck, dreams, status and role in life, etc.
 - usually, you need to consult a professional (shaman) to learn what your coessential animal is, interpret your dreams about it, etc.
 - in popular Euroamerican culture of the 20th century, a “person” was comprised of a conscious mind and an unconscious mind
 - two entities only partially aware of each other, both influencing thought and behavior
 - together, they made up your identity
 - you could understand people’s identities by using concepts about the conscious, unconscious, and how they interacted
 - often, you needed help from a professional to do this
 - these are equally abstract, arbitrary concepts of personhood
 - both untestable
 - both useful ways to understand selves and others for members of those cultures
 - other cultures have more “sociocentric” concepts of personhood or self
 - **sociocentric concept of personhood:** persons are
 - nodes in networks of social relationships,
 - you are so-and-so’s son or daughter, a student of professor X, a classmate of student Y, have authority over certain people when you are acting as president of the basketweaving club but not when you meet them at a party...
 - composites of social roles,

- student, young adult, worker, Giants fan, etc.
- whose identity and behavior depend on the current social context
- identity in a sense does not exist outside of specific social contexts
 - Robbins: “nobody is anybody except in relation to somebody”
- Examples
 - in Robbins:
 - Gitskan naming
 - Japan
 - 16th century Mixtec personhood involved membership in a group that is determined by one’s date of birth (Monaghan & Just pp. 135-136)
 - You belonged to one of twenty types, based on day of birth
 - All of the types were thought necessary for a complete society
 - they had different general occupations and status
 - Identity was partially in terms of roles and social relations of these groups
 - similar to people who take astrological Zodiac signs very seriously: a key part of who you are and how others relate to you is determined by the moment you happened to be born
 - More typically: Dou Donggo personhood is determined in part by social relations (Monaghan & Just pp. 71-74)
 - identity is made up of membership in a criss-crossing set of social groups
 - kin groups, residential groups, etc.
 - Elder to La Ninde (the guy who supposedly assaulted ina Mone in the case earlier this semester):
 - “You think you belong to yourself, but you don’t! You are owned by your parents, you are owned by your kinsfolk, you are owned by your village, you are owned by God. You can’t just do as you please!”
 - Dou Donggo persons are not autonomous individuals,
 - but rather persons that are nodes in networks of relationships...
- the concept of personhood in the US more on the “egocentric” side
 - we generally think that persons are
 - autonomous,
 - individual,
 - responsible for self
 - identity is internal, not fundamentally part of an external social context
 - so much so that we
 - tend to cut ourselves loose from our parents
 - and our parents push us out to achieve our identities on our own
 - value success in life mainly if it is achieved by our own efforts
 - without help from the family, government, etc.
 - the “self-made man”
 - so much so that people tend to insist that they achieved success independently
 - downplaying the help they have gotten by being born into a well-off family, getting subsidized student loans and education, etc.

- this concept of independent identity is part of our ideal culture
 - how it is supposed to be, how we say it works
- but is it so in our real culture?
 - isn't part of your identity also tied to groups you belong to by little or no choice of your own?
 - family
 - gender
 - social race
 - ethnicity
 - US citizenship or lack of it
- Point: identity is best understood as a combination of egocentric and sociocentric aspects
 - independent, autonomous identity with permanent qualities
 - *and* identity comprised of one's position in social networks
 - different cultures emphasize one or the other relatively more
- How are individual identities constructed and maintained? How do you establish who you are?
- individual identities are created and maintained by social processes
 - some aspects of identity are chosen by the person
 - working with what Robbins calls an “identity toolbox” of existing culturally constructed categories
 - from which individuals choose some and reject others
 - culturally defined categories of identities
 - student, athlete, nerd, gangster, theater person, preppie, stoner, “mook”, etc.
 - and “tools” used to establish these categories
 - where you hang out
 - your choice among known, recognized styles of clothes
 - the music you listen to
 - phrases you do or don't say, etc.
 - these categories communicate your desired identity to others
 - some aspects of identity are determined by others
 - how others classify you
 - how others react to your performance of the culturally constructed roles
 - other people's responses affect your own perception of yourself
 - if people say you are smart, or act like you are attractive, you will start to feel that is part of your identity
 - if they react negatively to you,
 - you may incorporate that into your identity,
 - or resist it by changing how you present yourself
 - your identity is created by a feedback between the cultural cues you present and how people respond to them
- Identity usually involves
 - gender
 - we will look at gender more carefully next time
 - social race (in many, but not all, societies)

- as we have discussed a bit before
- ethnicity
 - another socially constructed identity category
- kinship, birth or descent
 - as in the Indian caste system, where people are (were) born into certain groups with specified roles
 - or any society where some families are wealthier than others, more politically connected than others, etc.
 - Rockefellers, Kennedys, Hatfields or McCoys; etc.
 - Hatfields and McCoys were two extended families in Kentucky and West Virginia
 - Had a famous, long-term feud from 1878 to 1891 (13 years)
 - Started with McCoys fighting for the Union and Hatfields for the Confederates; disputes over land, theft of a pig, led to a murder; then conflict over a woman,
 - eventually arrests, then a night massacre, then more arrests, trials, and an execution: 9 killed overall, plus 1 hung
 - identity as a Hatfield or a McCoy in those years was a life or death matter
- age
 - you treat people differently depending on their age
 - age: child, teenager, young adult, middle-aged, elderly...
 - when born: “baby boomers” vs. “Generation X”, etc.
 - many African cultures have explicit “**age sets**”
 - every male born in a certain range of several years is a member of a given “age set”
 - members of the same age set feel solidarity with each other, connectedness, share similar experiences, tend to support each other, etc.
- Some aspects of identity are genuinely individual
 - personality, abilities, interests, idiosyncrasies
- but many aspects of identity involve membership in existing cultural categories (part of Robbins’ “identity toolbox”)
 - these categories themselves are not “out there”, but are culturally constructed
 - our culture arbitrarily specifies that certain features are appropriate to use in categorizing people’s identity,
 - and arbitrarily defines others as irrelevant to identity
- for example, we arbitrarily do *not* typically categorize people by
 - right or left handedness
 - yet in medieval France, lefthandedness supposedly indicated that one was a witch – an identity with severe consequences!
 - day of the week on which you were born
 - yet as we saw, the 16th century Mixtec categorized everyone by which day of the 20-day month they were born on
 - to them this was an obvious and essential feature of identity
 - there were 18 months of 20 days each, covering 360 of the 365 days in a year
 - 5 days every year did not fit into any month, and did not have the standard names

- the day of birth was so central to identity among the Mixtec in the 16th century that people born in the five-day year-end period without these named days had no normal identity!
 - they were said to be worthless
 - not even to have a real physical existence, so if they got ill, they were not treated
- height
 - which is why the song “Short People” by Randy Newman was funny:
 - it treated height as a legitimate way to categorize people
 - that is, it treated short people as a social category, when we do not normally categorize people that way
 - what is this song really about?
- these are not deemed relevant to identity in our culture
- yet in other cultures, they might be
 - Yale university is made up of 12 residential colleges. At Yale, the first question when freshmen meet is “Which college you are in?”
 - despite most people being assigned randomly to a college, one’s college immediately become a major part of one’s identity
 - yet totally irrelevant to anyone but another Yale student
 - college membership is a completely arbitrary, culturally constructed category
 - yet it was essential to categorizing people’s identities
 - by the way, this is no accident. From the Yale admissions website: “Before arriving as a freshman each student is randomly assigned to one of the twelve residential colleges, giving Yalies a built-in community from the moment they arrive. Most Yalies quickly become convinced that their residential college is the best...”
- **othering**: establishing identity by contrast to some other group
 - defining others as different in order to define ourselves by what we are not
 - emphasizing the importance of the difference between the groups
 - *they* have a distinctly different identity from *us* - usually not a positive one
 - emphasizes or creates solidarity in one’s own group, in opposition to the other
 - example: Berkeley students versus Stanford students
 - example: US citizens vs. “illegal aliens”
 - lumping and describing the “others” like this is a way for the speaker to define his/her own group by contrast
 - implies that “aliens” don’t belong here, take “our” jobs, are under-educated...
 - while “we citizens” are legitimately here, we deserve those jobs, we are well-educated...”
 - “we citizens” have much in common, which contrasts with “those others”
- What specific practices teach or establish identity?
 - one kind of practice that establishes identity is a **rite of passage**: a ritual that marks and produces a change in an individual’s identity
 - (“rite” is an old-fashioned word for “ritual”; it is not related to “right”)
 - Examples of rites of passage

- baptism: transition from virtually pre-human infant in the natural, pre-cultural state to human infant accepted by God and Church
- high school graduation, university graduation: transition from student to educated adult
- military boot camp: transition from nonviolent, independent-minded civilian to violent, obedient soldier
- marriage: transition from independent youth to married adult with responsibilities towards another person and two families
- funeral: transition from living person to memory
- coming of age: The classic, prototypical kind of rite of passage: transition from childhood to adulthood
 - quinceñera, debutante's ball, etc.
 - bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah
 - Jewish boys become responsible for following commandments at bar mitzvah at 13
 - Jewish girls at bat mitzvah, age 12
 - circumcision, as in Saitoti reading
 - fattening for marriage, as in Simmons reading
- idealized pattern of rite of passage
 - 1. **separation** from previous identity
 - 2. **transition**
 - **liminal state** or **liminality**: state of being between states, right on the line, not in any of the normal categories
 - often a difficult or uncomfortable state, since the normal cultural rules apply to people in known identities, not to those who don't fit into any identity
 - a person in a liminal state is not quite in society or this world
 - may be more able to experience the supernatural world, as in shamans
 - people in liminal states are often seen as dangerous, unclean, abnormal
 - 3. **incorporation** into the new identity
 - different rites of passage emphasize different parts of this idealized sequence
 - Rites of passage often (but not always) involve groups
 - shared experience of liminality can create strong bonds and group solidarity
 - membership in the group that was initiated together or underwent liminal experiences together becomes part of one's identity
 - African age sets, college graduating classes, military units
- Consider how the 3 stages work in some examples:
 - example: Maasai reading about Tepilit Ole Saitoti
 - how does this fit with the ideal pattern above?
 - does it work to create adult identity out of juvenile identity?
 - Note that a group of boys prepare and go through it together
 - membership in this group means an intense shared experience
 - membership in that particular group of initiates becomes a key part of their subsequent identity
 - preparation is separation from old identity
 - collecting feathers, wax, honey for beer, etc.

- three days before, discards all his belongings and is shaved: more separation from previous identity
- building tension is also separation, building into a liminal state
 - sister and others withdraw their support
 - recently circumcised warriors ritually ridicule him
- circumciser splashes white paint on his face
 - marking him as in a special, liminal state
- gets gifts of cattle immediately afterwards
 - starting into the new identity, but not there yet: still in a special, liminal state
- two weeks of recovery: liminality
- now an "initiate": still a liminal state
 - part of a group of other boys who were also recently circumcised
 - hunt birds to make feather headdresses
 - use blunt wax arrows to shoot at girls
 - wander around being feasted and well treated
 - but considered unclean, must use sticks to eat food without touching it
 - being considered unclean is a classic sign of liminality
 - people avoid too much contact with those in liminal states
 - they are not quite normal, a bit unsettling or dangerous
- when healed, discard the special cloaks, headdresses, etc.
- ceremony of shaving head to become a "newly shaven warriors", Irkeleani
 - finally, incorporation into the new identity as a warrior and an adult
 - now proud, happy, considered responsible
 - now allowed to have sex
- example: Efik (Nigerian) fattening rite
 - how does this fit with the ideal pattern above?
 - Separation
 - Transition is an extended liminal state: isolation, special decorations, white face paint
 - Physical change; psychological change (training, indoctrination, initiation, enculturation)
 - Incorporation into new identity:
 - Ekombi dance on emerging
 - often immediate a wedding – another rite of passage into yet another identity...