

Can people choose  
their identity?



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## Can People Choose their Identity? Discuss in Relation to the Media

This question raises two issues that are currently at the forefront of political and social debate – namely those of publicly displaying a belonging to a particular culture or society, and the ideological notion of choice. In addressing the question of choosing our cultural identity we have to establish what we understand by the term ‘ cultural identity’ and, secondly, if we (as individuals) are able to freely choose an identity. For the purpose of this discussion I will attempt to unpack what is meant by the catch-all term ‘ cultural identity; and also if it is something that can be ascribed to a person or if, indeed, a cultural identity is indelibly inscribed.

Of course the idea that an individual is born to a certain set of social and cultural values has not been taken seriously since the advent of cognitive and behavioural theories of human socialisation. In fact use of the term national identity had been appropriated to cover these reductive descriptions. The debate surrounding cultural identity is often conflated with that of the construction of national identity, and in some cases a cultural identity comes from an association with a specific national identity, for example Irishness with a rigid set of conventions that determine the individual as different from being English, or even British.

The words culture and nation can have wide ranging definitions depending on the context in which they are used. They are complex terms in their own right, and Raymond Williams has written a definition of what culture is, he states ‘ the complexity, ..., is not finally in the word but in the problems which its variations of use significantly indicate’ (Williams 1976: 92). In order

to set the terms of reference for this discussion a cultural identity is more fluid than a national identity. Anderson has stated in his definition of a nation, 'it [a nation] is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (Anderson 1991: 6). The nation state is imagined by its population as it is not possible for individuals to know all the members of that state, it therefore only exists as an imaginary construct within the individual.

The human individual is a complex mixture of social and behavioural experiences and these factors are often obtained through socialisation within the family; social influences gained through friends and school; gender; and influence from various forms of mass media.

First and foremost it is familial and social influences that determine our sense of identity. It is through the primary socialisation from our parents that a person develops a sense of the self and with it a consciousness of who and what they are. An individual begins to position her/himself in relation to other people who they know and have contact with. This environment is similar to that observed by Bourdieu who used the term 'habitus'. He wrote 'the habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the, system of classification...of these practices' (Bourdieu 1984: 170). This definition returns to the relationship between class and capital in the construction of a sense of the self, and the spaces occupied by that individual. The habitus can describe a place or space that a person feels comfortable inhabiting on a regular basis. For instance as a student I feel that my habitus is the university. This is a place where I feel that I belong to a wider community (of students) who have common interests and goals in

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their lives. The habitus may also be a location in which social conformity is necessary in order to be a part of that community. I am thinking here of dressing and talking in a certain way, acting or behaving.

The habitus applies equally to gang culture. These are sub-cultures that have their own hierarchies and rules that must be followed in order for a member to remain a part of it. The fact that many of these rules are dysfunctional, for example initiation into that gang through violent or anti-social behaviour, is irrelevant. Bike gangs such as *Hells Angels* display these rigid rules whereby the identity of a member is determined by the wearing of group's name along with the Hells Angels logo. Such has been the spread of this culture it is globally recognised as indicative of a particular cultural identity enjoyed by its members. This type of culture is typified by an association with certain objects, and in the case of Hells Angels motorcycles are the outward unifying signifiers. Members of this sub-culture have chosen this as their cultural identity - their machines, clothes, tattoos define who they are. And as with many sub-cultures membership is an act of public opposition to the dominant culture from which they emerged.

Gang culture provides us with some easy to spot visual indicators of belonging to a particular culture. Other forms of cultural identity can be harder to unravel without providing a reductive account of that culture, for instance one based on race or religion. The most important factor that affects cultural identity is the mass media (film and television).

The visual media have become an intrinsic part of the way we live our lives - mainly through the consumption of goods and services. Tomlinson (1989)

has referred to a diachronic and synchronic way in which culture has developed over time. The former refers to a linear, historical form of evolution whereby one thing follows another. However in the contemporary image saturated world synchronic cultural development has taken place. Images are used in order to make meaning. One image relates to another but not necessarily in a linear and consequential manner. Styles can then be forged that are based on samples from other styles, resulting in meaning being derived from pure simulacra (Baudrillard 1982). This notion of the image breaks the linkage between sign and signifier and consequently changes the way in which we make meaning from images. The argument states that in a world dominated by signifiers (images) the concept of truth becomes meaningless as there is no such thing as a single truth or reality, a person can take what they want from images and that becomes a truth personal to the individual.

In this way rap culture has taken this direction. It has taken other forms of representation in popular culture (such as soul music, rapping, reggae/dance hall) and produced something that has been socially radical for African Americans but has now become a global cultural identity for many people; an identity disseminated through television and film. In some ways the music has been appropriated by social groups to provide a cement for their identity. This has been evidenced by the use of jewellery, clothing, and speech. However although this is more of a general presence in social settings it is not true to say that rap is a cultural identity - it forms a part in the construction of a cultural identity, an identity that is also in opposition to mainstream white, male dominated culture. But can a white, Anglo-Saxon

person be a part of this identity? Performers have tried, for example *Vanilla Ice* and *Eminem*, but they are active in the production and consumption of a good to be bought and sold. It is not the culture of rap, but the image (or rather the sound) that is being sold. The distinction between a cultural identity and a marketable product becomes strained at this point. The role of television and film in promoting products (music, clothes, cosmetics) and something that has a cultural resonance to an audience reduces an identity to a mere commodity.

Gender roles are also affected by the adoption of certain forms of cultural identity. The rap/hip-hop culture has been criticised for the way in which women are portrayed. In quite vulgar ways women are portrayed as chattels and appendages to be worn like jewellery. This can be seen in music videos, lyrics in songs, and the language used by people who adopt this kind of lifestyle. But this is not only about representation, this kind of behaviour from women, as sex objects, is expected and it is a role that some women are expected to play out. So if females are to be a part of this identity they have to conform to a set of conventions that are regressive in their treatment as individuals and further compounds their status as secondary to men. In areas where particular cultural activities are dominant, then there is not necessarily the option of choice. If one lives in that community then one must behave in the way expected or be shunned by your contemporaries.

The mass media are implicit in a process of 'cultural imperialism' (Tomlinson 1989) and promoting forms of street culture is a further extension of this process. Tomlinson put forward the argument that the global proliferation of television through satellite broadcasting and the selling of programme

output at below cost has resulted in a homogenisation of culture throughout the world. Television can be accessed anywhere in the world and the social and moral values contained within this programming are spread to areas of the world where it previously did not have any influence. Not only does cultural imperialism pose a threat to indigenous cultures but selling programming cheaply makes it difficult for national broadcasters to make their own material, produced and performed by local people. The idea, then, of choosing your cultural identity is obscured by the influence of international mass media through the promotion of music, clothes, video games, and popular cultural forms like film.

Sport is one example of how cultural identity can be promoted and displayed in public, but it too raises some anomalies. During the recent cricket matches between England and Pakistan a reporter from BBC Radio 4 interviewed a group of British Asians and asked them who they were supporting. All of them supported Pakistan in the cricket, but then qualified it by saying they would support the England football team. Maybe this kind of poll shows more of people wishing to support favourites than any kind of partisan interest. However it does reveal that children of people from other countries who were born and educated in their adopted country show some ambivalence towards so called cultural identity. This identity can then be forged through the influence of mass media. In the time since Tomlinson wrote about cultural imperialism the volume and choice of television output has risen. There are many more niche channels catering for specific interests; international channels can be received such as those on the Asian Star satellite network. Access to this variety of material gives opportunity to

sample images from different parts of the world, and children who have never left their adopted country experience sights and language vicariously and not just from their parents.

In a sense there is some element of choice in selecting a cultural identity, but that is also contingent upon one's own social and ethnic origins. However the definitions of the terms culture and nation dictate the complexity of the subsequent debate. The sociological study performed by Bourdieu (1984) comes closest within the limitations of this discussion. Cultural identity can also be seen as a particular life-style, one that is fuelled by the influences of the mass media, but also one that is influenced by social class, ethnicity, and the interests of capital. Indeed there are elements of choice to be made within particular life-styles but cultural identity cannot be selected and commodified as if it exists in a catalogue.

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