

# Theories of identity



## **Introduction**

Who am I? What makes me the person I am today? We might have thought about these questions at least once in our life and yet, we are still figuring out the answer. To explain oneself about identity is not a simple task. A lot of internal and external factors should be considered in the making of our identity. Identity is important in our life as it represents how we are being accepted or rejected in a society. Is it the differences that brought us together in the world we live or the similarities? Basically, we as the species of Homo sapiens are made from the essence of biological structures. Our ancestors (Barker, 1999) are always becoming the parameter to determine ourselves as who we are as it indicates our origin and how we live our life since from the beginning of our descendant throughout the history as an ‘unchanging truth’ (Woodward, 1997: 12). This outlook of identity is supported by the essentialist theories, which suggested that identity is seen as a set of fixed characteristics, which do not change over the time (Woodward, 1997). In understanding the sexuality and gender identities, essentialism claims that our physical body sets a boundary of who we are and provide the basis of our identity (Woodward, 1997). However, does that mean it gives us the true meaning of identity? Every human being is so unique to one another. Even the biologically twin siblings have different DNAs and possess extremely opposite characters. This can lead us to the question, does our identities developed by the nature or against the nurture? As one’s identity of a member in a particular marginalized group is being undermined, it becomes a major turning point for the political movements (Woodward, 1997). It is argued by many theorists that identity can be seen in a wider perspective rather than the essentialist identities for example <https://assignbuster.com/theories-of-identity/>

identity as an ongoing process (Barker, 1999), identity as constructed with the ‘ natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established foundation’ (Hall, 1996: 2) and identity as social construction (Butler, 1990). Until today, the viewpoints of identity between the essentialist and non-essentialist remain collide in academics debates.

### **The Concepts of Essentialist Identity**

Identity is so crucial in one’s life and exists at many stages, as it may be located in the ‘ global, national, local and personal levels’ (Woodward, 1997: 1) Without identity, one might feel being estranged within the society, treated differently from the others and that could bring problems afterwards. But does by possessing an identity is adequate enough to be considered as part of the society? What kind of identity is recognized as ‘ the one’, which fits within?

In his article, ‘ He moves about in Wonderland: Theories of identity and strategic essentialism’, Eduardo Barrera suggested essentialist identities are ‘ theoretically dead’ and non-essentialist identities are ‘ exhausted’. He criticized that essentialist identities are often characterized by ‘ stability, that is, it already implied a fixed identity’. He prefigures this critique in Alice’s response to the Caterpillar and his implicitly Cartesian question taken from Alice in the Wonderland story:

“ Who are you?” said the Caterpillar. Alice replied, rather shyly “ I-I hardly know, Sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.” “ What do you mean by that?” said the Caterpillar, sternly. “ Explain yourself!”

“ I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid Sir,” said Alice, “ because I’m not myself, you see.”

Here in this example, it can be understood that the Caterpillar is representing the essentialism where he seeks to find the fixed identity which ‘ do not alter across the time’ (Woodward, 1997: 11) in Alice’s answer. Alice on the other hand represents the non-essentialism where she explained that she has been changed several times, which means her identity is unstable and thus it is hard for her to identify herself. She focuses on the differences of the characteristics (Woodward, 1997) she had across the time. This is only an example to reflect one aspect of essentialism concept of identity.

Apart from this, essentialism claims on different foundation as such ‘ political movements can seek some certainty in the affirmation of identity through appeals either to the fixed truth of shared past or to biological truths’ (Woodward, 1997: 13). That shows identity is viewed as ‘ historical truth about identity’ (Woodward, 1997: 19) passed from one generation to another within the culture and across the centuries without any changes taking place. For example, the Chinese people have been using chopsticks as their utensils for eating purposes since the era of its Emperor more than hundreds of years ago and even now in the twenty-first century, where everything has been modernized, they are still using those utensils as part of their eating style. That is how the Chinese consume their food and that makes their identity as the Chinese remains the same over the time. But does by using chopsticks as your eating style is enough to make you a real Chinese? Then what do we call those people for example from the Middle-East, who use chopsticks as well but they have nothing to do with the Chinese, historically

or biologically? Are they considered to have the Chinese identity? Woodward (1997: 19) in her example of English identity questioned “ Could there be one, authentic English past which can be used to support and define ‘ Englishness’ as a late-twentieth-century identity?” If identity according to essentialism is fixed and transhistorical, then whose history is more valid to conform the identity? For instance, the history of Dutch as one of the colonial powers who conquered a few parts of the world but what about the history of those people who have been colonized? How the colonized people view or have the ideology of Dutch? Both views about the identity of Dutch are historically true but whose ‘ historical truth about identity counts’ (Woodward, 1997: 19)? As Woodward (1997: 20) mentioned, “ Histories are contested, not least in the political struggle for recognition of identities”. The recognition of identities is continually being explored by looking at the differences in the concepts of cultural identity and seeking the traits of authentication identity under the same past. This is supported by Stuart Hall in his article, ‘ Cultural identity and diaspora’ (1990) where he acknowledges two main key points of thinking about cultural identity. The first one exhibits the position where a community try to find the truth about its past in the same shared history and culture which then be represented through languages, symbols, artifacts, discourse and so on. The second concept of cultural identity as Hall suggests it as ‘ a matter of “ becoming” as well as of “ being”’. It is noted that Hall does not deny that identity has its past but this kind of past endures continuous alteration and that we eventually recreate of what it is known as the historical identities. This recreation of identities may vary from one another and takes a long time to reach from one structure to another and occurs within the culture. Hall argues that in order to recognize

the difference, the meaning is never fixed or complete. Thus, there is always a fluidity of identity (Woodward, 1997: 21).

Interestingly, Chris Barker (1990: 3) also suggests the same idea about identity in which he quoted, “ By identity project is meant the idea that identity is not fixed but created and built on, always in process, a moving towards rather than an arrival.” This project is based on what we think of our identity of the past that reflects in our present time and afterwards make us think of how we would like to be in the future. For example, it is clear that Asian teenage girls are more reserve and polite as it is what they should become according to their ancestors tradition which has been passed from mother to daughter. In certain point, they cannot challenge or give out their opinion against the elders in their family and if they do, they are considered to be rude. In simple words, they are not allowed to voice out their opinion unless they are becoming adults and hold a responsibility. However, that fixed identity of Asian teenage girls is less likely to be seen in today’s society. It is undeniable that in certain part of Asia, this kind of identity is still being practice but there is some progress in another part of Asia that this identity has evolved where in certain families, the teenage girls’ voice is also being considered important. Besides, they are even encouraged to speak up their mind when there is a situation in the family. This kind of new identity might be adopted and influenced from the television through globalization as Barker (1990) points out identity is becoming more complex when we have more resources. That is Barker (1990: 4) suggests, “ The process of globalization provides us with just an increased level of cultural resources.” Though television might not be the main factor that can construct and

change one identity, it is unquestionably that it gives us the ideology of how one can have some particular identity for particular reason by representing the meanings and messages of the others (Barker, 1990). We tend to make sense of what we see in the television with our real daily life and television has been a major resource since then. It is therefore the concept of cultural identity according to Barker (1990: 7) “ Does not refer to a universal, fixed, or essential identity but to a contingent, historically and culturally specific social construction to which language is central.” Further, identity can also be argue as not a single but multiple identities one can have where it is being ‘ cross-cut and dislocate’ (Barker, 1990: 8) within time and space. For example, the black identity referred to essentialism would be those people who are born in Africa but what about the people who their national identity is not African but American or British? The black American or the black British might have different experience from the white American and British where their identities are much more complex and vary. Thus the meaning of American-ness, Britishness, blackness and so forth are not subject to be fixed and single but instead it is ‘ a process that will never finished or completed’ (Barker, 1990: 28). Identity can be viewed as different forms of categorizations such as nationality, gender, social status, race, religion, ethnicity and many more. Indeed, there is no specific ‘ essence’ to what identity is (Barker, 1990: 28).

### **Sexuality and Gender Identity**

Identity according to essentialist is seen as being inherited and passed from one generation to another. It is made up from the internal element rather than the external influences. That is, what runs in your veins is the primary

fundamental nature of becoming who you are. It suggests we are how we are because of the genetic composition we undergone when we were in the womb (Woodward, 1997).

Generally, in our common sense knowledge we see our body as a ‘ natural, biological entity’ (Woodward, 1997: 73). In this point of view, naturalistic claim that our body is simply base on biological unit in which the structure of one self and society are founded (Woodward, 1997). The sex of a newborn child is determined whether ‘ a penis is present at birth’ (Woodward, 1997: 75). It is the male sex chromosome, XY, which form the penis. If the ‘ Y’ component is not there, then it will turn out to be a vagina, which comprise of XX component known as the female sex chromosome. When the body reached puberty, the hormonal changes will take place governed by the sex chromosome genotype and develop the sex characteristics of our body (Woodward, 1997). However, the external factors such as the lifestyle can also contribute to the development of sexual characteristics (Woodward, 1997). Woodward (1997: 73) stated, “ Naturalistic views hold that inequalities are not socially constructed, contingent and reversible but are given by the determining power of the biological body.” This lay on the matter of sexuality and gender inequalities (Woodward, 1997). Giving a situation, women are always being seen as weak and vulnerable because biologically, their body system is structured with the hormones that have strong relations to emotions and feelings. The estrogen level in female body which is higher than the estrogen level in male body has always become the reason for that. Thus, in nature, women are always being treated unequally as compared to men. To one extent, women are seen or deem as dirt.



Besides, women also have been located in a very low status. For example, it is always accepted for men to be playful and ‘sleeping around’ with women but it is always wrong for women to do the same thing because as expected, it is not in the women’s nature to have that kind of behavior. Instead, for women who do the same thing like man in that matter, they will be considered as cheap or even worst will be labeled as the slut. It is normal for men to have that behavior but a bad thing for women to do so. Men on the other hand, are viewed as strong and dominant, again, by the nature of the biological system men possessed. Their hormone which is the male hormone known as testosterone (Woodward, 1997), somehow seem to relate them less with ‘vulnerable emotions’ and focuses more on the physical ability. Physically, the body differences between men and women do exist and cannot be denied thus make men look or perceived as more stronger than women. Both female and male have the testosterone and estrogen hormones (Woodward, 1997: 75) but the level of differences of each hormone divides the obvious characteristics of female and male. Thus, would it be possible for both sexes to overlap? Does the overlapping process will establish the sexual and gender identity of one? Hence, do sex and gender constructed by the biological process or by social construction? As Butler (1990: 9) argues, “Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-identity formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the casual result of sex nor seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex.” That is, whatever sex the children had when they

were born, that does not guarantee what gender they may become in their adolescence stage and finally adulthood. The journalist, author and novelist John Colapinto tells the true story of John/Joan case in the book entitled, ' As nature made him: The boy who was raised as a girl':

David Reimer was one of the most famous patients in the annals of medicine. Born in 1965 in Winnipeg, he was 8 months old when a doctor used an electrocautery needle, instead of a scalpel, to excise his foreskin during a routine circumcision, burning off his entire penis as a result. David's parents (farm kids barely out of their teens) were referred to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, home of the world's leading expert in gender identity, psychologist Dr. John Money, who recommended a surgical sex change, from male to female. David's parents eventually agreed to the radical procedure, believing Dr. Money's claims that this was their sole hope for raising a child who could have heterosexual intercourse-albeit as a sterile woman with a synthetic vagina and a body feminized with estrogen supplements.

For Dr. Money, David was the ultimate experiment to prove that nurture, not nature, determines gender identity and sexual orientation-an experiment all the more irresistible because David was an identical twin. His brother, Brian, would provide the perfect matched control, a genetic clone raised as a boy.

David's infant " sex reassignment" was the first ever conducted on a developmentally normal child. (Money had helped to pioneer the procedure in hermaphrodites.) And according to Money's published reports through the 1970s, the experiment was a success. The twins were happy in their

assigned roles: Brian a rough and tumble boy, his sister Brenda a happy little girl.

The reality was far more complicated. At age 2, Brenda angrily tore off her dresses. She refused to play with dolls and would beat up her brother and seize his toy cars and guns. In school, she was relentlessly teased for her masculine gait, tastes, and behaviors. She complained to her parents and teachers that she felt like a boy; the adults-on Dr. Money's strict orders of secrecy-insisted that she was only going through a phase. Meanwhile, Brenda's guilt-ridden mother attempted suicide; her father lapsed into mute alcoholism; the neglected Brian eventually descended into drug use, pretty crime, and clinical depression.

When Brenda was 14, a local psychiatrist convinced her parents that their daughter must be told the truth. David later said about the revelation: " Suddenly it all made sense why I felt the way I did. I wasn't some sort of weirdo. I wasn't crazy."

David soon embarked on the painful process of converting back to his biological sex. A double mastectomy removed the breasts that had grown as a result of estrogen therapy; multiple operations, involving grafts and plastic prosthesis, created an artificial penis and testicles. Regular testosterone injections masculinised his musculature. Yet David was depressed over what he believed was the impossibility of his ever marrying. He twice attempted suicide in his early 20s.

David did eventually marry a big-hearted woman named Jane, but his dark moods persisted. He was plagued by shaming memories of the frightening

annual visits to Dr. Money, who used pictures of naked adults to “reinforce” Brenda’s gender identity and who pressed her to have further surgery on her “vagina.”

When David was almost 30, he met Dr. Milton Diamond, a psychologist at the University of Hawaii and a longtime rival of Dr. Money. A biologist by training, Diamond had always been curious about the fate of the famous twin, especially after Money mysteriously stopped publishing follow-ups in the late 1970s. Through Diamond, David learned that the supposed success of his sex reassignment had been used to legitimize the widespread use of infant sex change in cases of hermaphrodites and genital injury. Outraged, David agreed to participate in a follow-up by Dr. Diamond, whose myth-shattering paper (co-authored by Dr. Keith Sigmundson) was published in *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* in March 1997 and was featured on front pages across the globe.

This is a story about a boy who didn’t have the choice to choose what gender he supposed he’d like to have. It is clear that the female sex characteristics as well as the gender identity were asserted and injected into his body in order to change him from a boy to a girl not just physically but mentally. He had to undergo psychological process to affirm him that he is a girl and the way his parents treated him as a girl. However, his body kept on resisting those projections. It turned out to be the other way round and everything went wrong. He even experienced identity crisis where he felt that he was trapped in someone else’s body but could not find the solutions for that entire crisis he had. He went through all the ‘construction process’ without even had any slightest idea that he was born a boy. Hence, this case is

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different from the case were the transgendered, who undergone surgical treatment to transform their sex, by chance, had the choice to choose in which they make their own decision and thus socially constructed their identity by that process. It is remarkable that this case is relevance in supporting the essentialism theories about identity explicitly about sex and gender identity. The social construction process had failed to shape him as a girl. Instead, when he reached puberty and when he knew the truth about his original sex identity, he finally can appear to relate and make sense of the nature of his body. Referring to this case, the question of ‘ nature vs. nurture’ has finally found the answer.

### **Identity Politics**

According to Woodward (1997: 24), “ Identity politics involve claiming one’s identity as a member of an oppressed or marginalized group as a political point of departure and thus identity becomes a major factor in political mobilization.” The hope and aspirations for these groups of oppressed people lies in the new social movements that have been emerged in the 1960s in the West where they can either celebrate their uniqueness as well as analyze any particular oppression occurred (Woodward, 1997). In understanding this uniqueness, it engages biological trait of identity and also the historical fixed truth (Woodward, 1997). For example, how many women are there who been given positions as CEOs in companies or at least in the top hierarchical management? Mostly, the men dominate these positions in corporate world as well as in the public service. Why does this situation occur? It is true that there are women who possess these high statuses but still, it is just the minority. Is it because women’s biological role as mothers

which makes them intrinsically more soft and serene (Woodward, 1997) become the grounds for men to suppress women's right in holding those positions? Feminism might have been fighting for women's right about this issue since ages. In contradiction within feminism itself, there is also Black civil rights where they defend against the acknowledgment of women's assumption in the movement categorization of women where that category is seen as white women (Woodward, 1997). Besides, sexual politics gives impact in the life of gay and lesbian as well. As they are perceived as 'immoral and abnormal' (Woodward, 1997) by society, it is difficult for those who openly declared their sexual orientation, to be given a particular job fairly or even accepted within peers or colleagues or even worst, in the family itself. In fact, they have to keep their sex orientation a secret and struggling in their daily life not to expose their true identity while the more so called normal heterosexual can easily and openly live their life as opposed to homosexual.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is no clear-cut definition of what identity is. It can be seen there are arguments from two distinctive points of views in between the essentialism and the non-essentialism. There are two key points from essentialism perspective. First, identity is naturally biological fixed and seen as biology entity one possesses. Second, identity is culturally unchanging across the time within the history that brings the concept of belongingness. Non-essentialism on the other hand argues that identity is more fluid and contingent. Thus, identity is seen more likely to be constructed within the society as an ongoing process. It is the byproduct of many interventions and

‘ intersection of different components’ (Woodward, 1997: 28). However as Woodward (1997: 28) argues, “ Contingent identity poses problems for social movements as political projects, especially in asserting the solidarity of those who belong.” In determining one’s sexuality and gender, it is crucial that every decision made fits within the capability of oneself. That is, the body belongs to whom it possess. It is not in anyone’s position to decide who should become ‘ male or female’ but lies within the owner of the body. The consequences of both theories may give great impact in our life. According to Freund’s work (1982, 1990) focuses on the body’s inferior in, “ There is evidence to suggest that being in stressful situations, which contradict our sense of who we are, can have neuro-hormonal consequences that adversely affect blood pressure and our immune systems. Overwhelming emotional episodes such as anger and hostility, anxiety and depression, and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness have also been linked to damaging physiological changes – primarily concerned with our nervous and endocrine systems (the latter referring to glands that secrete hormones directly into the bloodstream)” (Woodward, 1997: 85). This, can relate to the case of John/Joan, where he at the end of his life, committed suicide for the burden he carried by going through different phases of gender confusions in his life.

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