

"in defense of masks" by kenneth gergen essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



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“ In Defense of Masks”, by Kenneth Gergen regards that it is not possible for humans to adequately find a coherent self identity without an aftermath.

Gergen states, “ to the extent that they do, they many experience severe emotional distress” when trying to do so (172). He refers to Erik Erickson, a psychologist who speaks about how self-alienation can result due to the pressures of society to individuals with various masks of identity.

Determined to find exactly what altered masks can do to an identity, an experiment involving 18 female college students and a clinical trainee was conducted. Gergen’s intentions were to “ find the factors of an individual’s choice of mask and how outward appearances and inward feelings of personal identity affect masks” (172). The main source of such analysis was the students’ self-evaluations after answering questions regarding their background and about themselves. With the interviewer showing signs of approval or disapproval when answering, led to strong influencing of the young students’ image of themselves.

If the student received a positive reaction from the interviewer, she gained confidence while when receiving a negative reaction, they slowly began to change some of their answers to evoke the positive feedback from the interviewer. The overall conclusion of the experiment was “ that it was easy to modify the mask of identity, but it says little about underlying feelings” (173). Another experiment was conducted with the connection between a motive and a mask. The common link was the ideal of “ approval-seeking”, individuals throughout society are willing to add and drop certain attributes

of them, whether its personality traits or physical characteristics in order to, successful achieve others' acceptance. Carl Rogers, one of Gergen's colleagues, describes human identity as " We are made of soft plastic, and molded by social circumstances" (173). Individuals have different self-presentations of themselves when they do not seek other's approval, verses when trying to. This is commonly seen in relationships such as, family, friends, lovers, co-workers, and acquaintances.

Gergen's thesis " I believe we must abandon the assumption that normal development, equips the individual with a coherent sense of identity" (174), signifies how one individual receives different perceptions of themselves by other people. In every relationship encountered, we learn something about ourselves that we did not know before. " The value that society places on a coherent identity is unwarranted and possibly detrimental" (174), this thought is exemplified through various examples of inner struggle when needing to live up to society's norms. A vegetarian will always worry about meat cravings, and how a spouse contemplates infidelity. Human lives consist of desiring to rebel against set norms of living and love and showing indifference when facing different passions, potentials, or selves. I agree with Gergen that we do have multiple selves and I see how it is that these several identities are evoked throughout our lives. Throughout the course of history, humans still constantly change even today we are still evolving.

Whether it is through technology, language, cultural, and society, we embrace the concept of enhancing. I believe just like Gergen that by having multiple selves, it is the only way to reach our full potential as individuals. To

reach such potential we must adopt different masks, whether it is actual physical or inward characteristics. Society today has set a pressure to those who " don't fit" the world we live in today. Especially in teenagers and young adults, the ideology of finding an singular identity is constantly shoved down their throats. As a young adult, I find myself still asking myself that question, " Who am I?" and I have come to understand that throughout the course of my life, I have become many things. I have different selves that I use for different circumstances, that I can never be just one mask. I often found myself frustrated because I thought that I needed to be one substantial identity.

This proves Gergen's thesis, " I doubt that people normally develop a coherent sense of identity, and believe that to the extent that they do, they may experience serve emotional distress" (172). By having several masks or selves, is how we are able to adapt to changing society. With these multiple masks we are able to achieve acceptance and know who we are as individuals. Throughout life we must adopt masks when facing different circumstances; it is through these masks that we see how we change as individuals. If we spend our lives trying to stick to one mask, we can find ourselves to feel lost, depressed, or invisible. Change is good; however we must still stay true to ourselves when using masks. They are a part of us as individuals but they are not us. Growing up in a generation with high expectations of identity that are constantly altering whether it's the latest trends, styles and even mind-set principles, can be over whelming. When

asked to describe one-self, we often are stuck thinking of what particular word could fully describe who we are as a person.

We have such a hard time of coming with just one word because there is no form of describing one's self. How we see ourselves, we may not want to be that the next day. "Looks can be deceiving" or "the first impressions are the most important" is commonly instilled in our mindset which it is true to some extent. Our work attire is different from our school attire, this is how our identities can be seen. The mask we have from work is somewhat different from our school mask. In her essay, "Reflections in the Facebook Mirror", Aimee Lee Ball addresses how people feel the necessity to belong in society. By using social networking such as Facebook, people often identify themselves by liking certain categories, posting certain status', or by "friending" certain people. The small and mere comment box that says "about me" says everything about a person, it is the self explanation and self exploration.

For example, Ball writes about Cesar Castillo, a well known surfer from Southern California. Castillo identifies as, "I surf, therefore I am" (200), self-identification leads to self-satisfaction because identity and assurance go hand in hand, if you are not certain about something, you will not fully embrace it. Not only is social networking a method of acceptance but also a form of self-advertisement. Ball makes reference to advice columnist E. Jean Carroll, who states "we're all into self-enchancement. We're so in love with ourselves." (190) as people we tend to sell ourselves in order to obtain what it is that we want. The most common mask motive in today's society is

physical appearance, we have engraved in all mindsets that how you look says everything about you, even more that you would say about yourself. Ted Polhemus' " Appearance Equals Identity", discusses how our outward appearance greatly affects we are as individuals and what masks we may have. Sociologist, Irving Goffman says that " our presentation of self, functions as a medium of expression" (202) through our hair styles, dress, footwear, makeup, social class, and other materialistic features we can effectively communicate who we are as a person.

It is through these physical characters that we can transmit ourselves without spoken language. When meeting someone for the first time, we tend to look our best, when displaying photo frames in our houses that are visible to all guests we choose the " best" ones in opinion. It is then through materials that we tend to hide behind which how we create a mask of appearance before the world. Due to our human nature we feel that we are categorized because of our identities. Everyone wants to feel like they belong and there is nothing wrong with that. The mask of our outer appearance is just a piece of whom we are. When we are confident with our outer image, we are most likely comfortable with our inner image. How we see ourselves is highly influenced on how others see us.

When the climax of self-confidence is reached, it is when we truly believe that we can do anything we set our mind too. That with the right tools of appearance and characteristics, we are the best. Gergen believes that by trying to focus on having one fixed identity causes limitation and frustration in oneself. We can often feel stuck in our lives, without these different

identities you can never truly reach our full potential. Sometimes a change in physical attributes, gives individuals another chance of having a life that they want. The idea of second chances would be destroyed if we just had one coherent self.

Works Cited

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