

To what extent can we form our own identities assignment

Sociology



Are our identities established through choice or constructed for us by society and what is expected of us in line with our gender, class and culture? Can we change our identities to fit in with how we want society to see us rather than how society expects to see us? Firstly we should not confuse personality with identity. Personality traits may be something we have in common with people we meet but identifying with a certain social group is something we choose to do usually as a result of the things we have in common.

Personality is categorised as an internal characteristic not a choice.

(Woodward 2004, p. 6) Identity is, on the whole, how we are seen by society.

Our identities are first formed by the initial factors that are present at birth alongside the society we are born into. This is based on several factors; gender being the most obvious of these. Other factors include skin colour, language and ethnicity. These factors are combined along with others to create what we come to know as 'ourselves', our identity. How we are perceived by others also forms part of our identity as it puts us into an identified social group.

How we see ourselves comes later as we develop our own sense of self. As we grow and become more self-aware our identity changes and we begin to mould ourselves developing our own personal identity. This is done through choices we make (agency) and through interaction with forces beyond our control (structure). When we meet new people we tend to question their identity to establish where or if we fit in with their social group. This inevitably includes looking for ways in which we are similar but also different. On occasion we won't have to ask questions as the badges people wear can answer these for us. In this situation we can establish an immediate

connection even if we have never met them before. Someone wearing a T-shirt bearing the logo of your favourite band would be someone you could connect with instantly regardless of any other factors of their identity.

(Woodward 2004, p6). We use symbols so as others will see us in the way we want them to. Hair colour or style will set us apart from some but also connect us to those we want to identify with. " We symbolise the sort of person we want others to think we are through the clothes we wear and the ways in which we behave". (Mead 1934, p12) Our careers also play an important role in the formation of our identity. In our choice of job we will associate with our colleagues, with whom we share a collective identity, working for the same cause and aiming for similar goals. This is another part of the agency that helps define our identities, the choices we make in the careers we take up and the geographical areas in which we work. The structures by which our identities are formed are beyond our control.

The culture into which we are born will be the foundations of our identity. As we advance in years and knowledge we have the choice to change aspects of our culture, therefore changing parts of our identity. The colour of our skin, age, ethnicity and class are some of the restrictions that will prevent us changing our identities completely. Gender is also a structured part of our identities from a legal aspect. Whilst someone may change their gender, the official documentation that records that persons existence will always state the gender under which they were born. (Woodward 2004, p10) Assuming the identity of a parent is also a choice we make, being a sibling, aunt, uncle or grandparent is a part of our identity over which we have no control. We can also take on different identities depending on the situation we are in at any

given time, socialising, working or in our own home environment. In conclusion we can have a degree of control over our identities if we so choose but there will always be constraints. We cannot choose our gender but we can make the decision to change how society sees that gender. Our sexuality will be decided by structure regardless of whether or not we choose to follow that assignment. We can change our religion and beliefs even our body's appearance but what and who we were born as will always remain the same by legal standards. Therefore we can make our own choices by pushing the boundaries but will always be restricted by social structure.

References Woodward K, Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Ethnicity. Chapter 1, Questions of Identity. London, Routledge/The Open University.