

Relationship between identity and employment



How important is the relationship between a person's occupation and his or her identity?

Within human social contact, many of the interactions we have presume a link between paid occupation and identity. Such a presumption extends not only to the identity of the individual in question but also to the notion of a collective identity: an identity shared by the individual and his or her co-workers. The income generated from our work and the way in which we distribute it – the lifestyle it affords us – all help to shape our identity.

However, there are other things which influence our identity; work being only one of them, and so establishing a causal link between occupation and identity can sometimes be difficult. When thinking about our identity within the economic framework of employment we must also consider the notion of representation: our feelings about our occupation and the money and lifestyle it affords us are shaped by the way others see us, and what they have. ^[1]

Our identity is an encompassing concept that influences and is influenced by our relationships with other people. This logic dictates that our identities must be closely tied, in some way, to what we do, and how we interpret what we do in the context of our relationships. There is a close connection between doing and identity and the use of language in the creation of meaning and understanding of this ^[2]. Piaget ^[3] and Kagan ^[4] illustrate how children learn about the world through doing; how the realisation that we can act upon the environment contributes to our sense of self, and the realisation that we are separate from our environment. Children, therefore, come to realise that their actions have social meaning and that their approval as

individuals is in direct correlation to what they do: we begin to learn about ourselves as individuals and as members of social groups. As we develop our identity is shaped by our competencies, especially in comparison with others, as well as our social standing and the expectations placed upon us ^[5]. As adults, our identity becomes goal-oriented and this is largely influenced by society ^[6].

Occupation is a goal-oriented life activity. Goals are motivators because we view them in terms of the effect of goals met or unmet. Working late, volunteering, taking on extra responsibility allows us the opportunity to imagine praise, promotion, recognition because of our virtue. This imagining shapes our views of our future self and motivates us to further goal-directed action. Motivating images are often called possible selves ^[7] and they represent what we like might like to become or are afraid of becoming. Possible selves are useful for providing the catalyst to transfer thought to action and as we shape our own identity in a positive manner, our satisfaction increases. Our occupation is the vehicle through which we can develop and express our identities and in order for us to do so within our occupations we must demonstrate to others that we are competent to gain approval and avoid rejection. If we are competent it suggests that we are able to deal effectively with challenges that come our way; the more successful we are at dealing with challenges, the higher our self-confidence. Self-confidence highlights a clear link between our identity and a belief in the things that we are able to do.

If our identities are crafted by our occupation and the way in which we perform within that sphere, then a threat to our ability to engage in an occupation becomes almost a threat to our identity. Disabilities often threaten the establishment of an identity based on competence. [8] Redundancy, for example, or unemployment can erode the shared experience of the labour process which can act as the basis for group identity [9] as well as the benchmark that enable us to sustain and articulate our individual identity. [10] For men, unemployment or redundancy can undermine their masculine identity as the traditional male-breadwinner and relegate them to the private rather than the public sphere, and for those used to employment, a lack of occupation can lead to identities becoming more privatised. [11] Turnbull argues that an occupational based identity may offer the individual the highest status and most positive self-image available to them. [12] In this way, those without an occupation, or whose occupation affords them only the most basic living have identities defined by the notion of falling into a particular class, e. g. working class – here an identity is defined by subsistence. Poverty becomes a marker of status and position and can almost be a deprivation of identity.

It is clear that an occupation is central to a sense of who we are and our worth which in turn influences how others see us and how we see other people, and since we spend most of our lives working this provides us with a sense of coherence which helps plays an important role in the shaping of both our individual and collective identity. It is important to note though, that occupation is only one factor amongst many which impacts upon our identity

and its relative importance must be viewed alongside that of other social factors.

In what ways do social factors shape our identities?

It is true to suggest that our identity is made up of individual traits and interpersonal relationships as well as ideas and beliefs we derive from belonging to different groups. Every one of us has a number of different identities open to us and these identities tell us who we are and what each particular identity might involve. Social contexts will generally indicate which identity is most pertinent at any given time. Tajfel argues that there are times when our 'group' identity or social identity is more important to us than our personal identity and this decision is particularly dependent upon social factors. [13]

Categorisation shapes our identities - when we categorise someone or something we do so in an attempt to understand them and their social environment. So labelling someone as a Muslim, or a Jew, or a football fan or black or white, unemployed or employed allows us to define the kinds of behaviour that are appropriate or even expected of that category. There are a number of different categories which bring with them their own factors which help to shape our identity and the behaviour that is expected of individuals who fall within a particular category. Perhaps some of the most obvious categories are those of race, gender, nationalism and class. When we talk about categorisation by gender, for example, it is often assumed that the role of an individual is defined by their genitalia and that there are social roles for males and social roles for females. This categorisation can be something against which individuals may rebel, but this can also be a group

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to which they belong that brings with it negative aspects, too. For example, a sub-category for women is often that of the victim; such groupings can have a substantial impact upon the identity of the individual. In everyday speech, we often use the word race to denote a group of individuals who have a particular way of talking about themselves and others – and again we often expect of these people particular types of behaviour, some of which can reinforce stereotypes and contribute to prejudice: social factors which can all affect the identity both of the individual themselves and the identity of the group itself. [14]

We identify with groups we perceive that we belong to. This has two ramifications: part of what make me ‘ me’ is my membership of a particular group, so sometimes there are in-groups and sometimes out-groups (us vs. them) but my identity is also shaped by the fact that I am truly a unique individual. My membership of a particular category or group is just as real to me as the fact that I know that I am unique. A further ramification of this concept is the notion that despite the fact that I am unique, my group self also makes me the same as others within my group. There will be some occasions when I will treat members of my group as being the same as me in some important and pertinent way. For example, I may believe that although I am different to the members of my group, in that I am ‘ me’, I am also the same in that I believe that my nation is superior and more deserving of respect than yours (nationalism).

Within individual groups Tajfel argues that group members compare themselves with each other, because this comparison allows them to define their group as positive (or negative) and therefore by default, see <https://assignbuster.com/relationship-between-identity-and-employment/>

themselves in a positive (or negative) light. People are generally motivated to see their group as better than other similar groups, but often groups might try to belittle differences between groups in order to be able to view their own group favourably. For example, people from developing countries might regard their country as inferior technologically or economically but might believe that they live a morally much superior way of life. ^[15]

Social factors, therefore, shape our identity in a variety of ways: they influence the way we view ourselves and others, the people we feel that we belong to and identify with, the behaviour we feel is expected of us, and of others and the worth we attribute to other individuals and groups, as well as to ourselves and the groups we feel we belong to.

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Footnotes

[1] Woodward, K. ed. *An introduction to the Social Sciences: Understanding Social Change: questioning identity: gender, class, nation* . Routledge. London. 2002

[2] Vygotsky, LS. *The instrumental method in Psychology* . P134-143. 1981.

[3] Piaget. J. *The construction of reality in the child*. 1954. Basic. New York.

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[6] Cooley, C. H. *Human nature and the social order*. New York. Scribner. 1902

[7] Christiansen, C H. *Defining Lives: Occupation as Identity: An Essay on Competence, Coherence and the Creation of Meaning*. American Journal of Occupational Therapy. 1999

[8] Ibid.

[9] MacKenzie, R. Stuart, M. Forde, C. Greenwood, E. Perrett, R. Gardiner, J. *All that is Solid? Class Identity and the Maintenance of a Collective Orientation amongst Redundant Steel Workers*. Sociology 2006.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Tajfel, H. *Social identity and intergroup behavior*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. 1982

[14] Woodward, K. ed. *An introduction to the Social Sciences: Understanding Social Change: questioning identity: gender, class, nation* . Routledge. London. 2002.

[15] Tajfel, H. *Social identity and intergroup behavior*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press. 1982