

Describe one
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discuss how this
approach can help to
explain ...

[Health & Medicine](#), [Disability](#)



Describe one approach to identity. Discuss how this approach can help to explain the identities of people with disabilities. The concept of identity within psychology can be traced back to the emergence of the discipline with William James' publication *Principles in Psychology* in 1890 (as cited in Phoenix, 2007 p. 45). While various identity theories abound, all approaches are principally concerned with explaining what identity is and how individuals form and use their identities to define themselves. This essay examines the social constructionist approach to identity and will then explore how such thinking can be applied to the identities of those with disabilities. According to Hogg and Abrams (1988), identity is " people's concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others" (as cited in Fearon, 1999, p. 4). Thus, identity represents an individual's mental image of themselves, something Kroger (1989/1993) asserts necessitates an understanding of otherness, that is, who and what they are not (as cited in Phoenix, 2007 p. 52). This awareness is fundamental to social construction theories, which propound that, instead of being naturally occurring, identities are actively constructed through the process of social relations. It is through interaction with others that individuals distinguish between the self and other, and subsequently can affirm or modify their own sense of identity. This ability to negotiate identity is another feature of social constructionist approaches which maintain that, far from being static, identities are open to change and adaptation throughout the lifetime, being shaped by an individual's own experiences, as well as the cultural and historical milieu within which they exist and the social change and technological advances that occur during their lives (Connell, 1995; Holloway and Jefferson, 2000, as

cited in Phoenix, 2007, p. 72). Consequently, and in contrast to earlier identity theories, social constructionists claim that, since individuals do not exist in a vacuum, there can be no distinction between a personal and a social identity; all identities are social. Thus proponents of social constructionism, emphasise the importance of language; being the basic tool of human communication; in the formation and negotiation of identities. It is through language that people express and define themselves and identify their allegiance to particular groups and communities. Meanings attributed to language are inevitably influenced by the dominant discourses within society, reflecting the power relations and often imbalances that exist, as exemplified by the demonisation of single mothers by mainstream political discourse in the 1980s. Nevertheless, sub-cultures and minority groups often subvert dominant discourse in order to construct their own identities, as illustrated in the way once derogatory terms, such as 'dyke', are reclaimed, and in order to enhance group affiliation. It is noted that " Teenage slang is a highly productive generator of new meanings for old words" (Oxford University Press, 2006); it serves to augment group membership while excluding others. Language, therefore, is also a construct; its interpretations and use develops over time and across social groups. Another key tenet of social constructionist theories is that individuals possess numerous identities because they inhabit various locations, assume diverse roles, subscribe to particular ideologies and interact with others who themselves have different, multiple identities. As Phoenix observes " Unlike psychosocial theories, social constructionist theories reject the notion that people have one, core identity" (2007, pp. 78-79). While critics argue this represents a flaw in such

theorising; since many consider themselves to have a stable unified identity; it is asserted that people adopt autobiographical narratives, whereby they reconstruct their histories, in order to maintain a coherent sense of self. The employment of language and 'props'; such as attire and jewellery (Goffman, 1959, p. 32), as well as the autobiographical narrative, enable individuals to manage their sometimes contradictory identities. Consequently, people are able to use their identities as a resource to achieve the exhibition of a particular image of themselves, not only to others, but also to themselves. In turning to the identities of people with disabilities, it is necessary to address the issue of embodiment, that is, the way people live their lives through their bodies. Bodies are a resource that people use to construct their identity, through, for example, the use of make-up, tattoos and cosmetic surgery. For people with physical impairments, identity construction is complicated by their biology, which, is compounded by the dominant medical discourse which has generally labelled those with disabilities as lacking in some way, as different, as 'other'. The social model of disability developed out of the disability movement as a reaction against such discourse, and its proponents, such as Oliver (1990), have argued that while those with physical impairments experience 'individual limitation', disability itself is a 'socially imposed restriction' (as cited in Phoenix, p. 51). This reinterpretation of the word 'disability' highlights, as social constructionists claim, the importance of language and discourse in the constructions of identity. In recent decades, through campaigning and individuals identifying with a particular cause, the disability movement has brought about social change through putting pressure on the legislature to cater to its needs, for instance,

public buildings now have to be accessible to the wheel-chair bound. As such, the dominant discourse has shifted to be more inclusive of those with physical impairments. Additionally, medical advances have improved the circumstances of some with visual or auditory impairments. Social construction theories reveal the extent of autonomy that individuals have in relation to their identities. However, such theories fail to address adequately how identity can be imposed on individuals. People with physical impairments highlight this problem, since an individual has no control over how and to what extent they are impaired. Nevertheless, they do have a choice in how they label themselves, and some will self-define as disabled, while others may not, perceiving their impairment to be only one (lesser) aspect of their identity. This gives credence to the social constructionist stance that individuals construct many identities for themselves. It is also important to note that, as with most social groups, the physically impaired are far from a homogenous group; there is no one essential disabled identity. As Keith (1994) suggests “ the wide variation between the types of impairment and within groups who have the same impairments mean they are not a single group, but have multiple, diverse identities” (as cited in Phoenix, p. 83). In conclusion, social construction theories provide a useful framework within which to explore identity. In examining how identity is actively constructed through social interaction and the employment of language, as well as by being affected by dominant discourse and societal change, such theories explain how people are able to negotiate their multiple identities in daily life and throughout the life-course. (1, 079 words)

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