

How is identity formed, a look at some of the theories essay sample

[Sociology](#)



Identity can be defined as ' how I see myself and how others see me.'

(Questioning Identity. 2000. p7) An identity involves a sense of belonging, an individual chooses to identify with a group and actively engages in doing so, showing agency. This sense of belonging involves being the ' same' and recognising that others are ' different'. An individual can have multiple identities e. g. gender, supporting a football team; all of these identities make up the individual. Structures such as gender and class, influence, encourage or prevent individuals from identifying with certain groups and therefore shaping the identity.

The class structure always involves some degree of inequality, usually involving material resources. There are two main traditions within the concept of class and its effect on identity.

The Marxist theory of class clearly shows that the class a person belongs to is the fundamental part of their identity. It theorizes two classes in which all society fits, the owning and the property less. Marx believed that ' class consciousness is particularly important to our understanding of identity' (Questioning Identity, 2000. p980) this consciousness would occur once individuals came to realise their shared relationship to the means of production (MOP),(Marx believed that class was decided by an individual's relationship with the MOP,) and that some individuals shared a different relationship with this MOP. Class-consciousness would be cemented through collective action and would cause individuals to see themselves as part of a collective, acting and thinking as one within all areas of social contact. Marx believed that class, solely, shapes identity.

Webber also saw class as important when forming an identity. Webber however saw class as a group of individuals with similar market positions i. e. similar opportunities with regard such things as education.

He, like Marx, recognised class divisions, but on a much wider scale. He suggested that there were levels of market position within classes. Webber recognised that status is also important within social groups, he believed that status ' may confer certain benefits or rewards, or prohibit people from access to them' (Questioning Identity. 2000. p101) this statement could have been written about the class structure. This would suggest that status could have as much influence on identity as class. Webber's theories would suggest that class is an important structure within the formation of identity, but that it's far from the only factor involved.

It has been said by many that class is becoming more diverse with wider reference points within the structures. Some sociologists have gone as far as to say that ' class is dead' (Pakulski and Waters, 1996) although a survey in 1996

showed that two thirds of those interviewed felt that ' there is one law for the rich and one for the poor' (Adonis and Pollard, 1998).

One school of thought that is moving away from the original ideas of class is the idea of consumption based classes and identities. Post war Britain has seen a large shift in employment types, consumption and class. A study of car workers at a Luton car plant (Goldthorpe et al, 1969) concluded that the

working class identity was fragmenting and that a new type of working class was evolving.

This would suggest that work based identities are becoming less important. The change in employment structures as well as job stability, it is suggested, has caused this shift.

Saunders has put forward the idea that consumption and lifestyle are now more important to society than occupation set class. He states that in the future ' an increasingly visible fault line in British society, not along the lines of class, but on the basis of private ownership of the means of consumption.' (Saunders , 1984) Although Saunders has been criticised for being unable to prove that consumption can influence identity the idea of ' off the shelf identities' has emerged as they are available through consumption and can provide ' status' to fit within any structure.

To conclude, ' social class can provide us with a sense of belonging, it can tell us who ' we' are and who ' they' are and, hence, how to relate to the world around us' (Questioning Identity. 2000. p96) However although societies exist and function within class structures it does not mean that all members of that society identify with a class. Class is becoming, it seems, more diverse and wide ranging than ever before. The Marx theory of two rigid classes seems to be completely lost and a more individualistic, loose fitting system of consumption linked with class emerging and developing. It seems that class is becoming less important within the identity as individuality becomes more valued and encouraged.