

# Individual and society

Sociology



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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? This is a difficult question to answer because there is not one solid answer. Nor is our identity something that we can try to pull apart and look at each individual part. Our identities are constantly growing, changing, and adapting to our everyday lives. Our everyday lives are constantly changing too.

Nothing stays the same for long so our identity shouldn't be any different. How much of our identity do we really have control over? " The issue of identity is a complex one. More fluid than fixed our identity is comprised of a myriad of inner qualities and outer representations of self. It consists of innumerable defining characteristics that make up the whole of who we are in any given moment. These fragments of self-include our sexuality, gender, and sense of belonging to a particular culture, nation, religion, family, or some other group.

Our identity includes our looks, personality, beliefs and fears and is an unfolding story...continually recast in the course of experience" (Dana Mrkich). 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 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. Identity is shaped by a person's belief, ideas, views and wanting to be part of a group. Identity can be part of your personality but that is only a small part of it. People identify with many different groups in their lifetime socially and industrially in order to be identified as how they want to be i. e. when dressing for a job interview, what to wear? How do you want to be perceived by your prospective employer?

Identities are constantly being recreated and redefined in order to fit in with economic and environmental change i. e. job losses. Criminal identities can

be perceived by other as young, male and black (Mooney, 2000, pg 8) due to media attention and stereotypical opinions. We acquire our identity through “socialisation” Socialisation is the process by which we, as individuals, become members of our society or culture. We are active participants in this process – we decide what to accept or reject. There are two types of identities personal and social. Personal and social identities are linked in completing our identities.

Personal identity is about how we feel, who we are and social is about the society we live, cultural and economic factors. As you can imagine all of this plays a big part in shaping our identities. Personal and social help form identities as personal is what a person thinks or feels, their own views and social is about nation, ethnicity, class and gender. These are all strong factors for forming identities and for allowing individuals to find the right sort of job. As explained by (Althusser, 1971, pg 19) argues that people are recruited into identity positions they are interrelated.

This means that when people look at groups i. e. mother, lad, European they can recognise themselves in as this. For example when you are abroad and you hear someone speaking the same language as you there is a connection between that person and yourself. Processes that are involved in the formation of identity are social class – economic and social divisions in society which causes some inequalities, gender – inequality can be found with this i. e. work, pay, ethnicity – again has inequalities, political, industrial and boxed standard identity i. e. passport, birth certificate death certificate, states date of birth, sex etc.

With identity there always are inequalities with each category of identification. (Goffman. E. , 1957, pg14-15) states that individuals are all actors performing to others to get their identity recognised. The interaction socially with others he believes forms part of the identity process for all. We decide whether we will conform or reject social norms about things like how we express our gender, our class or our ethnicity and we show this conformity or resistance in our clothing, hair, language and personal possessions

So, if you were female and non-conformist you may choose masculine clothes, shaved head, to swear, to have large tattoos or to be overtly sexual which expresses your beliefs (ideology) that being feminine is not about having long blonde hair, skirts, small butterfly tattoos and allowing men to take the sexual initiative. When we are deciding whether to be typically feminine, for example, we take our lead from role models in our own family, amongst our peers, from the media, from our religion.

We either accept or reject these role models so if we are a young Muslim woman we are deciding whether to conform to our religion's idea of femininity, our peers, the media or our family or maybe a mix of them all – a compromise for a post-modern identity The identities we that are chosen for us include our Parents choosing your name, give you your first beliefs, tastes etc. Another thing that is chosen for us is our culture. The term ' culture' refers to the language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, dress, diet, roles, knowledge and skills, and all the other things that people learn that make up the ' way of life' of any society.

Culture is passed on from one generation to the next through the process of socialisation. Sociology teaches us that we are products of the society around us, and ultimately products of our own past decisions. Most people blindly accept this, which is why sociology works: without purposeful living, everyone really is a machine, and makes the same types of decisions a computer does, based on historical input. Society doesn't believe people can change. I think deep down, this is true, our true identities were wired in us from birth, and they don't change... but they also aren't what need to change.

As a Muslim, I believe in sin at work in the world; sin doesn't change: it's been around since the beginning of humanity. My dad once always told me that we aren't defined by our sin, because it's not our true identity: it's just the sin working in us, pushing it's way out to eventually manifest itself in our bodies. Sin doesn't change, but the amount of sin we allow into our life can change, and that's not beyond our control. To put things more simply: don't let your past mistakes define who you are. Your identity isn't wrapped up in the poor decisions you've allowed into your life. Your identity runs much deeper than your imperfections.