

Student Name:

Professor's Name:

Course:

Date:

Personal Identity

A person's identity is an amalgamation of how others perceive a person to be as well as a person's self-concept. The traits that are attributable to a person arise from an array of factors. Such factors include the person's environment and the decisions made by the person over the course of his life. Such decisions can have a significant impact over the formation of a person's identity.

The paper that follows should explain how various factors play a part in shaping the identity of people. It should also examine the power that people have in shaping their identities. It will also scrutinize the control that people have in the determination of their identities as well as expound on some of the factors that limit control over one's identity

The analysis of several cases of personal identity formation and alteration sheds light on the influence that people have in the determination of their identities

Analysis.

The case of Tyler Clementi and his roommate Dharun Ravi paints a compelling picture of the effect various factors at play in the determination of one's identity as well as the power that one has over the same. In today's world, technology, specifically the internet, has had a profound effect on the control we have over how others perceive us to be. This is due to the access that people have gained to previously inaccessible information. Personal information is accessible over the internet. We see that Ravi, Clementi's roommate, had viewed his past online activity

though simple Google searches. By searching the web, he also learnt that Clementi frequented the gay-pornography site Justusboys where he posted on its forum. This way, Ravi created an astoundingly accurate picture of Clementi's sexual and economic identity. He summarized Clementi as "a gay person who asks a lot of questions, is mostly techno illiterate, and makes tshirt ideas." This illustrates the extent to which such technology has taken the power to shape our identities out of our hands.

Prevailing attitudes in the society also have a profound effect on the identity of a person. In the case of Clementi, Ravi's friend Wei was surprised that Clementi had sex despite the fact that he was nerdy. It is clear that she had a preconceived idea of Clementi's sexual identity. Ravi was also observed by Wei to hold that M.B. was capable of stealing his iPad. "If he steals my iPad I'm going to make Tyler pay for it." This was as a consequence of M.B.'s economic status. Ravi also viewed Clementi as a potential rapist. In an online conversation he had joked "I'll have Jarvis warn me if he tries to rape me at night." referring to a computer application that he had created. This arose from his attitudes towards gay people. It is also clear that the society's discrimination against gays prevented people from viewing Ravi as an intruder of privacy. Rather, people's focus was on Clementi's acts of making out with M.B. It is seen that nobody viewed him as the invasive character that he really was. The attitudes in society are out of our control and so are the elements of personal identity that are shaped by the same. These attitudes are some of the factors that limit the control that one has in shaping his/her identity.

People have no control over their upbringing, yet this is a major influence on one's identity. As seen in the case of Dharun Ravi, his upbringing played a major role in shaping his character. Kappa recalled that during his childhood, Ravi was often the oldest child at poolside gatherings where he interacted gracefully with the younger ones, "tossing them around, teaching

them tricks . . . never pushing them away.” Kappa had been taught how to roller blade by Ravi. This upbringing is likely to have contributed to his cocky personality. Ravi came across as mean to some who met him and Jason Tam summed him up when he said “He’s so much of a jerk that it may seem like he’s a homophobe but he’s not.” It is clear that Ravi’s upbringing had a huge effect on his identity. since Ravi had no power over this stage of life, the formation of his identity as influenced by his upbringing was out of his control.

The ability to communicate emerges as a major tool that can be used to determine one’s identity. From the story of Clementi, it is seen that his family had never known about his sexual orientation until he opened up to them three days before going to college. This was despite the fact that he had identified himself as gay since middle school. His mother, Jane Clementi was kept in the dark by her son had felt that he had betrayed her. She said, “I must admit, other than being surprised, I felt betrayed.” By coming out to his family Clementi shaped an integral part of his identity. As seen in the story of Clementi, our ability to communicate effectively is a major source of influence over the course taken by our identity’s formation.

The culture in which a person has been raised also supersedes all most power that one may have to alter the formation of one’s identity. Ravi’s said that his father would most likely throw Ravi out of the window on the basis of his sexual orientation. It is no doubt that Ravi’s father, a first generation Indian American as correctly observed by Clementi was deemed the most unreceptive to the idea of his son having a gay roommate due to his cultural beliefs. This aspect of a person is only changeable by reeducation. A person can change parts of his identity by reexamining and altering his culture as pertains to the way of life.

As teenagers pursue the ‘cool’ identity, it is of importance to note that this part of how the world views them is largely under their control. From the case of Clementi, we see that

Ravi's description of him being 'profoundly uncool' arose from judgments based on Clementi's tastes Ravi says "I was fucking hoping for someone with a Gmail but no," showing that Clementi's choice of a yahoo address over one from Gmail projected a dorky identity. However, some of the yardsticks of the 'cool' identity arise from attributes that are dependent on much more static factors such as a person's economic status. As such, the inability to change these factors reduces the power that a person has to change these elements of his/her personality.

The power of a person to shape his identity is as varied as the various aspects of the same. For instance, the cultural, religious and national identities of an individual are to a large extent under the influence of the government in place. The ruling elite can impose an identity on their subjects simply by controlling the flow of information. A case in point is Nasser's imposition of the Arab identity on Egypt. By determining what schoolchildren spoke, what materials were published as well as what the media broadcasted, he successfully influenced the cultural identity of Egypt .this was all a strategy of aligning his nation against Israel, the Zionists. Saddat, who was willing to negotiate with the Israelis said that "we are Egyptian above all else". He used the Egyptian identity to present his country as ready to negotiate with the state of Isael. In the article, *On Becoming an Arab*, Leila Ahmed explains how she embraced the Arab identity despite her initial unwillingness to do so. She explains how an authoritarian regime that made use of tools such as unceasing propoganda, the secret police, and the demonization of anyone who questioned this imposed identity made this transformation inevitable. In the end she found that she was identifying herself as unquestionably, undeniably Arab. This demonstrates her powerlessness over the political aspect of her identity.

The power that the political elite have in shaping our identity is also seen in the rise of British-aided Arab nationalism. In this case the British promoted the Arab identity as a strategy

of defeating the Ottoman Empire. By encouraging those under the rule of this empire to identify them as Arab, the British successfully fuelled its fall through the 'Arab Revolt'. Therefore we see that the ability of a ruling power to promote or impose an identity on its subjects renders them powerless over the determination of their identity.

Technology such as the internet has been found to fundamentally alter the way people think. By providing a mammoth amount of information with matching variety, the process of thinking has radically changed among internet users. People, who previously had to go through page after page of literature in traditional libraries, deeply analyzing mountains of information, are now able to skim through countless internet articles while hopping from book to book using available hyperlinks. The psychological identity of these people has changed to such an extent that, while previously they were able to concentrate for hours on end while reading through hundreds of pages, a two page article now comes across as an extremely exhausting read.

According to Maryanne Wolf, a Tufts University developmental psychologist, online reading transforms people into "mere decoders of information." This is put into perspective by Bruce Friedaman, an internet blogger, who is one among many internet users who admit that the net had chipped away at their ability to concentrate and contemplate. The process of interpretation and contemplation is therefore severely diminished. This alteration of the mental circuitry is not limited to one region of the brain but could even affect areas that control the processing of audio and visual stimuli as well as memory. The scope of these effects therefore extremely wide and can affect aspects of our identity such as how we respond to our environment. Marshall McLuhan correctly pointed out that "media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought." Therefore a person can use appropriate media of access to information as a means of shaping his personal identity.

People have various tools at their disposal for the determination of their identities. Among these is what Daniel Bell a sociologist has termed intellectual technologies. An example of the effect of these technologies is the use of the clock. By adopting the clock, “Abstract framework of divided time had become the point of reference for both action and thought” (Carr). The psychological aspect of our identity was massively altered as we no longer viewed direct experiences as reality. Instead, the clock dictated a now diminished version of reality.

The use of Taylor’s stopwatch to control the operations of factory workers also shows the effect of these intellectual technologies on our identity perfectly illustrates this. Using a stopwatch, Taylor set timed standards for factory production. Tasks were performed as fast as was humanly possible using methods that placed emphasis on speed, maximization of output as well as efficiency. According to Taylor’s treatise, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, the overall goal of this system of work was to come up with the best method of working and as a result to enhance “the gradual substitution of science for rule of thumb throughout the mechanic arts.” This system found application in all areas of manual work and with time the society took up the sense of perfect efficiency embodied by the system. This shaped the identity of the society that took up this philosophy. Thus, we can conclude that the formation of one’s identity can be controlled by the decision to use or not to take up such technologies.

Conclusion

It is clear that the power of people to shape their identities is limited by the environment in which they live. Elements of the environment such as the media used to access information, the reigning political class, the prevailing social attitudes, childhood experiences and current technology all intertwine to form the prevailing force that shapes ones unique identity.

A person can alter his identity by exercising control over these factors. Identification of the aspects of the environment that may influence one's culture, philosophy of life, personal and social identity is vital to gaining control over one's identity.

However, some of these aspects are out of our realm of control. This renders us powerless in as far as the determination of some aspects of our identity is concerned.

As illustrated, all the elements of a person's identity are extremely malleable in the face of environmental factors. The power to shape one's identity therefore depends on his ability to wield control over the factors analyzed. The ability or inability to do so is therefore what determines the amount of control that one has his or her identity.

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