

Self Identity

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People's identity is rooted in their identifications; in what they associated themselves with. What a person associates him or herself with is ultimately who that person is, for all identity is ultimately in relationship to something else. An American person identifies himself or herself as "American", for example, and that becomes part of that American person's identity. The same person might identify themselves as male (or female), a member of a particular religious group, a brother or sister, a child, an employee, etc. Even more personally, they may identify themselves as a loser, as someone who is helpless to influence the course of their lives, or as someone who needs to hate a particular religious group simply because that is what members of their own religious group are "supposed" to do. Though such personal beliefs may have no basis in reality, they often are taken at face value by the people who hold them. Such people act on their mistaken or irrational beliefs and end up creating problems for themselves.

Identity is not just what you know; it is also how you know. People are not born with an identity. Rather, identity is something that evolves over time. Young children have simple identities and see things in an overly simple, generally self-serving manner. As people grow older and wiser, they identify themselves with other people, places and things in increasingly sophisticated ways and start to grow out of this initial selfishness. A young child may see her mother as a creature that exists solely to take care of her, but an older child will often start to appreciate that her mother has needs of her own, and start acting less selfishly towards her mother so as to take that knowledge into account. Sometimes life events interrupt this natural progression from selfishness to thoughtfulness and people's identities stop growing. Such people may be chronologically adults, but relate to others in the selfish manner characteristic of a younger child, creating problems for themselves and the people around them when their selfish expectations clash with those held by people around them, who expect a more adult, more "responsive" and "responsible" identity to be present.

Whether due to mistaken beliefs or developmental delays, identity problems can cause people to have difficulty taking an appropriate perspective towards other important life tasks, creating a wide range of life problems. The following list describes a few different ways that identity problems can be present. Consider each to determine whether an identity problem helps contribute to your own problem.

Cultural Identity

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One final aspect of identity we will consider is cultural identity. Identities are determined by what people identify with. In forming a cultural identity, people come to identify with and attach themselves to (fuse themselves with) a particular set of ideas that are characteristic of their larger family and tribal or national identity. This may include an identification with a particular religious group, a particular ethnic or racial group, a particular country, a particular language and dialect, a particular set of foods that are thought to be good to eat, a particular set of holidays, of usual and unusual names that people might have, etc. By accepting these ideas handed down by the larger tribe or nation or family a person comes to be an accepted part of the group. For the most part, this is a good thing.

There are occasions where cultural identity doesn't work for people. Individuals within a given culture may disagree with views that cultural leaders promote, leading to their persecution or marginalization (e.g., pro-democracy dissidents in China, pro-birth-control Catholics). A given culture may be highly intolerant of some of its members, forcing those members to suppress their views, go underground or go into exile. Dissent may lead to the formation of counter-cultures that promote values that are more accepting of dissenters (e.g., gay and lesbian communities). Stressful clashes between culture and countercultures may then occur. All this is to say that sometimes people's problems are not really so much due to something they are doing wrong as they are due to the ill fit between that person's identity and commitments and the culture in which they find themselves.

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