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SOC 23

Final Paper

Self and Identity

What's your name? Where are you from? What year are you? What are you

studying? These are popular questions I receive when first meeting someone.

They're short and easy to answer—my name is Lexie, I'm from California, I'm a

sophomore, and I'm studying Human Factors Engineering—but they are also

strategic. These questions are subtle ways of asking people about their past, present,

and plans for the future. They are some of the most efficient ways of getting to know

someone. Sociologists Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead suggest that

individuals acquire their senses of self by assuming the identities that others

attribute to them. However, I think a self has three components: past, present, and

future; individuals are a combination of who they have been, who they are in the

moment, and who they wish to become. Another person's point of view can help

someone identify how he or she is acting *in that moment*, a single component of the

self, but not who the person *is*. In order to capture someone's identity, one needs to

know every component of that person's self.

In "The Self as Sentiment and Reflection" Cooley describes the "looking-glass

self" concept. He explains that the self is a result of adopting the point of view of

another person, imagining how that person sees you and his or her expectations and

judgments of you. In "The Self as Social Structure" Mead agrees that the self emerges through social experience. Essentially, individuals develop a sense of self through interactions with others. Debra Van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin also identify this concept in "Young Children's Racial and Ethnic Definitions of Self". They discuss how children can be especially susceptible to assuming the racial and ethnic identities that others attribute to them.

This article reminded me of a diversity leadership conference I attended in high school. Although I was more of a teenager than a child, my knowledge about diversity was limited. I assumed that the leaders of the conference, who were probably no more than college students, were well trained and would guide me. When we discussed race and ethnicity and the origins of our parents, grandparents, etc, I was led to believe I was multiracial, because although my father is white, my mother is half-Asian. I joined the multiracial affinity group and no one stopped or questioned me. After the conference I led a discussion about race and ethnicity for students at my school that did not attend the conference. While consulting Google for the exact definitions of some of the terms, I learned that race is not defined by origins but by physical characteristics. Based on this definition, my race is defined by the "looking-glass self" concept or how others perceive me, which is simply as white. At the time I was confused and embarrassed to have misunderstood what I thought was a core aspect of my identity. Now, I acknowledge that race is only one dimension of the self, and it does not tell others much about my personality. To really know my identity, someone would have to consider my past and present with respect to this identity. For example, has white privilege opened doors for me all my

life or have I worked to achieve my accomplishments? That is not something you can tell by the color of my skin.

In "Face-Work and Interaction Rituals" Erving Goffman takes a different turn and discusses the emotional effect that others' perceptions have on an individual. He introduces the concept of "face" and how individuals work to maintain it by presenting a self that is consistent. I personally do not like the idea that people try to be consistent to establish their identities, because I think people should be encouraged to constantly change and develop their identities throughout life.

Last year I met someone during a rough patch in my life. We bonded over our pessimistic views of the world. When my rough patch ended, I started to view the world in a more positive light, but my friend did not. The face that my friend knew was no longer the one I wanted to bear. I wanted to show my optimism. Although that rough patch was part of my identity then, and has influenced who I am today, it did not need to be my past, present, and future identity. I allowed myself to develop. Now, the identity that my friend knew is only a past component of myself. And unfortunately that friend is only a friend to the past component of myself as well.

In "The Presentation of Self in Virtual Spaces" Simon Gottschalk references Goffman's concept and uses it to explain how individuals present themselves differently in a virtual space called "Second Life" to influence others' attitudes and impressions of them. They are able to change their faces, body, hair, and clothes to create either a more "real" version of themselves or explore aspects of themselves that are, for whatever reason, not represented in the real world.

Although I am not familiar with "Second Life", I am familiar with creating a virtual identity in the form of a Tinder profile. Like a "Second Life" user, I tried to create an identity that was the best version of myself. For example, I put on my profile the photos of myself that I thought I looked best in. In conversations, I described myself as more fun and adventurous than I really think I am. I did not feel like I was being dishonest but rather that I was showing two components of my identity: who I was (sometimes) and who I wanted to be (even more). In addition, some users would ask me to tell them "my story" so they could understand even the past component of myself and how that past has shaped my present. Although overall I prefer in-person interactions, I think these virtual forms of communication can have the interesting advantage of allowing their users to convey their identities better than they might be able to in reality. This is an especially great benefit for individuals with social anxiety who feel uncomfortable expressing any components of themselves in person.

Finally, in "Being Middle Eastern American in the Context of the War on Terror" Amir Marvasti discusses negative appraisals and how to use different strategies to preserve both identity and positive self-esteem. These strategies are using humor to divert attention from the stigma, using education to correct misperceptions, challenging the other person's attitudes, and "passing" or avoiding the stigma by concealing the stigmatized identity.

Somewhat recently a friend of mine called me a "pretengineer" (pretend engineer) because my major is not ABET accredited. I responded, "It doesn't bother

me. It's still a cool major, and I'll still get hired" and the conversation ended. I didn't use humor, educate the other person about my major, challenge their opinion, or try to "pass" by lying about my major being accredited. Instead I shook off the comment, hoping that if I thought it was not a problem then they might think so too. Since I plan for this major to be part of my future self, offending this major offends a component of my self. However, like people can shake off comments made about their present selves, people can also shake off comments made about future selves. Luckily, I had enough confidence in my major to not be fazed by this comment and used a strategy of my own to preserve my identity.

In the end, no one knows what defines the self. Perhaps you acquire a sense of self from assuming the point of view of others. That, at least, seems true for a racial identity. Or perhaps your self is split into past, present, and future components, and it is the combination of who you were, who you are now, and who you plan to be that makes up your self. Whatever the process, what matters now is that you have a self. And I believe that you should constantly develop that self; try out new identities—virtual or not—to see which identity fits you best; and know that while other people may accuse you of being inconsistent, or stigmatize your identity, it is *your* identity and you have the power to protect it.

This semester I learned that reflected appraisals define your self-concept, your beliefs about your personal attributes, and affect your self-esteem, your overall self-evaluation. If you let your self-concept and self-esteem fluctuate in every experience and interaction, you will have a fragmented sense of self and unstable

self-esteem. As high self-esteem can be correlated with happiness, health, and

success, and low self-esteem with anxiety, depression, and failure, it is worth

stabilizing. Therefore, my advice is this: do not let anyone else tell you who you are,

because in order to capture your identity, someone needs to know every component

of your self, and only *you* have that power. Only you can determine who you are,

because no one will ever know you better than you know yourself.

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