

Reading

Exploring the Concept of Identity

Directions: As you read, engage with the text by making the following annotations:

- A heart (♥) by ideas that make you think or that you can relate to
- A question mark (?) where you feel confused or want to pose a question
- An exclamation point (!) by “ah-ha” moments that teach you something about yourself, others, or the world

Introducing the Complexity of Identity

Answering the question, “Who am I?” is an important part of growing up. While the question may appear simple and straightforward, the *concept of identity* is complex and fluid. The answer to “Who am I?” depends on a range of factors: how you define yourself, your membership in certain groups, and how other individuals and society label you. Some parts of your identity may stay the same throughout your life. Other parts of your identity are more fluid and change as you move from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.

Psychologist and educator Beverly Daniel Tatum illustrates the complexity of identity by posing a series of questions:

The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers, my neighbors, store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? Or am I missing from the picture altogether?¹

Reflect and Respond: Choose one of Beverly Daniel Tatum’s questions to answer.

¹ Beverly Daniel Tatum, “The Complexity of Identity: ‘Who Am I?’,” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Sexism, Anti-semitism, Heterosexism, Classism and Ableism*, ed. Adams et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 9–14.

Defining Identity

Identity refers to our sense of who we are as individuals and as members of social groups. It also refers to our sense of how others may perceive and label us. We develop ideas about our identities and the identities of others through our interactions with people close to us, like our family and friends, our schools and other institutions, the mass media, and our encounters with other individuals. Sometimes we don't even realize that we have these ideas because we don't remember learning them.

Our ideas about our identity are also influenced by the social groups to which we belong. This concept is called *social identity*.

Social identity refers to your sense of who you are based on your membership in certain groups. While there are many different social groups, some of the main ones include ability, age, economic class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, language, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

We are all born into social groups, and as we grow up, these social identities can stay the same or change. Our membership in these social groups helps give meaning to our lives. Sometimes we have a choice about which social groups we are associated with, and sometimes we get placed in groups we don't identify with. For example, someone might have to check a box on a form that says Asian, but they identify as Pacific Islander. Or someone might get labeled by their teachers and peers as female, but they identify as gender nonconforming.

While our membership in social groups is an important part of who we are, we still have agency over how we define ourselves and what aspects of our identities we want to emphasize over others. This concept is called *individual or personal identity*.

Personal identity refers to the unique ways that you define yourself. One person might choose to emphasize their family, religion, and interests when describing their identity. A different person might emphasize their race, neighborhood, and job as important parts of who they are. Your personal identity consists of all the things that you believe make you, you.

Sketch to Stretch: Reread the definitions of personal identity and social identity and try to visualize the ideas (make a picture) in your imagination. Then draw a quick sketch for each one that captures what it means to you.

Personal Identity

Social Identity

Considering Why Identity Matters

We all have many personal and social identities, some fixed and some fluid, that help us make sense of ourselves and our experiences in the world. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah explains why he believes these identities matter:

An identity, at its simplest, is a label we apply to ourselves and to others. Your gender. Your sexuality. Your class, nationality, ethnicity, region, religion, to start a list of categories. . . . When we apply a label to ourselves, we're accepting that we have some qualifying trait—say, Latin or African ancestry, male or female sex organs, attractions to one gender or another, the right to a German passport.

These labels carry expectations from society about how we should act, think, look, and more. Sometimes we accept those expectations, and other times we are able to challenge them. Dr. Appiah continues:

Identities, for the people who have them . . . are living guides. Women and men dress the way they do in part because they're women and men. Given that we connect these labels with our behaviour, it's natural to expect other people to do the same. . . . So identities don't just affect our own behaviour; they help determine how we treat other people.¹

The identity labels we use come with norms and carry meaning; however, they are not all fixed. People can negotiate to change their meaning. For example, they might challenge the idea of a male/female gender binary. Or they might challenge gender expectations about work or parenting. A person's individual and social identities can influence how they understand and experience the world—for example, the opportunities and challenges they face, how they view and treat other individuals, and how others treat them.

TQE Time!²

Directions: Before discussing the reading with your peers, review your annotations and use them to help you record your thoughts, questions, and epiphanies in the space provided.

What are your thoughts (♥ annotations) about what you read?	What questions (? annotations) does this reading raise for you?	What epiphanies (! annotations) does this reading raise for you?

¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Can we choose our own identity?," *The Guardian*, August 31, 2018.

² Strategy adapted from Marisa Thompson, "TQE: Thoughts, Questions, and Epiphanies," Unlimited Teacher, accessed October 23, 2023.

Connection Questions

Directions: Discuss the questions with your group. Assign the following roles: *facilitator*, *note-taker*, and *summarizer*. The facilitator will keep time and lead the discussion. The note-taker will record the group members' ideas on this handout. The summarizer will report out to the class.

1. Review Beverly Daniel Tatum's list of questions in the first section of the text about the outside factors that can shape an individual's sense of who they are. Choose one or two of her questions to discuss together as a group.
2. Review the second section of the text that defines personal identity and social identity. Then share your Sketch to Stretch ideas. What similarities and differences do you see between your sketches? What questions do you have about personal identity and social identity that you want the class to help you answer?
3. Agree or disagree with the following statement and explain your thinking. Give evidence from the text and your own experiences to support your answer:

"Each one of us decides how to answer the question, 'Who am I?' to some extent, but there are aspects of identity that may be defined by forces beyond our control."
4. Reread the final section of the text with the quotation from Kwame Anthony Appiah. He discusses the relationship between labels (names, words, or phrases used to classify or categorize, sometimes inaccurately, people or things) and behavior.
 - When, if ever, are labels useful?
 - When, if ever, are labels dangerous?
 - How do you feel when society, a group, or another individual labels you in a positive or negative way?
5. With your group members, compose a tweet that responds to the question: "What are we talking about when we talk about identity?" Your tweet should be no more than 280 characters. You can include emojis and hashtags.