

Identity

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What is identity?

Identity is as much about how people describe themselves and others as it is inherently about difference – defining a group with regards to dissimilarities in cultural, gendered, sexual, ethnic or national markers among others. Questions relating to identity may also be buried in other terms and framing depending on context – the predominance of caste or clan in South Asia is one example. The general analytical understanding is that identities are historically and socially fluid and constructed even if, in practice, groups portray themselves as natural or primordial.

How is it articulated and expressed?

Class alone is no longer sufficient to account for the complexities of aspirational, socio-cultural and demographic movements. A range of developments have subverted traditional notions of social structure, time and space, here and there, and ‘us’ and ‘them’, including: new cultural, political or national loyalties; campaigns for identity-based resources and rights; religious revivals; the influx of asylum-seekers and new migrants; nations with a growing number of diverse and mixed race populations; and the development of new technologies that have affected how people relate to each other in dynamic ways across localities.

There are now two specialist journals that specifically focus on identity and its varied contextual expressions: *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* and *Social Identities*. Analyses cover a wide spectrum that branches out from identities that are about essentialism or roots to states of non-essentialism or routes. The spectrum may even cover instances where identities appear to be fixed or essentialist but can be shown to have hybrid or culturally mixed provenance, such as racial supremacists who emerge out of culturally mixed histories.

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Identity can be a positive force in informing new ideas and practices picked up from transnational media, or processes that emphasise collaboration, such as cross-ethnic community-based practice to eradicate disease, economic inequalities and other social hierarchies. However, recent experiences in the Balkans, Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Myanmar show that identity-based politics can have troubling consequences. A response to the latter has been to adopt an abstract universal humanist principle that privileges sameness over the ethno-religious difference. This response has come under criticism from a growing body of literature that highlights how such a universalist philosophy is grounded in particular histories, specific to post-Enlightenment Europe, that suppress other cultural histories and perspectives.

Why does it matter in international development?

Thinking through identity in context permits a deeper understanding of social and political change, the complexities of violence, and how people (dis)connect with one another. It reveals how identities can fissure (or form) the basis of collective groups and also provides a lens on inequality, discrimination and racism that can address the question of rights, empowerment and civic engagement. A better understanding of identity can also support representative research and accountable leadership in development work.

The diversity of identity has become integral to policies aiming to promote community cohesion, stability and security, and engagement, as well as to those trying to understand the basis of social conflicts, factors that enhance or impede economic growth, and those at the margins of extreme poverty who face multiple disadvantages.

Identity:

- exists on a fluid spectrum. It can be hybrid, with various influences brought together to form new or distinctive identities, or it can be essentialist, where the purity of origins and belonging are emphasised over all else. Invented traditions or identities refer to exclusivist groups that draw upon hybrid sources.
- is intersectional. It may go beyond national- or ethnic-level classifications and also interact with gender, sexuality and disability.
- can be voluntary or ascribed. The latter can be problematic when a group of people ascribed to a particular identity are treated as if they are a homogenous whole.
- can be lived or ideological. People may give little acknowledgement to fixed categories of identification when creating and forming new and transitory relationships, or they may choose to assert their identity self-consciously, such as those involved in political Islam.
- is not fixed. How people identify themselves may change over time relative to age, sexual or political orientation, the level of adaptation to a host culture, and the host culture's general attitude to specific groups. This identification may also be framed differently depending on social hierarchies and culturally-specific understandings of power.

Key readings

Reading 1: Hall, S. (1995). New ethnicities. In: *Stuart Hall critical dialogues in cultural studies* (eds. D Morley and K-H Chen). London and New York: Routledge, 442-451.

<https://filsafattimur.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/critical-dialogues-in-cultural-studies.pdf#page=454>

Stuart Hall is a titan amongst thinkers when it comes to identity and difference. His seminal essay on 'new ethnicities' explores the move away from 'the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' and tries to come to terms with a more diverse concept of race or ethnicity that intersects with other axes of identification including class, gender and sexuality. Although mainly focused on Britain, his insights have been applied to other ethnically diverse regions of the world.

Reading 2: Alexander, C; Kaur, R; & St Louis, B. (2012). Identities: New directions in uncertain times. *Identities: Global studies in culture and power* 19:1, 1-7.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1070289X.2012.672832>

This journal editorial highlights the paradoxical aspects of identity as both problem and solution. It argues that a focus on identity cannot be divorced from issues to do with social, political and economic context in which 'difference matters and is made to matter' as with inequality, discrimination and racism.

Reading 3: Baaz, M.E. & Stern, M. (2010). *The complexity of violence: A critical analysis of sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)*. Uppsala: SIDA.

<http://nai.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:319527/FULLTEXT02.pdf>

This paper focuses on how gender intersects with ethnic identities and informed the basis of systematic sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In this case, gender is understood as a relationship of power which positions essentialist ideas of 'masculine' against 'feminine' even though there are many different attributes associated with masculinity and femininity in any given context.

Reading 4: Bourn, D. (2008). Young people, identity and living in a global society. *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review* 7.

<http://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue7-focus4?page=show>

The author focuses on young people's engagement with processes of globalisation, urging for better integration of the local, national and transnational in understanding identity and a sense of belonging.

Reading 5: McLean Hilker, L. (2012). Rwanda's 'Hutsi': intersections of ethnicity and violence in the lives of youth of 'mixed' heritage. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 19 (2), 229-247.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/doSearch?quickLinkJournal=&journalText=&AllField=rwanda+hutsi&publication=40000529>

This paper considers the everyday experiences and categorisations of people of 'mixed' Hutu-Tutsi heritage in a post-1994 Rwanda where state policies have outlawed ethnicity. It notes how Rwandan youth simultaneously challenge and reinforce binary 'ethnic logics', and suggests that there is a need to de-essentialise the categories 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi' in order to reduce the risks of ethnic violence in the future.

Reading 6: Hussain, S. (2012). Looking for 'tribals' without politics, 'warlords' without history: the drug economy, development and political power in Afghanistan. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 19 (3), 249-267.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1070289X.2012.699877>

The author considers the discourse and function of 'tribals' and 'warlords' in Afghanistan within the drug economy and how this has been seen as an obstacle to a strong state, institutions and development in the region. The article explores contemporary identities and practice through a historical lens, including how Cold War interventions affected the way in which political power came to be organised in Afghanistan.

Reading 7: White, S. C. (2002). Thinking race, thinking development. *Third World Quarterly* 23 (3), 407-419. <http://courses.arch.vt.edu/courses/wdunaway/gia5524/White07.pdf>

The author uses a self-reflexive lens to emphasise how a focus on identities also implicates the researcher or practitioner in practices of aid and development. She examines to what extent development practitioners challenge poverty and deprivation, and to what extent they are dependent on, and perpetuate notions of white, western superiority. She challenges the 'colour-blind' stance that is dominant in development, and argues that that the silence on race 'both masks and marks its centrality to the development project'.

Questions to guide reading

1. What are the main factors explaining the rise of identities and identity-based politics in the modern world?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages, potentials and dangers of identity-based politics?
3. How important is it to appreciate how people self-identify as opposed to how they are identified by others?
4. What part do culture, race and place play in the formation of new identities?
5. How do global socio-political phenomena impact on locally-based identities?
6. What is intersectionality and why is it necessary to understand identity?
7. How might identities intersect with economic inequalities or power in any particular context?
8. Can we deal with identity and difference through multicultural policies? Is assimilation a better way to integrate migrants? Or are these the wrong questions to ask, creating an 'us' and 'them', active and passive, situation?
9. Do the practices of NGOs promote racist concepts of 'developing' countries, or do they promote notions of global solidarity? Is there a way to 'do development' without also 'doing racism'?