Identity

Teacher Background

The questions “Whom Am I?”; “What am I about?”; "How am I different from/similar to others?”; "Where am I going?” and “Who is the real me?” are perhaps as old as the human capacity for self-reflection. The question of personal identity is regarded in philosophy as one of the ultimate questions of existence that thinkers of every generation have sought to answer. It is also a fundamental “religious” question, for it is part of the human search for meaning.

These questions are closely connected to a subsequent question: “What is it to be human?” On the one hand, we strive for a sense of our own uniqueness, wanting to be singled out for recognition, status and love. We want to be independent, to make our own decisions, to form our own conscience. On the other hand, our feelings of separateness can give rise to isolation and loneliness. Humans have an innate sense of being part of a community of others. Human identity then, is not only to have a sense of self, but also a sense of self-and-others. The relatively modern sciences of Anthropology and Psychology have joined philosophy and religion in the quest to assist humans of every generation to achieve self-actualisation and make meaning of their existence.

The church has made the following official pronouncements on the meaning and context of human existence:

- God is the creator of the whole world and remains present to it.
- All created things are good because they come from the creative hand of God. Humans are the crown of divine creation.
- The dignity of the human person resides in the person’s intimate relationship with God. The human person has a soul - the transcendental dimension of human existence.
- We are, at the same time, essentially oriented to other people. Human existence is social existence.
- The human condition is characterised by a split. We are plagued by weakness and sin. We experience ourselves as limited creatures and this generates a sense of anxiety.
- We are called by God to master ourselves and live in harmony with the environment and we are empowered to do so by grace and especially by the grace of Jesus Christ.
- Death is not the end of human existence. Life is changed, not taken away. We are destined for glory.

In secular thought, there are as many theories about human identity as there are theorists. Western psychology regards the self as that part of our experiences that we regard as essentially “us”. In proclaiming “I think, therefore I am”, the father of modern philosophy, Rene Descartes (1596-1650), decreed that consciousness is a key factor in human understanding of what we are: the self is first of all a conscious, reasoning being. The earliest and perhaps most critiqued and developed psychological theory of what constitutes the conscious self is that developed by Sigmund Freud.

The Aware Self:

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)  Id, Ego and Superego

According to Freud, we are born with our Id. The id is an important part of our personality because as newborns, it allows us to get our basic needs met. Freud believed that the id is based on our pleasure principle. In other words, the id wants whatever feels good at the time, with no consideration for the reality of the situation. The id doesn’t care about reality, about the needs of anyone else, only its own satisfaction.
Within the next three years, as the child interacts more and more with the world, the second part of the personality begins to develop. Freud called this part the **Ego**. The ego is based on the reality principle. The ego understands that other people have needs and desires and that sometimes being impulsive or selfish can hurt us in the long run. It’s the ego’s job to meet the needs of the id, while taking into consideration the reality of the situation.

By the age of five, or the end of the phallic stage of development, the **Superego** develops. The Superego is the moral part of us and develops due to the moral and ethical restraints placed on us by our caregivers. Many equate the superego with the conscience as it dictates our belief of right and wrong. In a healthy person, according to Freud, the ego is the strongest so that it can satisfy the needs of the id, not upset the superego and still take into consideration the reality of every situation. This is not an easy job by any means, but if the id gets too strong, impulses and self-gratification take over the person’s life. If the superego becomes too strong, people would be driven by rigid morals and would be judgmental and unbending in their interactions with the world. Freud’s theories have had considerable impact on the development of religious thinking about moral choice, intention and fundamental options for good and evil.

Information about Freud, including his notions of the conscious and unconscious mind, is readily available on the Internet: for these notes and other links, go to [http://allpsych.com/psychology101/personality.html](http://allpsych.com/psychology101/personality.html)

**The Shadow Self and the Masculine/Feminine Self**

**Carl Jung (1875-1961)**

Jung attributed more to the unconscious than Freud theorised. Jung believed that there were fears, behaviours and thoughts that children and adults exhibit that are remarkably similar across time and culture. He believed that this was more than coincidence and represented what he called the **collective unconscious**. His newly formed school of thought, Analytic Psychology, theorised about how this collective unconscious influences personality.

In his view, infants are drawn to their mother because of the unconscious image of mother that is alive in all of us and that we fear the dark because of the unconscious image of darkness. Although he described many archetypes in his writings, there are a few that have received a lot of attention and thought. These include the **animus/anima, the shadow and the self**.

The **animus** is the masculine side of the female and the **anima** is the feminine side of the male. This expands on Freud’s writings that we are all born bisexual and develop normal sexual attraction through our psychosexual development. According to Jung, we all have an unconscious opposite gender hidden within us and the role of this archetype is to guide us toward the perfect mate. In other words, we project our animus/anima onto others as they project theirs onto us. When a match is made, we have found a suitable partner.

Another archetype is called the **shadow**, which is basically the unconscious negative or dark side of our personality. The shadow, like all other archetypes, is passed down through history and given different names depending on time and culture. In Judeo-Christian writings, according to Jung, the shadow archetype is called the Devil.

Finally, the self-archetype is the unifying part of all of us that finds balance in our lives. Working with the ego (which is partly in our personal unconscious), it helps us manage the other archetypes and helps us feel complete.

The **Masculine/Feminine Self** is explained in some detail at the following website: [www.lovesedona.com/02.htm](http://www.lovesedona.com/02.htm). It is even possible to do a Masculine/feminine disclosure test at [www4.semo.edu/snell/scales/MFSDS.htm](http://www4.semo.edu/snell/scales/MFSDS.htm).
The Multi-Factored Self:

William James (1842-1910)
The approach developed by William James, a highly influential late 19th century American psychologist, identifies a number of "selves" which together constitute the "self".

The first three “selves” describe the private identity.

- The first is **the material self** - the physical body and the stream of sensations which relate to it. Most people assume that the self resides in the body and locate the self as midway and slightly behind the eyes.

- The second is **the actual, psychological self** - what we think of when we think of "me". The actual self is our view of who we are at any particular time and provides a standard against which all other information is judged.

- The third self is **the stream of consciousness "me" – the thinking and emotional process** that is occurring all the time.

The social self acknowledges that we interact with others, who also have a view of us. The reactions of other people are the most significant influence on the formation of the self. The social self is in part the consequence of the roles we play - our public self. Our private and public selves influence each other and usually the view others have of us corresponds somewhat to our view of ourselves.

A fifth self is **the ideal self** - what we would like to be in an idealised world. We have dreams about what we would like to be. The ideal self need not be objectively worthy - it is simply what we would like to be.

Others would add another two “selves”, namely:

- **The cultural self** – that part of me that is formed by social and cultural determinants such as; religious belief, family norms and values; national identity and community identity.

- **The spiritual self** – the "me" that consciously seeks to transcend this reality and connect with forces beyond the rational.

Despite this Western tendency to divide the whole into parts, psychology stresses that the normal self is a cohesive whole, functioning as a single unit and presenting a single image to those who view it at any given time. The self is organised and consistent, the origin of freely chosen behaviour and is separate and unique. Abraham Maslow would argue that humans have a need for a separate and unique identity. The self also evaluates itself- people have general feelings about their own adequacy and their relative competency; and the self seeks actualisation- the term given to our urge to develop our actual selves so that they will correspond more closely with our ideal selves. Maslow suggests that a fully actualised person feels more unified and whole and is able to fuse with the world. The person’s abilities and power seem fully realised.
The Developing Self: (Freud, Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, Gilligan and Fowler)

Another way of understanding our growth to identity is that it is developmental- that as we grow, we move from one fixed stage to another, cognitively, psychologically and socially. Freud, Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, Gilligan and Fowler all use the developmental model to describe their theories of the human growth to self-actualisation. Kohlberg’s and Gilligan’s theories will be discussed in Teacher Background Notes later in this module. Further information on how these stages affect growth in self identity can be found at general psychology websites such as:

http://allpsych.com/psychology101/personality.html