

Final Indie Paper – Identity

Jennifer Furr

University of Florida

Contemporary Issues in Art Education

ARE 6641

April 20, 2015

What is identity? Why is the concept significant to us as individuals, as members of society, and especially as artists and art educators? Why are we proud of the positive characteristics and achievements that have made us who we are and yet ashamed of anything less than stellar that we have said, done, or been? For whatever reasons, we have the need for a sense of identity:

Beyond the basic need for a sense of control, we are deeply driven by our sense of identity, of who we are. We are in the middle of our individual world, where we place central importance on our sense of individual self...Our sense of identity degrades when we fail – which we often do as we accept constant social escalation of what ‘success’ means. (The need for a sense of identity, 2015, para 1, 14)

Why is identity profound, and even perhaps necessary, to us as artists? How do we define our identity through our art? Or is it our art that defines our identity? Does successful artwork make us feel more successful as humans and more stable within our identity? Should we base our success in life on the amount of art that we sell? Colette Fu is a contemporary artist who gives possible answers to these questions and more.

Fu achieved worldwide fame for her pop-up books. The books are a mixture of photography, collage, and pop-up artistry containing these elements. Through her books, Fu has expressed her cultural identity and has discussed what that means to her:

I discovered that my own personal anxiety was in part due to the lack of respect and connection to my own cultural identity. The pop-up book format allows me to create my own categories in another dimension and reveal things beyond what one expects when looking at the cover. (Anne, 2014, para 5)

Fu said that although she was originally from China, she was raised in the U.S., and had denied her Asian heritage while growing up, out of fear of being different (Anne, 2014). She tried to blend in with the Caucasian community where she lived. Fu now hopes to change perceptions of Chinese women with her artwork:

As I grow older, I start to understand the importance of preserving one's identity and culture, and the significance of learning about one's roots... Art has given me an opportunity to express and resolve my conflicting emotions. And constructing pop-ups allows me to combine my intuitive design and technical acuity with my love of traveling and helping others as I try to understand myself and the world around me. Recognition and celebration of diversity in others and ourselves leads us to stronger identity and involvement with the world. (Anne, 2014, para 10-11)

The Rapidian reporter, Anthony Mead, believes identity is expressed by artists in two ways: through self-awareness or self-presentation. Self-awareness is the knowledge of your own cultural, familial history and genetic make-up. Whereas self-presentation is based on the way we present ourselves to others, through our clothing, behavior, things in our home; the identity that others perceive of us because of our presentation (Mead, n.d.). Self-awareness could be described as an internal, DNA-based identity, where self-presentation is the external presentation, the identity we want, and want others to see. Self-presentation for adolescents would often include being classified into specific social groups where identity is found or labeled: Goths, jocks, brains, preps, thugs, and so on. Mead said that we wear a mask based on our self-presentation:

Behind the masks that we form based on what we take in from all of our senses, to digest in our brains and hearts is the truth of ourselves. We create a crunchy, sometimes sugary, shell over our outer coating. Like an exoskeleton made of actions and appearances. This is who we then wear out into the world and present ourselves as. A nice sugar coated...masked creature that has only the form of a human...We are human. We are communal creatures. These are all parts of our identity, sometimes ugly, but also beautiful, unique, individual, with personal lineage, thought, emotion, and understanding. (2014, para 11-12)

The key elements in developing healthy youth are to create a distinct identity and a sense of purpose (Wexler, 2009). Wexler studied the importance of culture and identity as they related to the well-being of Indigenous youth. Certain historical events such as epidemics and colonization (in developing countries) have been linked to identity conflicts. In some cases, these conflicts have even led to health problems in Indigenous youth:

The link between cultural affiliation and well-being is explained as the answer to core questions such as “Who am I?” “Who are we as a people?” and “Where am I going?”.... Identity formation is related to expectations of what it means to be a man or woman, Indigenous or white, elder or youth in different settings. In the case of the Indigenous youth, images of the “noble savage” or the “drunk Indian” make it hard for them to construct salient identities within the larger society without a strong sense of their group history (Wexler, 2009, para 4, 7).

A belief in your own identity and having purpose in life can help turn bad experiences into growth opportunities (Ridley, 2013). Ridley explained Psychologist Erik Erikson’s beliefs

about the topic of identity, as well. Erikson thought integrity should be the final step in human development. He said that without a sense of identity, you could not have a feeling of being alive (Ridley, 2013).

A 'self' is composed of many different identities, professional and personal, that make up the comprehensive, deeper self (Thornton, 2013). Thornton said that it was important for children to experiment with practices and learn concepts in the visual arts that will help their well-being or sense of self. For some children, this experimentation will lead to an identity as an art teacher or artist:

Individuals who identify significantly with visual art have opportunities through the education system, to deepen this identification and even find employment in which their knowledge and skills are utilized... Art is an important human experience that if not taught would be denied to many. To teach art well is to promote art as a worthy experience both in the making and in the appreciation. The term artist teacher could be understood as implying a mutual relationship that benefits not only the developing artistry of the student but also the developing artistry of the art teacher (Thornton, 2013, pp. 23, 27).

Students are always encouraged to explore their identities as artists, but what about art teachers? Is anyone professional or teaching artists to keep furthering and deepening their identities in the art field? Furthermore, does an identity crisis occur when changing from student to art teacher or from artist to art teacher? What is the solution to maintaining these dual identities?

The important point in relationship to the identity of the artist is that exposure to fine arts practice has usually been quite extensive so that by the time students decide to train as teachers of art, their identities as artists have usually been developed. . . . Students who adopt the artist teacher identity could find this identification helps to counter the sense of identity crisis experienced by some students who feel confronted by a conversion from artist into teacher, or from teacher into artist, as one identity does not have to be abandoned in favour of another. (Hatfield et. al, 2006, pp. 43, 53)

Art educators, interviewed by Hatfield, Montana, and Deffenbaugh, said many different factors influenced the way they experienced their professional identities. Some of these factors were: the type of pre-service programs and preparation offered to them, and mentors; school environment; their identity prior to teaching; and the way they manage their professional identities (Hatfield et.al, 2006). Through the study, the interviewers concluded, “A well-developed artist identity is grounded in technical knowledge, practice, and creative philosophy” (2006, p. 43).

Art educators, and educators in general, seem to have a good idea of which factors influence their identity development. But what do the experts in the human growth and development field say? Psychologists say that our personal identity is the foundation for our professional identity (Hatfield et. al, 2006, p. 45). Psychologists have also discovered links between identity and ethics:

There is a basic human need for self-esteem. Maintaining self-esteem seems to play a key role in maintaining identity. When there is a nominal gap between perceived self-image and one’s behavior, people experience a cognitive dissonance which they try to minimize,

by modifying either their behavior or their underlying values in order to achieve conformity. (Monroe, 2001, p. 498)

The way we perceive our own identity, and others', influences the moral content of our actions (Monroe, 2001). Our actions, in turn, become part of the mix that is the foundation of our identity. All of these factors melt together: culture, genetics, environment, mentality, self-esteem, morality, education, and training. How we want the world to view us becomes our identity, and how the world truly sees us becomes our identity. Our identity is the unique spark that makes each human a masterpiece, and makes life interesting.

Reference List

- Anne, S. (2014, July 18). Conversations: Colette Fu on the role of pop-up art in shaping cultural identity. *Shanghai Street Stories*. Retrieved from <http://shanghaistreetstories.com/?p=7015>
- Hatfield, C., Montana, V., & Deffenbaugh, C. (2006). Artist/Art educator: Making sense of identity issues. *Art Education*, (59)3, 42-47. Retrieved from http://www.mica.edu/Documents/Art%20Education/MAAE%20Research/59%283%29_ArtEd_May2006_Deffenbaugh%280%29.pdf
- Monroe, K. R. (2001). Morality and a sense of self: The importance of identity and categorization for moral action. *American Journal of Political Science*, 45(3), 491-507. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2669234?uid=3739600&uid=2&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21105975935251>
- The need for a sense of identity. (2015). Retrieved from <http://changingminds.org/explanations/needs/identity.htm>
- Mead, A. (n.d.). Portrait: Artists deal with self, identity, culture at Free Radical 2014. *The Rapidian*. Retrieved from <http://therapidian.org/portrait-artists-deal-self-identity-culture-free-radical-2014>
- Ridley, S. (2013). Importance of identity. *The Mirror Project*. Retrieved from http://artshealth.com/themirrorproject/?page_id=11.
- Thornton, A. (2013). *Artist, Researcher, Teacher: A Study of Professional Identity in Art and Education*. Bristol: Intellect.

Wexler, L. (2009). The importance of identity, history, and culture in the wellbeing of indigenous youth. *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 2(2), 267-276.

Retrieved from

http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/journal_of_the_history_of_childhood_and_youth/v002/2.2.wexler.pdf.