

University Senate President's Reflection April 2022

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Over the past year, I have used the University Senate President's position to editorialize at each of our meetings, and I apologize if you saw these monologues as waste of time, inappropriate or abuse of pulpit power. What I really intended with these reflections (for which at times I had to do some research outside my area of expertise) was to frame the conversation, to motivate, and to inspire you to use the brain power, the energy and the amazing expertise around us, to become better as individuals and as an institution overall. I apologize if you saw this otherwise, and I maintain the hope that at least a grain of what was said left you with the desire to explore further ways to do good, to become more collaborative, to be better leaders or to motivate other members of our community.

Identity

I am sure you often ask yourself (either explicitly or implicitly) the following questions: “*Who am I?*” “*How do I see myself?*”, “*How do others see me?*”; and that you sometimes ask yourself the same questions about our own institution, Emory. What is in fact *identity*? How does it apply to individuals, but also to states, churches, firms, political parties, universities, practically to any institutional actor?

Often identity is defined as *the sum of qualities, beliefs, personality traits, appearances or expressions that characterize a person or a group*. Jean Paul G. Ricoeur was the first to introduce the distinction between *ipse identity* (selfhood, 'who am I?'), and *idem identity* (sameness, or a third-person perspective for identity). The first, based on *selfhood*, favors a primordialist approach that takes the sense of self and belonging to a collective group as a fixed thing, defined by objective criteria such as common ancestry and common biological characteristics. The second, based on *sameness*, takes the view that identity is formed by a predominantly political choice, questioning the idea that identity is a natural given, characterized by fixed, supposedly objective criteria. Both approaches need to be put and understood in their respective political and historical contexts, such as debates on issues of class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, etc. Further, the concept of identity includes a personal side and a collective side to selfhood or sameness.

Personal identity

Here is the most common entry for *identity* in a dictionary: "The sameness of a person or thing at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact linked to itself and not something else; individuality, personality." Personal identity is what a person thinks that distinguishes themselves in socially relevant ways, something that the person may take special pride in, uniquely orients their behavior; or is perceived as immutable to themselves. As such, identity becomes a correlate for dignity, honor, pride or self-esteem. And this extends even further: personal identity becomes a moral code or compass, a set of moral principles, ends or goals that a person uses as a normative framework or as a guide to action. This explains how the concept of identity can become such a powerful motivator of action, and how identity matters can engage such deep and powerful emotions.

A key feature of self or ego identity is described as an individual's personal sense of continuity. People can attain this feeling throughout their lives, as they develop, and is meant to be an ongoing process. Ego identity includes two main features: one's personal characteristics & development, and the culmination of social & cultural factors and roles that impact one's identity. There are various identity stages across lifespan, each characterized by conflicts between the inner, personal world and the outer, social world of an individual. Erik Erikson found that the identity conflicts occur primarily during adolescence, and described potential outcomes that depend on how one deals with these conflicts. Those who do not manage a re-synthesis of childhood identifications transition to a state of *identity diffusion*, whereas those who retain their given identities unquestioned have *foreclosed identities*. The development of a strong ego identity along with the proper integration into a stable society and culture can lead to a stronger sense of identity in general. Conversely, a deficiency in either of these factors may increase the chance of an identity crisis or confusion.

Collective identity

In sociology, the emphasis is on collective identity, in which an individual's identity is strongly associated with the role, the behavior, or the collection of group memberships that defines them, in other words, "*who we are, and how we announce ourselves to others.*" Identities then guide behavior, leading, for example, "mothers" to behave like "mothers", "physicians" to act like "physicians", etc. Some coined the term *state identity* as a state that remains itself through time, despite complete turnover in its body of citizens. Noting that Aristotle addressed this very issue in the writings of *Politics*,

Booth used in 1999 the term *state identity* in this specific sense, in order to analyze the conditions under which an organization or state are politically responsible for acts committed in the past (e.g., the Holocaust, the enslavement of African people, etc). When *state* is used to refer to a political community (or a set of citizens), it is a social category. But in the more common use of *state*, as in country, organization or university, there is no set of persons that uniquely identifies the *state*.

Many people gain a sense of positive self-esteem from their identity groups, which furthers a sense of community and belonging. Different social situations also compel people to attach themselves to distinct self-identities, which may cause some to feel marginalized, switch between different groups and self-identifications, or reinterpret certain identity components. These different egos lead to constructed images dichotomized between what people want to be (the *ideal self*) vs how others see them (the *limited self*). Educational background, occupational status, past history and roles significantly influence identity formation in this regard.

There are certain identity formation strategies that a person (or an institution) may use to adapt to the social world. Cote & Levine developed a typology, which investigated different manners of behavior that individuals may use. For example, one can settle to be a refuser, a drifter, a searcher or a guardian. A resolver (the desirable type) consciously wants self-growth, accepts personal skills or competencies and uses them actively, and is responsive to communities that provide opportunity for self-growth.

These different explorations of 'identity' demonstrate how difficult it is to pin down the concept. Since identity is a virtual entity, it is almost impossible to define it empirically. We often use the term with different meanings, from fundamental and abiding sameness, to fluidity, contingency, membership, negotiated aspects, on-going processes and so on.

As I said earlier, am sure you ask yourself the questions: “*Who am I?*” “*How do I see myself?*”, “*How do others see me?*”, and also: “*Who is Emory?*”, “*How do we see ourselves?*”, “*How does the world see and define Emory?*” Asking these questions is the first necessary step in this identity settling process. The next step – is really up to us: how do we evaluate the past; how do we resolve potential past and present identity crises; and how do we want the future to look like?

While I do not have the answers to these questions, let’s keep working at it together!

Thank you.