Identity and diversity in today's world

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ABSTRACT
This paper develops a thesis about identity and diversity. I first look at activity-based identities, identities like being a gardener, birder, citizen scientist or fan-fiction writer. These are freely chosen identities and they are proliferating at a great rate today thanks to participatory culture, the Maker Movement and digital and social media. Next, I turn to relational identities, identities like being Asian-American, elderly, ADHD or Catholic. These are classificatory labels that are not always freely chosen. I argue that they can do as much to efface diversity as celebrate it. I look at the ways in which people can accept and own, reject, or be conflicted about such identities. When such identities are accepted, and owned they become very much like activity-based identities.

Introduction

This article develops a thesis about identity and diversity. I first look at activity-based identities, identities like being a gardener, birder, citizen scientist, or fan-fiction writer. These are freely chosen identities and they are proliferating at a great rate today thanks to participatory culture, the Maker Movement, and digital and social media. People young and old, with no need of formal credentials, are becoming experts at things like video and music production, game design, journalism, citizen science, fan-fiction, robotics, fashion consultants, DIY biology, hacking, social activistism and a great many other things. Many of these people are finding an identity and sense of self-worth in these activities, often outside of the market and status based on jobs or wealth. Such activity-based identities are, as we will see, rooted in new forms of social organization on the Internet and in 'real life', forms we will call 'affinity spaces'.

Next, I turn to relational identities, identities like being Asian-American, elderly, ADHD or Catholic. These are classificatory labels that are not always freely chosen. I argue that they can do as much to efface diversity as celebrate it. I look at the ways in which people can accept and own, reject or be conflicted about such identities. When such identities are accepted and owned they become very much like activity-based identities.

For both activity-based identities and relational identities, I develop what I call the 'Sub-Type Principle' which says: Real diversity exists one or more levels down below any general label. This principle has the odd property of being seemingly obvious, yet probably

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controversial and regularly ignored. I cannot simply claim it is right, especially in the face of the frequent use of classificatory labels by activists seeking social justice. I suggest the principle so, even if readers reject it, we will have, at least, done some 'mutual mulling' over our differing perspectives on diversity in the modern world. I also want in this article to suggest the importance of activity-based identities in the modern world, in themselves and in tandem with relational identities.

Activity-based identities

Many activities in the world are organized around what I will call an activity-based identity (Gee, 2013, 2015). Consider, as an example, a 'birder' (a birdwatcher). Certain people are what we might call 'real birders'. By this I mean that they are 'into' birding, identify themselves as birders, are adept at birding, and are recognized by other adept birders as a birder. 'Real birders' are the people who set the norms and standards for identifying birds in the field and engaging in other aspects of birding (e.g. how to keep a list of the birds you have seen; how to engage in bird counts; what sorts of binoculars and scopes to buy and how to use then; what bird books to use in the field; what to do next when you face a problem in the field, and how to comport yourself when you are in the field with other birders).

'Birders' come in three varieties, 'master birders', 'adepts', and 'laity birders'. A great many activities today operate by the 'Pareto Principle' (Reed, 2001). This principle says: 'For many events or activities, roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes'. In an activity like birding, the masters make the most contributions, while the adepts still make significant ones as well. Then there are people like me. I love birding as an activity. I respect real birders and I understand and appreciate their values, norms, and ways of engaging in their practices. But I do not consider myself a 'real birder'. This is a choice I have made. If I wanted to – as could anyone – I could commit more and learn, with mentorship, to be a real birder. Let's call people like me 'lay birders.' I adopt the term from religion. It is as if the master and adept birders are the clergy and the lay birders are like laity who have chosen not to take up a vocation as a priest, but see themselves as part of the religion. As in a religion, committed lay people share important understandings about values, meanings, and practices with the clergy.

I have used birding as an example of an activity-based identity. Of course, any society is just chock full of such identities. Consider, for example, the very partial list below:

Mime
Policeman
Gamer
Kindergarten Teacher
Social Activist
Linguist
Physicist
Gang Member
Doctor
Birder
Fan-Fiction Writer
Craft-Furniture Maker
Carpenter

Some of these are typically jobs, some are not, and some can be jobs for some people and not for others. But I am concerned with them not as jobs, but as ways of being 'into' something, of identifying with it. There are certainly master policemen, carpenters, and biologists and there are adept policemen, carpenters and biologists. There are, as well, lay carpenters and biologists (indeed, there is today a whole DIY biology movement), and even lay people who ride along or aid the police. Of course, there are also people who do a job just to earn money and survive, with no real commitment to it as an identity. These people are 'doing time.'

Degrees and credentials are secondary here, as well. There are master biologists, historians and mimes who have no advanced degrees or certifications and there are people with degrees and certifications that are not really adept or devoted to what they do (Andersen, 2012; Hitt, 2013; Hatch, 2014). Indeed, today, participatory culture and maker spaces are producing masters, adepts, and lay people with no degrees or credentials in all sort of areas of interest and passion, including areas of citizen science (Gee, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2010).

Activity-based identities are another form of collective intelligence, perhaps the most important form in today's world. When someone takes on – as master, adept or lay person – an activity-based identity, they are networked to the values, norms, practices, and shared knowledge and skills – as well as the smart tools and other resources – of a large group of people who, through time and space, develop and continually transform effective ways to do certain things and solve certain sorts of problems.

Today there are more activity-based identities than ever before. And new ones are being invented all the time. A great many of these identities are not tied to traditional jobs or institutions, but, nonetheless, involve important skills. Let's take as an example people who play the game *The Sims* and design landscapes, houses, clothes, furniture and other such things, for the game (Gee & Hayes, 2010, 2011). The Sims is a simulation of life, work, families, and neighbourhoods. It was designed by the game-design genius Will Wright and is the best-selling game in video game history. Somewhat over half the players of the game are girls and women.

In the virtual world of *the Sims* players can go to in-game stores to buy (with fictional money) what they need. But they can also use in-game creation tools to design these things themselves. The tools are user-friendly 3D design tools. They can go yet further and use 3D design tools and image manipulation tools outside the game (e.g. Adobe Photoshop) to make things and input them into the game. They can give their creations away to other players or sell them (for real money) if they wish. These activities take place on interest-driven sites devoted to *the Sims* where players share things and information with each other. Elsewhere, I have written about an elderly woman who was a shut-in due to illness, but became a widely respected designer of houses, clothes, furniture and landscapes for *the Sims*. She eventually gave away more than 14 million designs and had a guest book on her website where over a million people had thanked her and praised her for her designs. So being a '*Sims* designer' can be an identity if a person identifies with it, understands the judgement system connected to that identity, and can design or appreciate design in the terms that fit the norms and values of the group. Lots of people are lay *Sims* designers in that they engage in the activity and respect the 'real designers', know something about their standards, but are into *Sims* design more as a 'hobby' than an avocation.

Activity-based identities are making the modern world go round. They are things you can be and activities you can appreciate. They are a large part of what development and schooling ought to be about – though schools confuse 'having a job' with 'being something' in a world where being something (a committed designer) is more important than any one job you have.

Every child today faces a fast-changing, high-risk, and highly complex world. Young people will need to be exposed to a good number of interests and activities and learn to choose wisely which to master, which to become adept at, and which to do as a devoted lay person. They will need to make such choices across a lifetime. The areas where they are masters, adepts, or lay people will constitute the set of skills and insights that they will need to navigate the future.

Diversity

Activity-based identities are named by both a noun (for BEING) and a verb (for DOING). So birders bird, gardeners garden, gamers game and physicists do physics. However, for any activity-based identity, these general names (e.g. gardeners, gardening) hide the large amount of diversity that the activity-based identity encompasses. There are not only many different types of gardeners, they are many different ways to distinguish among different types of gardeners.

Gardeners can grow one type of plant or many; they can be fruit and vegetable gardeners or flower gardeners or both; they can do organic gardening or not; they can garden to landscape or eat; they can engage in community gardening or garden at home; they can be casual gardeners, high-tech gardeners, large-scale gardeners, or serious gardeners with small plots; they can be container gardeners, raised-bed gardeners, urban gardeners, indoor gardeners or even butterfly gardeners (planting plants that will attract butterflies). These are only a few of the many different things gardeners can be. The same thing is true of any other activity-based identity. The true diversity exists in the sub-types (and sub-sub-types, etc.) below the general label. This is important enough, I would argue, to be seen as a general principle (albeit one that is often ignored), let's call it the 'Sub-Type Principle': Real diversity exists one or more levels down below any general label.

Activity-based identities are identities that people identify with by free choice. It is important to note, though, that activity-based identities are not IN a person. They are a reciprocal relationship between a person and a social group and its core defining activity. Such identities change in history as groups change their activities, norms, values, or standards. Some activity-based identities go out of existence and some new ones arise. Activity-based identities are ways for people to identify with something outside of themselves, something that other people do and are.

Saint Simeon Stylites (390 AD – 459 AD) was an aesthetic who lived for 37 years on a small platform on top of a pillar near Aleppo in Syria (Lent, 2008). He inspired a six century long succession of *stylitoe* or 'pillar-hermits'. Being a pillar-hermit is an activity-based identity. Saint Simeon became a saint. If you tried this today, you would be seen as mentally ill. The niche for pillar-hermits is now long gone. Of course, it might come back, though I doubt it. But, for now, it is gone and you're out of luck if you want to be one. For St. Simeon to be a pillar-hermit people had to recognize and accept that he was one (and understand what it meant) and others had to become one, too.

Activity-based identities are like a marriage freely chosen. They are, we might say, marriages for love. However, there are a large number of other sorts of identities that are much more like arranged marriages. Sometimes people in arranged marriages end up in love, sometimes they don't, but it is not all that easy to leave the marriage in many cases. The myriad of different activity-based identities and their diverse internal sub-types are not usually what educators and policy makers mean when they talk about diversity. They more often mean these other sorts of identities that are much more like arranged marriages. These are what I will call 'relational identities'.

Relational identities

Relational identities are defined in terms of relations, contrasts, or oppositions between different types of people. Here is a non-exhaustive list:

Identities	Examples
Cultural	Native-American, Latino
Ascribed	ADHD, gifted
Gender	woman, trans-man
Sexuality	heterosexual, gay
Attributes	Cancer Survivor, deaf
Ideological	conservative, libertarian
Religious	Christian, Hindu
Class	working class, 1%
Family	the Smith family, The Billings lineage
Age	teen, elderly

Relational identities are often imposed on or assigned to people, the result of 'fate', or picked up in early socialization in life within families. Even political viewpoints like being liberal or conservative are strongly connected to our families and upbringing. Each of these sorts of relational identities can exist in three separate ways: (1) a classificatory label that other people apply to you, but which you reject or don't much care about; (2) a label that you own and identify with; (3) a label you are conflicted about.

As classifications, relational identities can be problematic in a number of ways. First, unlike activity-based identities, such as gaming or gardening, these identities are relational. They are defined in relation to, often in contrast or opposition to, other identities. Teens are defined in relation and contrast to other age groups. Native-Americans are defined in relation and contrast to other ethnic groups. People with ADHD are defined in relation and contrast to other disabilities and abilities.

Relational identities change or disappear if the other identities they are contrasted with change of disappear (Hacking, 2006). If humans died by 20 or so, there would be no need for a teen category (teens then would just be adults) and the category of elderly would change quite a bit. If all non-African-American people in the United States disappeared tomorrow, then African-Americans would cease to be African-Americans and would become just 'Americans'. Conservatives in the United States moved so far to the right over the last few decades that politicians once called conservative would now be viewed as moderates (e.g. President Dwight Eisenhower).

Such relational identities can easily get caught up with invidious comparisons and hierarchies. For example, why do we regularly and obsessively refer to some American black people as 'African-American' because some of them had an ancestor hundreds of years ago

in Africa, but next to no one ever refers to me as a 'British-American' because I had ancestors in England long ago?

African-Americans are 'special' in the sense of being singled out as eternally hyphenated while a great many other groups have lost their hyphens (or have them as merely honorifics). Indeed, it is hard to think of any group more indigenously American, aside from Native Americans, than African-Americans. After all, they have been here longer and contributed more to the country than almost any other Americans, but they keep their hyphen, nonetheless.

Second, though relational identities are the categories that define what 'diversity' means to educators, they can actually efface diversity. Relational identities are at such a high level of generality that they efface the myriad of real and many differences among Latinos, Christians, elderly people and so on for all the other categories. In all these categories, the differences among people in them swamp any commonalities they have as a big group. There is tremendous diversity among African-Americans (not to mention 'blacks,' a much wider group), Latinos, and the elderly. Why? Because all of them have lived out lives defined by many more attributes than being African-American, Latino or elderly.

These categories are at the wrong level to define real diversity. Diversity exists at the next level(s) down. Just as the diversity in gardening exists in the many different types of gardeners and even the many different ways to identify such types, diversity in regard to relational identities exists at the level of different types of African-Americans, elderly people, working class people and conservatives. It exists at the level at which individual people in these categories have distinctive experiences that, though connected to the larger category, differ based on their own unique selves and distinctive positions in life and trajectories across time and space.

Third, relational identities can efface individuality. People are the products of their unique genetic and epigenetic make-ups and experiences in life. Each person's unique tapestry is too often effaced by the way many people use relational identities labels, which tend to be totalizing. There are times for everyone when a non-relational activity-based identity trumps one of these relational labels. Sometimes a good gamer or fan fiction writer wants to be a 'real' gamer or fan fiction writer and not 'just' an African-American or Latino or 'Anglo-American' gamer or fan-fiction writer. Individuality is genetic, epigenetic, physical, environmental, social and cultural. It is the product of interactions among a person's body/brain, environments and social interactions. But the dynamics of these interactions happen closer to the ground of lived reality and diverse experiences than these more general relational identity categories allow for.

Fourth, relational identities are often used and abused in ways that efface history. Each one of these categories has a long history of having been invented, produced and reproduced, and transformed across time and in terms of a great many vested interests. There is nothing 'natural' about any of these categories, though we often treat them as if there were. Take the category 'Asperger's disease' as an example (Baron-Cohen & Klin, 2006). For most of history, no such category existed. In 1944, it came into existence, thanks to the Austrian pediatrician Hans Asperger (1906–1980). However, in 2013, the DSM-5 replaced Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder and other related developmental disorders with the umbrella term 'autism spectrum disorder' (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Asperger's disease disappeared. It may come back, or it may not.

When I was growing up in San Jose, California, in the 1950s, some Italian-American friends of ours bought a new house in a better neighbourhood than their old one. People in the neighbourhood picketed with signs that said 'No Blacks'. Today many Italian-Americans have long lost their hyphen (except for holidays) and no one can seem to remember when they were 'black'.

My own heritage is in a group of people who have been called things like 'white trash', 'hillbillies', 'trailer trash' and more (Isenberg, 2016). This group of people has existed since long before the founding of the United States. Indeed, related terms of abuse were already common in England before any English person set foot in America and were retained when they did. These terms included: 'lubbers', 'rubbish', 'clay-eaters' and 'crackers'. One interesting term that the English at home and in the American colonies used for such people was 'offscourings', which meant 'human fecal waste'.

Historically, the term 'trash' in 'white trash' is related to 'waste' and a peculiarly British view of waste (Isenberg, 2016). In pre-colonial and colonial times, the word 'waste' was applied to both people and land. Land was 'waste land' if no one cultivated it or made it otherwise commercially productive. 'Waste people' owned no land and drifted from place to place. They were unproductive people and, thus, 'waste', like unproductive land.

This group, whatever we call it, has played a significant role in U.S. history – though in different sub-groups, for example 'Southern White Trash', 'hillbillies' or 'Western Squatters'. It has been repeatedly used as a model of degenerate culture and often juxtaposed in complex ways to African-American people as a way to ensure that poor whites and blacks did not join in common cause. Indeed, this group – 'my people' – may be the only group left that has no label that isn't derogatory. History matters, not least for those who are products of it.

Fifth, activity-based identities exist because a person identifies with the activity and the people who do it. If they did not so identify, they would not join the activity. But relational identities are 'imposed' on people, whether or not they identify with the identity themselves. People can be 'trapped' in them as stereotypes largely defined by others if they do not identify with them themselves.

Relational identities as owned, rejected, or conflicted

Relational identities as labels stem from the work that institutions and social groups have done through history to classify people. In turn, these classifications come to define how we treat people in the category though, in reality, the people in the category are quite diverse and, thus, one size never fits all here. However, people can choose to own and identify with a relational identity. For them, then, it is not just a classification that was imposed on them or which they inherited. It is how they see themselves. For example, some deaf people see deafness not just as a socially significant attribute, but as a valuable and distinctive culture with its own language (ASL) and ways of being, doing and knowing. They refer to themselves as 'Deaf' with a capital 'D' and, in this way, they turn a classification ('deaf') into an identity they highly value and accept (Padden & Humphries, 2005). Being Big D Deaf is defined not by how much hearing you do or do not have, but by values, norms and activities in which people engage together.

A relational identity can, thus, become much like an activity-based identity. Being Big 'D' Deaf is an example. Here is another: I was raised a devout Catholic. Since I was baptized as

a baby, I clearly did not choose this religion. It was imposed on me. But I strongly identified with its activities, things like going to Mass, being an altar boy, teaching catechism, going to confession, attending retreats and many more. I was a 'real Catholic' in the way in which someone can be a 'real mime' or a 'real gamer'.

Some other Catholics identified in no deep way with Catholic activities. They came to Church irregularly and saw Catholicism as an inherited culture. We called such people 'Catholics in name only', though we accepted them still, in some sense and for some occasions, as fellow Catholics. There were also people who identified with Catholic activities, but did not accept all the Church's beliefs, though they did not make this public. They wanted a religion for their own lives and for what they conceived of as the good of their children. They were active in the Church and committed to its activities. I did not then have a name for such people, since I did not know they existed until I left the Church. When people left the Church, by the way, we called them 'lapsed Catholics'. It was hard to get away from the label. At the most general level Catholics define someone as Catholic if they were baptized as a Catholic.

People can and do even freely identify with relational identities like 'manic-depressive' or 'cancer survivor' (Martin, 2007). They see such an identity not just as a label someone else has given them, but as a way of being in the world connected to special ways of doing and knowing. They sometimes even join with others to celebrate the identity and redefine it in positive terms. This is one way they seek to own the identity rather than be trapped in it. If a person does not personally identify with a relational identity, then I will simply say they fall in to a relational classification that some other people have made up for them. The trouble is that for people who do not want to identify with these relational identities, it can be very hard to 'opt out'.

Too often, in education, what passes for a discussion about diversity is really a discussion about these relational identities as classifications. What passes for multiculturalism can sometimes be more a celebration of classifications than of actually lived and shared experiences of people who almost always, in reality, make up many smaller kinds of the people being classified.

If we really wanted to celebrate diversity at school we would celebrate the identities that people actively identify with and ask how they identify with them, which is different for different people who share the same label. We should never assume Johnnie or Janney is an 'X' unless we come to know how they identify with X, if they do at all. Diversity should also mean the very complex ways in which people relate to these categories. There are many nuances between identifying with a label (though always in certain specific ways, not 'in general') and not identifying with it. For example, as I said above, my background is in people who have been referred to as 'white trash', 'waste people' and 'hillbillies', among many other labels, since well before the founding of the United States. I have a very complex and conflicted relationship with this category and the big and diverse group of people it indiscriminately labels. The relationship is far too complex to say either that I identify or don't identify with this group. It is a matter of love, loyalty, fear, loathing and pity. That's my story and if you wanted to honour my 'diversity' you would have to listen to it, not generalize on the basis of what is, in reality, a rough and ready and 'other infected' (not self-defined) category.

Now, of course, it is possible I should be less conflicted about my heritage. Possibly I have been duped into these conflicts by other people's opinions (people who, by and large, really

know nothing about 'my group'). And, admittedly, when I began to read the history of 'white trash', I learned new ways to think about these people and myself and, too, America. In fact, one of the most important things education could do for people is let them know the complex history of relationships among and within relational identities.

I am not, by any means, saying that these relational identity categories are not important. They, indeed, make up the social geography of society. They are the level at which many people are advantaged or disadvantaged, thanks to other people with other labels. What I am saying is that they are not the level at which diversity of the sort that gives rise to collective intelligence exists (Brown & Lauder, 2000; Leimeister, 2010). That level is made up of living, breathing, multi-facetted people with a great many varieties of experiences and identities who may happen to be labelled 'X' and may or may not identify with 'X' or may have an entirely complex relationship with 'X'. That they are 'X' is important (because it affords and constrains the experiences they have; how they are 'X' is even more important.

I have acknowledged that people can, and often do, turn a relational identity not just into an owned identity, but a cherished one indeed. In many cases, such cherishing has been a crucial survival device for people and a prime motivation for demands for respect and fairness. But, alas, such cherishing sometimes – too often in history – comes at the cost of distaining people with other labels.

When we go the next level or levels down from general label – into types and sub-types, and sub-sub-types, and so forth – we reach the levels at which any general category is rich with both difference and commonality. The label comes really to be variation in a theme. And, as in music, different themes can be integrated to make a symphony.

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Notes on contributor

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