

Identity and Difference

Identity is commonly understood as a stable and unified quality that is internal to the person. From a sociological perspective, however, identities are much more dynamic; they are social and relational constructs that are constantly unfolding within changing social contexts. From this view, identities are always in motion, and their boundaries are continually drawn and redrawn within and across social groups and communities. In this course we will follow the sociological approach by exploring how identities are constructed through social differences, and how the meanings of those differences themselves are always being redefined through social and power relations.

Historically, modern identities have taken shape through binary oppositions – an “us”/”them” or “we”/”they” mentality. This logic of exclusivity is still very much alive, and yet it may be that many personal and social identities are becoming increasingly multidimensional and unsteady. Changes in identity are thus wide-ranging and difficult to capture within a single theoretical model. Our course assumes that we need more empirical research about the people and groups that are experiencing various kinds of identity transitions. Therefore we will investigate the volatility of identity in an up-close, grounded way.

After exploring some of the main concepts and perspectives in the area of identity, we will read different kinds of ethnographic and interview studies that address a variety of areas (gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality, and others, depending on student interests). We will read widely so to generate many different kinds of research problems. Still, we will find ourselves regularly returning to a few central questions:

How do people in different social contexts embody and define their identities? How do they understand their own unique identity challenges and their differences from other groups?

How can we better understand the many effects of social power on identity? How do meanings of difference reproduce social inequalities? How is power exercised through the pursuit of identity?

What happens when identities are embodied in ways that challenge prevailing notions of “who one is” or is supposed to be? What new identity strategies are emerging?

What approaches to research are valuable and necessary in the sociological study of identity? What methodological, epistemological, and ethical issues are at stake for researchers? How should we define our own identities as “researchers” in these areas of study?

A salient dimension of this course is qualitative research methods, especially those that emphasize talking and interacting with people in real social contexts (interviewing and ethnography). Students will choose a topic in area of identity and difference and develop an original study (20-25 pages) over the course of the semester.

Throughout the semester we will hold several methodological workshops that correspond to the development of students’ research projects. In class, students will present their proposals and project results. Our course will generally follow a collaborative and workshop-based approach where students lead discussion and regularly share their work while offering constructive feedback to classmates.

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