

Future of Identity





The Global Challenge

Identity provokes challenge in many ways. I want to suggest four challenges that might be considered noisier than others:

Firstly, what I see as the challenge of 'more-of-the-same'. There are few signs that the existing challenges associated with single-dimension personal and social identity (whether as social role or type of identity) are slowing down. So, North vs. South continues to matter - even though new issues of East vs. West are also becoming apparent. Similarly, identities around faith, social mobility, language, gender and age, among others, will continue to create more and bigger challenge.

Secondly, the 'dealing-with-multiple-identities' challenge is likely to become more complex and more significant. As our world becomes smaller through migration and mobility, both virtual and real, it may be that people and groups will express themselves more insistently through multiple rather than single identity lenses. So it will be the particular ingredients of the 'cocktail identity' (the combination of personas and their consequences) which will be the more significant. How will we protect and respect apparently contradictory and multiple identities? Will it be through identity personas that we define or will it be from an integrated set of values?

Thirdly, there is the 'new-generation-identity' challenge. This will be where the answers to the 'who are you?' questions are framed in completely unexpected ways. Here lies perhaps the most interesting (and challenging) of all - a new demographic, a new generation of (especially younger) people creating or reflecting new types of social membership. These memberships may be a reaction to what we currently have or be the transient results of increasingly fluid social networking, the automaticity of easy travel and instantaneous communication. How can we make any assumptions about how a 15-year-old frames her or his definitions about self and awareness of self?

Fourthly, the 'the-virtual-identities' challenge. The increasing application of smart working and virtual engagement is creating whole new paradigms for identity. Teams of young, professional South Asians are trained in new identity characteristics (US-English accents, up-to-the-moment knowledge of current US television soap). Hence, qualified in new role and type identities, they can be profitably applied to a call-centre industry but separated from customers; more solemnly, military drone-airplane operators can operate at a continental distance and return home to supper with their families at the end of a work-shift. We are turning identities into jobs (rather than jobs into identities) but creating new types of social dislocation.

If in each of the four cases, "identity" means either a socially distinguishing feature that a person takes a special pride in, or a social membership governed by rules, attributes or behaviours (or both at the same time in certain instances), then the global challenges are around where difference is articulated hierarchically (haves-have nots, traditional-new, digital native-digital immigrant, home birds-migrants and so forth.) In the case of the new generation, we may not be able to predict the challenge at all - as we do not yet understand the basic paradigm - and nor by definition should we!

The uncertainty relating to how well we will manage diversity is another significant issue. In this regard, the potential 'clash of identities' must relate to a community membership, let's say European citizenship. This brings with it the complex pattern of relationships people have to nationality. Oversimplifying nationality by seeing it as a simple and single identity type (and hence in the same way citizenship) would be dangerous. Diversity is the existence of

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multiple and parallel identities within one nation, each with its own context and origin. These multiple identities define and describe contemporary citizens (perhaps and at the same time with a religion, a set of skills, a first/second language, food preferences and so on). They are further distinguishable by geographic origin, political persuasion, level of education etc.

So, given the multi-layered and multi-dimensional nature of nations, communities and individuals, the challenge to bring positive coexistence is to develop a cohesive set of values with due regard for diversity and individual rights, and find successful ways of promoting difference while also identifying and embedding a shared identity among community members.

Options and Possibilities

Of course it may be more productive to ask associated questions by dispensing with “identity” and analysing instead the political implications of personal desires for dignity, honour, and self-respect and the politics of the membership of social groups. In a future 2020 European context, for example, a mono-layered European identity is less likely (and maybe even less desirable); socio-economic and political crises, along with a deteriorating climate, will provoke increasing protectionism - essentially stronger boundaries and potential ‘exclusion’ zones that will brigade sameness.

That said, a certainty over the next ten years will be the contribution of identity issues to diversity, and to the challenges of diversity and of living together in communities of multiple cultures. It is clear that people will continue to be mobile and migrate in huge numbers as economics, politics, climate and so forth, provide incentives. The more marginalized and excluded groups will probably not join such movement over the next ten years, constrained by their restricted toolkits and opportunities. Such mobility will create new sustainable and diverse communities characterised by the much greater proximity of different identity types.

Issues of the cohesion of these new communities, together with a strengthened sense of protectionism and resistance to further diversification will prevail. In the UK, communities are seen as communities where there is a common vision and a sense of belonging

shared by all members with respect and understanding of their diverse backgrounds and circumstances. A cohesive community also displays strong and positive relationships between its members and similar life opportunities are actively promoted. So the joining of very different identity types and roles need not lead to a non-cohesive community, but what seems clear in many European and North American contexts is that at this moment in time, cohesion is not easy and requires deliberate policies and actions.

Bad experience within diverse communities has been considerable. This has created stronger understanding of, but also stronger positions on, the notion of ‘cultural pluralism’. In the wider Europe, experience of a number of different measures and policy approaches following racial and ethnic discrimination and conflict has increased awareness about various cultures, religions,



racess, ethnicities, attitudes and opinions which might be thrown together in a single community. Responses have ranged from so-called 'Multiculturalism' (often criticised for reinforcing barriers with its emphasis on respect and acknowledgement of differences) to either dialogue and actions aspiring to openness and interaction between cultures in order to lead to long term change or the application of more formal rules of engagement with integration as the planned result.

I suspect that in the next decade we are likely to move more quickly and more widely towards an integrated identity for work and social interaction, although we may see a serious reinforcement of difference in the private world. What will appear as cohesive and connected communities may well be quite schizophrenic. This describes a community where members play out distinctive identities depending on the community context they find themselves in. Though this might be a reasonably certain outcome, as yet we do not really understand the nature of the challenge that it creates. It may be that our communities are stable and secure when times are reasonably OK but hugely fragile when exogenous threats appear or bad times arrive.

As I have implied, peoples in the joined-up and interrelated world of the 21st Century will need to come to terms with a plethora of pluralistic identities. In the future, to be a Brazilian or Asian, or indeed a young global citizen, will mean being much more than one rigid

thing. Above all, peoples will have to come to terms with new community defined identities, which would include Russian-Arab and European and may even challenge the rugby world to add London-Polish to the London-Irish in that league. Many other such identities will challenge the shaping of communities, nations and regions characterised not by multiculturalism per se, but more by the coincidence and co-existence of multiple cultures where transcending difference and somehow helping to bring out the strengths (benefits) of living together becomes an imperative.

Communication technology adds another layer of complexity. A significant proportion of this emerging generation may actively and deliberately develop parallel identities - teenagers constrained by conservative family contexts who use on-line dating and chat rooms to create alternative egos and behaviours in the virtual world. The potential challenge here may focus on a whole generation who fail to 'comply' with traditional rules, or who collapse into an inter-generational crisis.

If what is certain is that communities of different identities will continue to proliferate, and that such communities will increasingly have evident majority and minority 'identities', what is not certain is how community members will react and behave. Many believe that unless the diversities and varieties are harnessed and understood as community benefits, we have a problem, as more likely than not, without this, communities will not be sustainable.

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Proposed Way Forward

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Interventions by community (or national) leadership: These would create the formal rules for social identity groups - based on the desired and negotiated shared values. So, this means introducing accepted and enforceable laws that govern the behaviours within diverse communities and promote community cohesion. These would elevate community practices above difference, and create space for difference to exist as difference.

Changing the impact of identity issues by growing understanding and trust within communities: Finding ways of bringing people from different groups together and encouraging collaboration between these people helps create more comfort with difference. Recent work suggests that contact is successful in bringing about more positive attitudes towards others, reducing prejudice and also building long-lasting friendships. The approach is based on the premise that everyone, individually and as a nation, benefits from knowing, experiencing and working with other cultures, as the focus with these projects are the commonalities that bind groups together, rather than their differences. Intercultural Dialogue is one of the ways in which people can be brought together for such collaboration.

It is also important to stress the significance of the individual as well as the community, and the benefits of dialogue between individuals and communities. There is probably more to be gained from a culturally open and diverse way of life that involves interaction and dialogue with other individuals and groups than there is for a culturally self-contained existence. So, should community leaders or the state set the agenda? Culture and identity are so deeply linked into our everyday lives that high degrees of openness are often more successful if they are generated from the individual or

community. Dialogue and openness should not be about abstract notions of cohesion or integration, but about practical things. Communities can sit down and discuss real issues of concern and potential tension.

Economic growth and stability: Identities matter most when difference is seen as threatening - and the threats are greatest when times are bad. This is probably the most plausible approach to mitigation of the worst case identity scenarios, though the extent to which it is a sustaining and sustainable solution is questionable. Ultimately we can make difference less of an issue through prosperity and plenty, but we may not actually be addressing the core problem.

In my view there are two huge compromises that need to be made for solutions to gain traction and impact.

Firstly, we must have a commitment to an honest, true account of the past. Intercultural exchange cannot be viewed without consideration of global movements and global communication. It is also often asserted that one can only understand one's own culture by looking at other cultures. This requires being able to see one's own culture from an outsider's perspective to some extent; using an historical approach can help.

Second, diaspora matters. Diasporas provide a key link between identity, history and now. Engaging with diaspora space and identity strengthens understanding of how and where identity and difference are made and remade. Through migration, peoples are dispersed across many physical borders. Through these journeys, diasporas also cross social, conceptual, and psychological borders. The diaspora and its location becomes a distinctive place built by immigration, while including the indigenous population as an integral part of a diaspora space. Identity in a diaspora space or



location develops as an ongoing process that can change with situations and experiences. Again,

intercultural dialogue can help with understanding processes within diaspora space.

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Impact and Implications

Socially, identity has become a complex and central phenomenon, and with it diversity itself has become one of the single most important issues for human development. To accommodate diversity, we have to come to terms with multiple and changing identities. What we define and describe as our constituent parts, say in Europe or in Asia, become an integral part of ourselves. It is not just that these parts coexist in communities, but their ideas, art, literature, food and lifestyles now play a central part in shaping both the communities and the individual. In best cases, the difference is evaporating; and we must adjust to this radical change.

If global economic and technological events, processes and change are creating difficulties for individuals to cling on to traditional notions of identity (of both type and role), and challenging our self-confidence and our ability to really understand ourselves, they may at the same time be redefining our potential and the opportunities on offer for human development. Take for example, the virtual world which radically changes the notions of interface. This line of thought takes us quickly to the potential consequence of a world economic order which forms and massages identity types to deliver majority identity agendas, whether for political or economic gain. The influence of Hollywood or Bollywood, the globalisation of brands or the promotion of single-minded liberal democracy comes to mind.

Coming to terms with the impact of identity and diversity requires us to renegotiate our approach to difference, to reject its demonisation without abandoning it. Communities must create space for difference to exist

as difference, and for diverse communities to exist within their own parameters. This view would enable us to confront the challenge without creating all-embracing and philosophical solutions. Assimilation, integration, multiculturalism and the like either eradicate or reinforce difference, whereas success (whatever that means) will require that minority identities retain some of their roots.

The path forward should be one which frames diversity within shared values, where both majority and minority cultures need to abandon the idea that a single truth can be imposed on a plural society and where diverse personal and social identity is mobilised as a good rather than as a source of struggle. Inter- and intra-cultural dialogue must create the space and opportunity for reasoned disagreement and elevate co-existence in the confined spaces of communities to a higher level. This requires us to move forwards from a place where identities are contested and in constant rivalry.