Do we discover who we are, or do we decide who we are?

Emily

‘Who am I?’ We spend our entire lives trying to define ourselves, seeking answers to that burning question of identity yet identity is neither something we are born with nor easily grasped; rather it is continuously evolving through life, shaped by a range of personal and social factors. The more we experience, the more we change and are influenced, and the harder it becomes to define ‘who we are’ as we grapple with different versions of ourselves built by these factors, trying to comprehend which is true. But is this something we discover or decide ourselves?

The widely held concept that our identity is something to be discovered lies in the fact that it cannot be determined immediately in the early stages of our lives but instead develops progressively through lived experience. This developmental perspective on identity predominantly stems from Erikson’s theories, such as his ‘Stages of Psychosocial Development’, which posits eight sequential stages of identity formation and development influenced by the biological, psychological, and social factors throughout the lifespan, from infancy to adulthood[1]. Within this framework, Erikson suggests that from a young age, identity is established when children recognise themselves as a unique being, separate from their parents. As they mature, they adopt traits and characteristics of parents or significant others - a process he called identification - which enables them to form ideas and build a set of expectations about what they wish to be and do. Then, as they transition into adolescence, they lose interest in merely adopting the roles and personality attributes of others and move towards creating a coherent sense of self through discovery. Adolescence represents an optimal time for this due to a variety of physical and cognitive changes and social factors, such as occupation and education; all of which enable the exploration of roles, relationships, and ideologies. As adolescents confront the questions ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What is my place in this world?’, they face the conflict between identity and what Erikson describes as ‘role confusion’, attempting to discover who they are through synthesising all the experiences and social roles they have had into one unique sense of self[2]. This discovery is particularly important for individuals who do not fit into their social environment and face greater ‘role confusion’; a prominent example being those of mixed ethnic heritage as they navigate between multiple cultural identities and struggle to establish a clear sense of belonging,

unable to make a concrete decision and instead needing to explore deeper which identity fits and relates them to the world best.

Furthermore, Erikson suggests that identity refers to not only a sense of discovering who one is as a person but also as a contributor to society[3], which closely links to the 'Social Identity Theory' developed by Tajfel and Turner. This theory posits that individuals define themselves based on the group memberships they discover, classifying themselves into various social groups based upon shared attributes, such as nationality, religion, social class, or values, and once categorised, they adopt the norms, values, and behaviour associated with that group in order to feel a sense of belonging and have a positive social identity[4]. This is further supported by the sociological phenomenon of homophily, whereby individuals form bonds and interact with others similar to themselves naturally like 'birds of a feather'[5]. Such groups facilitate discovery as studies demonstrate that it not only leads to positive self-perception but makes one critically reflect upon themselves and their own values then comparing them to the other members in order to discover what feels right and what does not, thus forming a unique, personal identity[6]. Altogether, these theories demonstrate that identity is not something decided but is a process of discovery, shaped by both personal development and social interactions that teach us lessons on who we want to be.

Yet while identity is said to be discovered, does only discovery, particularly under these social influences, hinder who we can truly be? Many structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers believe accordingly[7], suggesting that our identity is a product of mainstream systems - educational, political, and social. For example, the philosopher, Foucault, viewed identity to be a concept constructed by the power of societal institutions and norms in order to categorise and control individuals[8], and similarly, Althusser, a Marxist structuralist, argued that identity is not innate, but constructed by ideology through a process known as 'interpellation', where individuals are 'hailed' or called into specific roles by Ideological State Apparatuses (institutions such as education, religion, and the family)[8] - all of which means there is no sense of personal identity. Existential philosophers, such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard further emphasise this, where they argue that society is a 'herd' that suppresses individuality and enforces conformity[9], and this is evident across history. For example in Victorian England, women were 'interpellated' into roles centred around the traits of domesticity and submission, which were viewed as 'fit' for a woman. This was perpetuated by institutions, such as the church, family, and education system, leading to many women concealing aspects

of their identity that lay outside of the prescribed norms in order to conform. Similarly, other non-conforming groups, such as homosexual individuals, had to suppress their true identities in societies which stigmatised and often criminalised them. Despite perhaps discovering their identity while undergoing similar developmental stages in their life, these examples of suppression demonstrate how discovery alone cannot make us who we are. Rather than being our true selves, we may instead select from identities that are congruent with society and the hegemony in order to feel a secure sense of belonging under social pressures. Thus, action through decisions are crucial, however difficult they may be, in order to truly become who we are. This perspective is shared with Nietzsche, who viewed identity not as a fixed, inherent 'essence' but as a process of self-realisation and 'becoming' - a form of art to be created rather than only discovered. There have been many examples where individuals have, despite their social backgrounds and the social context of their time, achieved this, making fearless decisions to become the person they discovered, such as suffragettes and other activists. Therefore, this proves that as well as discovery, decision-making is paramount to becoming who you are.

Therefore, as presented, the answer to 'Who am I?' remains an evolving concept unique to each person. It is not something that we only discover or only decide but a journey in which we discover who we want to be then make decisions in order to become that person, breaking free from the social influences that may constrain us, and thus forming who we are.

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