

Identity Exercise on Identity Saliency Victor Asal vasal@albany.edu & Lewis Griffith

To help students grasp both their own relationship to identity and the power of identity based discourses, we propose an identity selection exercise in which all participating students are asked to write down five key self-identifiers that are most important to them that they share with others. It is important to advise the students to write down identities that make them part of a larger community. So “Mets fan (if that is one of their key identities would be ok) but mother or father would not. They need to write down communal identities which also allow the instructor to discuss very specifically how this relates to Anderson’s Imagined Communities (1993). Another way to ask the question, or to restate it for clarification, is to instruct the students to write down the five things that they feel would best describe their identity or key communities to a stranger. In effect, you are asking the students to demonstrate identity formation or at least to record what they see their own currently formed identity to be. Table one shows how this question can be framed in a PowerPoint¹. Note that the bullet points should be revealed individually, one after the other, and that only the first one should be shown to the students when you explain what you are asking them to do. After they have all written down five identities, ask them to cross one off. Most students have no problem doing this. Then ask them to cross another one off. By the time they are crossing off their third or fourth identity most students struggle or express frustration. Some students refuse to do it- which actually serves the purpose of the exercise.

We **strongly** recommend that the instructor begin the discussion with a caveat that no one is required to volunteer any information that they are uncomfortable discussing or to raise their hand in response to a general survey if they do not feel comfortable doing so. Some of the identities our students have a very personal and private – and some are painful. Forcing them to share would be irresponsible and could result in a backlash. While we have been surprised by some of the things our students are comfortable sharing it is important that the choice is theirs and theirs alone in terms of what they will share.

Table 1: PowerPoint for Identity Exercise (note these are bullet points and only the first one should be shown at the beginning and each one should be serially shown after the other)

1. Write down five key identifiers for yourself that you share with others
2. Cross one off
3. Cross another one off
4. Cross another one off
5. Cross another one off – yes I know but cross it off anyway
6. Why did you choose this last identity to save?
7. The power of experience in creating the saliency of identity

After the students have eliminated all but their last identity the students are in a position of having had to consider what are key factors in their identity – and to choose which elements of their identity are the most important to them in this moment. Once this caveat is completely understood the next step is to ask the students to share the categories of identities they had on their list of five – these will usually be things like:

Nationality	Ethnicity	Religion
Gender or sexuality	Age	Demographic references (New Yorker, Southerner, etc.)
Race	Economic status	

There are usually students who suggest categories or volunteer identities that are off the wall or virtually unique in their conception, either of which can generate interesting discussions in their own right. For example, one student declared music fan as a category. When asked which music specifically (caveating that they did not have to share if they did not want to), the student explained that they were a Grateful Dead fan. When I asked the student why, the student’s response was extremely useful. They said that the music of the Dead was a key

¹ If you email me at vasal@albany.edu I can send you a PowerPoint

part of who they were and that it meant a lot to them – and that they got crap from other students in high school for liking a group like the Grateful Dead.

The next step is to ask the students into which category the identity they would not give up, their last identity after crossing out all the other identities they wrote down, falls into. For those students who already perceive themselves as part of an out or outsider group in mainstream society, this point may be largely self-evident, if not fully developed. But for many students, the impact of context, social perceptions, and even us-them interactions in defining identity is largely unexplored. In the typical US classroom, 3rd or more generation US students rarely put down “American” or “US citizen,” particularly if they are of the dominate ethnic identity either nationally or locally. Usually it is women or sexual minorities who say gender while it is usually people who are not white who say race or ethnicity. The discussion of why this might be so is very productive in terms of talking about identity formation and identity salience. Then ask the students if their final identity would be the same in different hypothetical situations. Some students would not change their identity under any circumstances, but there will be students who report that different contexts would change their key identity dramatically. For example what if this exercise had been conducted in another country where being of a certain race, speaking English, and/or coming from the US was in sharp contrast with the majority, would that have changed the identities they recorded and/or the one they picked? Other questions in support of the issue of context and us-them interactions include:

- 1) If the students did not list a national or majority identifier (American or Caucasian), did they not feel the need to list it in a US classroom?
- 2) How much did the location (local, regional, national) and context (this class with these classmates) shape what they put down on their identity list?
- 3) Do they feel or have they encountered situations where they felt they were defined as a them by others of a different identity group?

At this point, the instructor should introduce the concept of salience and after a short discussion of the concept and its relationship to their own exercise of selecting only one identity descriptor, ask the students why they picked the one that they did. Questions that stem from and support this discussion include:

- 1) Would they consider it their most salient identity and why?
- 2) Do they know what experiences or social linkages that make that particular identity factor the most salient?
- 3) Do they value others with the same core identity more than they do those who do not share that identity?
- 4) How much do the elements associated with this last identity determine the student’s world view?

The next issue to address is the issue of identity mobilization. Beyond simply the struggle to establish a core identity, the question that follows is how powerfully this particular identity motivates behavior. For most students, again particularly those who had not thought in these terms and/or see themselves as part of an unthreatened majority, this will not be a self-evident relationship. They may be largely unaware of how much their identity is engaged and intertwined with their values, their perception of how the world works or should work, and/or what motivates them to action. They may then be very surprised to see how strongly correlated their identity is with their sense of what is acceptable or necessary on a wide range of other issues. If the first question regarding identity formation/recognition was, how important is this identity to you and why, then the second question regarding mobilization centers on what would you accept or do in the name of/defense of this identity? A number of supporting questions follow from this core inquiry:

- 1) Does that identity motivate them to emotions or actions that the others would not?
- 2) Would defense of this identity with violence be justifiable?
- 3) Would the individual student be willing to use violence themselves to defend this identity?
- 4) Does the student feel this last identity is under attack or in need of defense or protection?

It will likely surprise most students to find -- assuming that they have executed the exercise in a way that results in a core personal identity -- they are able to easily generate strong motivations for action based on that identity. When the discussion of salience is coming to a close, it is often useful to supply a real world demonstration of how identity is used to inspire and/or justify political action.