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What’s Identity Got to Do With It?
Mobilizing Identities in the Multicultural Classroom

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Research done over several decades in a variety of disciplines across the social sciences and humanities has shown that students and teachers alike bring their identities and experiences with them into the classroom. Identities are highly salient for students’ experiences in school; they make the classroom a different place for different students. This is because students with different identities in the same classroom will face different sets of what Claude Steele calls “identity contingencies.” Steele uses the term to refer to the specific set of responses that a person with a given identity has to cope with in specific settings. Indeed, who a student is perceived to be will affect such variables as her placement in an educational tracking system, the friends she will have to choose among, and the academic and social expectations that her teachers will have of her. While these identity contingencies might seem relatively insignificant, they can have major consequences for the opportunities a person will have over the course of her life.

To the extent that we are genuinely interested in educating for a just and democratic society, then, we will recognize the salience of identities in the classroom. We will work to alter the negative identity contingencies that minority students commonly face, even as we find strategies for maximizing opportunities for all our students. But I will go even further than this. I argue that a truly multi-perspectival, multicultural education will work to mobilize identities in the classroom rather than seeking to minimize all effects of identities as part of the process of minimizing stereotypes. Only by treating identities as epistemic resources and mobilizing them, I contend, can we draw out their knowledge-generating potential and allow them to contribute positively to the production and transmission of knowledge.

Identities

What are identities? In my book, Learning From Experience, I define identities as the nonessential and evolving products that emerge from the dialectic L. M. Alcoff et al. (eds.), Identity Politics Reconsidered © Linda Martin Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M. L. Moya, 2006
between how subjects of consciousness identify themselves and how they are identified by others. Elsewhere in the book, I define them as “socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world.” I argue that identities are “indexical”—that is, they refer outward to social structures and embody social relations. Insofar as identities reference our understanding of ourselves in relation to others, they provide their bearers with particular perspectives on a shared social world. They are, in the words of Satya Mohanty, “ways of making sense of our experiences.”

In this essay, for analytical purposes, I take the dialectical concept of identity I worked with in Learning From Experience and separate it into two components: ascriptive and subjective identities. I make this analytical distinction not to suggest that the two components can be, in fact, separated from one another. Indeed, identity is inescapably relational. Rather, I make the distinction because it allows me to more clearly delineate what is at stake in taking a realist—rather than an essentialist or an idealist—approach to identity. I argue that taking a realist approach to identity is critical to the project of working toward a more egalitarian and free society. Only a realist approach effectively registers the dialectical (as well as historically and culturally specific) nature of identity construction—an adequate understanding of which is essential to our ability to work toward the transformation of socially significant identities. To the extent that we are interested in transforming this world into a better one—insofar as we cannot get there except from here—the transformation of the identities that are central to the arrangement and functioning of society will be a necessary part of our epistemic and political project.

Ascriptive identities are what some researchers call “imposed identities,” and what I sometimes call “social categories.” They are inescapably historical and collective, and generally operate through the logic of visibility. Examples include racial categories such as “Black” and “Asian” as well as gender categories such as “woman” and “man.” Ascriptive identities come to us from outside the self, from society, and are highly implicated in the way we are treated by others. More importantly, ascriptive identities are highly correlated with the selective distribution of societal goods and resources. This is because, as a result of variable and historically specific economic and social arrangements such as slavery, employment discrimination laws, and restrictive housing covenants that unfairly advantaged some groups of people at the expense of others, different social categories have accrued different meanings and associations. These meanings and associations—many of which linger long after the economic or social arrangements that gave rise to them have been dismantled or even outlawed—are often invoked and mobilized by those in positions of relative power to justify day-to-day processes of social and economic inclusion and exclusion. These processes can range from the personally painful, as when a young Black girl is refused admission to a schoolyard game by a group of white girls, to the economically debilitating, as when a Latina fails to gain a much-deserved promotion because her white male boss has trouble imagining her in a position of authority.