

MULT10014: Identity

Essential Subject Notes

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Unit 1: How is Identity generally understood?

Week 1, lecture 2: what do we mean by 'identity'?

- **Identity**: the properties, characteristics, traits and aspects relatively central to who you are.
- Philosophers Rorty and Wong divided this list into:
 - **Bodily traits** e.g. strength.
 - **Temperament/psychological traits** e.g. the 'big five' personality model.
 - **Social role identity** e.g. social and occupational roles.
 - **Socially-defined group identities** e.g. race, class, religion, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, occupation.
 - **Ideal identity** e.g. personal and social models for the way you should be.
- The primary focus of this course will be on **socially-defined group identities**: the ways in which societies mark one of the groups more strongly than others as well as the fluidity of identities.

Week 1, reading 1: aspects of identity and agency (By Amelie Oksenberg Rorty and David Wong 1997)

- **Central traits**: traits that remain constant throughout an individual's lifetime and create a systematic difference to their livelihoods.
- Personal identities are made up of the following aspects:
 - **Somatic dispositions**: can affect the individual's beliefs, motives and plans through social ideals of body types e.g. slender, muscular or agile.
 - **Temperamental/psychological traits**: can affect the individual's actions by encouraging the development of certain motives and habits.
 - **Social role identity**: can establish central traits by placing the individual in socially-defined institutional roles and is influenced by somatic factors and temperamental traits.
 - **Socially-defined group identity**: can affect the actions and directions of individuals within a certain group due to race, class, age, gender, ethnicity or occupation being associated with stereotypic traits.
 - **Ideal identity**: can establish central traits through the imitation of an individual's idealised figure, which can be created by popular culture.

Week 2, lecture 1: biological determinism

- **Biological determinism**: suggests that socially-defined group identities are biologically based and non-malleable. Therefore, these identities can affect the psychological and bodily identities of people, making them more suitable for specific social role identities. As a result, an attempt to change such social role identities would be going against nature.

- This idea has given rise to stereotypes e.g. 'all Asians are brainiacs'.
- One position supporting this involves the belief that biological factors guarantee given phenotypes in normal environments.

Week 2, lecture 2: biological determinism about race

- **Race**: 'an intrinsic biologically-based property of an individual determined by their ancestral links to a continent of origin, revealed in skin color, eye-shape, hair type etc, and related to other characteristics such as body-type, athleticism, health risk factors, and, more controversially, intellectual and other aptitudes'.
– Hernstein and Murray (*The Bell Curve*).
- Unfortunately, this particular definition of race can create racial hierarchies.
- As a matter of fact, biology reveals that there is very little genetic difference between individuals in modern human populations.
- Modern humans are considered evolutionary newcomers as they have only emerged about 200,000 to 300,000 years ago and are slow to reproduce.
- The traditional biological determinist view on races is, therefore, not supported by the lack of genetic diversity.
- The first response to these biological facts is **eliminativism**: race does not actually exist, and the classification of people based on race should be eliminated from all discourses.
 - **Advantages**: if race is not real, then racism becomes a confused concept. Instead of using moral and political arguments against racism, education can be used to teach people that race is not real.
 - **Disadvantages**: if race is not real, then how would people conduct research and create policies to remedy the effects of racism?
- Another alternative view is **social construction**: acknowledges that the concept of race is real but only as a social construction.

Week 2, reading 1: race (By Michael James 2016)

- **Race**: a modern phenomenon, especially in Europe and the Americas.
- The **monogenesis view**: adhered to the Biblical creation story in asserting that all humans descended from a common ancestor: Adam.
- The **polygenesis view**: suggested that different human races descended from various ancestral roots.
- **Racial naturalism**: signifies the old, biological conception of race, which depicts race as having 'biobehavioural essences: underlying natural (and perhaps genetic) properties that (1) are heritable, biological features, (2) are shared by all and only the members of a race, and (3) explain behavioural, characterological, and cultural predispositions of individual persons and racial