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Mark Leary Ph.D.  
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# A Different Kind of Identity

People's identities can separate them from others—or bring them together.

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People take their identities very seriously. Our identities identify who we are, what we are like, our social connections, and the groups to which we belong. So, if I tell you that I'm a white male social psychologist who is married with two sons and a granddaughter and plays drums in a faculty garage band, these racial, gender, occupational, relational, and group identities tell you a lot about me.

In addition to reflecting who we are and where we plug into the world, our identities influence our behaviors and our reactions to events. We filter what happens through the lens of our identities—so our identities determine what's important to us and what we pay attention to. And they also guide our behaviors and emotions.

Although our identities serve important functions, they also create a slew of problems. One problem is our identities usually reflect ways in which we *differ* from other people. Every time we think of some part of our identity, we implicitly distinguish ourselves from others. If a person's identity includes being religious, a marathon runner, or a cattle rancher, those identities reflect a difference between them and other people who are not religious, runners, or ranchers,

Likewise, aspects of our identities that refer to relationships with other people are, if not unique, at least highly distinctive. No one else can claim to be my sons' father (at least I hope not), and I have only one wife and a few good friends. Similarly, our membership in various groups—our collective identities—always reflect differences from others. One's nationality, race, religion, or membership in a particular organization contrasts oneself from people of other nationalities, races, religions, or groups. Identities inherently draw distinctions among people, distinctions that often don't really matter very much.

To see the profound effects that our identities have on our reactions and behaviors, imagine that race or nationality suddenly disappeared as an aspect of everybody's identities. If everyone suddenly lost their ability to identify themselves as a particular race or nationality, people's reactions to other individuals and groups would no longer be influenced by these identities.

Among other things, people would no longer favor citizens of their own country or people of their own race, so nationalism and racism would disappear. Of course, people would probably find other ways of categorizing themselves and others. After all, research shows that people can form group identities based on exceptionally trivial criteria, such as whether they prefer one kind of art or another. And once they do, they start favoring people who share their identity over those who don't—liking them more and treating them better.

Yet, not all identities highlight differences among people. Some people think of themselves in ways that apply to all other people or that are even broader than humanity, sometimes including other animals, nature, or the entire universe.

Over the years, research has shown that the characteristics that constitute people's identities generally fall into five broad categories. If I asked you to give 20 answers to the question, "Who are you?" your answers would likely fall into most or all of these categories. Four of these categories are features of identity that typically distinguish people from others on the basis of their physical characteristics, personal attributes, interpersonal

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But the fifth category involves identity characteristics that reflect a similarity or connection with other people or the world. For example, some people answer the question, “Who are you?” with responses such as “I am a human being” or “I am a part of nature” or “I am a child of God.” These kinds of responses reflect that one is somehow connected to all other people, who are also presumably human beings, parts of nature, or children of God.

This kind of transpersonal or hypo-egoic identity has not received much attention from researchers, possibly because it is less common and it may seem strange or new-agey to people who don’t see themselves these ways. But from what we can tell so far, many people identify themselves in these ways, and those who do experience a stronger sense of kinship with other people—as well as often with other animals and nature more broadly. And thinking of themselves in ways that connect them to others leads them to have a more positive, egalitarian, and prosocial orientation toward other people.



People of the world. Source: Used courtesy of Pixabay under CC00

For example, people who express this kind of broad, inclusive identity are more concerned both with the welfare of people with whom they are in frequent contact (they value benevolence more highly) and the welfare of all people, as well as nature (they value universalism as well). People who express this kind of identity identify more with people outside of their own groups and communities. They may also be generally nicer people—kinder, more compassionate, more forgiving, and more agreeable. And, not surprisingly, they are also less likely to have racist attitudes.

consciousness, the universe, energy, spirit, life force, matter, the unified quantum field, or whatever. But however they conceive it, having a transpersonal identity is linked to beliefs in the oneness of all things.

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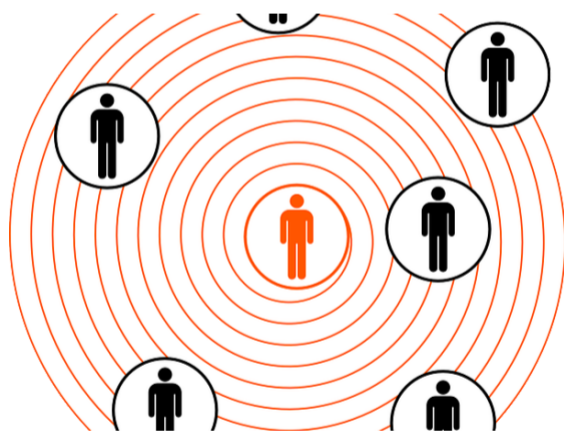
Many people have suggested that an attack by extraterrestrials would cause people to drop their individual and nationalist identities and bond together as Earthlings to fight the alien invasion. Research on the Common Ingroup Identity Model supports this idea, showing that getting people of different races to think about themselves as members of a single group—such as students at a particular school, or as Americans—reduces prejudice and improves interactions between them.

In the same way, people whose identities include characteristics that they share with everyone else seem to regard all other people as members of a giant in-group. Perhaps we can begin to solve some of our social problems by developing identities that focus less on the ways in which we are different from other people and more on the ways in which we are all the same.



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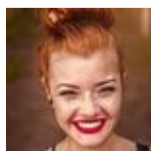


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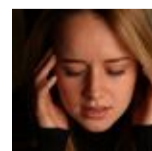


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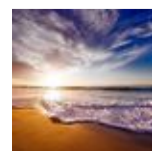
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