



Shahram Heshmat Ph.D.
Science of Choice

Basics of Identity

What do we mean by identity and why does identity matter?

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Identity is largely concerned largely with the question: “Who are you?” What does it mean to be who you are? Identity relates to our basic values that dictate the choices we make (e.g., relationships, career). These choices reflect who we are and what we value. For example, we can assume that the investment banker values money, while the college professor values education and helping students. However, few people choose their identities. Instead, they simply internalize the values of their parents or the dominant cultures (e.g., the pursuit of materialism, power, and appearance). Sadly, these values may not be aligned with one’s authentic self and create an unfulfilling life. In contrast, fulfilled people are able to live a life true to their values and pursue meaningful goals. Lack of a coherent sense of identity will lead to uncertainty about what one wants to do in life.

A person may hold multiple identities such as a teacher, father, or friend. Each position has its own meanings and expectations that are internalized as identity. A major task of self-development during early adolescence is the differentiation of multiple selves as a function of social context (e.g., self with father, mother, close friends) with an awareness of the potential contradictions. I noticed this with my own 16-year-old daughter. While she was happy with her friends, she seemed to be depressed around me, or she would switch from being cheerful around her friends to being nasty with her mother. I wondered, and I believe she did as well, which one is the real her? However, as young people mature cognitively, they achieve a sense of coherence in their identity.

Identity may be acquired indirectly from parents, peers, and other role models. Children come to define themselves in terms of how they think their parents see them. If their parents see them as worthless, they will come to define themselves as worthless. People who perceive themselves as likable may remember more positive than negative statements.

Psychologists assume that identity formation is a matter of “finding oneself” by matching one’s talents and potential with available social roles. Thus, defining oneself within a social world is among one of the most difficult choices a person ever makes. In the face of identity struggle, many end up adopting darker identities, such as drug abuse, compulsive shopping, or gambling, as a compensatory method of experiencing aliveness or staving off depression and meaninglessness.

What constitute the true self? The ultimate goal for individuals is to develop and nurture those choices that are consistent with their true self. To deny the true self is to deny the best within us. To find more happiness in life means to live in harmony with one’s true self.

Three goals are required for the task of identity formation. The first task is discovering and developing one’s personal potentials. Personal potentials refer to those things that the person can do better than other things. How can the person discover what those potentials are? The answer is a process of trial-and-error. This requires exposure to a wide array of activities, some of which we become able to do relatively well. This is recognized by the feedback we receive from others and our own positive feelings about those activities. These activities simply “feel right” to us, and these feelings are useful clues. We are intrinsically motivated to do these activities. However, the development of skills and talent requires time, effort, and willingness to tolerate frustration when we encounter obstacles.

frustration and failure. Finally, one is required to find opportunities to implement that potential and purpose. Open societies allow for role mobility and flexibility to implement identity-related choices. However, this is not the case in close and rigid societies. For some, this may lead to emigration.

Identity is never “final” and continues to develop through the lifespan. Knowing one’s identity accurately increases [self-esteem](#) and reduces depression and [anxiety](#). When people are doing what they think they should be doing, they are happy.

When people misrepresent themselves or present themselves in out-of-character ways to impress an audience, the behavior is unnatural and exhausting. The behavior requires greater cognitive resources, because the mind is filled with self-doubt, self-consciousness, and negative thoughts. Moreover, when people look to immediate audiences to help them define who they should be, how they should look, and what they should do, they are in danger of acting in ways that endanger their health, such as [eating disorders](#) and [alcohol](#) or [drug abuse](#). For example, eating disorders are due in part to concerns about body appearance. Alcohol and drug use are related to [peer pressure](#) and acceptance.



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About the Author



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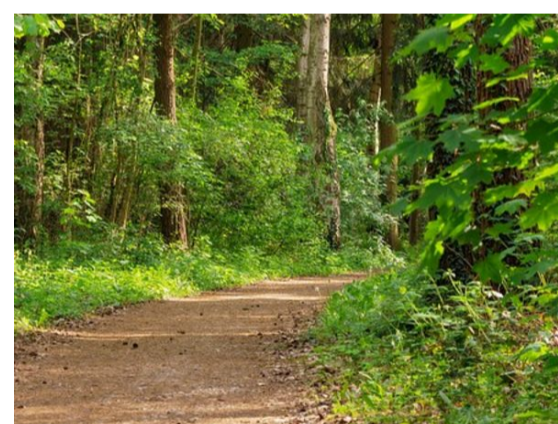
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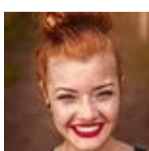


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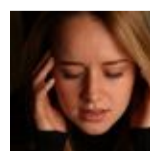


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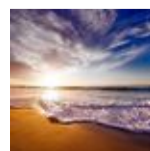
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