

IDENTITY



What words would you use to describe yourself, if asked to complete the following sentence: “I am...?” The words you list may reveal important parts of your identity.

Identity is made up of many things including sex, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious orientation, abilities and disabilities, personality characteristics, accomplishments, and roles (e.g., parent, sibling, spouse, friend, or student).

Sometimes the qualities that come to mind first when describing ourselves, are those that someone used against us, like our race or sex. We think of those qualities first because when we experience a lack of power, it causes us to feel pain, and those experiences stand out to us. But our identities are not always associated with being treated unfairly. They may also be sources of our strength and pride in who we are.

While others’ perceptions are often based on qualities that show on the outside, such as skin tone and hair texture, our own perceptions are influenced by much more.

CONSIDER THIS *Consider the following questions. Challenge yourself to think of answers from multiple perspectives, & to understand what might bias your response. Discuss these topics with someone else in your class.*

The manner in which we see ourselves may differ from how others’ perceive us. How does the way the world sees people differ from the ways they see themselves? When have you experienced this kind of mismatch? How did it become noticeable? Did it impact your identity?

Imagine a person of color who identifies strongly with her or his ethnic heritage, but who appears White to the outside world. What implications might this have for their identity, experiences, and life?



“My husband and I had that conversation about who are we really? Where did we come from? Where are our people from? Because we don’t know. The only thing that we know is that at some point we obviously descended from slaves to be here. But what does that mean? And so we did our DNA. We laughed because his came back that he was primarily Irish. So, he had a bigger Irish chunk of the pie than anything else. And he found out that the little sliver of African in his blood was from Mozambique. And so, he started researching, ‘Well, what’s Mozambique about?’ For me, I know there was a big chunk that was from Yoruba culture in Nigeria, and then a whole smattering of stuff from everywhere else. And so, it was just interesting to find out all of these little pieces. And what does it mean? Who are we? I can’t say that I’m an African American. That’s not the only place that my people came from.” — Andree

“If we are not easily identifiable, there’s some innate need for people to know what you are. But what’s scary about that is like, okay, now that you know what I am, what do you plan to do with that information? Are you gonna use it to stereotype me or are you just idly curious? Are you idly curious up to the point where I do something wrong and then you go, ‘Oh, that’s just like a Mexican.’ You know what I’m saying? So, it feels like a loaded question, but it’s one that you can’t get away from cause people are insistent. They really are.” — Lisa

CALL TO ACTION