

Thinking Critically About Identities

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The sociological and social psychological literature is rich with dissertations on the formation of identities, their heterogeneity, contextuality, flexibility, social determination, and behavioral significance.¹ It is generally agreed that identities provide an impetus to specific types of actions. The answer to the *who am I* question furnishes a premise that undergirds conclusions and behavioral choices. This action-implication of identities derives from a compulsion toward ego-identification behavioral consonance. How the self is designated must be consistent with actions taken by the self and toward other selves, for "we" constitutes an extension of "I."

Self-identification imposes particular expectations from, and obligations on, the self. For example, as a "sociologist," a "psychologist," or "economist," one is constrained to teach the history, concepts, and perspectives of one's discipline. As a "critical thinker," one is committed to focus on students' ability to reason within disciplines. To illustrate further. If I were to designate myself as a pacifist, I would experience an obligation to respond nonviolently in conflict situations, reasoning—I do not endorse violence, therefore, I cannot respond with force. In order to respond with force, I must, even if only momentarily, abandon my pacifist self-designation, or change its meaning. These contextual and strategic dimensions of identities imply that, in given situations, a "Jew," "black," or "white," or a "woman" will behave identically, and differently. The varying salience and understandings of categories of self-identification problematize their relationship to behavior. Nevertheless, what is generally conceded is that any given identity connotes a covenant and concomitant expectations among those so identified.

The issue of identity is sorely absent from discussions of strategies for infusing critical thinking into educational experiences, an absence that reflects the illegitimate separation of philosophy from social and natural sciences. In general, philosophers do not rush in where social scientists tread, while philosophy is terra incognita for most social scientists.² However, they should both converge on the terrain of identity, within a critical thinking movement

seeking to re-connect philosophy, the sciences, and educational practices. Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* treads both philosophy and psychology and, re-phrased as: "I think and, therefore, I am a member of society," it certainly incorporates sociology. The founders of political science, economics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology belong to philosophy as much as these disciplines.

Assuming that one of the purposes of advocates of critical thinking is to establish a focus on reasoning and its assessment, two questions appear most relevant to reflections on identity. Can gender, racial, ethnic, and class identities survive an evaluation based on intellectual standards, such as clarity, accuracy, logical consistency, relevance, and significance? Is their cultivation inimical to the appreciation of reasoning as human praxis? These questions are answered through an exposition of two sets of arguments:

1. Identities originate from overall social theories that are mediated by official and social scientific practices. Specifically, gender, racial, ethnic, and class theories underlie self-identifications as men, women, blacks, whites, middle class, Hispanic, Asian American, Jew, working class, and middle class.

2. Because critical thinking abilities imply trust in defining characteristics of human beings—reasoning and empathy for other beings—their cultivation would be facilitated by a human-species perspective. Indeed, insofar as critical thinking is defined within a focus on reasoning, its infusion presupposes a human self-identification. Conversely, the absence of a proactive human self-identification retards the progress of critical thinking in educational institutions.

Self-identification may be the most salient psychological variable to be considered for the cultivation of interest in critical thinking, for the answer to the *who am I* question influences the formation of intellectual interests. The claim by some radical feminists' that Western knowledge is androcentric implicates the man-identity. Those who classify themselves as "men" take it for granted that masculine themes constitute both the foundation and exemplar of human experiences. Conversely, the self-defined woman, is more disposed to reject an equation of "human" and "man," and concentrate on the experiences and interests of women. Gender identities matter. "Men" and "women" choose to be advocates of issues that are relevant to their selves as men and women.

Identities matter particularly in educational institutions, which are locations of intense intellectual intimacy. There is a consensus among advocates of multicultural education that students bring salient gender, racial, ethnic, and class identities to the classroom.³ However, the recommendations vary regarding the schools' responses—ignore these identities, cultivate them in the name of diversity appreciation and celebration, utilize them for an egalitarian transformation of society. What is missing from the multicultural education advocacy is a suggestion that these identities be subjected to a critical thinking scrutiny. Such a scrutiny would involve, in the name of

analytical depth and breadth as well as intellectual diversity, an unearthing of the theoretical lineage of gender, racial, ethnic, and class identities. Through this scrutiny, it would be discovered that identities, such as women, men, blacks, and whites, are traceable to social theories that form a sub-discipline in sociology. (See Appendix, GRECH). A description of self, or others, as white, woman, Jew, or black indicates a utilization of specific gender, racial, and ethnic theories that encompass empirical and conceptual dimensions of the elements of thought. The ascription of identities also reflects an individual's participation in the intellectual environment through socialization and formal educational influences.

Identities reflect both the individual's irrevocable membership in the web of interdependent actions called society and the institutional propagation of symbols and designations. It is in recognition of these relationships that sociologists write of "the social construction of identity."⁴ One implication of social constructionism is that gender, racial, and ethnic identities should not be taken as "natural" or "real" phenomena. Rather, they must be regarded as contextual, changeable, and even "reversible" designations. Andrea Dworkin writes:

The discovery is, of course, that "man" and "woman" are fictions, caricatures, cultural constructs. As models they are reductive, totalitarian, inappropriate to human becoming. As roles they are static, demeaning to the female, dead-ended for male and female both. Culture as we know it legislates those fictive roles as mormalcy.⁵

Peter Berger appeals to fellow sociologists as follows:

The sociologist ought, therefore, to have difficulties with any set of categories that apply appellations to people—"Negroes," "whites," "Caucasians," or, for that matter, "Jews," "Gentiles," "Americans," "Westerners." In one way or another, with more or less malignancy, all such appellations become exercises in "bad faith," as soon as they are charged with ontological implications. Sociology makes us understand that a "Negro" is a person so designated by society, that the designation releases pressures that will tend to make him into the designated image, but also that these pressures are arbitrary, incomplete and, most importantly, reversible.⁶

There is a deep structure to identities. They mirror dominant social theories, the degree of intellectual diversity in educational experiences, and official policies on identity-formation.

Governments devote considerable resources to the cultivation of anatomical and ethnic identities.⁷ The inscription and elevation of anatomical and cultural differences into public consciousness require specific institutional arrangements. It is government policies that project specific identities—national, racial, ethnic, and gender—as significant. Michael Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge serves to remind that the capacity to define situations and

shape events is not evenly distributed.⁸ Although individuals negotiate their way through a maze of identities, their core identities are ascribed to them through official decrees and designations. Institutional practices determine who becomes white, black, woman, Asian, Hispanic, . . . who may marry whom, and who gets what as a result of the allocation to a gender, racial, or ethnic category. No advocate of critical thinking can take these categories for granted, oppose an assessment of the psychological, philosophical, sociological, and institutional ramifications of identity ascription, or fail to notice that gender, racial, ethnic, and class designations are fraught with obfuscations, arbitrariness, and self-contradictions.⁹

The last decade has witnessed a comparatively voluminous outpouring of writings on critical thinking. While definitions vary in emphases on process, outcomes, methods of cultivation and relationships to other forms of thinking, there is common accentuation of reason and reasoning. It is no accident that Michael Scriven titles his book on critical thinking *Reasoning*, and that Harvey Siegel chooses *Educating Reasoning*. A definition of critical thinking proposed by Scriven and Paul illustrates this emphasis on reasoned reflection:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness. It entails proficiency in the examination of those structures or elements of thought implicit in all reasoning: purpose, problem or question at issue, assumptions, concepts, empirical grounding, reasoning leading to conclusions, implications and consequences, objections from alternative viewpoints, and frame of reference.¹⁰

As a cognitive process, critical thinking involves a deliberate and standards-bound evaluation of elements of thought—objects or problems, theoretical structures, purposes, assumptions, implications, and premises. This process, then, represents an application of intellectual standards to the elements of thought within given texts, claims, and subject matters. Whether intellectual standards themselves regress into criteria that reflect value choices, or not, what cannot be gainsaid is that they are most relevant to the assessment of all cognitive activity, and that conclusive discussions are facilitated by a consensus among disputants on the decisiveness of such standards. To present clear and logical arguments against the standards of clarity and logicalness is to engage in self-contradiction, and intellectual exchanges that are tolerant of self-contradiction would be mutually unintelligible. Similarly, it is the height of obfuscation to claim that a concept is illogically constructed—race, for example,—but that its ontological referent is evident in “reality.”

For advocates of critical thinking, the cardinal purpose of education should be the cultivation of reasoning, not because it is that which distinguishes human beings from animals, but because only through the cultivation and evaluation of clear thinking can intellectual disputes be resolved. Thus, the recommendation of a focus on reasoning echoes again and again in the literature on critical thinking.¹¹ The basic premise is that particular statements and beliefs are part of a network of inferential processes whose assessment involves consideration of premises, theoretical structures, implications, assumptions, purpose, and questions at issue within standards such as, clarity, precision, consistency, logicalness, analytical depth, and breadth.

In Richard Paul's exposition of critical thinking, the elements of thought embody not only assumptions and premises, but also conceptual and empirical dimensions, and theoretical frameworks. These elements are also manifest in the classifications, descriptions and explanations within natural and social sciences such as chemistry, biology, physics, economics, psychology, history, sociology, and political science as well as various schools of thought in art, architecture, and literature. Theories of gender, racial, ethnic, and class relations are sub-disciplines within sociology, and they permeate educational experiences. Systematically utilized in schools and in official policies of identity ascription, they create corresponding identities and experiences among students and the entire population. Thus, the idea of being a woman, white, black, Jewish, or Hispanic is traceable to specific theories in biological and social sciences. It is through the clarification and evaluation of theoretical structures that students can become adept at justifying their beliefs about not only identities, but overall social relations and the natural phenomena.

Usage of a given theory shapes experience, which is a specific interpretation of events. In conditions of massive investments in the production and dissemination of gender, racial, and ethnic classifications, corresponding experiences will be pervasive. The process is self-sustaining. Official and academic institutions propagate gender, racial, and ethnic definitions of situations, which are then cited as empirical bases for further research, policies, and propagation. It is the official racial-ethnic classification, demands for such self-designations, the teaching of race relations in secondary and higher education, and media emphases on racial differences that create racial identities and experiences. These government, academic, and media policies themselves derive from an endorsement of GREC theories, and their popularity reflects an overall state of uncritical thinking. Citizens whose reasoning, analytical, and empathic abilities are stymied by an instrumentalist approach to education—learning only in order to earn—will necessarily fail to detect the absurdities in gender, racial, and ethnic frameworks.

What is a race? Thinking guided by a principle of analytical radicalism would lead to the recognition that races are a product of racial classification and, therefore, it is not "races" but racial classification that presents or creates problems in American intellectual and political life. Racial classification is

itself part of an eighteenth-century project that developed biologically-based explanations of history. Negroes, Caucasians, Mongoloids, and a slew of other races are constituents of a racial theory of social development. The popularity of this theory in educational institutions is a virtual scandal, given the repeated refutation of its conceptual foundations by a variety of biologists, anthropologists, and sociologists. As the *LA Times* Science writer Robert Lee Hotz reports from a recent conference: "Researchers adept at analyzing the genetic threads of human diversity said Sunday that the concept of race—the source of abiding cultural and political divisions in American society—simply has no basis in fundamental human biology."¹² The continued endorsement of the concepts black people and white people represents an educationally generated imperviousness (to the assessment of) the reasoning underlying theories. It is in this sense that American society may be said to possess not racial, but reasoning problems.

Suspensions and allegations of sexism, racism, and ethnocentrism are bound to escalate among individuals who are incessantly sensitized to their anatomical and cultural differences, trained to avoid focusing on the reasoning behind beliefs and actions, and who, by virtue of being denied access to a diversity of philosophical perspectives, are convinced that genders, race, and ethnics are "natural." Because these mutual suspicions and allegations invariably lead into the cul-de-sac of violence, and do not contribute to a resolution of the problems identified, the problems at hand need to be re-defined problems of human reasoning. The solutions would then be clear. Through an induction into the dimensions of critical thinking and the multiple perspectives within philosophy, individuals can divest themselves of the gender, racial, and ethnic affiliations that generate both nepotism and intellectual separatism. It is the absence of courses in philosophy and critical thinking that produces conceptions of "women," "men," "whites," and "people of color" as natural divisions and the moral-intellectual antagonisms expressed in accusations of sexism, racism, and ethnocentrism. "Women," "men," "whites," and "people of color" lack an active identity as human beings as well as the information and intellectual competencies necessary for detecting the flawed foundation of GREC theories.

Within the official documentation of gender, racial and ethnic membership, citizens are subjected to an incessant bombardment with different descriptions of themselves, other individuals, and social situations. Thus, these identities are difficult to release. Their adoption reflects processes of indoctrination, in which students are told what to think of themselves rather than how to clarify and evaluate theories. The advocacy of critical thinking would depart from this tradition of teaching students what to think about themselves, and instead, propose that they reason about GREC theories. Educators are not obligated to imitate the Census Bureau, or take statistical data on gender, race, and ethnicity as irrefutable representations of the real world. On the contrary, they are charged with encouraging creativity, dissent, and challenges to what

is perceived as "real" by evaluating the elements of reasoning within arguments and data. Teachers can choose to teach realistically and dogmatically, or critically. What schools need, then, is curricula geared to the development of an interest in knowledge for life and teachers committed to, and capable of, cultivating critical thinking abilities.

Through courses that cater to the development of critical thinking abilities, students can be taught how to dissect, question, and refute fallacious arguments about races, cultures and civilizations. Teachers of Western civilization courses could encourage their students to consider the theses that Western civilization began in the Middle East, or North Africa, that the line between Western and non-Western civilizations is geographic convenience if not fiction, and that the term civilization may be a cloak for some very uncivilized practices in all "civilizations." A course on Western civilization, then, is not necessarily an exercise in Eurocentrism. Nor are courses on non-Western civilizations a corrective to the lack of intellectual diversity in the curriculum. How to, by what standards, are students to approach, read, and evaluate texts on civilizations? That is the question.

A curriculum that does not focus on the universal feature of reasoning cannot promote the breadth of concern and competence necessary for the refutation of unclear, inaccurate, and illogical arguments about "white" civilizations. A curriculum that focuses on gender, racial, and ethnic differences merely heightens gender, racial and gender readings of civilizations and contemporary social relations. People who are constantly being made aware of their gender, whiteness, blackness, and ethnicity should be expected to ignore human similarities, form separate groupings, discriminate against one other, and reject reasoning and standards for its assessment as necessary for dispute resolution. Indeed, reasoning itself comes to be conceptualized as having sexually, racially, and ethnically peculiar patterns. Universal intellectual standards are thereby rejected, and the disputes escalate into riotous confrontations.

Genuine remedial proposals for discrimination would aim at increasing recognition of human similarities. Within a common human identification, problems of economic deprivation and violence could be discussed without mutual accusations, anger, and mistrust. Appreciation of symbol variations in (human) culture could be born out of the recognition that the glories and failings of Asian, Egyptian, Greek, Chinese, Indians, Inca, European, Aztec, Mayan and other civilizations, . . . are all part of a common human heritage. Indeed, geographic designations of civilizations are illegitimate and may even be obstacles to an appreciation of (human) culture. This culture is characterized by symbols patterned by sequential and inferential processes. Even the affective dimensions of human experience are comprehensible only through standard-bound judgments.

Implicit in the critical thinker's recommendation that educational processes focus on reasoning and its assessment is a perspective that conceptualizes students as members of the human species. Within this perspective, U.S. society will be perceived as containing not racial and ethnic but reasoning problems. These problems, then, are to be resolved through the establishing of standards for assessing discourse and decision-making. What appears to be lost on even some critical thinkers is the radical notion that "women," "blacks," "whites," "Hispanics," "Asians," and "Jews" are but classifications generated by specific social theories. As an identification of a human form, each of these categories is bound to claim to be human, and, in conditions of conflict, to be more human than the other. Herein lies the process of other-dehumanization that serves arbitrary political purposes. The different easily become targets. Indeed, those who are defined as different from myself and group are already objects of separation, and, in given political economic contexts, become objects for discriminatory policies. This sets the stage for cycles of victimization and counter-strategies. Gender, racial, ethnic, and class identifications become partisan states locked in unending intellectual and political enmity. The critical thinking alternative is to promote reasoning as a unifying human praxis in order to resolve the problems facing the species.

References

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2. A measure of the neglect of philosophical issues in social sciences is that at the 1996 American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, among 410 papers, not one explicitly deals with issues of epistemological, logical, ethical issues in sociology. See The American Sociological Association, "Abstracts of Papers Presented at the 91st Annual Meeting," August 16-20, 1996.
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5. Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974), p. 174.
6. Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* (New York: Anchor Books), pp. 156-157.
7. Cynthia Enloe, "The Growth of the State and Ethnic Mobilization: The American Experience." In Norman Yetman (ed.), *Majority and Minority: The Dynamics of Race and Ethnicity in American Life* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1985), pp. 245-258; Philip Gleason, "Identifying Identity: A Semantic History." *Journal of American History* 69 (March 1983), Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies* (London: Duke University Press, 1995), Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race* (New York: Verso, 1994).
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11. See Michael Scriven, *Reasoning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), Gerald Nosich, *Reasons and Arguments* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1981), Arthur Costa (ed.), *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking* (Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1985), Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, and Education* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1988), John J. Conley, "Critical Thinking and Educational Assent," *Inquiry: Critical Thinking Across the Disciplines* 11, no. 3 (March 1983); Ralph Johnson, *Logical Self-Defense* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), Edward Damer, *Attacking Faulty Reasoning* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1987), Matthew Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Richard Paul, *Critical Thinking: What Every Person Needs to Survive in a Rapidly Changing World* (Sonoma, California: Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique, 1992), Kerry Walters (ed.), *Re-thinking Reason: New Perspectives in Critical Thinking* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).
12. Robert Lee Hotz, "Scientists Say Race Has No Scientific Basis," *LA Times* February 20, 1995) p. A10.

SOCIAL THEORIES (GRECH)

	GENDER	RACIAL	ETHNIC	CLASS	HUMAN
Criteria of Classification	Anatomical	Anatomical	Cultural	Economic	Species
Explanation	Sexism	Racism	Ethnocentrism	Capitalism	Reasoning
Object of Victimization	Women	Non-whites	Non-WASPS	Working Class	All Human Beings
Stratification	Male Power	White Power	WASP Domination	Ruling Class	Universal Material Insecurity
Proof of Structure	Reality	Reality	Reality	Reality	Logical Rules
Solutions*	Legal Reforms	Legal Reforms	Assimilation/ Pluralism	Socialism	Critical Thinking/ Educational Reforms

*Genocide, Repatriation, Reparations, Segregation, Separatisms, Affirmative Action and Anti-Discrimination Laws, Black Power, Black Capitalism, Racial Awareness Training, Miscegenation, Multiculturalism, Acculturation, Assimilation . . .