

IDENTITY FORMATION AND DIFFERENCE IN MASS MEDIA

Shilpa Dave'

University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA

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Summary

At the end of the twentieth century, the effects of rapid transmissions and globally televised images continually influenced individual and public perceptions of national citizenship and internal differences (see chapter *Media Globalization and Localization*). With the advent of so many different images, access to cultural, racial, and social differences worldwide often reinforces stereotypes of identity and makes difference seem exotic rather than challenging the existing racial and gendered images that exist in the media and popular culture. One of the prevailing themes in mass media is how we define ourselves. Identity is influenced by multiple factors such as class, gender, race, and ethnicity. The ramifications of these categories on identity individually and collectively emphasize the complexity of how the media constructs identity through images and national representations, and how these representations in turn effect individual subjectivity. (See chapters *The Internet as a Mass Communications Media; Management and Future of Mass Communications and Media.*)

1. Introduction

The question of identity has been addressed in multiple venues and various academic fields ranging from psychology to biology to economics to history. The politics of identity and how we construct, present, and modify our individual, national, and international sense of who we are is influenced by a wide variety of factors. When scholars break down different components of identity they usually look to economic,

social, and historical factors such as class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and nation. Related categories such as geographical location, economic location, and political climate also effect individual development (see chapter *International Communication and World Affairs*). With the multitude of factors that influence us, it is often easier to define ourselves by what we are not. For example, when we some people are different from us, by either where they live, or the color of their skin, or the language they speak, we learn to understand who we are ourselves. What makes Egyptians “Egyptian,” or New Yorkers “New Yorkers,” or teenagers “teenagers”? How do these multiple categories relate if we try to discuss the identity of a teenager in New York City who has an Egyptian cultural background? We have an understanding that a teenager is different from a senior citizen, but how do their common experiences as New Yorkers make them similar? When do we push forward one identity over another, and do we always have a choice in the way that we are seen and the identity we choose?

We rely on the mass media (newspapers, magazines, television, film, and radio) to bring us news about not only what is happening locally in our area, but also what is happening nationally and internationally. Most of us have never been to outer space, and yet we have all seen the image of what Earth looks like from outer space. That image is transmitted by the media, and it creates a sense of unity among all of us on the planet. We frame our identity by the fact that we all live on one planet. This is not the only frame, but one of many ways in which we define ourselves, and this process of identification is facilitated by a media image.

One way we tend to use to define ourselves, nationally and individually, is by what we are not. Theorist and scholar Edward Said focuses on the aspect of “othering” in his influential theories of orientalism. Said argues that the Orient was an imaginary “other” used by Europe to define the “West,” where the idea of a static, unchanging Orient is created by the West to bolster the image of the West. He emphasizes that the history of the East and the West are intertwined, and predicated on relationships of power and domination, and institutions and policies set up by this relationship. Said specifically addresses how colonial empires such as nineteenth century England employed this strategy of defining the other in order to implement their policies in other countries that they ruled. The British system of education, for example, was exported to all the colonies, and the native population was encouraged to adopt the English language and curriculum in order to raise themselves to English standards and ultimately posts in the government.

The concept of the “other “ can be extrapolated to include gender, race, class, as well as geography, and infiltrates all the images and texts we see and read in the public sphere. These images and ideas reinforce specific ideas of the role of men and women in culture, the professional and economic goals of society, and race relations in a multicultural environment. One prevalent notion is that the US is technologically more advanced and by association more modern than places such as Iran or Cambodia or Tibet. There are many examples both in literature and film that promote the idea that the East is ancient, superstitious, and bound by tradition whereas the West is modern and progressive. The documentary, “Slaying the Dragon,” for example, chronicles how Asian women are historically stereotyped in Hollywood film. One common narrative depicts how traditional “Asian” woman are liberated by a progressive education and

lifestyle in the United States, which in turn creates an identity crisis between “Eastern” and “Western” values within an individual. The interpretation of the influence of Western culture on the East and Eastern culture on the West depends upon the origin of the narrative. While one culture may believe a woman can be liberated by Western education, another culture may view education as secondary to duty to the family. Media narratives can help reinforce or challenge these views.

In early 2000, the people of the US were bombarded with extensive coverage of the plight of Elian Gonzalez, a six-year old Cuban boy whose case expanded from a localized family custody issue to national and international issues about immigration policy, US foreign policy, and family reunification policy. During the dramatic seizure of Elian by US federal agents in the early morning hours of April 22, 2000, the actual event took second place to the news stories about the editorial decisions of which photo of the event to publish. The first available image was the heavily publicized Associated Press photo of Elian (in the arms of fisherman Donato Dalrymple) confronted by the immigration official with an automatic rifle. The second photo portrayed a smiling Elian shown with his father.



Figure 1. Seizure

The case of Elian Gonzalez is a microcosm of the impact of the media on the way in which US citizens as individuals, families, and a nation form their opinions about world events. News agencies polled US citizens on their views on Elian’s custody situation. One little boy became the focus for discussions on various issues such as child custody, political campaign strategy, and immigration law. The contrasting photos show how images can be manipulated to serve purposes such as influencing ideas of nationalism, US domestic and foreign policy, and the definition of what is an “American.” The vision of a child being threatened by a gun strikes at the very heart of the US ideal of freedom, and thus the photos of Elian and the emotional responses to those photos around the country and the world portray how intricately tied our beliefs are to media

images. (See chapters *Management of Information, Communication, and Media Resources; Communication Strategies for Sustainable Societies.*)

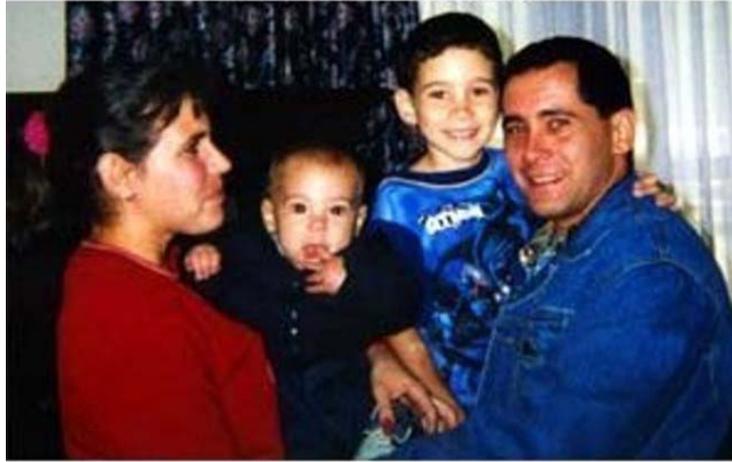


Figure 2. Family portrait

2. Facets of Identity Development: Class, Gender and Sexuality, Race and Ethnicity, and Nationhood

The examination of identity addresses how identity is framed and formulated in connection with the economic factor of *class*, the social influence of *gender*, and the cultural context of *race and ethnicity*. The research focuses on how the contexts operate on an individual basis and how they operate in concert with each other. The study of the transmission of images in mass media (television, radio, film, Internet, magazines, and newspapers) affords an opportunity to discuss questions such as how do we define ourselves and how do others define us. How do we reconcile the differences between the way our identity is represented in popular culture and the way we perceive it in our daily lives?

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Biographical Sketch

Shilpa Dave' is a visiting assistant professor in the Asian American studies program and English department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She graduated from the University of Wisconsin, Madison with honors degrees in English and molecular biology. She received her doctorate in English language and literature from the University of Michigan.

Her current research examines the development and representation of the fetish for political and cultural citizenship in contemporary Asian American literature. Dr. Dave' has written articles about Asian American literature, Asian American masculinity on television, media studies and Star Trek. She also works on themes of community development in south Asian American women writers, and writes about representations and theories of race and gender in Asian American popular culture.