Connections

Identity is not fixed, we
are free to choose, says
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Individual identity is given a high profile in western psychology. In fact, much of western psychology is about the individualised self with a supposedly fixed identity. In this way of thinking, identity refers to an individual's sense of uniqueness; of knowing who one is or is not. Indeed, it is almost regarded as a basic 'fact' that the development of a stable sense of identity is a central process of development during childhood and adolescence. And the concept of 'identity crisis' has been used to explain diverse problems, from general unhappiness to 'psychosis'; from lack of confidence to criminal violence. It is in this setting that there has been much talk during the past 20 or 30 years of 'cultural identity' and, to a lesser extent, 'racial identity' – and both concepts ('culture' and 'race') get mixed up with others to form 'ethnic identity'.

In our society, as in many others, the tendency recently has been to celebrate the fact that people identify as being different in 'culture'. And the historic legacy promoting the view that people can be divided into different races results in many people still identifying as belonging to a 'race', distinguished by certain physical markers – mainly skin colour. Yet, we know that there is no biological basis for distinguishing human groups on the lines of what we call 'race'. It is purely a social construct that is perpetuated for economic and historical reasons.[1]

Today we extol the virtues of being a multicultural and multiracial society; one formed of individuals hailing from diverse cultures and races. And national statistics muddle the concepts of 'race' and 'culture' to designate 'ethnicity'. Identifying like this may be necessary, I think, in the continuing fight against discrimination and racism – in mental health services as much as in other fields. But divisions between us, often promoted by politicians and racists and, even more importantly, political events (the aftermath often of colonialism) have led to what some have called 'identity-madness'.

The highly respected Nobel Prize Laureate, Amartya Sen, has explored identity in terms of connections, critiquing the idea that it is fixed or destined in some way.[2] He maintains, rightly I think, that identity has several traces; several connections, as it were. Identity is community and family based; it depends on parental ('nominal') religion and background, but also perhaps on one's allegiance to a caste or clan that one is born into or a profession that one gets trained into. And in some circumstances we identify as being poor or rich, or middle-class and so on. But most of all, identity comes from a sense of what one *is* in terms of relationships, real or imagined. Another aspect of identity is that there is an element of personal choice or personal inclination: one's loyalties, values, sense

of belonging to a place, perhaps one's chosen beliefs or religion. Finally, identity is contextually determined by other people's perceptions, forces in society such as racism and so on.

The reality is that most people hinge their identity to a variety of 'things', as it were. But attaching identity to just one 'thing' and imagining that it is absolute all the time and in perpetuity may be mistaken. In other words, identity is flexible and changing. One 'thing' may be important at one time and something else, or many others, at another time.

Some people today live and think internationally, sometimes with dual or triple citizenship. As human beings we are all adaptable and derive our sense of who we are from a variety of sources, and our loyalties are equally diverse. We can be, say, Indian or Jamaican *as well as* British or Canadian. The idea of 'identity conflict' or a conflict of loyalties being an inherent psychological problem in such a situation is not based on any evidence. But wherever we go, racism in some form or other *is* a problem.

What appears to have happened in some parts of the world is that the sort of overarching identity where people think of themselves as one 'thing' and nothing else has led to conflicts, even genocide. This has resulted in political theories about 'clash of civilisations' and thence to further antagonisms being promoted, seeing other people as non-persons, just identities. In British society we see people who resent arbitrary (to them) ethnic classifications – being, say, designated Asian or Black when they may feel as if their roots are varied, tracing their ancestry in a variety of directions, or think of themselves as having many facets to their identity. Questioning ethnic classification does not mean arguing against multiculturalism; far from it. The promotion of diversity, which is the main thrust of multiculturalism, can go hand in hand with freedom for each of us to choose our identities as we would wish and to change them as often as we like, depending on the context.

So is it right and proper to promote the concept of 'identity' – ethnic identity in particular? Should we talk of our society being diverse in terms of how we identify ourselves or other people culturally and, if we want to, racially? Or should we now minimise this talk and emphasise ethnic similarities and reject the idea of 'race' determining any part of identity? A major issue here is that racism – institutional or personal – continues in many

countries; and identifying 'racially' – being 'proud of one's race' – may be one way of maintaining self-esteem in such a context. In fact, racism may be the biggest barrier to integration of the various communities that live here.

The history of humankind shows, I think, that we need to feel different to others (a sense of individuality) while at the same time we need to feel the same as others (a sense of communality). Strong ethnic identity may well be necessary to safeguard our self-esteem, and hence maintain a sense of wellbeing when persecuted or discriminated against. At the same time, we have to be careful not to let an overarching single identity take us over and make us into the perpetrators of discrimination or even persecution. The balance between having too much ethnic identity and too little must vary according to context, and it is up to us as a society and as individuals to work out what is the right balance at this particular time given all that is going on – racism included.

The lesson for people planning mental health services may be this. Many of the problems that face black and minority ethnic people using mental health services do not arise from their cultural background, which is always varied anyway. Rather they arise from a lack of cultural sensitivity and institutional racism in the system, and sometimes personal racism in people who work the system. What the statutory sector has to do is clear enough. The voluntary sector tries to make up for deficiencies by providing services designed for specific cultural groups, especially the ones that seem to be excluded or mistreated. Indeed, what the black and minority ethnic voluntary sector does is admirable. But I think its ethnic-specific services need to be balanced by services that are concerned with fostering links *across* communities and not just links between people from what appear to be similar backgrounds. A service in Toronto (Canada) that impresses me on this count focuses on anti-racism rather than cultural background as the common theme binding people together. It is called Across Boundaries[3] and serves people with mental health and social problems from across all of Toronto's diverse communities. In Britain too I think we need to get together across boundaries, while at the same time addressing the issues that prevent us from doing so.

1. Omi, M. and Winant, H. (1994) *Racial Formation in the United States*, second edition, London: Routledge.
2. Sen, A. (2006) *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, London: Allen Lane.
3. Fernando, S. (2002) 'Across boundaries', *Openmind* 115: 22.