



## Identity as adaptation to social, cultural, and historical context

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Adaptation may be the best way to conceptualize the complex, multilateral relationship between individual identity and sociocultural context, because it recognizes the causal importance of culture yet also recognizes individual choice and change. This argument is developed by considering how several historical changes in the sociocultural context (i.e. increasing freedom of choice, changed interpersonal patterns, loss of traditional value bases, and rising tension between desire for uniqueness and difficulty of achieving it) have led to changes in the nature of identity. Although identity adapts to changes in its sociocultural context, these changes sometimes create new problems, including the specially problematic nature of modern selfhood.

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### Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to provide some basis for understanding how individual identity is related to its sociocultural context. This relationship between individual identity and society is one of the classic chicken-and-egg problems. Which causes which? Is society the sum or product of identities, or is it the source of them?

It is obvious that identities do not come into being in a vacuum. Nor do they emerge first and then merely seek out a suitable context for themselves. Thus, societies clearly play an important causal role in creating and shaping identity. Then again, it is also clear that identities are not merely created by society and foisted willy-nilly on helpless, hapless individuals. People clearly do exert considerable choice and influence on their identities.

We propose that the relationship of identity to social context be understood in terms of *adaptation*. More precisely individual identity is an adaptation to a social context. The concept of adaptation is useful because it does not imply mere passive acquisition of identity by individuals, but it also does not overstate the scope of self-determination. History, culture, and the proximate structure of social relations create a context in which the individual identity must exist. People have individual wants and needs that must be satisfied within that context. Individuals actively choose, alter, and modify their identities based on what will enable them to get along best in that context.

Our approach will be to consider several major features of society and culture that have changed over the centuries to set up the specifically modern Western cultural context. We shall then examine how these changes in cultural context have altered the nature of identity, as people seek to adapt themselves to these new social conditions and possibilities. It is important to understand that these changes did not all occur simultaneously, nor have

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they stopped. They have been occurring since the Renaissance, but some of these changes have accelerated in the twentieth century. When we speak of the modern identity, we are referring largely to the post-Renaissance changes in identity. At points we also try to illustrate how changes in late twentieth century society also impact on adolescents today.

By way of definition, we treat identity as a composite definition of the self. That is, we assume that selfhood exists prior to linguistic definition or social construction. Self is based on having a physical body, experiencing reflexive consciousness, having interpersonal connections and belonging to small groups, and exercising the executive functions of decision-making and self-regulation (Baumeister, in press). Identity is a set of meaningful definitions that are ascribed or attached to the self, including social roles, reputation, a structure of values and priorities, and a conception of one's potentiality (see Baumeister, 1986). Although it is possible to distinguish between self and identity, that distinction is not important for our present purposes, and so we shall use the terms interchangeably.

### Freedom of choice

One form of historical change in Western society that is particularly relevant to adolescence concerns the degree to which society dictated each person's major adult roles and other aspects of adult identity. There has been an immense loosening of societal guidelines, restrictions, and pressures, allowing people an almost unprecedented degree of freedom. Yet this same freedom has increased the burdensome pressure on individual adolescents to find a basis for making these crucial choices.

Triandis (1989) distinguished between *tight* and *loose* societies, in terms of how much latitude for individual choice and variation they allow. Western societies evolved from relatively tight to quite loose. This allows people much greater scope to choose and change their circumstances and adapt their identities as they wish. On the negative side, however, it has increased the pressure on the individual to create his or her own identity, a pressure that reaches a major peak in adolescence.

Two related sets of changes in the social context led to these developments. The first involved the gradual elimination of the structures that tied specific paths in adult life to broad, unchosen features of identity. Centuries ago, the options available to most people were heavily determined by their gender, family background, and other accidents of birth. Men and women had separate spheres, for example, and each was closed to the other. There has been a concerted effort to reduce or end most of those restrictions.

The other set of changes has involved an expansion of freedoms and range of opportunities. In a sense, the separate gender spheres of medieval Europe did not matter so much anyway, insofar as most people were going to be farmers. Industrialization, urbanization, the rise of trade and corporate life, increasing social and geographical mobility, and other modern developments have vastly increased the range of potential choices that society has to offer the individual.

The emergence of modern education has played a role in both of these developments. Education now serves as an all-purpose background for a broad range of occupations, at least until one specializes in a particular field late in one's educational career. The reliance on education to start one's career frees the individual from the limitations of background, such as gender and family background. Likewise, it allows people to prepare for a broad range of occupations, as well as to change them if they find their work unsatisfactory.

The contrast with the apprenticeship system that shaped adolescents of recent centuries is important: an apprenticeship prepares you for one particular line of work and is useless if you decide not to pursue that job. Apprentices were thus more or less locked into a fairly rigid occupational path by early in their teens. In contrast, a liberal arts education is regarded as suitable preparation for a broad assortment of jobs, allowing specific choices to be postponed until one is past the age of 20 (e.g. Kett, 1977).

A parallel change involves the opening up of Western society toward more tolerant, pluralistic diversity in its values. In periods of state religions and consensual moralities, the basic values were seen by many as objective facts rather than as personal choices. In modern Western society, however, the concept of *personal* values means that people can hold different values and basic beliefs and others are enjoined to respect them. This allows people to coexist with others without having to conform to the same values, but it puts a difficult burden on people in that it requires them to find within themselves some basis (e.g. what feels right to them; see Bellah *et al.*, 1985) for choosing what their values will be.

As we said, the burden of creating the adult identity now falls most heavily on adolescents, because most major life decisions can be postponed until adolescence, and adolescence does not fully end until the basic parameters of adult identity are in place. The combination of having a broad range of choices without having a clear basis for making them renders adolescence now especially difficult to negotiate.

There is indeed some evidence for the newly difficult nature of adolescence. Historians have provided evidence that adolescence has always been a time associated with mischief, disobedience and conflicts with authority, unruly behavior, and the risk of sexual and aggressive misdeeds. In contrast to those traditional problems of adolescence, however, modern Western culture has added the new view of adolescence as a time of awkwardness, uncertainty, and indecision (e.g. Demos and Demos, 1969; Kett, 1977; see Baumeister and Tice, 1986, for review). In short, adolescent misbehavior is an age-old problem; adolescent identity crisis is a modern one.

Thus, adolescence is both an old and a new problem. The old problems are still there, reflecting no doubt the difficult final stages of socialization and the instigation of socially sanctioned self-controls over the emerging adult motivational patterns. The new problem reflects the struggle with the modern tasks of identity formation, including the need to find a basis for making choices that will define the adult identity.

We are not suggesting that modern adolescents deserve special pity for their burdens and challenges. Indeed, if anyone is to be pitied, it is the adolescent (more common in bygone eras) who is locked into a path to an unwanted adult identity, such as an unsuitable marriage or career. Modern adolescents are relatively free from such oppressive limitations on their choices, and many have an enviable scope to their ontological horizons. Yet the lack of clear bases for making such choices does present difficulties. One common injunction is that the person should look inward to find a way to make such choices as are right for the self, as if the inner self contains the answers. We turn now to considering how the belief in an inner self is also an adaptation to social and historical changes.

## Emergence of inner self

Basic Western beliefs have long distinguished between an invisible essence or soul and the visible person. Through the Middle Ages, identity was largely equated with the visible

person, although the theological changes around the 11th and 12th centuries began to conceptualize souls in unique, individualistic terms. Still, one's identity was largely discernible at a glance in most cases. Dress codes ensured that one's social rank could be seen immediately, as could gender. Besides, the lack of social and geographical mobility and the stability of social groups entailed that people were mostly seen by those who knew them anyway.

Urbanization and other trends increased the contact people had with strangers. Social mobility enabled people to change their rank in society, and as Sennett (1974), Stone (1977), Trilling (1971), and others have explained, people began to try to pass for their betters. True identity could no longer be safely equated with surface appearance.

Likewise, the increasing instability of social relations offered chances for people to benefit by dissembling. Capitalism, industry, and expanding sales markets offered ways for people to make money by deceiving others, in large ways and small. Trilling (1971) concluded that the modern figure of the villain appeared in literature around the 16th century. The essence of the villain, in his view, is that of someone whose evil is concealed by a veneer of social acceptability and good intentions. In medieval morality plays, in contrast, evil figures typically came obviously labeled as such, but 16th century drama often turned on the suspense raised by the fact that the characters in the play did not initially perceive the wicked intentions of the villain.

Thus, it appears that society began to recognize the increasing appeal and prevalence of concealing one's identity. The cultural understanding of identity adapted to these new social conditions by drastically expanding its conception of the hidden or inner nature of selfhood (see Baumeister, 1986, 1987). Henceforth an important and large part of the self was thought of as something that existed hidden away inside the person, to be revealed and even discovered only gradually and selectively.

The acceptance of a large important inner self has changed and shaped the nature of modern identity. A hidden self is by definition more difficult to know and define than is a plain, visible one, and so the task of self-understanding has been made more complicated. The increasing recognition of self-deception meant that people may often fail to know their own inner selves. The low point of the epistemological status of self-knowledge was probably Freudian psychoanalysis, which asserted that self-knowledge could be gained only by many expensive hours spent with an expert, and even then it was likely to remain incomplete.

The belief in an inner, hidden self has also expanded the scope for myths of selfhood. People may come to believe that their inner selves contain all sorts of things, and there is no easy way to disprove such beliefs. Sure enough, a broad variety of contents have been ascribed to inner selfhood, including latent creative inspirations and works of art, personality traits that run contrary to one's actions, undiscovered abilities and potentialities, and the basis for making moral choices (see Baumeister, 1986, 1987 for reviews; also Sypher, 1962). For adolescents today, movies, books, talk shows, and other popular media frequently allude to the importance of finding oneself and the benefits of inner search, although there is no clear conception of precisely what this means or how to do it and no clear evidence of beneficial consequences of doing so. Thus for adolescents of the late twentieth century, popular culture not only encourages but expects one to understand oneself. We suspect that many of the problems facing adolescents today may arise partially out of this (misguided and unclear) expectation to find oneself.

In short, changes in social relations and the progressive questioning of self-knowledge

have removed identity from the realm of the obviously visible. Adapting to these changes, identity has come to be understood as an inner, hidden entity that is only indirectly known, such as by being expressed in one's actions or roles. This adaptation may have solved some problems but it has created others, thereby complicating the nature of modern selfhood. For example, the modern need to find this hidden identity may result in more experimenting with different roles and greater suggestibility from peer groups, as the person tried to find a self that "fits".

### Identity and the value gap

Another social and historical change has radically altered the context for selfhood and required fundamental changes in the way people construct and understand identity. This change has to do with society's understanding of important, basic values.

The argument is somewhat complex and has been detailed elsewhere (Baumeister, 1991), but briefly it is generally important to people to have some basic, fundamental values by which to justify their choices and endow their lives with positive value. Many choices are right and good on the basis of serving some higher or more fundamental value, but ultimately there has to be a basis for these values, and so some values must be accepted as right and good on their own, without needing to invoke some yet more ultimate value. These moral entities that are right and good on their own, without further justification, may be termed *value bases*.

In this connection, the major problem in modern Western society is that it has lost several main value bases. Such basic values are easily destroyed in the modernization process, but they are notoriously difficult to replace (see Habermas, 1973). Tradition, for example, justified certain ways of doing things and made them right, but modern bureaucracy has largely replaced tradition with rational decision-making procedures (e.g. Shils, 1981). These may often be effective for solving certain problems and increasing efficiency, but they lack the moral force that tradition had: tradition lent a positive value to a certain way of doing things. Obviously, God's will and similar religious mandates furnished an important value base in many cultures and societies, but the separation of church and state (along with the Enlightenment's devaluation of religion, the rise of agnosticism, and other secularizing trends) has sharply reduced the role that Christian religion plays in providing the criteria by which everyday choices are made in the modern West.

The result of this loss of value bases can be labeled the *value gap*, which is probably the most acute and common problem that modern Western individuals face in terms of making life meaningful (see Baumeister, 1991). This cultural deficit presents individuals with a problem in how to find meaningful ways to endow their lives with value and make choices that are right and good.

The culture has responded to the value gap in several ways, all of which involve taking something that the culture has placed some value on and trying to elevate these into major value bases. The work ethic can be considered a first such experiment in elevating something into the status of a major value (see Rodgers, 1978). The enhanced value of domesticity, including marital love, privacy for the nuclear family, and especially parenthood, has been another (see, e.g. Margolis, 1984; also Sennett, 1974; Lasch, 1977, 1978).

For present purposes, however, the most important cultural response to the value gap has been to elevate the self into a major value base (Baumeister, 1991). Thus, the modern Western individual often perceives a moral imperative in the pursuit of self-interest and self-actualization that is largely unprecedented. According to this new view, one has a moral right, and even a duty, to do what is good for the self, such as learning to understand oneself and cultivating one's talents and abilities.

The modern preoccupation with identity is therefore more than a mere reflection of some particular difficulties about it (see Baumeister, 1986). Instead, that preoccupation gains urgency and force because people look to identity to help make life meaningful. Identity is expected to help people solve the basic dilemma of how to make life meaningful.

The evidence for the notion that self and identity now form a major value base in Western culture is presented elsewhere (Baumeister, 1991; see also Bellah *et al.*, 1985). For the present, we focus on the implications for understanding identity in context.

#### *Why individuals embrace self as a value base*

First, the cooperation of individuals in treating selfhood as an almost sacred value must be understood in two ways. It is an easy rationalization for self-interested, even selfish behavior, which people have always wanted to do. Indeed, the remarkable thing about the modern valuing of selfhood is that it puts morality and self-interest on the same side. Throughout most of history and in most cultures, morality operates mainly to restrain and oppose self-interested behaviors. What is moral and good is generally what benefits the social group, and the pursuit of individual self-interest at the expense of the group is what morality particularly opposes. Now, instead, people are free to do what is best for themselves individually, with a clear conscience because of the presumptive moral duty to the self.

The other reason that people cooperate in accepting this new moral role of identity is that it helps resolve their own difficulties with the value gap. As we said, the lack of firm sources of value is not just a problem that the culture as a whole faces: it also makes it difficult for individual human beings to believe they are doing the right thing and to make choices on a reliable basis. The self is already something that the individual person sees positive value in and is motivated to protect and maintain. Hence people are well disposed to solve their moral dilemmas and escape from their moral vacuum by a high-minded effort to do what is best for their identity.

Related to this is the fact that the new moral role for selfhood helps tell people where to look for answers and guidance. In bygone days, perhaps, one confronted a moral dilemma by asking a priest or minister for help, or perhaps one consulted Scripture oneself. Others may have consulted culturally approved legends or philosophical writings. None of these approaches is entirely satisfactory or practical in the modern West. The new moral role of selfhood tells people that they should look inside themselves to find the sources of value and the answers to moral dilemmas. If identity does indeed embody a value base, then people should be able to look inward to find out what is right and good for them to do. In practice, this boils down to a rather insipid form of moral choice based on doing whatever seems to feel right (Bellah *et al.*, 1985), but that too may be quite agreeable to people because their own feelings are unlikely to compel them to do anything that is too aversive or disadvantageous.

Because adolescence is a time to develop one's identity, it is likely that the need to see the self as valuable is particularly relevant to them. Additionally, they should be highly

sensitive to any feedback regarding their identity, as they are still in the process of trying to see themselves as valuable. For example, people with high but unstable self-esteem often respond to criticism with aggression and violence because these people want to value themselves but are unsure of their true worth and therefore respond by attacking their perceived attacker (Baumeister *et al.*, 1996). This description may be particularly true of adolescents in the process of developing their identity.

### *Implications for work*

Another important consequence of the new moral role of selfhood is that it has helped transform the meaning of work. Societies everywhere must solve the basic problem of how to motivate people to work, at least to the extent that basic tasks get done such as the production of food and shelter. Moreover, the system of rewards for this work is often distributed very inequitably, in particular out of proportion to the exertions individuals make, and so the system of distributing rewards often requires some values to legitimize it.

Medieval Christianity justified work with various theories about religious duties and obligations, and these helped justify a feudal system with extreme inequities. Once modernization separated religion and the workplace, however, a new set of values was needed. The work ethic ultimately failed as a system of values to keep society working and justify the reward system (see Rodgers, 1978).

The new reliance on self as a value base has, however, proven quite potent at motivating people to work. In this context, people work as a means of cultivating, providing for, and glorifying the self. The modern concept of a career captures this new meaning of work. The career is a record of promotions, honors, and other marks of distinction that the person can list on his or her resumé. Thus, the work is not just for the sake of the extrinsic paycheck, nor is it done out of love for the work itself. Rather, it is done for the sake of identity-building, such as by gaining advancement and recognition that validate the good qualities of the self. Thus for modern adolescents (especially of the twentieth century) the need to find meaning for their self in work may be heightened and any task that does not help to support this goal may ultimately be rejected. This may have implications for how adolescents view school and their future career choices.

### *Implications for family and love*

Unlike the work ethic, the belief in family values has largely been successful at providing a powerful motivating force that people can use to guide their decisions and justify their actions. Pursuing love, caring for family members, and doing what is best for the children are all widely accepted as ways of doing the right thing—and they do not require further justification. No one asks you to explain why you should bother doing what is good for your children.

Self and family are therefore two of the most powerful modern values. The potential for conflict between them is therefore one important aspect of the modern context for identity. Such conflict would presumably take the form of dilemmas in which what is best for the self is not necessarily what is best for the family. Zube's (1972) study of the moral messages in women's magazines showed how the culture's thinking about such conflict evolved over several decades in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1940s, the consistent message was that family needs should take precedence, and so the needs of the self had to be subjugated to what was best for the marriage. By the 1960s, however, this priority had reversed, and so it

was depicted as a right and even a duty to break free of an unsatisfying marriage for the sake of benefiting and cultivating the self.

Such patterns suggest that identity is often regarded as a more important value base than marriage. Society is not fatally disrupted by widespread divorce, but if people began applying the same logic to filial bonds the result could be catastrophic, because abandoned children could not take care of themselves. The prospect of conflict between the value of self and the value of caring for children is genuine, particularly in view of evidence that parenthood lowers happiness in life (for reviews, see Spanier and Lewis, 1980; Bernard, 1982; Glenn and McLanahan, 1982; Baumeister, 1991). It is therefore of urgent social importance that people maintain the widespread contrary belief that having children increases happiness, and perhaps even more important that the culture continues to insist that duty to one's children must always take precedence over duty to oneself. On a similar note, many of the issues facing late twentieth century adolescents may be a result of a conflict between what they view as good for their self and what their parents (and society) may demand of them. Their rebellion against society's values that is frequently observed in adolescence may be a result of the conflict between their own needs for selfhood and their perception of what is demanded of them.

#### *Implications regarding death*

Using identity as a major value base may be an effective way to solve some societal problems such as work motivation, but it tends to present individuals with a difficult problem late in life. Obviously, the self ceases to exist at death. To the extent that the self has furnished the positive value of one's life's strivings, then death nullifies the value of all one has done. (In contrast, if the value of one's actions is based on something that outlives the self, such as a long-term religious or political or scientific context, then death does not affect the value of what one has accomplished.)

Thus, the modern use of identity as a value base has added a new dimension to the threat of death. People have always feared death for obvious reasons. Now, however, death means more than the end of one's life; it threatens to wipe out much of the value of what one did during that life. Consistent with this, Aries (1981) concluded that people in the modern West are more troubled and afraid of death than their predecessors, to the extent that the very idea of death is collectively avoided and repressed.

Modern adolescents, particularly those without well formed identities, may therefore be less threatened by death than adults who do have a stable sense of their identity. This may account for some of the risk taking by adolescents. Adolescents who do not have a well formed identity may behave as adults of earlier eras, with less regard for their person or well being. Additionally, this suggests that there would be developmental changes in adolescents' perception of death that mirror their own development of the self. Adolescents who do have a well formed identity should be more troubled by the thought of death and behave in ways to avoid and repress the idea of death. This is one area that needs considerably more research to answer important questions about the relationship between adolescents' development and their fear of death.

#### *Conclusion*

Identity has been transformed in response to modern culture's need for new sources of value. Whereas through most of history morals and values provided a potent counterforce



to inclinations to act in ways that served the self, now it is considered morally good to do many things that benefit the self. The new moral role of selfhood is thus an adaptation to the cultural value gap, and the resultant alterations in the nature of identity have effects that ripple through many of the self's basic roles and relationships.

## Uniqueness

Another issue of identity development facing modern adolescents is the desire for individuality, and in particular the desire to have one's identity be unique. People want to feel that they are special and different from everyone else. The goal of personal development or fulfillment is partially a response to this wish for uniqueness. For example, most people believe that they are above average or better than most other people (see Taylor and Brown, 1988).

The desire for uniqueness is an adaptation to two separate historical trends in society and culture. In particular, changes in upbringing have encouraged people to feel unique, special, and important. These changes may have even instilled a need to feel unique and valuable. On the other hand, changes in society allow people fewer opportunities to feel unique, special, and important, as interactions with other people are more transient and less deep. Mass media, advertising, and similar trends have given rise to the mass society in which uniqueness is elusive. In short, people have a need to feel special that is difficult to fulfill in modern society. How adolescents develop their identity may be an adaptation to these opposing pressures.

### *Upbringing*

Several historical changes have led to this increased desire for individuality and uniqueness. In particular, changes in child-rearing may have created a need to feel that one is special and important. Previous to the modern era, child mortality was extremely high. It was likely that parents did not become as emotionally attached to their children for fear that the children might die. Additionally, parents had many children to ensure that at least some would survive to help work the farm and take care of the parents as they aged. Children were not treated as if their value depended on being unique and special individuals. Indeed, to some extent they may have been an unwanted burden until they could work and therefore they did not receive individualized attention, nor were they made to feel important by their parents. For example, Stone (1977) described how upper-class parents in early England would send their newborn infants into the countryside to be nursed, despite the greater risk of death. These behaviors may have made children feel less than unique and special. Indeed, parents would sometimes give several children the same name in the hope that at least one would survive to carry on the name. In short, uniqueness was neither encouraged nor supported to the extent that it is today.

With changes in medicine, hygiene, public health, and society itself these practices died off. In fact mortality declined greatly and the number of children parents had decreased as well. Parents now try to spend a great deal of time caring for their children and become strongly, intimately, emotionally attached to them right from the start. The special emotional attachment between parents and children has, along with marital intimacy, become the focal meaning and purpose of the family, in contrast to the greater economic

and social functions that predominated in earlier times (e.g. Burgess and Locke, 1945). The typical child now receives a great deal of individualized attention and love. Thus people grow up feeling special and important and supported in their uniqueness.

#### *Lack of support for one's uniqueness*

While modern child-rearing has instilled in people an increasingly strong desire to feel special and unique, modern culture has restricted the opportunities to fulfill this need. The modern urban environment has increased the frequency of interactions among strangers, which remain superficial and in which each party could relatively easily be replaced by someone else. This is quite different from the small town or village of earlier eras in which one's personal and family history was known to most interaction partners, and it undercuts the social validation of one's uniqueness.

Furthermore, in modern society, particularly late twentieth century society, people are aware of many other people with similar experiences and background, making one feel less unique. Mass media and advertisement help to make people more similar to one another. Advertising is designed to persuade a large segment of the population to behave in similar ways, such as by using the same products. People with even a slight insight into their behavior would be aware of the homogeneity of society and how similar people really are. Thus becoming a unique individual is further hindered by knowledge of one's true lack of uniqueness.

We are not trying to make a strong statement on the methodologically difficult question of whether people were actually more unique at one historical period than another. Our point is simply that modern society may make it more difficult to *feel* unique, at the same time that cultural changes have placed special value and emphasis on the pursuit of such feelings.

#### *How identity adapted to these changes*

Because of the increased need to feel special and unique in a context that restricts opportunities to achieve that feeling, the development of identity has changed. In particular, the development of one's inner self has become a method of highlighting one's individuality. As described above, the inner self has grown over time, and today the development of a special and unique inner self is of great importance to people. Western society today puts great emphasis on inner experiences as the personal, special, and unique qualities of an individual. Personal fulfillment (in the sense of becoming a complete, unique individual whose special talents are fully realized) is a goal of many adolescents in society today. Thus one tries to become important to oneself and become a unique individual by trying to develop oneself to the fullest. Hence many of the issues in identity development and identity crises may involve how to best differentiate oneself from others. To modern adolescents, developing a unique and special identity may be quite important, yet the means for accomplishing this are far from clear. Empty claims of being special and unique, as well as increasingly strident demands that authorities and other figures constantly recognize this presumptive uniqueness, become increasingly common (see Adler, 1992).

It is possible that the current cultural fascination with self-esteem is linked to these cultural changes. In principle, one could have high self-esteem without believing oneself unique, such as by virtue of one's membership in a privileged elite or successful ethnic group. In modern America, however, self-esteem seems to be based most heavily on one's

individual traits and achievements, as opposed to collective memberships (see Triandis, 1989; also Baumeister, 1991). Most evidence indicates that modern Americans are fairly successful in their pursuit of self-esteem, managing to convince themselves that they are superior to the average person in multiple ways (e.g. Taylor and Brown, 1988; Taylor, 1989). This often self-deceptive pursuit of feelings of individual superiority may be a crucially important way of satisfying the need to see oneself as unique in the context of a society that makes true uniqueness difficult to achieve.

Thus, the cultivation of a sense of identity that emphasizes special, individual uniqueness may be an adaptation to important cultural and historical changes. In our view, the motivation to be unique has been intensified by modern child-rearing practices, but the social context tends to place serious obstacles in the fulfillment of that desire to be truly unique. Hence people often settle for superficial signs and markers that may furnish the subjective feeling and impression (or indeed the illusion) of uniqueness.

## Conclusion

Selfhood is universal and precultural, at least in its most basic sense: people everywhere have selves that serve some of the same basic functions. The society and culture, however, provide a context in which the self has to operate, and to do so it adapts in far-reaching, important ways. The nature of adult identity can thus be seen as the result of both the basic nature of selfhood and the sociocultural context.

We have proposed that adaptation is the most appropriate way of characterizing this compromise. That is, identity is not simply a product of society, nor is it an inevitable product of a preprogrammed developmental pattern, nor is it entirely a result of free choices by the individual, nor is it simply a compromise between the opposing forces of individual needs and socialization pressures. People do not simply turn out the way society dictates, but neither can they develop identity without regard to the sociocultural context. Hence we have proposed that identity reflects the adaptation of the individual self to the sociocultural context. The self constructs for itself a definition that allows it to get along reasonably well in its social environment. Insofar as one task of adolescence is the formation of an adult identity, the adaptation processes will be particularly important and visible at that period of life.

To elaborate our model of adaptation, we have described how identities changed in response to historical changes in the social and cultural context. It does not appear that society changed and merely dictated a new form of identity, nor is it correct to say that identities changed and these changes resulted in new social forms. Rather, societies changed through the operation of political, economic, and other social forces, and identities gradually adapted to the new circumstances.

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