

Simmel's Web of Group Affiliations

Imagine trying to describe someone you met to someone who doesn't know that person. To do it well, simple physiological descriptions may not be very helpful (i.e., "she has black hair") But, because society has a way of using labels and group affiliations to create identities, mentioning that she's a blonde may be more meaningful. The meaning comes not from the word or the hair color, but from the associative qualities of the words "a blonde" with the group we call "blondes" in America. The more groups like this—whether they be familial, social, ethnic, religious, academic, geographic or an infinite number of others—that you can bring into your description, the better the idea one will have of the person you are trying to describe. In George Simmel's *Web of Group Affiliations*, he suggests that, while social groups are composed of individuals, it is through those group affiliations that we are defined as individuals. Without seeing something in different contexts, it is difficult to define it as its own entity. Otherwise we make the error of seeing it only as a part of something else. Simmel suggests that we become more and more defined by each new group that we join or are affiliated with. Our individuality is born at the center of the different influences that affect us.

Simmel sees group affiliation as a function of two different processes: the organic membership and the rational membership. Organic memberships are very traditional in nature and, while more basic, are less closely tied to the personal characteristics of the individuals that make them up. They are groupings of very different people who come together without much thought or purpose. Conversely, rational memberships exist because people have to get needs met and cannot find people within their primary grouping who have compatible traits. These usually secondary group affiliations are more useful in defining the individual because they are both infinite in number and are controlled more by the individual himself.

In medieval times, most group memberships were a result of where one was born or into which family they were born. This organic form of group affiliation limited the number of groups a person was in and narrowly defined who they were. While the individual may have had a number of identities (i.e., cousin, son, Texan), he was still defined primarily by one or two groups. Because other people could just as easily have all of these same identities—his brother for example—his individual personality and identity remained undeveloped. Only through small adjustments, such as marriage or memberships in war parties, was he able to add more pieces to the puzzle of who he was.

Because identity is something so controllable, some groups went to great lengths to shape their member's identities. Some universities would not allow students from the town where the institution resided. This is similar to some current residential colleges' expectations that "townie" students live on campus so that they can be indoctrinated into the campus community and not be tainted by their involvement with former friends and geographic cultural traits. Also journeymen would often not marry, thereby defining them solely by their job and little else.

Simmel describes a more extensive identity-control process whereby Catholic priests were identities created by the larger social group, the church. By stripping away the individual's affiliations with all other groups, they were able to narrowly define him as an arm of the Catholic church alone. By being no longer connected to a particular family group, class, or even geographic area, the priest was able to work with any member in any diocese without the potential conflicts that arise when different groups meet. In this way, the priest who was originally a slave had the power imposed on him by his new identity to deal with other originally wealthy priests as equals. The priest was a kind of *tabula rasa*, a blank slate that the Vatican could fill with its characteristics. The interesting group affiliation that they never seemed to clear from the board was that of "men." As all priests were men, they still held a level of inequality when dealing with another group, women.

Rational group affiliations were those created because of reason and intellectual needs of the individual. With the intellectual explosion of the Renaissance and the technological changes of the Industrial Revolution, people were beginning to see very different connections that they had with other people. They made new alliances with people very unlike themselves in regards to geographic or familial origin, and through those alliances, further defined who they were. Various talents, interests, occupations, and even physiological characteristics were realized and put into use within these other groups.

Individuals were more able to move outside of the very concentric group relationships that they were formerly bound by and cause some juxtaposition of group identities. Because it is at the intersection of groups that identity is clarified, this juxtaposition had some negative benefits and positive ones for the individual. For example, the concentric group affiliations of being a Tucsonan and an American gave the

individual two meaningfully different identity labels, but they were not necessarily likely to conflict with one another. The values of the latter have an impact on the values and characteristics of the former. But, when there is a juxtaposition of potentially conflicting group affiliations, there is a resulting kind of schizophrenia. This juxtaposition is at the crux of some of the problems American Catholics had in seeking the presidency. Americans questioned John Kennedy's allegiance to American values versus those of the Vatican. Similarly, gay Christians, black Republicans, and Jews for Jesus are questioned because of the perceived incongruity between the identities they assume. The positive outcome of these conflicts is that the individual again assumes some control over which group affiliation controls their attitudes and has a greater effect on that person's identity. Onlookers into the life of a person with these kinds of conflicts are no longer easily defined by how blacks are supposed to behave or how Republicans are supposed to behave. By joining the two within themselves, black Republicans reshape expectations of both of those groups, even as they reshape expectations of themselves. The more groups a person is affiliated with, the greater the opportunity for conflict and the greater the likelihood that the individual will shine through. Multiple group affiliations both unmake and reinforce the individual's identity.

These rational group affiliations bring in a number of other interesting complications that further shape who the individual is. Some group affiliations create opportunities for status shifts. A person who works as a tutor for a king's children exists in almost two interactional dimensions with those children. In one way, she is subordinate to the children, a slave. At the same time, in her role as tutor, she can instruct and make demands upon the children. She is the same person in both cases, but her role creates two different phases in which she can move. These identities seem to clash, but come together to create her one personality and identity.

Rational choice in group affiliations also creates a fine distinction between a person's freedom to choose group affiliations and obligation to be in groups. As the individual is creating new groups for himself, other individuals are creating groups as well. With more groups being formed, more options are created as the circles begin to cluster under larger umbrellas. This combination of rational and organic group affiliation works well with religion. While a person may be obliged (because of birth or some other method) to be a Christian, the fact that other people create sects of this broad group category gives her the opportunity to choose which kind of Christian (charismatic, baptist, catholic) she wants to be. Her identity expands then beyond just being a religious person or a Christian. She is now defined more explicitly by which denomination she is a member of.

Specialization is another way that identities are formed and the mechanism for that individualization can be both direct and indirect. The direct path is an obvious one. The doctor who only heals through acupuncture is much more clearly defined as an individual than the doctor who uses a number of methods to heal. Similarly, if nine out of ten doctors are general practitioners and the tenth is a podiatrist, she stands out and is much more useful when your feet ache. The more indirect path, as Simmel describes it, results from the specialists' opportunity to spend more of his time doing other things, making new alliances, "finding himself". Being a generalist, in Simmel's opinion, clutters a person's time and absorbs too much of their energy. This creates less opportunity to get the other needs met and create greater webs of group affiliation. I'm not sure I agree with this point, because it seems that the generalist would have much more opportunity to find out ways that she connects to different people. There isn't always the necessary possibility that she will then be defined by what she offers to those people as opposed to what they offer her.

Another major function of identity formation is labeling. As people move outside of the realm of the organic membership, they find themselves more often coming into contact with groups that are both specific in content and representative of the pure form. This harkens back to the earlier discussions of freedom versus obligation, but in a different way. As groups of individuals come together, they are defined by the groups, but still have some freedom through the juxtaposition of those groups to define themselves. Simmel speaks eloquently of how industrialization created even greater alliances for individuals than those that even intellectualism allowed. Through large groups coming together and realizing the similarities they shared, different groupings were formed that carried with them entirely new identities for their members. Bank owners and printers saw the commonality of their work and became entrepreneurs. The aggregate characteristics of all of these different groups of business owners created a new label with its own particular characteristics. Seamstresses, widget makers, and cooks all became wage laborers because of the commonality of the method through which they received compensation. In a different way, females from different classes, different geographies, different ethnicities all came together to be seen as one group: women. It was an odd reversal of what most rational group affiliations seemed

to be. By bringing individuals from many different groups into leagues with each other, umbrella identities were created that gave a different meaning to the identities they already claimed.

Simmel concludes his discussion with a look around himself and an analysis of how the changes in technology that he saw boded well for greater individualization. The idea that we can reach across the country and find connections with people very unlike ourselves in a number of ways creates greater opportunity for group affiliations and the resultant growth in the definition of who we are as individuals. That I can be an African-American from Iowa, Tucson and Philadelphia makes it more difficult for someone to know how I'll react to things because they can no longer simply say "well, that's how African-Americans respond to things". In the same way, the opportunities to change careers so easily makes me less an example of "teachers", by applying the templates of admission officer, counselor, midshipman, musician, banker, and sociologist. This cluttering gives me more definition and separates me from any of the contexts that I can be associated with.