

RU EU? Teaching Support Materials

Support Material for Teachers

Articles and Sources on Identity



What is identity and why is it important?

The term identity has a number of different but overlapping meanings. The influential child psychologist Eric Erikson (1968) used the term “identity” to refer to an individual’s sense of self and personal identity, which he regarded as being acquired through interactions which take place from a very young age. Initially family and especially parents are important influences on children in their early years, but Erikson argued that an increasingly wide “radius of significant individuals” impact on children’s developing understanding of self as they get older. Erikson characterized conflicts that occur at different stages in development and which lead to an exploration of personal values, beliefs, and goals. In this sense personal identity refers to a subjective feeling of an individual’s uniqueness, our “authentic inner selves” as Fukuyama (2018) puts it.

As well as personal identity, theorists have also discussed social identity. Social identity theory is an established theory in social psychology for describing how a person's sense of who they are is based on the groups that they belong to and the positive feelings that they have about their membership in these groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This is also related to the idea of national identity. Anderson (2016) gave national identity studies and nationalism a key concept in that of ‘imagined community’. This is predicated on the idea that national identity is not material or natural, but is something between the issues of culture, society, politics and psychology. Thus, a national community is ‘imagined’ because not every member can know every other member on an individual level, but each person, in their own mind, holds a connection of varying intensity.

It seemed that the differing levels of commitment to the EU experienced by European citizens provide a good example of the idea of an imagined community and national identity in action. The vote by the UK to leave the EU stirred up very strong pro and anti EU feelings where differences between groups that had previously been relatively weak and implicit suddenly became strong and explicit. This reflects unexpectedly deep seated and entrenched attitudes and emotions and highlighting our poor understanding of how strong (and prejudiced) attitudes emerge and how resistant these are to change. The idea of imagined community, and the related issue of national identity and social identity are able to be investigated through the RU EU? Game. In the game players would interact with individuals in the shape of non-player characters (NPCs) who express varied views about European identity, national identity and their understandings and beliefs of their imagined communities.

References

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- Erikson, E. (1968) *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton.
- Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: Contemporary identity politics and the struggle for recognition*. Profile books.
- Tajfel, H. and Turner, J.C. (1986) *The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior*. *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, 5, 7-24.