



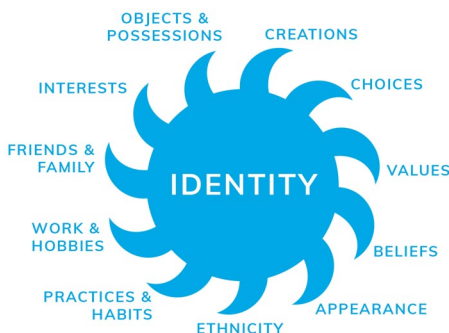
Mauri Identity Life Spark

Dr. Sue Bagshaw

Some would say that life spark begins with ancestors long ago, derived from heavenly being(s), others when egg meets sperm, others at birth. Many philosophers have pondered over how to answer the question “who am I?”.

Erik Erickson (1902-1994) who was a psychologist, became famous for his stages of life theories. He described the time between 12 and 18 years old as one in which the young person discovers who they are. On the way they try on different roles and ways of being as they learn the impact of those on others. Between 1 and 3 years children learn autonomy and separation from Mum. “I do it” is a catch phrase whether it be feeding myself or dressing myself. Teens have almost the same catch phrase as they remain in the whānau but separate emotionally and developmentally from being a child to enter the adult world.

Many factors contribute to identity and “who you are”: gender, ethnicity, culture, values, sexuality, whānau, friends, school, community, media as a “voice” of what society thinks, amongst many others. Identity affects what you do, how you do it and what others do to you, and in turn these events influence who you are.



Ethnicity and Culture

Ethnicity and culture are often confused (Bhopal & Donaldson, 1998). The term race is still around, especially in an insulting way, but in many studies of population using race like “white”, “black”, “brown” is not a term used much now. Should we describe identity using nationality? The term taken as meaning the country you were born in. Many people now are born in countries they don’t grow up in, perhaps it depends on where your parents are born?

So we turn to ethnicity and culture. Are they the same thing? Some would say that race is determined by genetic biology and ethnicity by culture defined by a whole group of different activities within geographic regions. Most agree that ethnicity is self-identified.

Does it matter? Well, yes. How you identify and who you identify with is a big part of who you are. Culture is so much of life especially the life of whānau, and bigger hapū groups. Contributions to culture come from reo, music, clothes, traditions, ceremony, dance even sport and icons whether they be people or object icons. When culture is shared by a large group then it could define ethnicity but there are many different groups that have a culture, defined by the group.

Thus there are those with different abilities which develop their own culture; sporting groups, professional groups, hobby groups and many others who come together, mostly for support and to develop their own ways of belonging. The power of self-help groups is big in helping to heal those that are discriminated against because they are different

from the majority. Culture can be very helpful if it encourages belonging. If it is an excuse for exclusion it is not as helpful.

Values

Identity and culture are interwoven, and an important part of culture are the values of that culture. Value can be described as the importance of something to an individual or group. The Oxford Dictionary has nine definitions and that’s just for the word when used as a noun. Some examples given are:

- something that is treasured - your support is of great value,
- value in terms of monetary worth – the value of a house is what it will sell for,
- standards of behaviour – they internalise their parents’ rules and values
- algebra – a symbol is given a value
- music – the duration of the sound signified by a note
- linguistics – the value of the pronunciation

Te Reo has separate words for all these meanings according to Te Aka, the Māori dictionary:

- Wāriu – monetary value
- Whai hua – to have value, use, be worthwhile
- Whaipanga - to nourish, add value
- Whanonga pono – values as principles – standards
- Iti kahurangi – something aspirational of value

Values are usually what guides a person’s behaviour as they are important and help guide

the development of identity. Neuroscience when considering the plasticity of the brain in recovery from trauma uses a whakataukī or memorable phrase “where your attention goes, energy flows and that’s what grows” (Leitch, 2017).

Meditation, prayer, teachings from the Bible and many wise writings point out that what we value is where we give our attention - so take care of what you value. The reverse is also true, give it attention so that it grows. When young people take pride in their values and their culture they give themselves a platform a tūrangawaewae where they belong and from which they can grow. A whakataukī from a book by Peter Alsop and Te Rau Kupenga states, “E kore au e ngaro, he kakano i ruia mai i Rangiātea; I will never be lost, for I am a seed sown in the heavens.” (2016).

Religion and Spiritual Beliefs are also an important part of the development of identity and are tightly woven with culture and values.

Gender and Sexuality

Currently when many people talk about identity their thoughts are often trying to express the identity of gender and sexual attraction. To be clear about the difference between sex and gender is important. Sex is determined at birth by the appearance of genitalia. Gender is what you feel you are or identify as. Sexual orientation is who you are sexually attracted to and again is a self-identification and affects behaviour. Both are a range of identities ranging from Binary – male or female to Non-binary – neither one or the other; always having sex with the same gender or the opposite with a range in between including not at all. So gender and sexuality can be a spectrum of identity and behaviour. This article is not going to cover all the different terms nor the details of transitioning from gender assigned at birth to the gender you are becoming aware of during development about who you feel you are. The newly published

guidelines are tremendously helpful and have based the model on Te Whare Tapa Whā which helps to provide context for identity development in Aotearoa (Oliphant, Veale, MacDonald, Carroll, Johnson, Harte, Stephenson & Bullock, 2018).

Gender identity is of great importance to overall identity. The concept of gender, like many things in our culture, is a minefield of stereotypes and truisms, from self-help books like “Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus” to blatant discrimination about the lesser value of women, which may not be as blatant in Western culture compared to others but the implications are everywhere. Parents who are having difficulty coming to terms with their children’s developing identity often worry that it is the influence of these stereotypes or friends that is driving the motivation to change. They can be reassured that for most young people there is an internal drive of knowing who they really are, which is very real and not influenced greatly by the presence of stereotypes.

The most important way we can show respect to developing gender identity is to use the correct name and pronouns the person has chosen to use and identify with. If that is not clear – ask. The second is to provide recognition and to work against discrimination. The third is to provide plenty of support to parents. If parents are supported to support their child/young person the journey is much smoother. The research called Counting Ourselves, asking people who are gender diverse about their experiences leads to sombre reading when it comes to the difficulties they face but is highly valuable (Veale, Byrne, Tan, Guy, Yee, Nopera & Bentham, 2019). A young person who was transitioning said “when I transition many more people than myself have to transition with me; my friends, my whānau, my school and my community”.

The WHO defined sexual health in 2006 like this: ‘Sexual health is a state of physical, mental and social

well-being in relation to sexuality. It requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence’. Their definition of sexuality in the same document is

“...a central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors.” (WHO, 2006)

When we consider these definitions it is no wonder that gender and sexuality are such an important part of identity.

Ability

In just the same way as gender is experienced differently as part of development, having different abilities such as changes in the senses – sight, hearing, levels of intelligence and the motor system that so affects mobility are all part of developing identity. These might be inherited genetic effects that babies are born with or disease or trauma but they can all affect identity even if it is forced upon you by society’s view of you. Minority discrimination and bullying is very destructive. To wrap a culture of different ability or illness that can carry pride in that identity can be very helpful provided it is recognised and supported by people with ability.

Psychological identity

Much research has focused on personality. A definition that appears frequently when googled is: "Personality development is the development of the organised pattern of behaviours and attitudes that makes a person distinctive". These ingredients develop and change throughout life. Personality as part of the development of identity has a big part to play. The balance of nature and nurture input to personality development has long been discussed and it is probably both with the key link being epigenetics which in essence is the way nurture can change parts of our genes. A very complex and biological definition was proposed in 2009 by Berger et al: "Definition: An epigenetic trait is a stably heritable phenotype resulting from changes in a chromosome without alterations in the DNA sequence."

The University of Otago cohort study following babies from birth in 1972 into the present provides much information about the interplay between genes and the influence of nurture. Professor Richie Poulton, taking examples from this study gave a simplified explanation during a presentation to school counsellors: – there might be a gene present when born for alcohol dependence or violence or depression, but if nothing happens to trigger that gene to be expressed in behaviour and function then being violent or abusing alcohol will not emerge.

Development of identity is not as simple as it sounds, especially when how it all happens in the brain is considered.

Influences and Opportunities

It is obvious that many people will have more than one identity. I quote Philip Patston, well known self-identified sit down comedian, who happens to have cerebral palsy, and was heard to say at a speech at the Involve conference "on the one hand I am quite powerful in that I am white, male and have a job, on the other hand I am disabled, vegetarian and homosexual." He is a leader

in many different organisations representing diversity.

Major influences on the development of identity are of course whānau – both nature and nurture, genes and environment, friends, community and school. All provide opportunities to create a culture or environment of belonging, acceptance and respect. Parents of developing children and young people need to be taught about how identity is developed and how that can be guided and nurtured what can be helpful and not helpful, information about all the different aspects of identity would be important.

Schools are also an important environment for doing this. Education systems have been created to impart knowledge. More and more people are realising however that attitude and skills are just as important, not just with adults but from birth up; from early childhood education to tertiary levels. In other words, it is time society realised that the "business" of assisting the development of people in the first 25 years of life to go well so that they can truly thrive is the business of all of us – parents, whānau, schools and community, including how electronic media is used to influence.

The formation of identity is one of the most important that leads to that life spark that creates thriving. This can be done through programmes, wise use of media whether it be printed, film radio, platforms like Facebook, Instagram and other internet based ways we use to communicate our values, cultures, beliefs and attitudes.

"E tipī, e rea, mō ngā rā o tō ao, ko tō ringa ki ngā rākau a te Pākehā hei oranga mō tō tinana. Ko tō ngākau ki ngā taonga a ō tīpuna Māori hei tikitiki mō tō māhunga, ā, ko tō wiarua ki tō Atua, nāna nei ngā mea katoa.

Grow up o tender youth and thrive in the days destined for you, your hand to the tools of the Pākehā you provide physical sustenance, your

heart to the treasures of your ancestors to adorn your head, your soul to God to whom all things belong."

Sir Apirana Ngata 1874-1950

Sue says she is a youth worker with a medical degree. She works in a Youth One Stop Shop in Ōtautahi, loves spending time with her seven mokopuna and really enjoys teaching whoever would like to listen.

Sue is incredibly humble and was recently awarded a Dame Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for her work founding the Collaborative Trust, 298 Youth Work and so much more.

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