Social Construction of Self and Identities: Psychology 792

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This course is a broad exploration of self and identities from constructivist and constructionist views: What is identity? What is self? What is the difference between self and identity? How does one develop a sense of identity? Is identity singular or multiple? How do multiple social contexts and constructions (including power) influence the perception and construction of identities?

This will be a student centered, discussion oriented seminar. The course begins with an introduction to various ideas of self and identity, as well as a brief (and by no means thorough) review of some constructivist/constructionist theory. We will then go on to explore in more depth specific identities/topics generated by students. Specific topics may include: specific racial and/or ethnic identities; gender identities; feminist identities; gay, lesbian and bisexual identities; class/SES identities; identities related to ability/disability, identity related to trauma; the more traditional ideas about general adolescent identity (or identities); etc. See attached for some examples of topics and associated readings.

Course Objectives

• To introduce/overview post-modern perspectives (constructivistic and social constructionistic theories) as they relate to clinical psychology, with a particular emphasis on their implications for minority populations. These theories are increasingly affecting the conduct and critical analysis of research and the development of therapeutic interventions (e.g. narrative family therapy, cognitive constructivism), particularly in relation to minority populations whose worldviews are frequently marginalized.

• To contribute to understandings of individual differences in a social context, highlighting the complexities of the interaction between individuals and social constructions, particularly for minority populations.

• To contribute to developing an understanding of the perspectives of ethnic minorities, low-income groups, and other people/groups experiencing systemic oppression.

• To support students' particular clinical and/or research interests by enabling in-depth exploration of student-chosen topics related to self and identities.

Foundational Readings:


Additional readings on reserve
Structure:
The first third of the semester will be used to create a foundation in some of the theory regarding constructivism/constructionism and self and identity. We will use this reading to explore issues and dilemmas and attempt to come to some tentative agreement or structure of understanding (co-constructed meaning) regarding self and identity.

The remainder of the semester will be student-centered. Each student will define a more specific area of interest related to identity and self. Students will be scheduled for particular sessions (hopefully 2) and will be responsible for providing readings related to their chosen topic for the class beforehand. Readings should consist of 2-3 articles/chapters (about 30-35 pages per student, per presentation). The majority of these readings should be current primary sources, although classic contextualizing research and theory is also acceptable for a part of the readings. Personal narratives, case examples, fiction, etc. directly relevant to the topic are encouraged but should account for no more than 20% of the readings used to fulfill the assignment requirement (feel free to include more as optional). Students will be responsible for preparing discussion questions and guiding the class discussion on their topic, demonstrating "expert knowledge" and critical thinking/integration. You are also responsible for writing up and disseminating a discussion summary after each class discussion on your topic. Some examples of past topics:

• Various racial and ethnic identities, sometimes intersecting with other identities such as gender or social class or with particular experiences such as delinquency in adolescents, or mothering
• Dissociation and identity
• Disability and sexual identity
• Twins and identity
• Straight-edge identity
• Feminist identity and issues related to why women do or do not identify as feminist
• Trauma and identity, related to developing a survivor identity or related to genocide
• Transcending identity
• Youth activist identity

Assignments:
Model/metaphor of self and identity: a model of your understanding of self and identity in whatever media you choose. Your metaphor/model should answer the question "What is identity (and or self)?" But, as a work in progress, it should not be definitive. One of the wonderful things about metaphors is that they are multifaceted, frequently richer in meaning than we first intend, and often open to co-construction due to their ability to encompass multiple (even contradictory) meanings. When thinking about how to approach this, consider not only the base question ("What is identity?") but also the framing of the metaphor: "Identity is like..." (sometimes its easier to explicitly put in the "like." 25%

Class presentation(s) (hopefully 2 depending on class size) as described above, including summaries. 30%

Final paper: The final paper for this class will be an exploration of your understanding of self and identity, based on issues discussed in class. The paper should integrate the collective knowledge gleaned from the different class perspectives as well as explore the specific research and theory associated with your particular chosen topic. 35%

Class participation including discussion/written feedback on shared papers. 10%
**Course Calendar**

**Week 1: Introductions**

**Required Reading:**
- *A&J*: Chap. 6: The historical formation of selves, Danziger
- *A&J*: Chap. 8: The self and society, Baumeister
- Gergen, K. J. (2001). Psychological science in a postmodern context...
- Cox, L. M. & Lyddon, W. J. (1997). Constructivist conceptions of self...

**Recommended Reading:**

**Week 2: Historical Contexts**

**Required Reading:**
- *A&J*: Chap. 6: The historical formation of selves, Danziger
- *A&J*: Chap. 8: The self and society, Baumeister
- Gergen, K. J. (2001). Psychological science in a postmodern context...
- Cox, L. M. & Lyddon, W. J. (1997). Constructivist conceptions of self...

**Recommended Reading:**

**Week 3: Development**

**Required Reading:**
- *A&J*: Chap. 3: The case for unity in the (post)modern self, McAdams
- *A&J*: Chap 5: Me’s and we’s, Thoits & Virshup
- Guidano, V. F. (1995). Constructivist psychotherapy...

**Recommended Reading:**
- Rigazio-DiGilio, S. A. (1997). From microscopes to holographs...

**Week 4: Social and Cultural Contexts**

**Required Reading:**
- *A&J*: Chap. 7: Selves as cultured, Holland
- Triandis, H. C. (1989). The self and social behavior...

**Recommended Reading:**
- *A&J*: Chap. 4: The personal self in social context, Harter

**Week 5: Models and Metaphors**

**Models/metaphors due**

**Required Reading:**
- Suyemoto, K. L. (2002). Constructing identities...
- Suyemoto, K. L. & Kim, G. S. (2005). Journeys through diverse terrain...

**Weeks 6-14 Specific Identities and Issues**

**Student Facilitated Topics**

**Final papers due May 10**

**Meet During Finals Week: Discussion and feedback**
Student Facilitated Topics—some guidelines for readings

Readings should consist of 2-3 articles/chapters for each presentation (about 30-35 pages). The majority of these readings should be current primary sources, although classic contextualizing research and theory is also acceptable for a part of the readings. Personal narrative, case examples, fiction, etc. directly relevant to the topic is encouraged but should account for no more than 10% of the readings used to fulfill the assignment requirement.

Two examples for a single class presentation are below. Neither of these sample lists is exhaustive and of course, yours will reflect your interests.

Asian American Ethnic and Racial Identities:

Required Reading

- Yee (1995). Little thoughts in America: To be the real me? In *Our Time: An anthology of writings by Asian American students from the University of Massachusetts Boston* (p. 35).

Optional Background

- Omi and Winant chapters 1 & 4 as background—optional 30 pages

Optional Narratives


Identity and Trauma

Required Reading


Optional Background


Optional Narratives

WEEK 2: Historical Contexts


WEEK 3: Development


WEEK 4: Social and Cultural Contexts


WEEK 5: Models and Metaphors

Required Reading
