why identity matters

How do you identify yourself? And, what is the most important part of your identity? Is it your sex, your race or ethnicity, your sexual orientation, your class status, your nationality, your religious affiliation, your age, your physical or cognitive abilities, your political beliefs? Is there one part of your identity that stands out from the rest, or does your identity change depending on who you’re with, what you’re involved in, where you are in your life?

key concepts

- Identity is a socially and historically constructed concept. We learn about our own identity and the identity of others through interactions with family, peers, organizations, institutions, media and other connections we make in our everyday life.
- Key facets of identity—like gender, social class, age, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, religion, age and disability—play significant roles in determining how we understand and experience the world, as well as shaping the types of opportunities and challenges we face.
- Social and cultural identity is inextricably linked to issues of power, value systems, and ideology.
- The media uses representations—images, words, and characters or personae—to convey specific ideas and values related to culture and identity in society.

From WNYC’s series “Being In2” (2015).
**keywords**

identity, social construction, norms, ideology, intersectionality, stereotypes, prejudice, bias, sexism, racism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, ableism

**understanding identity**

The answers to the questions above clearly depend on many factors. They prod us to think about our identities in singular terms (I am female), but also as multiple and intersecting parts (I am a Latinx teenage girl from South Los Angeles). Most importantly, these questions lead us to consider the meaning of identity. Beyond “who am I?” these questions frame our individual identities in a broader social historical context and in relation to other groups. Part of understanding our identity, therefore, means understanding how we fit in (or don’t) with other groups of people. It also means being aware of the fact that some groups have more social, political, and economic power than others.

When we think about identity, we may focus on cultural markers (things like clothing) or biological and physiological markers (things like skin color); however, it’s also important to understand that our identities are comprised of shared ideas, ideologies, biases and ways of seeing the world around us. Our identities, therefore, are socially constructed, and our biological attributes are only one part of who we are.

But, where do these shared values or ideologies come from? Again, the answer is not clear-cut. In many cases, we’ve learned and internalized these values over the course of our lives from family, peers, role models, school, organizations, government, etc. The media also plays a prominent role in creating meaning, shaping our values, defining who we are, and establishing norms. These values are powerful because they generally come from places of power, but also because we internalize them and take them for granted; they seem natural and the way things should be, and in turn, shape the way we see and understand the people, objects, practices, and institutions in our lives.
Our gender, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, disability, religion, and age can play a significant role in determining whether or not we have social, political and economic power. While many assume that anyone can accrue social, economic and political power if they have talent, ability, and work hard (the idea of meritocracy), we also need to acknowledge the way historically ingrained prejudices are built into existing institutions and structures, and consider how they create barriers and limit opportunities.

Given the role our identity plays in the way we experience and accrue power, it’s important to understand the potential obstacles, discrimination and oppression that some groups experience over others. For some, the experience of being a particular sex or sexual orientation, from a particular racial or ethnic group or socio-economic class, involves recurring and even systematic or institutional prejudice. This prejudice can manifest in unequal opportunities, rights, or wages, as well as being stereotyped, marginalized or persecuted.

Intersectionality is a term coined by scholar Kimberle Crenshaw to explain how individual aspects of our identities (our gender, race, ethnicity, class, etc.) intersect and, in turn, can shape how we’re treated, what kind of education and jobs we get, where we live, what opportunities we’re afforded, and what kind of inequities we may face.


These terms reflect beliefs that posit the superiority of one identity over another: men over women; whites over non-whites; straight over gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender; wealthy over other classes; young over old; able-bodied and mentally fit over disabled and mentally ill. Historically, the terms have been used to call attention to discrimination and bias. They further challenge ideologies that perpetuate hierarchical structures and limit a subordinate group’s opportunities and freedoms. Intersectionality offers us an additional frame to understand the way
multiple systems of oppression (i.e., sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism) intertwine across individuals’ experiences.

**identity and the media**

The media can be both a site of change, but also fundamentally a site that perpetuates ideologies and norms. The media uses representations—images, words, and characters or personae—to convey ideas and values. Media representations, therefore, are not neutral or objective. They are constructed and play an important role in imparting ideology.

One question we might ask, then, is whether media produce ideologies or simply reflect them, mirroring what’s already happening in society. This is another difficult question to answer. The line between mirroring reality and producing reality is difficult to discern. Regardless of where ideologies originate, the media plays a key role in conveying ideas and giving them weight or power.

With the media, we tend to see the same images and representations over and over again. Media rely heavily on genres, conventions and stereotypes. As certain images and representations are repeated, they become familiar and natural. But are these representations really “natural”?

Think about what goes on behind the scenes in fictional media. Screenwriters, directors, casting agents, set and costume designers all make choices that help audiences understand who a character is and what they care about. These behind-the-scenes players use clothing, hair and makeup, the way characters speak, and how they move as shorthand in their storytelling. It’s important to look at these elements of the story, rather than take them for granted. There are also deliberate storytelling choices and frames for non-fiction storytelling (in news, documentary, “reality” programming, and advertising). It’s also important to consider whether or not a characters or representations of particular groups are complex or seem more like caricatures and stereotypes.
Understanding and critically examining the decision-making process behind a piece of media can help us see that media representations are constructed. If identities in the media are constructed, should we accept them at face value? Or can we (should we) question them? And, even change them, and create our own identities?

Read the overviews on gender, race and ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, age and disability to get a better idea of the way values and meanings are specifically tied to each of these individual facets of our identities. The overviews serve as building blocks to frame the media examples on this website. Each media example and the accompanying questions, in turn, prompt you to dig deep and critically think about the way media creates meanings, values, and expectations tied to our identities. After learning how to critically analyze the media, we hope you'll explore some of the suggestions for making your own media and telling stories about your own identity.

Note that most of the media examples and the overviews are written from an American perspective or vision of the world. Once you familiarize yourself with the critical tools to analyze identity in the media, you can apply your knowledge and approach to any number of examples, including media from across the globe.