



## IDENTITY QUILT

### Uncovering Diversity

How would you describe yourself?

Most of us can identify ourselves within these identity-groups. See how your identity grows in complexity as you define yourself within each circle.

*Race: African-American; White; Asian-American; Latino; other*

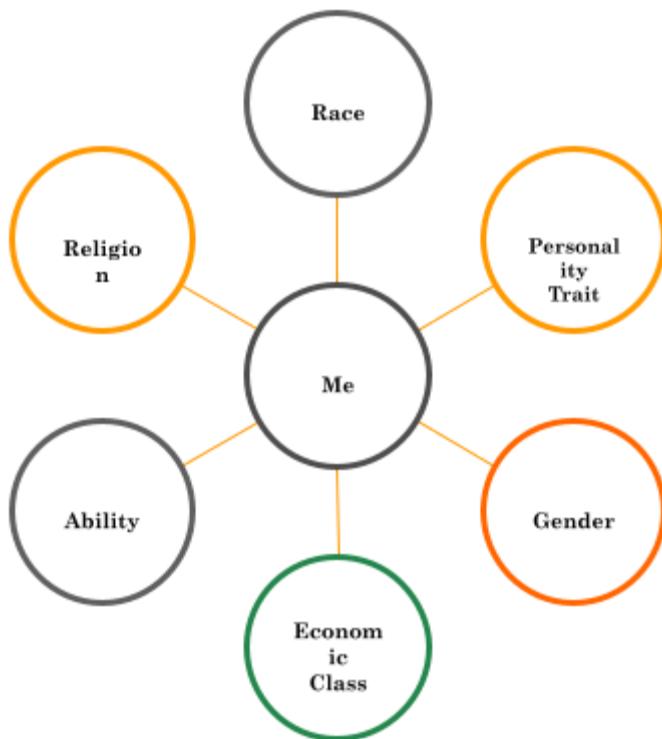
Many factors contribute to the formation of each individual's cultural identity. As an example, we can consider the concept of race, which is commonly defined as a biological fact, with specific genetic characteristics. The Human Genome Project (<http://www.nhgri.nih.gov/10001772>) has shown that there is truly no such things as race- all individuals in our world have similar DNA, and there are no specific genetic markers attributable to any one race of people. Race is a political and social construction, with historical significance as it has been used to justify the enslavement, extermination, and marginalization of specific groups of people. Indigenous Americans, African Americans, poor immigrants, and non-English speakers all have stories to tell about their experiences with discrimination based solely on assumptions made about them because of their supposed membership in these groups.

*Personality Trait: Extroverted; Optimistic; Pessimistic; Aggressive; Energetic; other*

Each individual is born with or develops a unique set of personality traits; a person may be introverted or extroverted, passive or aggressive, optimistic or pessimistic. These personality traits add complexity to whatever roles, norms or values might be attributed to any specific cultural group. What does it mean for an individual who is born into a community that is typically seen as shy, quiet and reserved to have an outgoing, extroverted personality?

*Gender: Male or female*

Our ideas about gender are also impacted by society, as we develop understandings of the roles of women and men, our own gender identity, and the values and beliefs associated with gender. Ideas of gender are complex and interdependent upon our membership in other cultural groups; many groups have well defined gender roles, others may be less obvious. Gender roles are one area in which people change their identity over time. A child may be raised in a household that has very defined gender roles, but then leave home and experience a greater flexibility of roles and adopt those values. Sexual orientation adds





further complexity to our ideas about gender and identity. To be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered impact the ways we are treated in society, as well as the values and beliefs we hold.

*Economic Class: Middle-class; Poor; other*

Economic class distinctions play a significant role in our cultural identity development, even though some would say that the United States is not a class based society. The life experiences of individuals in poverty differ significantly from those in the middle class, and from individuals in the wealthy class. Perceptions about the privilege, power, self-determination, opportunity, and the ability of the individual to exert control over life choices are impacted greatly by the obvious and not so obvious opportunities afforded based on membership in a given class.

*Ability: Able-bodied or with disabilities*

In some cultures, divergent social or emotional characteristics may be seen as a deficit or disability. Similarly, in other cultures, the ability to use and manipulate language is highly valued. Individuals in these cultures may be devalued or disabled by their lack of linguistic skills. Thus, in essential ways, the interaction between individual abilities and capacities and cultural values results in socially constructed labels of “gifted” or “disabled.” The complexities of these phenomena play out in the kinds of disability labels that become part of government or community school policy in various societies. In the United States, we know that students who receive a particular label in one community or school district may not be labeled in another community or school district. This same phenomena can be viewed internationally. There are some individuals who have complex and compromised abilities that impact their physical, intellectual, linguistic and social/emotional functioning. These individuals are likely considered disabled in many contexts and cultures. Thus, individual and cultural features interact to create ability or disability.

*Religion: Christian; Muslim; Jewish; Buddhist; Hindu; Atheist; other*

A significant contributor that is often overlooked in our definitions of culture is religion or spirituality. The United States was founded on the idea that individual choice and expression of religious beliefs is an unalienable right [1]; these beliefs and practice contribute significantly to our cultural identity. Given that culture is a combination of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behavior patterns, and that for many, religion is the primary source of these, it seems that religion must play an important role in our individual conception of us as cultural beings.

Tatum, B.D. (1997). *Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* New York, NY: Basic Books.

Zion, S., & Kozleski, E. B. (2005). *Understanding culture.* Denver, CO: National Institute for Urban School Improvement.

[1] We must remember, however, that at the time the United States was founded, Native Americans and Black Slaves were not considered to be protected by these rights- women were in large part excluded from these protections also, along with men who did not own property.