

## Expression Of Identity.

Symbols are the basic element in the portrayal of our identities. Our identities are represented through a variety of different types of symbols for example the type of clothes we wear, the words we use or the car we drive are but a few of the many symbols used to portray our identity to others.

The definition of a symbol is something that is used for or regarded as representing something else. Esp. a material object representing something immaterial; emblem or sign. (1)

We take careful consideration choosing the symbols used to present our image and identity to others. Williamson (1986, pg. 13) suggests that we have a choice in our image selection process and that we realise when we make this choice that other people can interpret and understand our choice. Therefore, we construct our identities from choice, we make an active decision to include and exclude symbols in creating out identities, of which we may have many, and our identities are both active and flexible. Part of this selection process involves us imagining ourselves as others would see us. This process is called symbolisation, visualising the overall picture of ourselves and thinking in symbols. George Herbert Mead (1930, pg. 12) argued that we have the ability to imagine how others view us and we have the ability to carry these images in our memory. Imagining how others view us helps in our selection process i.e. I would not wear a tracksuit to an interview for fear that the interviewer interpreting that symbol as me being too lazy for not making an effort to go out and buy a suit. The initial reading of the symbol as 'lazy' may then also indicate to the interviewer that I would not be a suitable candidate for the job as 'lazy' and 'work' do not compliment each other.

Part of our identity is one that we have little or no choice over. Our names, religion, our social upbringing and place of origin all help create our personal identity. Meanings about this part of our identity are produced through symbols such as our accents and our lexical choice e.g. A heavy Scottish accent to some may symbolise a lack of education or intelligence whereas a 'Queens English' accent may symbolise a good upbringing and a sound education. Another part of our identity that we have little control over is our gender. Our identity is strongly influenced by feminine and masculine characteristics. This will inevitably play a part in the symbols chosen by each gender in the way they portray their identity for example a gay man may choose to wear feminine type shoes, tight t-shirts or a ring on his little finger so while still dressing like a man he is subtly symbolising his femininity.

According to Turner (2) (pg. 47), identity is shaped by self-categorisation, that is people assessing the different social categories and making a decision as to whether or not they fit into a category. If they feel they fit into a category then that category becomes part of their identity. A social category can also be defined as a group, and part of identifying with that group is to conform to standards. Symbols of this standard, for example in a middle class society, would be to have a new, expensive car in the driveway of a large detached house in an expensive, attractive area and having good use of the English language e.g. Correct grammar etc. George Herbert Mead's 'Self Concept'(3) is the ability to take oneself as an object. The self then arises with development and through social activity and social relationships. Identity is then defined according to the conformity of the social group through actively seeking out the socially acceptable symbols and being able to display them in an acceptable manner. This would be

described as self-presentation: being able to express oneself and behaving in a way designed to create a favourable impression, we then have to self-monitor: being aware of the way we present ourselves in social situations and adjusting our performance and/or symbols to create the desired impression.

Louis Althusser (1971, pg. 19) argued that people are interpellated into identity, interpellation being a process of recognition, by looking at yourself and thinking 'that's me!' Social class can be thought of as an interpellated position as the social class you are born into is quite often the one that remains throughout your life. This then becomes one of the many symbols that make up our identity. Althusser's work sought to link the individual and the social and to show how some social structures work to recruit people into identities.

In conclusion, we make an active decision to identify with a particular identity or group and some have more choice in this selection process than others. There are clearly social factors that shape our identity some of which we have little or no control over. Identity is portrayed by a variety of symbols which come from a variety of sources, where we live, our social status, the names we are born with and our choice of clothing. Material, social and physical constraints may prevent us from successfully presenting ourselves and choosing the symbols we would like, for example a low income would not allow us to symbolise the wealth of a middle class wage. Identity is a combination of how I symbolise myself and how others see me. It is ultimately symbols that help us decide which people are the same as us and which are not, which people we wish to socialise with and those, which we do not.