To provide you with a basis for understanding why it is important to consider how social groups are being represented in the mass media, in the remaining sections of this introductory chapter we will first introduce you to the concept of social identity and then present you with a preliminary picture of why the social group categories we explore in the book should be examined.

SOCIAL IDENTITY

Social identity is a concept that came to the forefront in the 1960s and early 1970s, primarily due to increased concerns regarding group conflict. With events such as the US–Vietnam war, civil and women's rights movements, and the Arab–Israeli conflicts, researchers began to make efforts to understand the roots of the conflicts and how identities might come into play in these group conflicts. Social psychologist Henri Tajfel was one of the more prominent scholars to delve into this question. He was interested in understanding the sources of group conflict and the role of social identity. In his influential work on social identity, Tajfel defines social identity as a self-concept that is based on group membership and the emotional attachments associated with that membership.[3] When an individual identifies him/herself as a group member, his/her beliefs, interests, and actions tend to become aligned with those of the group.

Social identity develops as a social process whereby people not only self-categorize themselves, but the people around them as well.[4] Humans have a natural drive to categorize or partition the world into units in order to cut down upon and simplify the amount of information they need to deal with and process. They create schemas or interrelated conceptual units of information that help them encode, remember, and react to incoming information. What often results is the emphasis of differences between the schemas and a de-emphasis of differences within them. In terms of the categorization of people, the same process occurs. Individuals have an inclination to accentuate the shared qualities that they have with members of their own group, while stressing the differences they have with people belonging to other groups. What results is a clear distinction between in-group members and out-group members.

As stated earlier, the number of groups to which an individual belongs and to which identification takes place can be widespread. An individual's social identity can be considered as being made up of multiple identities. Some of the core identities recognized by researchers include gender, age, racial/ethnic, sexual orientation, national, religious, and class, with many of these identities intersecting.[5] Given the understanding that identities are developed through a social process, one can see the potential role of mass communication in influencing the development of each of these identities. Through mass communication, individuals can be exposed to information related to their identities. The information can play a part in creating, reinforcing, modifying, negotiating or adding to identities.

RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY

When discussing the social inequities that exist within societies and between nations, one of the most often discussed underlying reasons for the inequities is race or ethnicity. In such discussions, the terms race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably even though in actuality they are distinct.

Race was originally understood as a classification of individual genetics. An assumption was made that if a person were of a particular geographic origin, he or she would have certain physiological characteristics. With a better awareness of the variance that exists across individuals, the categorization of individuals based on biology was recognized as unrealistic. Several scholars from the social scientific community and the humanities called for the entire abandonment of the term "race." Instead, many have called for the use of the term "ethnicity" instead.

Ethnicity encompasses one's own heredity, national origin, and culture (i.e., beliefs, norms, values associated with one's own heritage). The word combinations often found in terms of individual background (e.g., African American, Japanese American, Arab American) are reflective of this. They highlight an acknowledgement of not only the citizenship but also the deeper cultural background of the individual. In other words, the combined term assumes that Arab Americans share cultural norms found in Arab culture and in American homes. Clearly, ethnicity is a much more fluid concept than race.

Even with efforts to eradicate the term race and replace it permanently with the term ethnicity, usage of race persists. Which term is the proper term to use remains a point of controversy. As such, the term "race" is still used not only by the US government, but also by private and public institutions to identify individuals. The federal government assumes that individuals who are defined as a specific race may come from different ethnic backgrounds.[6] By the same token, those who come from a particular ethnic origin may be of any race. Because both race and ethnicity are used in existing literature, both of these terms will also be used in this book.

Race/ethnicity is an important and frequently sensitive part of our broader social identity. With globalization and the advancement of communication technology, more individuals have the opportunity to encounter individuals from other races or ethnic backgrounds either firsthand or through a mediated source such as the mass media. Thus, it is crucial to nurture a greater understanding and appreciation of the diversity of individuals that make up the world populace.

In terms of the United States, with the increase of immigrants from certain sectors of the world, the racial/ethnic landscape has been dramatically changing over the last few decades (see Table 1.1). According to the US Census Bureau, the populations of Asians and Hispanics are growing at faster rates than any other racial ethnic group.[7] In the 1970 Census, 9.6 million individuals reported being Hispanic. This figure grew to 35.3 million by the 2000 Census, and to 50.6 million by 2010[8] – 1 American in six is Latino. The US Census Bureau projects that by the year 2050,

Table 1.1: Population Size by Race and Ethnicity: 1980 and 2009 Comparison.

Race/Ethnicity	1980	2009
White	188,371,622	244,298,393
Black	26,495,025	39,641,060
American Indian and Alaska Native	1,420,400	3,151,284
Asian and Pacific Islander	3,500,439	14,592,307
Hispanic	14,608,673	48,419,324

Resident Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin Status, U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2011, December 15, 2010, accessed April 4, 2011, http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2011/tables/11s0006.pdf.

Source: *U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2011.*

132.8 million individuals living in the United States will be of Hispanic origin, representing one-third of the total US population.

The Asian population is projected to grow to 33.4 million by 2050, which would represent about a 213 percent increase from the year 2000. As a proportion of the US population, the Asian population is expected to grow to 8 percent from the 3.8 percent figure provided in the 2000 census.

The number of people who identify themselves as biracial or multiracial has also been rapidly on the rise. This growth is significant considering that for some time in the history of the United States the mixing of races, especially between Whites and non-Whites, was frowned upon, and children from biracial or multiracial backgrounds often had to endure ridicule. In fact, legislation prohibiting the marriage or even sex between individuals of different races (anti-miscegenation legislation) had been in place in the United States for hundreds of years until the US Supreme Court overturned it in 1967.[9] The 2000 US Census was the first to recognize multiracial individuals by providing people with the option of choosing multiple racial backgrounds.

With such fluctuations in the racial/ethnic makeup of the United States, it is important to understand how these groups have been historically and are currently represented in the mass media. After all, it is often through the mass media that understandings or misunderstandings are brought about regarding the different racial/ethnic communities.

GENDER IDENTITY

Many people tend to view gender as something you are born with. Gender, however, is distinct from biological sex. It is a social construction generated within a particular cultural context. From a very young age, individuals learn the roles and attributes that are associated with males and females.[10] If resistance surfaces against

these accepted roles or attributes, discomfort or even hostility toward the resistance may result. The opposition is looked upon as an affront to the societal or cultural beliefs that exist regarding gender.

Those individuals who represent the opposition might be ridiculed or ostracized as being different. In some cases, a new category might even be created to explain those people who do not quite fit into the established gender categories. For example, when men began to outwardly express interest in designer clothing, and skin and hair products, a new label was created to describe those who had broken away from the traditional conceptions of masculinity. Thanks to media attention, the label "metrosexuals" quickly caught on. Identifying British soccer star David Beckham as a metrosexual because of his penchant for fashion and cosmetics, writer Mark Simpson describes metrosexuals in the following manner:

> The typical metrosexual is a young man with money to spend, living in or within easy reach of a metropolis – because that's where all the best shops, clubs, gyms and hairdressers are. He might be officially gay, straight, or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference.[11]

In Simpson's description, it can clearly be seen how an attempt is made to create a new category of men who do not quite fit in with the societal notions of masculinity.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that just as societies and cultures evolve so too do our notions of masculinity and femininity. Though these notions have changed some over time in the United States, traditional views are still quite widely held. For instance, masculine qualities include being strong, ambitious, successful, aggressive, rational, and emotionally controlled. Feminine qualities include being nurturing, sensitive, thin, emotionally expressive, deferential, physically attractive, and concerned with people and relationships. Since gender is learned, not biologically coded, media messages, along with other societal sources, contribute to how individuals define themselves.

Gender scholar Julia T. Wood notes that just because social meanings of gender are taught does not mean individuals passively receive cultural meaning.[12] Choices are made whether to accept or reject messages and whether to reinforce gender norms or to step outside them. When people choose to step outside accepted social boundaries, they tend to provoke change in societal views. For example, years ago, many would have looked down upon women who played basketball on a team in the United States. Now, however, many girls and women are encouraged to be actively involved in the sport, and there are even professional basketball teams under the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA). Still, female sports are not universally or wholeheartedly accepted. Media coverage of the WNBA is relegated to cable, while NBA coverage is provided on the major broadcast networks. Even in the Olympics, men's basketball is given more airtime than women's basketball.

In one study on the 2000 Summer Olympics, only two minutes was given to the US women's team, whereas over two hours of coverage was provided to the men's team.[13] The idea the mass media are, perhaps inadvertently, conveying is that women's basketball is not worth the viewer's (and, as a result, advertiser's) time or money.

SEXUAL IDENTITY

For the longest time in the United States, heterosexuality was considered the only norm, and homosexuality was viewed as abnormal. Homosexuality was deemed a mental illness, even by the medical profession, and the common thought was that individuals could and should be "cured" of the illness. It is against this social backdrop that individuals formed their sexual identity. It goes without saying that for homosexuals it was a time of personal turmoil both externally, at the social level, and internally, at the personal level. The mainstream belief of who they should be was counter to their own sense of self.

Through the social and political efforts of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, understandings regarding sexual orientation have advanced. Although still fighting an uphill battle, the LGBT community has found greater acceptance at the social and political level. For example, due to years of activism, several states in the United States have recently passed legislation recognizing same-sex marriages.

Signs of advancement of understandings regarding sexual orientation have also been noted in the mass media. Whereas mention of homosexuality was taboo in the early days of mass media, a policy later succeeded by a stream of negative coverage, positive depictions and more well-rounded images can now be seen in much content.

AGE IDENTITY

People create schemas based on chronological age which then become a major part of our own social identity as well. We tend to adopt cultural notions regarding what type of language pattern or behavior is appropriate for certain age groups. Age-based schemas can influence whether a person's talents, contributions, and feelings are acknowledged. Psychologist Becca Levy notes that age schemas are internalized at a young age, often as young as 4 years old, long before they are relevant, and are constantly reinforced throughout a lifetime.[14] Further complicating these schemas, both of older as well as of younger people, are media representations. Actress Doris Roberts, who is in her 70s, testified before the Senate Special Committee on Aging in the fall of 2002 to drive home this point. At the hearing

she noted, "My peers and I are portrayed as dependent, helpless, unproductive, and demanding rather than deserving. In reality, the majority of seniors are self-sufficient, middle-class consumers with more assets than most young people, and the time and talent to offer society."[15]

Just like the other social identities discussed in this book, age complicates how an individual is perceived. Though no two people are alike, our learned schemas teach us to expect certain things about certain groups of people. For instance, if an individual was watching a man perform complicated stunts on a skateboard, that individual might think, "Wow, that's impressive!" If that individual then approached the man to get a closer look and saw that the man appeared to be in his 50s, the individual's impression of the skateboarder might dramatically change. The individual might encounter a bit of a disjuncture in thought processes. People tend not to expect a 50-year-old man to be doing stunts on a skateboard, simply because of the schemas that have been created for men in that age group. Another example is the reaction that actor Ashton Kutcher and actress Demi Moore received when they initially announced that they were dating. Because of the 15-year age difference, people were surprised by the pairing and even voiced expectation that the relationship would never last. The reverse was true. The two married and are now mainstays on Hollywood red carpets.

As baby boomers (i.e., those individuals born during the post-World War II years) age, attempts have been made to revise some of the standard cultural notions associated with old age. For example, the phrase, "40 is the new 30" or "50 is the new 40" can be heard. Such phrases really are attempts to change cultural ideas regarding age brackets. As with the other core identities, however, changes in cultural notions regarding age often entail a gradual process. The mass media can play a large role in bringing about or resisting the changes.

DISABILITY IDENTITY

Cartoonist John Callahan drew a cartoon showing three people: the first two are shown walking with question marks above their heads; the third person is shown in a wheel chair, also with a question mark above his head, but in the form of the symbol for disability. What Callahan, who became a quadriplegic at the age of 21 as a result of injuries received in a car accident, and who passed away in 2010 at the age of 59, was conveying through this cartoon is that individuals with disabilities are often defined by their disability. In other words, the disability becomes the only social identity for that individual.

Our cultural ideas about disability influence how we view and make judgments about people with disabilities. In certain cultures, disability is perceived as an embarrassment, something that should be hidden from public view. In other cultures, people with disabilities are considered as different, but not inferior to other individuals. Both cultural notions can be found in the United States.

CLASS IDENTITY

Every society is divided by certain social stratifications. One form of stratification is socioeconomic class. The socioeconomic class to which individuals belong often shapes how others view them and how they define themselves. People tend to associate certain communication styles, fashion, food, and recreational choices with each class.[16] For example, you might associate champagne and caviar with upper-class individuals, while linking beer and hot dogs to the lower class. Why are such associations made? They might be loosely based on reality, but many are social constructions often influenced by the mass media.

Studies suggest the mainstream mass media present images or perspectives of the upper class or middle class often but the lower class infrequently.[17] When the lower class is portrayed, the depictions are often negative in nature. For example, the poor often are shown as lazy or unmotivated and personally responsible for their own class position.[18] Such negative portrayals or outright omissions can be problematic. If the images are negative, it is difficult to evoke compassion or understanding from the consumers of those images. If images are absent, viewers might come away with the impression that an insignificant number of individuals actually are poor. The impact of this faulty impression could have a direct impact on social services or legislation designed to help those who are financially underprivileged. If individuals believe the population of low-income families in the United States is lower than it actually is or have negative attitudes toward the poor, then they might be less likely to support services or legislation designed to help that social group.

Reflection Questions and Thoughts to Consider

1. The social importance placed on certain identities has waxed and waned with the passage of time. Consider US mass media history. Do you believe certain identities (e.g., religious, sexual, gender) were given more notice within the mass media during specific time periods than in other periods?
2. Consider your own identities. Which identity or identities do you believe is most important to you? Why do you think that is the case?
3. How would you think or feel if you saw a little boy playing with a Barbie doll or heard about a young girl attempting to try out for her school's football team? Would you feel awkward or taken aback? Would the behavior come as no surprise? What do you believe are the root causes of your reaction?
4. Think of the area in which you were raised. Have you noticed a change in the racial/ethnic make-up of your area within the past 10 years? If notable changes have taken place, how has the local media addressed or taken advantage of these changes?

Notes

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