

Collective Identities: Trap or Tool for Empowerment?

by Andreas Speck

Collective identities—"we" as queers, or whatever group you like—are often perceived as empowering by providing a sense of belonging. At the same time, by the very existence of these collective identities produce new boundaries of "in" and "out" and new norms of behavior that limit people's freedom to be and to do. Thus, identity can be disempowering and even threaten people's lives, in the case of nationalist or homophobic attacks.

Perhaps it's obvious, but I consider none of the normally-discussed collective identities (ethnic, gender, or nation-based) as "natural." All of them are social constructions. That doesn't mean they don't exist or that they don't have an influence on our lives. But it means that we have an active role in shaping our collective identities, in stabilizing or deconstructing them.

As a gay man, I write primarily about that perspective. But I believe that similar processes are at work in the construction of other collective identities and these reflections are not limited to issues of gay identities.

Constructing "the Other"

It is probably no coincidence that Western European/Northern American, heterosexual, middle-class white men are generally unaware of their identity: they represent the "norm" against which everything is measured. Collective identities are often definitions of "the Other," different from the norm and therefore less valued. At the same time, these descriptions of "the Other" are necessary to define the "norm." One of these "norms" is heterosexuality. Thus, something that is a social construction is shown as normal—a practice that serves to maintain power and to secure control. This practice is not possible through definition of heterosexuality on its own, but through the construction of "the Other:" the non-heterosexual or homosexual. This demarcation—the exclusion from the norm—leads to the construction of identity and the description of a collective identity for homosexuals.

In this process there is no awareness that normality depends on "the Other" even though it is the dominant form in society—that is, definitions of heterosexual depend on definitions of homosexual. Rather, those who do not belong become aware, painfully, of their own collective identity through this very exclusion. The Other experiences a collective sense of not-belonging and being different. Coming Out as gay or lesbian then can be a first step in the process of empowerment and there is little doubt it is crucial for a one's personal development and self-confidence. At the same time, this homosexual (or gay/lesbian) identity would not be possible without a hetero normality.

Redefinition of identity: first step of empowerment

One necessary first step of the gay/lesbian emancipation movement was to redefine the negative collective identity that was imposed on the community as a positive. Gay Pride and Gay is Good were slogans that attached positive values to one's identity.

According to writer Susanne Kappeler, "The development of a political awareness of identity...is a first step in the politicization of the resistance of oppressed groups...."

Awareness of identity is a result and a means of liberatory politics, identity a (temporarily) term of struggle: a response to discrimination and the view of the norm. Identity in this sense means awareness of a common history of exploitation and oppression...." This means empowerment on both a group and personal level.

In the beginning, many of these movements had to struggle to overcome definitions inherited from the outside. Many people of color in the U.S. and elsewhere had a socially-inherited view of inferiority compared with white people. As part of the process of organizing for empowerment, they had to overcome and reshape that perception. Similarly, many gays and lesbians agreed with a negative view of themselves, leading to a policy of claiming to be the same as straights. The gay and lesbian movement that emerged after Stonewall was largely a Coming Out movement in which gays and lesbians empowered themselves by working on their own outing.

In the women's movement, women's groups filled a need to share the common experience of oppression with each other and to empower themselves as women. Then they served to develop political action. All of these movements experienced a shift from identity as a common experience of oppression toward a politics of identity. Newly found identities as Black or gay or lesbian or women became the basis for political action. As the gay movement consolidated, however, the frontal assault on the basic notion of boundaries between sexual identities rapidly lost popularity. Gay activists began to argue that gays were a sexual minority deserving of the same rights as other citizens. Instead of tearing down the system, the new goal emerged—rearrange the system and allow homosexuals to participate on a more equal basis. Thus, identity loses its character as a temporary term of struggle and becomes a means of constructing new norms for the group on which this identity was first imposed.

Dominant identities: invisible norms

Male identity, heterosexual identity or white identity exist as norms, but there is little awareness of them. It does not make sense to employ them as terms of struggle or products of liberation politics. To the contrary, through their norm-setting character they are means to shape and oppress and do not require an awareness of identity to achieve this end. Rüdiger Lautmann states that heterosexuality is not suitable for identity. It is only a category of exclusion—a category of the rest. Perhaps heterosexuality wants to be seen as the same as being human being and this immodest claim is the reason for its universal success. This white, male, heterosexual norm reflects the structure of power relations in society, a prerequisite and product of the power to define. Therefore, it is increasingly necessary to question this identity as a norm. Weakening this norm-setting identity involves snatching it from its status as "natural" to achieve its collapse. At the same time, it is not enough to deny these identities and to pretend they don't exist.

As a white man from Germany, I have a view of the norm. Without reflecting on it, I am likely to judge others according to this norm, to divide people into categories according to well they conform to the norm and perhaps even pressure into compliance the norm as an exercise of my power. These characteristics—male, heterosexual, and white are attributes of power-over, not of liberation. At the same time they limit the behavior of those to whom they apply, just as the norm robs the potential of others. Everyone becomes enslaved to the norm.

Anyone who has tried to break with masculinity understands the powerful pressure of the norm, even for non-heterosexuals. The pressure begins with banal issues like clothing—through these superficialities society's pressure to conform is most evident. Ever tried cross-dressing in public? Although empowerment for heterosexual men might sound strange in a patriarchal society, I see it as crucial to breaking the cycle of reproducing oppressive masculinities. In this process, it is important to acknowledge men's power-over (women, gays, people of color) as a step toward overcoming the desire for power-over and replacing it with power-with others.

Marginalised identities

The collective identities of marginalized and oppressed groups are also ambivalent. I believe that advocates of identity politics tend to overvalue the collective awareness of oppression in the attempt to reshape identity in a positive way. Although recognizing shared oppression is an important aspect of empowerment, the principle of exclusion is built into these collective identities. They are constructing norms and thereby limiting inclusion also. Judith Butler cautions that while we fight the violence of being made invisible, we do not produce new forms of violence in this context norms of identities. New regulative ideals are easily constructed, controlling which forms of gender and sexuality are legitimate and which are not, leading to new forms of marginalization. The effect is disempowerment, when I realize that I don't fit the norms of the collective that I identify with.

Susanne Kappeler makes the point:

"The content and reason of a political awareness of identity is not to celebrate a newly found identity, but to overcome the racist, sexist, heterosexist identity and the abolition of all criteria of discrimination and exploitation....Politics of identity, a politics of interests out of so called identities, means the de-politisation of the struggle for self-liberation of oppressed groups. With this politics of identity--women's politics instead of feminist politics, lesbian and gay politics instead of anti-heterosexism politics, female culture instead of criticism of patriarchy--with all this politics of identities and differences, which is emerging today, the political sense of building a collective awareness of identity of oppressed groups got lost. Identity was run-down to a psychological and cultural term, and lost its meaning for liberation politics."

Queering, the identity dilemma?

This is what queer politics is about. With the weakening of oppression resulting from personal and social empowerment—queering of identities is one option to avoid the trap of identity politics. At the same time, insisting on the awareness of identity as an oppressed group might still be an important political tactic. While it might be easier to identify as gay—at least in the cities of western countries—I still have to accept one of the collective identities, gay or straight. But aren't these just new norms? Does taking this identity mean that I accept the norm? Does it mean that I am complying voluntarily with the norm?

There are many practical difficulties in refusing to conform. One is that society's norms have a lot of power to shape reality. This power affects me too. Although I have my share of the advantages that patriarchy offers to men (despite the fact that I'm gay), society often imposes an identity on me—whether I like it or not. But, do I

have to take part in perpetuating the homo-hetero binary just to comply with the norms of the gay community? Where is the liberation in this?

For me, empowerment is the means overcoming of the need to comply with collective identities—to see being gay as one of many aspects of my individual identity, no more important than the others. The question is how to liberate ourselves from society's constructions of the norm? The danger is in simply denying the power of existing collective identities or to be unaware of how we participate in them. If we manage to refuse to take part in constructing and stabilizing these norms, then maybe possibilities for liberation will emerge.

Sources

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