

# Who Am I? You Tell Me

By Delaney Fauber

## *Third Place: Synthesis, Analysis or Research Writing*

“When I was just a little girl I asked my mother, ‘what will I be?’ ” (Livingston and Evans). While this may just be a song lyric to some, it does pose a relevant question. Is who we are and how we view ourselves determined through the perceptions of others? The girl asking her mother who she will be is just one example of how our identities are influenced by those in our lives. Our identities are directly affected by three major factors that impact our perception of self; those include, our interpersonal relationships, our environment, and society as a whole. How we choose to portray ourselves in order to appeal to others in our lives as we see fit is shown in Beverly Tatum’s “The Complexity of Identity” as she explains the relationship between self and others. The relationship between identity and perception is not only influenced by interpersonal relationships but our environment as well which is shown in Neil Gaiman’s “A Wilderness of Mirrors.” Lastly, self-perception and identity is influenced by society as a whole as it dictates norms and develops popular ideals held by a majority of the population which is shown most prominently in *The Danger of a Single Story*, a TED Talk by Chimamanda Adichie and in Tatum’s work as well.

While many may think that identity is based solely on how one chooses to view oneself, that is not the case. In “Complexity of Identity” Tatum states, “Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am” (1) This statement ties into the idea that individuals directly develop their sense of self from the perspective of those around them. Individuals observe how those around them such as peers and family respond to certain qualities

and then choose what to reflect in their personality based on how they want to be received by those they value the opinion of. In a “Wilderness of Mirrors,” Neil Gaiman reflects upon how his family photo album reassured him of who he was when he was in a period of questioning his identity. He said, “You put down the album and go back to your life reassured, given a frame and a place” (83). This could be interpreted as his family serving as a cornerstone of his identity as his family gives him a glimpse into who he is. He sees himself as a piece of the puzzle that is his family, which then serves as an anchor to him as it does with many individuals who may struggle with identity. When someone is struggling with defining who they are, they often look to those they hold dear. We often tend to surround ourselves with those like us, or we tend to befriend those whose qualities we wish to have.

It’s not only the perceptions of those in our close circle that impact how we view ourselves, though. In his work Gaiman also reflects on the exterior environment’s impact on individuals and how they view themselves outside of close knit groups. Gaiman states, “I would stare and stare puzzling over who I was and what the relationship was between who I thought I was and who I really was” (83). He found discomfort in looking at his reflection; however, he found comfort in celebrity portraits. It’s easier to look at an image and find meaning than it is to look at oneself and do the same. One aspect that heavily influences the world around us and therefore ourselves is media specifically in relation to its contribution to stereotypes and bias which then influences our perceptions through what is portrayed. For example, in *Danger of a Single Story*, the true dangerous nature is revealed to be how heavily a singular narrative can impact our perception. Whether it be within ourselves or how we view others, when there is only one common narrative, it can heavily influence and shape our perspectives both of self and other. For example, how would you view yourself and your identity if all that was ever said about it

painted that facet in a negative light? That's exactly the case Tatum mentions in "Complexity of Identity" when she proposes that most facets of identity center around and rely on a dominant and a subordinate group which is determined by popular ideology within society as a direct result of hegemony (2). The risk of single stories is essentially that they take one singular narrative and spread it. This focus on a single story leads to the idea being reinforced to the point that it becomes the common conception of a majority of the population regardless of the legitimacy or truthfulness of the story.

A common perception held by a majority of the population not only affects a group of people, but also individuals. Specifically, in "Complexity of Identity," Tatum discusses how individuals often overlook, or choose not to express, facets of their identity altogether due to the common ideals held by society. Tatum uses the term social context to describe this phenomenon of societal factors that impact how identity and perception of self develop and are expressed. Another sociologist, W.E.B. Dubois developed the idea of double consciousness, which essentially describes his experience as a black man as having two perceptions of himself, how he viewed himself in private, and how he viewed himself through the eyes of his oppressors. The idea of double consciousness can then tie into Tatum's theory of dominant and subordinate facets of identity. She argues that being a member of a subordinate group, or one deemed less worthy by society, negatively affects how individuals see themselves and their identity. Unlike the members of the subordinate group, members of dominant groups often overlook some facets of their identity because they are in a privileged enough position so as to not have their sense of self affected by something such as their race or gender. Another example is when in *Danger of a Single Story*, Adichie tells a personal story of how she was treated differently due to common misconceptions surrounding her being African. Although Adichie's examples do only portray a

negative perspective, in “Complexity of Identity,” the “gifted kid” dilemma is introduced. The “gifted kid” dilemma, while it has positive intentions and connotations, also leads to negative effects on individuals as so-called gifted kids can begin to struggle when being “gifted” or self-sufficient becomes a key aspect of how these kids view themselves. This may lead to them struggling later on in life as they have, like the other examples previously mentioned, been treated differently by society due to a facet of their identity (Tatum ). These examples can all combine to support the idea that society directly influences how individuals view themselves based on how they are perceived by society as a whole.

Therefore, a common theme between all of the above mentioned readings is that our perception of self is directly influenced by three main societal factors, interpersonal relationships, our environment as well as how we interact with it, and society as a whole. Our family and peers directly shape who we will become and which aspects of our identities we will choose to express. The environment an individual is in directly weighs on their concept and development of self. Lastly, society as a whole determines identity in general and how it is expressed by individuals.

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