Identity Politics

by Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur

Not limited to activity in the traditionally conceived political sphere, identity politics refers to activism, politics, theorizing, and other similar activities based on the shared experiences of members of a specific social group (often relying on shared experiences of oppression). Groups who engage in identity politics include not only those organized around sexual and gender identities, but also around such identities as race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and disability.

These groups engage in such activities as community organizing and consciousness-raising, as well as participating in political and social movements.

The most important and revolutionary element of identity politics is the demand that oppressed groups be recognized not *in spite of* their differences but specifically *because of* their differences. Identity politics was an important, and perhaps necessary, precursor to the current emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity in American society.

Proponents of identity politics argue that those who do not share the identity and the life experiences that it brings to members of an oppressed group cannot understand what it means to live life as a person with that identity. That is, people who do not share a particular group identity cannot understand the specific terms of oppression and thus cannot find adequate solutions to the problems that members of the group face.

Thus, advocates of identity politics believe in self-determination on the part of oppressed groups. They argue, for example, that glbtq people should determine the curriculum in queer studies departments, be responsible for developing social services programs aimed at queer communities, and be represented politically in all debates about laws and policies pertaining to queer people.

Identity politics assumes that the shared identity and experiences of glbtq people is a rational basis for political action, notwithstanding the different (and sometimes competing) interests of individual members of the queer communities. Basic to this assumption is the idea that glbtq people constitute a legitimate political constituency deserving of equal rights and representation.

Identity politics has been important in the development of inclusive queer movements, since it insists on the necessity of incorporating the perspectives of the diverse glbtq constituencies in order to serve the varied needs of a notably fragmented community.

Identity politics has sometimes been criticized as naïve, fragmenting, essentialist, and reductionist. Some critics question whether sexual identity itself is a stable element of an individual's personality and have questioned whether it makes sense to base a political movement on so nebulous a concept. Social critic bell hooks, for example, argues that identity is too narrow a basis for politics.

More practically, several political theorists have pointed out that glbtq people are anything but united, rent

as they are by multiple and often competing identities based on race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

Traditional liberals have sometimes opposed identity politics in the belief that paying attention to difference merely highlights its salience in interactions. They promote the idea that queer people are "just like everyone else" and should therefore base their politics on factors other than their sexual or gender identities. They seem to believe that ignoring difference will do away with discrimination.

Those engaged in identity politics, however, believe that discrimination can only be overcome by drawing attention to the oppressed difference.

Glbtq people have themselves often criticized identity politics, particularly on the grounds that individuals possess multifaceted identities and thus involvement in politics based on a single identity does not suffice.

For example, Asian American and African American gay men often struggle to mediate their split sense of identity, especially if they find that their Asian American or African American communities are homophobic and their gay communities racist.

Those with multiple oppressed identities have sometimes responded by forming new, more specific identity politics groups, as, for example, lesbians of color. This fragmentation counters the original point of identity politics, which is to encourage recognition of the vast numbers of people who share identities that are outside the mainstream.

However, these communities can also provide support and consciousness-raising to those who become involved in them. Moreover, they can also function to educate other communities, as when lesbians of color demand acceptance and equality within their racial communities, even as they assert their identities as lesbians.

Identity politics is a controversial concept, subject to a range of critiques. However, as long as glbtq people are stigmatized and discriminated against on the basis of their sexual and gender identities, identity politics are likely to be seen as an appropriate response.

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