

Identity

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Case

Nahira is 18 years old and is studying speech therapy. When she was ten years old, she came to Belgium with her parents and little sister. As the oldest child in her family, she is a real perfectionist. She is under pressure to make a decision: should she opt for Flemish society and reject that of her parents? Or should she break things off her with Belgian friends and choose her parents' culture? This question occupies her thoughts a lot, to the extent that she has anxiety attacks because of it and at times feels completely frozen. To her, it like a feeling of alienation. As if she doesn't belong anywhere and is dissolving into nothingness. Her greatest fear is not being able to choose.

General

Extremely diverse society

- Dealing with diversity is one of the greatest challenges of our modern society.
- The care sector faces the same question: how do we deal with the complex stratification of a multi-cultural reality?
- We are often faced with the question of whether life in itself is impossible for bi-cultural young people. Are they really caught between two worlds or does it just seem that way? And if so, what can support workers do to support them?

Context of 'difference'

- In a society which is becoming more and more diverse and complex, people go in search of individuality.
- The main focus in an individualistic society still falls far too frequently on external differences. Because everyone wants to be unique and special. However, do these external differences not get in the way when we try to find the deeper similarities between people? This is where the challenge lies when trying to establish a collective narrative.

Identity

- Our identity is intricately linked with context. Identity is construction kit; a collection of elements which our environment imposes on us. These elements may be very different, depending on where and when we grow up. .
- Identity is dynamic: over the course our lives, new elements are added and others disappear. Our identity gives us a key to belonging, which is why people sometimes adapt their identity.
- Of course, there is also a certain degree of continuity: identity does not change constantly. Identity is a process that is re-shaped at the crossroads of past and present experiences.
- A sense of belonging and identification are two important ingredients. I identify with a certain group, a certain context, a certain country, a certain topic, but this does not always mean that I am guaranteed a sense of belonging. This means that identity is also a social process.

- So, it is not only us who determine identity: "The concept of the self is not a psychological private reality: it shapes itself, but it is also shaped by the social context and the participation in the social environment." Identity is shaped using the social mirrors we find in our surroundings (information we get from others about ourselves)

Multiple identities

- No-one has just one single identity. Previous wisdom stated that your true self was buried deep within yourself and you had to dig deep to find it. But identity is more like a cake, with each piece saying something different about you as a person.
- Multiple dimensions determine your identity: gender, class, religion, ethnicity,... All of these factors have an influence on your life. Are you at a disadvantage or not? What choices do you make? How do you feel? How do you act? etc.
- Care is intrinsically related to position and context: every single support worker also belongs to a certain class, gender, ethnicity etc. These dimensions will also have an influence on the future support process. Support worker and client both have multiple identities, which come together to form the whole person. However, not all identities are equally as visible. As a result, it can be difficult to be aware of them.
- Often, the identity of clients from a different culture is often reduced to ethnic identity. This causes us to see the person's narrative from a very narrow perspective. There is a risk that we'll make diagnostic and method-related mistakes.

Partial identity

- In our society, some partial identities are overexposed, others underexposed.
 - Overexposed:
 - ethno-cultural origin
 - religious identity
 - Underexposed:
 - socio-economic identity (pre-education, financial situation, working situation,...)
 - politics and social identity
- Begin by seeing clients as individuals with different partial identities. Don't focus solely on their religious community or culture. Take all partial identities seriously, not only those which are most visible to you, or which are most different to your own identity.
- Clients from a different cultural background or who hold a different world view should be treated the same. The professional skills and tools you apply elsewhere will also certainly prove useful in such cases.
- Make a list of the three partial identities which have the strongest influence on the client's needs. For example:
 1. phase in life
 2. gender
 3. frame of reference in terms of their world view

Double consciousness

- Double consciousness implies that people live in a constant state of tension: the tension between the here and now, and the desire to be somewhere else (Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the late twentieth Century*, 1997, p. 255).
- Double consciousness implies the identification with two contexts: the dominant culture and the culture of origin, with its values and standards, its codes, which shape daily life.
- Since the process is irreversible, the tension is unbearable. The phenomenon intensifies if people feel isolated (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 1993, p. 10).
- Sometimes the gaze of the other upon ourselves can be crucial. The fact that it is impossible to break free of the gaze of the other, the surroundings, the society, can cause people to eventually adopt the same gaze and think of themselves in the same way.
- Migration has an effect on social capital. What happens if humans cannot exist with a double consciousness? You have to choose: you are one or the other, you belong to one or the other.
- The possibility of double consciousness also appears in literature. For instance, in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903): "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."
- But still, two souls, two thoughts and conflicting ideals can find their way, calling upon a deep-rooted will to survive in the process.

The self under construction

- We are constantly measuring ourselves against the other when shaping our identity, personality and self-awareness. But what if this other is a part of your individuality that you cannot simply push away.
- Du Bois proposes that double consciousness constantly forces us to construct a truer and better self. But during this process, we don't want to lose too much of the old self. It is the striving towards both identities, without being condemned by peers and without doors and opportunities being closed in your face.
- Having to choose between two cultures or frameworks has a negative impact on the emotional and cognitive development of young people: it forces them into a straight-jacket.
- Multiple identities provide an opportunity to forego making a choice.

We call it an and-and-choice: you can be (for instance) a Western citizen and a Muslim.

Blind to context and obscured efforts

- Being blind to context means that you don't see what you don't know. If you have little experience with bi-cultural youths, all the efforts involved are probably invisible to you. How does a young person try to make compromises in order to combine his or her partial identities? What does he/she have to sacrifice on a daily basis? The stress that is often experienced by young people is, for example, the pressure from the surrounding environment to make a choice.

- Obscured efforts means that we often miss the efforts made by these young people.

Active pluralism

It's impossible to know everything about all cultures and all world views. Active pluralism refers to a negotiation process between you and the other. The focus is on the negotiation, not the end result:

- Don't be afraid to ask about statements or arguments you don't understand.
- Formulate your questions in a respectful manner.
- Make it clear why you are asking the questions.
- Ensure that the focus is not on differences. Between the partial identities lies a vast array of aspects that you can pick up on.
- Try not to disguise the differences. You don't have to agree on absolutely everything.

Empathy and recognition

People want recognition for the way they are. They also want to feel a sense of belonging. The feeling that they are allowed to be here, despite the differences. Empathy is about perspective: you can see things from the perspective of the other.

- Give compliments wherever possible - it's a motivational technique.
- Set good examples of behaviour: we fulfil an exemplary role.
- Clients often identify themselves with their support worker.