

THOUGHT PROVOKING IDEAS OF THE GLOBAL ESSAY COMPETITION 2023

The Tyranny of Group identity and its Solution

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In his book "Group Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment" (2018), the renowned political economist Francis Fukuyama explores the significance of recognition and appreciation for group identities in modern politics. Despite the emphasis on universal dignity for individuals, as outlined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Fukuyama argues that a focus on exclusive group identities in politics is increasingly threatening democracy.

As a behavioral trait developed through evolution as a social animal, group identity associated with social evaluation and expectation can have its benefits, such as the sense of responsibility and duty that come with certain identities. This is evident in individuals who take on roles such as soldiers, medical professionals, and parents, who feel a sense of

obligation to their cause, patients, or children. Identity also plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and promoting societal progress, as it enables marginalized groups, such as racial minorities, to challenge longstanding discriminatory social standards.

The legacy

However, the overemphasis on static¹ social group identities with a mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive (MECE) structure can result in in-group discrimination and out-group demonization, since this major problematic legacy from previous generations often places pressure on individuals to conform to the expectations of their identity. The MECE structure of identities, which appeals to the human desire for purity (Haidt, 2012)

¹ "Static" in this essay means that an individual cannot change their identity easily.

and does not allow for gray or undefined areas, facilitates not only prejudice against certain subgroups within a group, but also ostracization against those who cannot be properly allocated to the defined identity subgroup and force them to pursue a lifestyle inconsistent with their nature and wishes.² In some cases, subgroup identities can form based on seemingly arbitrary characteristics, such as blood type in Japan, leading to discrimination against individuals perceived as having negative traits based on their blood type (Nuwer, 2011; Evans, 2012).

The drive to prioritize one's own group identity and to pursue megalomania, or the desire to show their superiority to others, can result in subpar decisions to boost their image, a lack of self-reflection, and an inability to empathize with and learn from other groups, hindering innovation.³ Low-performing entities within a group can hence deflect criticism by presenting it as an unjustified attack on the group's identity. A strong delineation of group identities increases the likelihood of recognizing other identity groups as enemies and expecting other groups to exaggerate its shortcomings. This results in attempts to conceal mistakes and even rejection of outside aid during disasters, even at the risk of harm to the group members (e.g. Yerushalmy, 2022). Excessive animosity can cause people to recognize an enemy of "the enemy" as an ally, even when this ally violates basic human rights, as seen

in the Chinese perspective that views the Taliban's actions in Afghanistan as a "liberation from US influence" and their portrayal of Afghan women raising concerns about their potential loss of rights as "traitors of the Afghan people and collaborators with the US" (Tanzeem, 2021; BBC, 2021). Enemy group identity can also be assigned to ideas to manipulate public perception of their acceptability, such as portraying climate change as a "Chinese hoax" to turn Americans against measures mitigating carbon emissions.

Fukuyama (2018) proposed to resolve the issues of identity by creating a more inclusive and robust identity to hold people within e.g. a country together, and work on the assimilation of immigrants. Not only does the approach fail to address the issue of out-group demonization, but it also fails to solve the root cause of even in-group discrimination, since even conventionally insignificant characteristics such as blood type can be used to divide a nation into different identities with very different social evaluations, let alone criteria such as income and race. The proposed inclusive identity might end up being sustained by the illusion of unity (with some members more equal than others), which can be perceived to be broken by any deviation from the norm, including criticizing own group or praising the "enemy".⁴⁵ Some subgroup identities might even be discriminated against in

² Such as women who prefer to work instead of adhering to social expectations of staying at home.

³ Even improving traditional craft by e.g. using a more sustainable material might be rejected in the names of preserving the tradition that is part of the identity.

⁴ "Criticizing" can mean mentioning a slightly negative occurrence or suspecting official reports. Even if the critics are obviously a victim of such a phenomenon, they would also be accused of e.g. "making the country look bad". Similarly, "praising" can mean mentioning a slightly positive occurrence.

⁵ This can also happen in a democratic society, as evidenced by the fact that it took almost 70 years to officially allow women to vote in the US (Livesay, 2022).

the name of safeguarding the proposed group identity.⁶

Solution and Conclusion

The rapid expansion of the internet has resulted in a plethora of information and the formation of numerous online identities, as demonstrated by online communities such as subreddits. Therefore, it is crucial to be discerning when evaluating online information and avoid letting identity influence judgment, or getting trapped in an echo chamber. An overemphasis on static and MECE group identity can result in distorted perceptions and a fragmented worldview, making it difficult to reach a consensus and effectively address pressing issues collaboratively, such as reducing carbon emissions. To address these identity-related issues, a solution comprised of three crucial components is proposed: responsible mass communication, effective online content moderation, and the promotion of critical thinking skills.

Mass communication

We should avoid presenting the content of mass communication in such a way that would reinforce stereotypes, unless it is necessary to understand the context. It means avoiding unnecessary mention of identity groups such as sex, race, and sexual orientation. Due to confirmation bias, including this information would almost certainly reinforce negative stereotypes associated with the traditionally negatively-viewed identity groups. For example, repeatedly highlighting the gender of a female driver in news reports about car accidents reinforces the stereotype that women are

poor drivers, even if statistics show that women are involved in fewer car accidents than men. One should note that the effect would persist even when the traditionally positively-viewed identity groups are also consistently mentioned due to confirmation bias.

To promote inclusivity and respect, it is also crucial to encourage public figures, particularly those in positions of power and influence, to refrain from making statements that reinforce harmful stereotypes. This includes discrimination against marginalized groups by using identities to attack opponents and blaming personal shortcomings on their own identity group. For instance, a former Japanese prime minister claimed the superiority of his blood type over his opponent's, and a Japanese minister blamed his bad temper on his blood type during his resignation speech (Evans, 2012). These statements not only amplify biased public perceptions of marginalized groups, but also perpetuate their negative behavior shaped by social conditioning and reinforce harmful stereotypes.

Online Content Moderation

This aspect is separated from the previous one since it is also relevant for online platforms that are not solely dedicated to mass communication, such as Reddit.

With the advancement of AI technology, it is feasible to identify online messages that aim to manipulate the audience by excessively emphasizing their identity. Similar to the way some online platforms currently detect and flag fake news, the AI

⁶ E.g. China's Education Ministry aims to make boys more masculine to be capable of defending the country, essentially implying that boys that are not masculine are inferior to masculine boys (which can lead to bullying) and that women are less useful in defending the country (Allen, 2021; May, 2021).

can be trained to recognize patterns in messages that suggest manipulation and flag them for further review by human fact-checkers. The inputs of verified users from diverse backgrounds can also be taken into consideration, as is done by Twitter, which also allows quicker response to the spread of manipulative messages (Clayton, 2021). The presence of this kind of content moderation alone can alert users to attempts at manipulation, and over time, the judgment process can become more transparent.

Identity-based manipulation often goes hand in hand with misinformation, as demonstrated by the current South Korean president's campaign, in which he, to appeal to young men, made abolishing the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family⁷ a central pledge, alleging that it was obsolete because structural sexism had been eliminated, which is untrue (Mackenzie, 2022; Bicker, 2022). To address this issue and others like it more effectively, it is advisable to integrate the systems used to identify identity-based manipulation and misinformation.

While AI technology is not currently able to recognize identity-based appeals or other forms of manipulation with certainty, ongoing research in sentiment analysis and natural language processing could contribute to the detection of these manipulations in the future. The process of online content moderation can also help drive this development and eventually allow users to receive information in a more objective manner.

Critical Thinking

For a functioning democracy, an informed and critical-thinking population is crucial. Education plays a vital role in fostering critical thinking skills. To address the challenges posed by identity-based issues, it is important for school education to focus on the following aspects of critical thinking:

- **Recognizing human individuality:** It helps individuals understand that the label of "identity" does not define a person and that undue significance should not be attached to group identities. By highlighting that there is no prescribed behavior that must be followed based on one's identity, this approach reduces the impact of social conditioning that may conflict with a person's unique traits and fosters personal growth and development. It also enables people to form their own opinions based on evidence and reasoning, instead of blindly following identity-based group biases or misinformation.

Recognizing human individuality also discourages making assumptions about others based on their identity and acknowledges that individuals within the same identity group can hold diverse opinions, beliefs, and experiences. This can reduce the tendency to dehumanize those with perceived "enemy identities" and view them as personal enemies, promoting communication and mutual understanding. It emphasizes the message that discrimination is not directed toward an identity group, but toward fellow human beings.

⁷ Note that the ministry spends only around 0.2% of the nation's annual budget, with the majority of it going to family-based services rather than promotion of gender equality (Bicker, 2022).

It also facilitates the recognition that the actions of one individual do not represent the entire group and should not be used to form blanket judgments or biases against the whole group.

- Recognizing the fluidity of identities: It challenges the static and MECE views of certain identities by highlighting the following aspects:
 1. Identities can exist on a spectrum, such as with gender and sexual orientation.
 2. Personal identities can change, as demonstrated by the example of someone becoming a victim of sexual assault.
 3. The factors that define an identity can change, as in the case of the Han Chinese who no longer practice the harmful custom of foot binding.
 4. Certain experiences can be shared across multiple identity groups, as men can also be victims of sexual assault.

This recognition of the fluidity and complexity of identities leads to greater empathy and understanding between individuals with different identities. This, in turn, fosters a more inclusive and equitable society, where diverse perspectives are valued and considered in the formation of decisions and policies. For example, acknowledging the reality of sexual assault as a universal issue that can affect anyone, regardless

of gender or other kinds of identity, would help reduce victim blaming and increase support and compassion for survivors. In South Korea, this shift in perspective could have prevented the election of a president who pledged to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, which provides support to victims of sexual assault. By acknowledging the dynamic nature of identities and valuing a diversity of perspectives, society can strive toward greater fairness.

- Accepting the inevitability of imperfection: This would allow people to realize that it is normal that an identity group is not perfect, making them more likely to acknowledge the flaws of their identity group. This promotes a proactive and constructive approach toward addressing the shortcomings and issues within one's identity group, rather than ignoring or denying them, which only leads to more severe consequences in the future. On the other hand, it is also important to understand that no identity group is so flawed that all ideas associated with it are without value. This fosters a more nuanced perspective that allows for positive change and growth.
- Recognizing the fallibility of authority: Recognizing the limitations of authority is crucial in promoting informed and independent thinking. People should be aware that even widely-respected figures can make mistakes or abuse their power. Their statements may be inaccurate or influenced by

personal biases, and therefore should not be accepted blindly. Additionally, authorities may manipulate people's identities to further their own agendas. For instance, some politicians have exploited racial tensions to gain support from certain identity groups, even though their policies would harm those same people (Fukuyama, 2018). It is important to critically evaluate the motivations and reasoning behind the claims made by authority figures, rather than simply accepting them based on their position of authority. People should understand that an authority figure's credibility is

questionable if they rely on appealing to identity for persuasion rather than reasoning. By being aware of these limitations, people can make more informed decisions based on evidence and reasoning, instead of being swayed by deceptive propaganda.

If most people could learn to look at some identities in the same way they look at group identity based on blood type, many conflicts would be resolved. This would contribute to a more robust and democratic society and global community.

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