

**America as a Philosophy, and the Implications for Development of American
Identity among Today's Youth**

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Abstract: American identity is a little understood aspect of youth development, and one that is important to youth civic development and engagement. This article introduces the problem of American identity as a multidisciplinary issue, provides a historical analysis of the philosophical foundation of the nation, and integrates the different disciplinary perspectives to gain insight into the conflicts that challenge the perpetuation and growth of American identity. The analysis in this article contextualizes American identity such that the complexity of the problems can be more fully understood by those who seek to conduct research on civic and national identity among American youth.

It is no surprise that we are faced with perplexing questions about how to educate our young people toward a positive national identity and citizenship. American identity, writ large, is in conflict. On one hand, American exceptionalism proclaims a uniquely noble nation founded on the elevated ideals of liberty and equality, and the American dream shines on as a beacon of unlimited opportunity for anyone who is willing to sacrifice and work hard. On the other hand, contemporary Americans bear the burden of being citizens of a “super power” and political model for the world. Global perceptions of American citizens, based on a history of imperialism and impressions of arrogance, cause Americans to wear Canadian flags on their luggage while traveling abroad, and persistent domestic racism and discrimination leave many Americans feeling shame about what happens in our own backyard. Americans are ambivalent about national identity. We take for granted the benefits—the freedoms, rights, and opportunities—that we have as American citizens, assuming them to be inseparable from who we are, but stand apart from the “ugly American” that is recognized in many parts of the world. We are collectively conflicted over this thing called American identity.

The conflict over American identity is a problem, particularly among young people. Young Americans repeatedly show in surveys and focus groups that they are prone to distance themselves from their role as American citizens (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter & Zukin, 2002); to be distrustful of the government, social institutions, and their fellow citizens (Jennings & Stoker, 2004; Levine, 2007); to not be proud of their American citizenship; and to be disinterested in politics (Delli Carpini, 2000; Levine, 2007). They are disconnected from their identity as American citizens, and as a result are

failing to develop positive civic identity. This is especially true in minority and urban youth populations (Atkins & Hart, 2003).

At the same time, research consistently shows that young people in America are politically and civically disengaged, with youth participation in civic life and the political process at its lowest point in decades (Delli Carpini, 2000; Levine, 2007). There is a reciprocal relationship between civic identity and civic participation, such that participation in civic activities fosters positive civic identity (Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997; Nasir & Kirshner, 2003), and development of national and civic identity has implications for civic engagement (Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997; Rubin, 2007). “Affiliation with the nation state implies that one’s country and the polity of which it consists becomes the social reference group for the development of attitudes, and one’s attitudes then function to guide one’s participation as a citizen in that country” (Bogard & Sherrod, 2008, p. 287). The state of American identity among youth is therefore a pressing concern, as it is critical to maintaining and promoting democracy in America. It is also an important area of social inequity, as faltering civic identity development among economically disadvantaged and racial minority groups perpetuates the cycle of underrepresentation of these groups in the American political process.

This article, along with those that follow, addresses this problem by asking the most fundamental questions about American identity. What does it mean in this day and age to be American? What is happening to American identity? Is it being lost? How we can foster deeper attachments to country among young people? These questions are basic, and profoundly important. If we are concerned about our young people’s ability to participate in shaping the world they live in; if we are concerned about the persistence

and expansion of democratic American ideals such as justice and equality; and if we are concerned about protecting for future generations the rights, freedoms, and opportunities that America represents, then we urgently need to address this problem of faltering American identity.

These questions cannot be answered by any one area of inquiry. Identity is a psychological phenomenon, but also a social one, and *American* identity has both a historical dimension and a philosophical one. This special issue of *Applied Developmental Science* looks at the problem of American identity from multiple disciplinary angles, to examine these fundamental questions from historical, philosophical, psychological, and social perspectives. Each perspective provides insight about the state of American identity, and also brings to the surface conflicts in American identity that have brought us to the civic crisis that we face today. Rather than basing an argument on one definition of identity, this article explores these different perspectives to gain insight on the challenges to developing a strong American identity in adolescents, and the conflicts inherent to that goal. While there are agreed upon ideas and values that form the foundation of American democracy and American identity, there are conflicts that prevent many, if not most, citizens from forming an attachment to those ideas and values. Furthermore, it is arguable as to whether a strong, unified American identity is a realistic or even desirable goal. This article starts from the position that we are currently far from the danger of developing a too strong, or too unified, national identity among American youth, and that we have reached a point in history when a deeper attachment to American ideals is needed if we hope for them to be sustained. Looking at American

identity through different disciplinary lenses, this article examines some of the challenges and conflicts that have brought us to this point.

Historical Identity

National identity is a form of social identity, and as such is found in the things that are shared among a group of individuals. In a presentation at the American Identity Renewed conference, Andrew Delbanco (2010) argued that there are two traditional pathways to a shared national identity that have been proposed throughout American history. The first is shared ancestry, which was argued by John Jay (1787) in Federalist Paper #2 as a reason for uniting the colonies under one federal government: “Providence has been pleased to give this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion.” The second path to shared national identity that Delbanco finds in American history is shared experience with major events, such as the Revolutionary war. Jay’s quote from Federalist Paper #2 above continues that the uniting of Americans was made complete when, “by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established general liberty.” Taking another angle, social scientist Os Guinness (2010) suggested that it is the shared love of liberty among Americans that makes for a shared American identity.

Further examination reveals that shared American identity cannot be accounted for through shared ancestry and experience. Historical analysis shows that shared ancestry and experience have never been pathways to shared national identity in America. Delbanco (2010) maintained that this shared ancestry is not true now in America, nor has it ever been true. “We are not all descended from the same ancestors.

Our parents and grandparents did not speak the same language.... We do not profess the same religion. These are assertions, but they are not descriptions of a factual situation.” As for shared experiences, they may provide an important national bond at the time, but the psychological experience of such events necessarily fades through the generations. As Lincoln (1838) noted, although there had been, “In the form of a husband, a father, a son or brother, a *living history*...a history bearing the indubitable testimonies of its own authenticity, in the limbs mangled, in the scars of wounds received,” in the years following the Revolution, he also remarked that just 60 years later, “those histories are gone.” By Lincoln’s time the Revolution was already failing to be a defining aspect of American identity. The same can be said of subsequent experiences that have been shared by generations of Americans, such as the Civil War and Viet Nam, that they were important bonding experiences, but those bonds cannot hold up against the destructive force of time (Delbanco, 2010).

Psychological and Social Identity

Looking at American identity from other disciplinary perspectives further confirms that neither shared ancestry nor shared experience serve as a source of shared identity for contemporary Americans. The articles in this volume by Margaret Beale Spencer and Kay Deaux portray the psychological and social dimensions of American identity, and in doing so they demonstrate that, just as shared ancestry and experience among Americans are not historical accuracies, they are also not typical in American society today.

The concept of identity most familiar to those who work in youth development is psychological identity. Identity in this sense refers to the self-concept of individuals, how

it develops and what aspects of internal self the individual perceives to have continuity (Erikson, 1968). Adolescence is a critical time in the trajectory of identity development, and also a turbulent one, in part because of biological development, but also resulting from interactions in the social world. Identity is not a static entity within the individual, but a dynamic and evolving understanding of self that takes shape and is reshaped through interaction with and participation in social institutions and activities (Rubin, 2007; Nasir & Saxe, 2003). Therefore, in adolescence, national identity goes through an important formative process and is strongly influenced by experiences and interactions in and with American society.

The notion that identity takes shape through interactions and experiences in society is key to addressing the question of American identity, what it is, how it is evolving, and how it can be fostered in young people. As Spencer discusses in greater depth in the following article, the experiences that young people are having in America are widely disparate. Experiences with American society vary depending on factors such as race, immigration status, ethnicity, and social class. These lived factors determine how a young person will make sense of civic institutions and the texts and documents that tell us who we are supposed to be as a nation. For example, youth from privileged and homogeneous communities reported that their experiences aligned with texts such as the Declaration of Independence and the Pledge of Allegiance, while urban youth of color felt that their experiences did not align with the ideas in these documents (Rubin, 2007). As Spencer argues below, these disparate experiences cause American identity to develop in different ways. This is a long way off from the vision of a unified American identity that can serve as a reference point for fostering civic attachment and engagement.

American identity is also a form of social identity, which provides another analytic lens for understanding what it is and how it develops. The social view of identity is concerned with how individuals associate with, express solidarity with, and participate with groups. Through association and participation, individuals come to name themselves as members of a group, and shape their role in society according to that association (Gleason, 1983). Social identity theory is also concerned with the social behavior of individuals that emerges as their identity takes shape through internalization of experiences in society (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Therefore, examining American identity through a social identity theory lens can be especially useful for illuminating the interaction between American identity and civic activity. Youniss (this issue) argues that civic participation is “having and practicing American identity,” suggesting that American identity is best fostered by increasing opportunities for young people to participate in civic society. As Deaux discusses below, social identity is particularly salient when talking about immigrants in America. Traditionally, immigrants took on American identity, not upon arrival, but some time after arriving in America, as they participated with ethnic associations in their communities, engaged in civic activity, and became contributing members of American society. Deaux argues that this is not such a straightforward course for contemporary immigrants to America, as they face the issues of difference that Spencer raises.

America as a Philosophy

So far this article has examined identity as the national attachment felt by individuals who consider themselves to be American. There is another definition that is equally important to addressing the status of American identity, and that is the historic

identity of America as a nation. It recalls the idea from Os Guinness cited above, that the identity of a nation is defined by the loved things held in common among citizens, and the thing that Americans love most is liberty. National identity in this sense is not about the identity of the citizens, but the identity of the nation itself, how it was formed and how it is evolving. America is not simply defined by its geography, but by the important ideas that it was founded on, and that make it a philosophy unto itself that other nations in the world look to for inspiration. Guinness (2010) refers to this as Americanism: “that constellation of first things; notions of equal opportunity, freedom of conscious, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, the rule of law, separation of church and state; many of those political first things that have been and still are absolutely crucial to the ongoing liberty of this country.” And Americanism, Guinness argues, is facing a deep crisis today.

The ideas at the heart of Americanism define America as a liberal state.

Liberalism is a political philosophy based on a fundamental belief in the importance of liberty, equality, democracy, and individual rights. As a foundation upon which to form a nation, it is a broad and powerful philosophy. However, as Delbanco (2010) described in his recent talk, liberalism makes a poor foundation for citizens seeking to build a national identity. “America is committed to the idea...that the purpose of the state is not to command or coerce or create people in its own image, but to give them space and freedom to work out their lives on their own.” This is a similar idea to the notion of negative liberty that Isaiah Berlin (1958/1969) proposed in his *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Negative liberty is the ability to live free from authoritative control and obstruction. Individuals in a liberal state are emphatically free to develop their own beliefs and values without imposition of ideas by the state. Rawls’ (1993) worked through a related

argument in the development of his own political theory, first claiming that a shared sense of justice united citizens of a liberal democracy, and later challenging this theory with the recognition that unity around one idea cannot happen in a liberal state. For Rawls this was not because the liberal state offered no ideological structure, but because it necessarily comprises a plurality of philosophies and ways of understanding ideas such as justice among its citizens. Furthermore, Kymlicka and Norman (1992) argued that even if citizens have shared beliefs about liberal democratic ideas, that does not mean that those beliefs are sufficient for claiming shared national identity.

The primary concern for adolescent identity formation is the notion that liberalism does not impose particular values on citizens, and therefore it also does not provide a belief system that can guide citizens in developing a meaningful life. This is especially problematic for adolescents because they are typically in a phase of searching for ideologies to attach to, and exploring their lives for meaning and purpose (Erikson, 1968; Fry, 1998; Damon, 2008). Delbanco continued his description of liberalism by adding that adolescents “have a strong desire to be shown the way, to be given the light, to be told why or how their lives have meaning. Our state doesn’t do that. This conception of liberalism doesn’t provide those answers.” Essentially, this means that there is no national-level belief system guiding our young people as they experience their most intensive phase of identity formation.

The idea that liberalism provides no ideological foundation upon which Americans can build national identity is contested. Since the beginning of the nation, the argument has been made that sustaining the founding ideals of liberty, equality, and democracy requires a populace endowed with virtue, and virtue itself must be developed

through education and proper upbringing. While this idea is often repeated, some argue that it is not clear what is being called for. Even those who agree with and uphold the need for virtue in American society suggest that “the meaning of virtue is imprecise and inconstant” (Berkowitz, 2000, p. 7). Others argue that liberalism is a guiding ideological structure because it demands virtue: “Free and equal citizenship is...about the type of people that we become, and the type of people that we want our children to become” (Callan, 1997, p. 2). It calls for Americans to develop particular qualities that Callan argues make up virtue, such as civil participation in discourse about what life is and should be, commitment to ensuring the common good, and a respect for others that looks beyond ethnic, racial, and religious distinctions.

A related argument is made by Guinness (2010), who describes the paradox of freedom: “The worst enemy of freedom is freedom, and freedom always undermines itself.... Freedom requires order, and therefore restraint, but the only appropriate restraint to freedom is self-restraint. Yet self-restraint is the thing that freedom undermines when it flourishes.” If we are to sustain the freedoms that are essential to American identity and to a functioning American society, it is imperative that citizens are fully living their freedom, while also exercising restraint upon their own freedom. This occurs only when people are acting with virtue as it was defined above by Callan. This is a paradox that plays out in how we prepare young people for citizenship, because any effort to force or instill virtue and civic responsibility, whether through public education, required civil service, or otherwise, goes against the principle of liberty that is at the heart of American identity (Levine, 2007).

The concern among historians and philosophers is that the type of virtue needed to sustain liberty in America is deteriorating. The evidence of diminishing political interest and civic engagement cited above is indicative of this decline. Furthermore, the incivility that overwhelms public discourse in America, evident in the culture wars that currently typify the political process, is believed to dramatically undermine the ongoing pursuit of liberty and threaten the demise of American civil society. This climate of incivility and civic apathy is the environment in which our young people are being inducted into Americanism, and it is having an impact on how they develop their civic identity. A recent study showed that 18-24 year olds are the age group least likely to say that it is possible to disagree respectfully in a political debate (Kovacs & Shea, 2010). Callan (1997) paints a hypothetical dystopian picture of liberal democracy collapsing because shared public morality has disappeared, and this imagined scenario is not far off from the actual situation that we are heading toward.

History provides at least one important solution to the inevitable demise of liberty in America. The framers of the American constitution foresaw the challenges to sustaining liberty and established a conceptual structure intended to address these challenges. The structure they envisioned was a triangle, which Guinness (2010) calls the “golden triangle of freedom,” made up of three points that depend on each other to uphold liberty. The first two have already been discussed, namely, virtue and liberty and the paradoxical relationship between them. The third point on this golden triangle is faith. The framers believed that if individuals were to possess the virtue required to sustain liberty, they would need to have some type of faith, because the faithful hold themselves responsible to an unseen force. This type of faith, in turn, would require freedom, because

faith enforced by the state cannot inspire virtue. So the framers believed that religious faith among the people would be necessary to sustain freedom.

Faith in the religious sense is a precarious solution to introduce for problems of civic identity in contemporary America. Religious freedom is arguably one of the most important freedoms for most Americans, and neither secularists nor the faithful want the government having any say in what they should believe. While faith as a religious concept is a controversial solution, the notion of faith in ideas might provide direction for how to foster American identity among youth. As we educate our young people about the ideas at the foundation of America and democracy, are we simply informing them about these ideas, or are we providing the inspiration and opportunity for reflection that will enable them to develop faith in these ideas as the vital source that makes our society possible?

American Identity: A Multidisciplinary Issue

The question of how young people take up the important ideas that are at the heart of American identity requires that we integrate a psychological perspective. Here we begin to see that the deepest problems of American identity lay in the intersection of several different areas of inquiry. Fostering and sustaining American identity in young people requires that we understand the important ideas upon which America is founded, and that we also understand how young people and new Americans are experiencing and responding to these ideas. Looking at American identity through different disciplinary perspectives, the conflicts involved in fostering and sustaining American identity become even more evident. One conflict that emerges is that many Americans cannot identify with what America means as a philosophical and historical entity. America has a national

identity based on the important ideals of liberty, equality, and opportunity set forth in the liberal framing of the nation, but these ideals have been an ongoing source of contradiction for American identity. Historically, Americans have lived different experiences with these ideas, and the long history of oppression and discrimination in American society means that those differences are deeply and bitterly ingrained. In contemporary America, young people of diverse backgrounds continue to have experiences in society that clash with these fundamental American ideals, so their identity takes shape within the context of a dissonant relationship to the identity of their nation (Spencer, this issue). Given such long-standing and enduring disparate experiences in society, can we instill faith in these ideas among the many young Americans who are having such conflicted experiences with them? And, can we have a collective “American identity” that is meaningful and that furthers the important ideals that are at the foundation of our nation?

Further conflict is seen in the intersection of the philosophical foundation of American identity and the social perspective on American identity. The notion of virtue that has been described as crucial to maintaining the beloved ideals of America rests on a vision of a collective society that is unified toward the betterment of the common good. This idea of unity is important to the identity of America as a nation, and aligns with a social perspective on identity, which suggests that collective activity through group association and participation is important to identity formation. However, running alongside this American narrative of E Pluribus Unum is the narrative of individualism that is intrinsic to the liberal state. While both of these perspectives on American identity date to the early days of the union, the dominance of one over the other at different times

has been indicative of the trajectory of America's identity as a nation. In a series of essays on the evolution of the American dream, Delbanco (1999) describes a shift of focus away from nationalism and pursuit of democratic ideals toward a focus on selfish pursuits and material gain. Somewhat recently, the shift to individualism over unity in America became evident in the response of our nation's leaders to events on September 11, 2001, when President Bush encouraged Americans to carry on with their lives as though nothing had happened. "The advice given by the President of the United States after 9/11 was 'go shopping!' There has not been a word about collective sacrifice in this country since then" (Delbanco, 2010). The shared experience of bleeding side by side on the battlefield is happening to some Americans, but very far away, and Americans at home are deliberately discouraged from uniting as a nation in pursuit of shared ideals.

Even more recent events have demonstrated that individualism is gaining strength as an identifying feature of America and Americans. As Deaux points out in her article below, government officials have recently used the national narrative of individualism to prevent immigrant groups from fostering the connections that traditionally lead to active and productive civic engagement and identification as Americans. The trend is increasingly toward individualism and away from unity and community. As will be discussed throughout this special issue, this trend, while reflecting important elements of American identity, is a detriment to both sustaining the ideals that identify America as a nation, and to fostering positive national identity in American citizens and those pursuing citizenship.

Social unity in America faces another challenge, and that is the great diversity among its populace. America has flourished as a pluralistic nation, and a tremendous

variety of groups and individuals identify themselves as American. However, looking beneath the external features that make our country appear diverse yet unified as Americans, the ideological aspects of identity—religious, cultural, and political—yield differences that have taken their toll on unity and civility in our society. Public discourse is marked by insolence and disregard, as people with different ideological stances battle it out in what is often referred to as the culture wars. Guinness (2008) argues that in order to sustain America’s identity as a nation of liberty and democracy, we need to revitalize the civil public square, that is, a public square in which people of all faiths, cultures, and political ideology can enter and engage in discourse about pressing issues in American society. Restoration of civility in public discourse is a noble and worthwhile goal, but the challenge for developmental research and practice lay in understanding how to enable in young people a more optimistic and constructive attitude toward civility and public discourse.

Conclusion

America is facing a crisis of civic apathy and disengagement, especially among younger generations. At its foundation, this crisis is about a loss of American identity. This paper has introduced the problem and argued that it is one that must be examined from multiple perspectives, specifically through the disciplinary lenses of history, philosophy, developmental psychology, and sociology. Starting with a historical analysis, this paper argues that the conflicts that give rise to problems with American identity begin with the philosophical foundation that America was built upon. These conflicts become more complex as the historical analysis is merged with analyses from other disciplines. From these analyses, a picture of the evolving challenges to sustained

American identity emerge. First, this analysis reveals that American identity is a problematic idea at multiple levels, especially at the levels of personal identity of American citizens and the identity of America as a nation. It further reveals that there is no easy path to sustaining American identity. Shared ancestry, background, and experience have throughout history been named as paths to shared national identity, but those paths are dead ends when it comes to American identity. Furthermore, the founding ideas of America, namely individualism and liberty, present a conundrum in sustaining the unity required to perpetuate American identity.

Ideas for renewing and revitalizing American identity have been proposed, including restoring people's faith in American ideals and bringing back the founders' notion of a civil public square. However, the question remains for adolescent research and education: what do we need to do to help young people set a developmental course that includes the civic attitudes, beliefs, and actions that can bring about this renewal of American identity? In the next two articles, the questions of American identity that have been introduced here will be pursued at greater depth from different disciplinary perspectives. They will serve as important groundwork for the articles that follow, which will broaden the base of disciplinary perspectives further and move toward conceptualizing solutions that can be applied in future research on the problem of decreasing civic attachment and engagement among young people. This multidisciplinary approach is needed as we set out on a search for innovative solutions to the crisis of civic identity in America.

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