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**identity politics/relational politics**

Human society abounds with exercises of interper- sonal power and identity politics. Power is

the ability to get what you want with or without the consent or cooperation of

others. Effects of deployed power are observable at the structural and institutional

levels of society, and in face-to- face interactions. A discussion of identity politics

(sometimes also called relational politics) may focus on either the class or group level or at the

level of personal interactions. The subject of interpersonal politics rests within a set of related

concepts, such as the distribution of social power, social location and status, and a stratified

system in which these interpersonal resources may be valued and utilized for purposes of individual

or group advantage over other individuals or groups.

Groups in a stratified system contend for advan-

tage among themselves. Each group seeks to utilize group-level resources in addition to

individual characteristics to secure a better or stronger pos- ition vis-a`-vis the members

of other groups. This may not be a result of actual conspiracy: often people acting in

their own perceived self-interest serve the desires of others in a similar social

position.

In the struggle for relative advantage, winning groups succeed in marketing the notion that

their group members are the legitimate holders of a higher social position than members of

other social groups. One example from recent American history was the successful claim by men that

group char- acteristics associated with maleness and masculinity were more valuable to society

and thereby more deserving of monetary compensation for paid labor than the group

attributes of females in equiva- lent positions.

While some identity politics plays out at the level of the political order and public discourse,

individ- uals also engage in identity politics in face-to-face encounters. Goffman (1959)

notes: ‘‘an individual may find himself [sic] making a claim or an assump- tion which he knows

the audience may well reject . . . when the unguarded request is refused to the

individual’s face, he suffers what is called humili- ation.’’ Later (1963) he calls the

resulting damage to identity a ‘‘stigma’’ that is then managed well or poorly by the

individual in succeeding interactions Blumer (1986).

Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method) describes how these pat- terned social interactions are real to their participants and result in mutual expectations for behavior in wider contexts. One set of themes in the academic literature regarding identity politics involves the

practices of identity claiming on the one hand, and altercasting on the other. In identity

claiming, an individual seeks to portray herself or himself as a certain kind of

person, which portrayal may or may not be met with agreement from others. Altercasting

occurs when another or others attempt to impute an identity to an individual, which the individual

may or may not embrace. These processes may also operate with groups.

A second theme in research and theory about identity politics is the ongoing debate

between essentialist models of identity and social cons- tructionism, also referred to as

antiessentialist posi- tions. Debating whether group level characteristics are innate (essential)

or socially constructed ob- scures a basic misunderstanding about the differ- ence

between diversity and inequality. Over time, identity politics has shifted somewhat from de-

mands for equality of opportunity toward demands for recognition of and structural access for

persons and groups of diverse views and practices.

A third theme that may be observed in the lit- erature on identity and relational politics is

the relationship between individual experience, per- sonal status, or social roles and

political stance. For example, one might examine the expectation that part of being gay is

being political, or that only members of oppressed minorities can legitimately ‘‘belong’’ in

their movements for equality, such as an African-American rights group that only accepts

European-American members in ‘‘auxil- iary’’ roles.

SEE ALSO: Essentialism and Constructionism; Goffman, Erving; Social Identity Theory; Status

SUGGESTED READINGS

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