

I am interested in how experiences shape our identity and individuality. I have contemplated the questions, “Who would I be without certain experiences? Would my life, identity, personality, and views be completely different today if I did not live my exact experiences?” I believe the answer to this last question is “yes.” To me, identity is made up of many traits, experiences, and memories.

These small collaged paintings best represent my research because they are a compilation of many things, just as I believe identity is. I mixed paints with precision to accurately represent the nostalgic memories I associate each color with. Layered on top of the canvas boards are photos of me and members of my family who have influenced me. I chose to cover the faces in the photos as a way to detach the viewer from what most people typically see as the most tactile form of identity, a face. Several of the canvas boards have amorphous photos of the sky to display how unclear the concept of identity can feel. Each canvas board represents an experience that, when put together, works to create one greater story.

This collage is meant to be a brief representation of memories I have from my childhood. I chose to leave the canvas boards detached from each other to represent how fragile and malleable our memories can be. To me, the collage is a reflection of the cheerful, yet chaotic, events and experiences that I believe have helped shape my identity and individuality.

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# What Makes Up Our Identity?

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There are many theories that explore what make up one's identity; philosophers and scientists alike seem to have their own theory. Beginning as far back as 17th and 18th-century philosophy, identity was a topic of debate. Philosophers such as David Hume and John Locke, discussed identity and the concept of an immaterial soul versus physiological characteristics of a person. David Hume believed "The identity that we ascribe to things is only a fictitious one, established by the mind, not a peculiar nature belonging to what we're talking about," which questions how we typically view identity as a tactile thing. Our identity is a very fragile and abstract concept; therefore, it can be viewed from many different perspectives. Often times people believe that we are constantly changing and evolving as individuals. While some might espouse the view that one's identity is based on nature (i.e. our genetic material), what we have experienced in the past can affect our thoughts, actions, and judgment. Though, some of how we identify ourselves is due to genetics and the way our brains develop, we are essentially a product of our environment; as we grow and experience new things our thoughts change.

Humans only learn from what is around us; studies have shown that if we were not surrounded by other humans we would have no idea how to walk, talk, and communicate. For example, reports of children being raised by animals and adopting the animal's mannerisms because it was the only way they were shown how to live. Growing up, humans rely on their parents and people around them to teach them everything. I remember always watching my parents and their interactions; however, I still had my own opinions that differed from theirs. Having collective experiences of what I was taught in school versus what I saw at home versus what I have learned from friends and relatives have all helped me to form my own opinions and perception of the world. What would I be without those experiences? Would my life, identity, personality, and views be completely different if I did not have all of the exact experiences I have today? I believe the answer to this last question is "yes." If the people in my life were not in my life, if I never switched schools, or I ended up moving to New York with my dad, I would not be the same person I am today. But I believe this theory within reason, for I am sure some parts of my identity would remain the same even if I did not experience certain events.

Do we already have a sense of identity and individuality without specific experiences?

Even identical twins who have the exact same genetics and live in the same environment have a strong sense of individuality. That is because we all live within our own internal world and have variations in brain development (Ben Thomas, Scientific American). So even though two people might experience the exact same thing, they internalize it very differently.

We all have variations in brain development, from before we are even born, that add up to create unique individuals. This raises the question of nature vs. nurture. According to Ben Thomas "DNA doesn't actually encode your individual traits; it encodes long lists of instructions for building various kinds of biological structures if - and only if - the right circumstances arise". DNA could be seen by many as a somewhat predictable possibility of how one might handle an experience. Environment controls more than DNA. He goes on to say "Researchers have suggested that factors like maternal stress and disease, early nutrition, and even position in the uterus may trigger individual epigenetic variations months before birth". Even if two humans are raised in the exact same environment, "small acts of individuality trigger differences in development which add up over time to create even greater differences in adulthood." Different experiences cause different brain development and, therefore, different personalities. The "link between exploratory behavior and adult neurogenesis shows that brain plasticity can be shaped by experience" (Science Daily). Variations in experiences leads to variations in new neurons in

the brain. Neurons are constantly changing and are affected by new memories, skills, and experiences. Neurogenesis is a term for the creation of new neurons, it was recently discovered that new neurons develop throughout a person's lifetime. There have been many scientific studies that attempt to find the link between genetics, brain development, and identity, but a common theme in results is hard to find.

When I reflect upon my relationship with my brother, I realize how different we are yet we get along. My brother and I have always been pretty close and seem to have an even better friendship as we get older. We have gone to all the same schools, experienced the same home life, and share similar opinions about the world despite him being two years younger. While our personalities are fairly different, we share a similar taste in music, clothes, movies, sense of humor, and even art. Though we share common interests, we have entirely different reasons for having those interests. It makes me question how much I, as the older sibling, have influenced my brother. We are very different people but have had a noticeable effect on each other. I have been told by many people that are close to me that I have an uncommonly strong sense of identity for someone my age. I do not feel I have ever consciously tried to develop what I feel makes up my identity but have only reflected on the people, experiences, passions, and morals I feel the most connected with. I believe my morals and interests have never really shifted despite the major shifts I have experienced in my environment throughout my childhood.

How does individuality develop?

In an experiment in 2013 called "Emergence of individuality in genetically identical mice," rats were given a drug that prevents the brain from forming proteins that make a memory. When the rats followed through with a certain action, they were electrically shocked. Next time, the rat would almost go through with the action but then stop, as if remembering the threat it posed last time despite taking the drug. In experiments where rats were bred to be genetically identical and put in the exact same environment, they still developed to be individuals. When put in the same environment some mice roamed around more than others, causing them to have different experiences, and therefore, their brain developed differently. "It wasn't the genetics, it wasn't the environment, instead, it was how the animals experienced the environment they were in" (Scientific American). The mice, as individuals, processed their environment differently which caused differences in brain development, so despite the mice being genetically identical they all developed differently. Same goes for people in the sense of no matter how similar of lives people live we are all vastly different in complex ways.

What makes an experience that shapes us?

An experience that has the most impact is typically one that we remember best and gives us a new perspective. Typically traumatic experiences from childhood resonate the most with people in their everyday lives and judgment; for the purpose of survival and avoiding threatening situations. According to psychologist Tamsen Firestone, "Being truly adult also involves recognizing your early childhood trauma and losses, taking steps to resolve them, and understanding how they helped shape your current behavior." The rate of change tends to slow down as we age, therefore the experiences we had when we young influence us the most. Young children are like a sponge, absorbing and learning from everything around them. As people age they tend to become more stuck in their morals and ideas; however, no matter what age, people are always a work in progress. That's why people often make decisions that their future selves regret because we underestimate how much our future selves are going to change. Everyone has

specific people in their lives that they feel has shaped them, knowing that comes with both positives and negatives. How we perceive people can change overtime and is what shapes us into adulthood.

When I think about my own childhood and crystallizing experiences, I can see a pattern emerge that involves specific people. The majority of the negative experiences in my life relate back to a few people, who have played a substantial role in my life in and in shaping my identity. Watching the adverse effects they have had on both myself and those around me has made me extremely conscious of how my words and actions affect others. Furthermore, seeing their actions and hearing their opinions have forced me to have a stronger sense of my own identity. Negative people and experiences are difficult to deal with but when reflecting I realize those experiences have taught me alot. I can say without any doubts I would not be the same person I am today without those experiences.

How does the memory of an experience affect us today?

The memory of an experience changes over time because each time you think of it, it is recreated in your mind. The more often that you think of it, the more inaccurate it becomes. In a study done by Duke University after 9/11, people were asked to describe what they experienced that day and one ordinary event. The participants in the study were asked to come back almost every week to describe the memory. Most people expected their memory of 9/11 to be much more vivid than their memory of an ordinary event, however the studied shows that both memories became inconsistent over time. Do we shape memories into what we want to remember? If so, how does this affect our identity? Research shows the less often you reflect on a memory the clearer both the memory and your judgment on that topic are. Memories or even memories of people that we continue to have positive associations with cause us to recreate those positive associations even with strangers or new experiences. People make judgments based on what they already know and have experienced in the past, without those experiences, they would go about their daily lives very differently. For example, I have always been taught how unfortunately as a woman, I have to be extra careful on my surroundings in public places. Ever since I started high school I have taken the train to school and back almost every day. My past experiences with strangers on the train have altered my judgment about people. I have seen many acts of kindness. For example, a man stalling the train door open for a person in a wheelchair, and have had many pleasant conversations with people visiting the city looking for directions. However, I have had an equal amount of bad interactions with strangers that have made me very cautious of strangers intentions when they start a conversation with me. Despite all positive instances, the negative ones stick out more in our brains as a way to avoid threatening situations.

What is the importance of individualism?

We are all individuals, some people decide to embrace that concept more than others. Our environment undoubtedly has an impact on our perspective of ourselves and our individuality. What we experience in our childhood sets a path, which creates the question of embracing your environment versus having opposing views. These kind of decisions can most likely be attested to our brain development and personal influences. From the moment we are born we are all unique and as we develop our individuality is emphasized even more. Our distinct experiences and perception shapes our perspective on both the world and ourselves. "The individual lives and acts within society but society is nothing, in spite of the combination of individuals for cooperative effort" (Ali Korban, Anayet Hossain, Relation Between Individual and Society). I

am sure everybody has at least one or two people who come to mind when they reflect upon what makes their individuality because what are we without meaningful human interactions? Many people share common experiences but what makes up our individuality is how we internalize those experiences in our own unique way. “Even if some action was done purely of our own volition, the underlying cause of it could be traced back to some influence of the social environment or upbringing that explained how we behave, act, and live” (Individuality in Community). Nothing a person does is completely individualistic because every decision that we make can be traced back to experiences that makeup our judgment and morals.

I have always felt a strong sense of individuality and a separation between my environment and how I identify myself. Growing up in Atlanta, some people have very conservative and religious views. Despite going to school in that environment I have never felt a connection to what I feel are closed minded views that many of my peers have on the world around them. The people closest to me have a very liberal and open mindset that I associate with my identity and perception of the world. I believe my way of thinking has caused me to attract the people I am friends with and the people I feel I am most influenced by. We all take in our environment and pick and choose the parts of it we want to be heavily incorporated into our lives. Over time our choices of what we decide to be influenced by make up our individuality whether it is consciously or subconsciously. Often people see their identity in their environment, hometown, family, friends, and even career; which makes me realize that identity is both an internal and external concept.

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