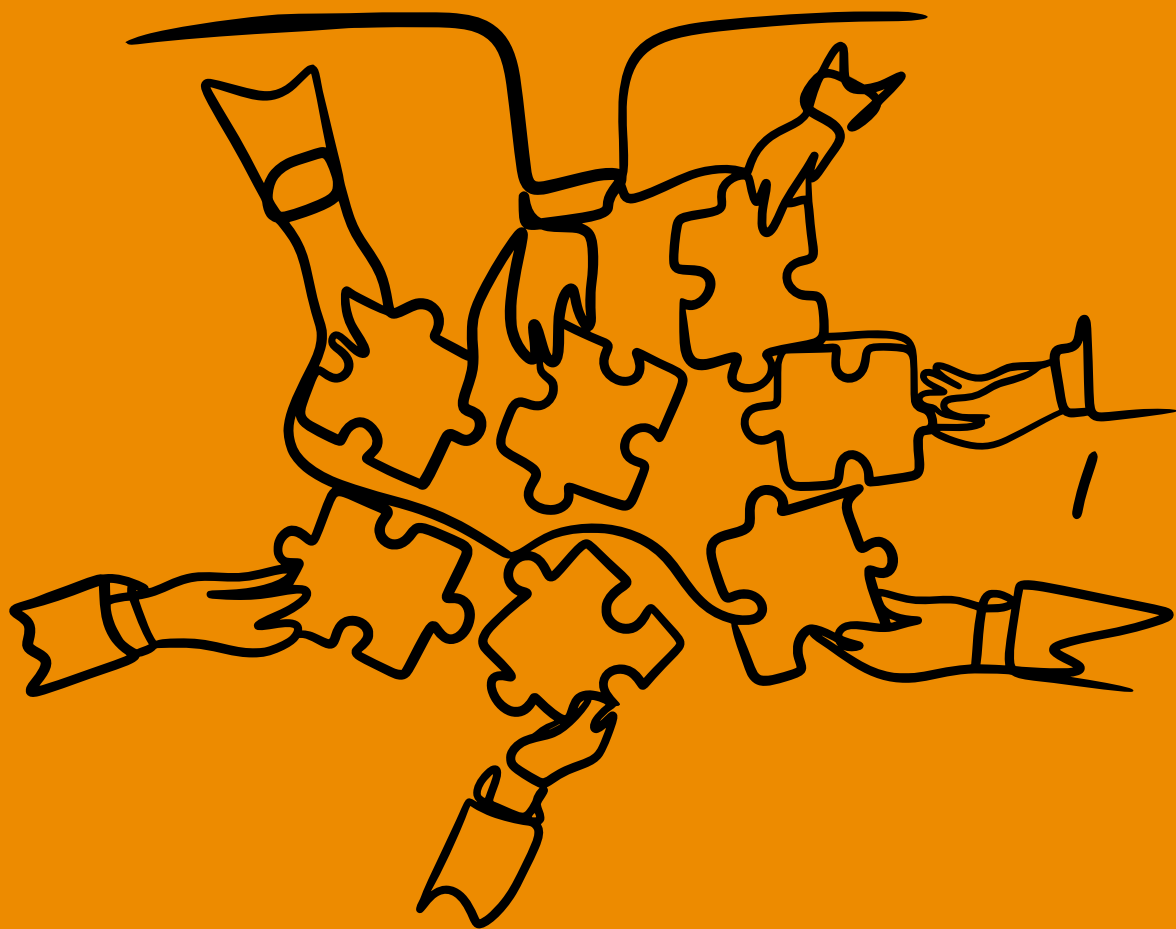# IDENTITY AND DIVERSITY

WHAT ARE SOCIAL IDENTITY & DIVERSITY?

Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their membership in various groups.[1] This includes both offline and online groups. Our **sense of belonging** to the social world, **security**, **self-esteem** and **pride** are very closely tied to belonging to certain groups.

We all tend to **categorise ourselves and other people into social groups** based on attributes like background, gender, race or nationality. Yet identity is much more **complex, diverse and elastic**.

By **diversity** we mean the **range of differences between individuals**, which may be related to our culture, educational level or opportunities, economic means, age, religion, gender, race, sexual orientation, values and attitudes, political views, whether we are differently-abled, whether we are long-standing residents or newcomers to the community, how we think and act, and much more.

Within each of us, these elements are woven into an intricate and singular web.

[1] Tajfel, H. and Turner, J.C. *The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior* in: Worchel, S. and Austin, W.G., eds., *Psychology of Intergroup Relation*. (Chicago: Hall Publishers, 1986), pg. 7-24.

WHAT MAKES UP MY IDENTITY?

INDIVIDUAL & PAIR REFLECTION

Here is a brief reflective exercise to help you consider the elements that make up your own identity.

Spend 10 minutes reflecting on the questions by yourself, then, if you have a partner to share with, spend 5 - 10 minutes in pairs, taking turns sharing ONE of the elements of your identity that might surprise the other person.

Think about how a neighbour might learn about you and change their image of you if they knew this about you.

QUESTIONS:

- Who am I? What makes up my identity?

- I am connected to my family. To whom else and what else do I feel a strong connection?

- Do I have a sense of belonging to more than one group, more than one place? If so, name the groups/places.

- How do I think others may identify me?

WHY IS SOCIAL IDENTITY IMPORTANT TO COMMUNITY BUILDING?

It is easier to be with people with whom we feel we share things (experiences, opinions)…or who just like the same music. It can lead us to **self-segregate** into networks of people who think and act like we do. This is called affinity bias (see the Power dynamics and bias thematic bloc).

When we close ourselves off in social bubbles, we have **less interaction with people who think and act differently** – and we make more **assumptions about what they believe or want**. We can fall into creating initiatives **for** the community - that are designed from our perspective and don't resonate with the wider community in all its diversity - instead of **with** the community (for more on this see the Letting community lead thematic bloc).
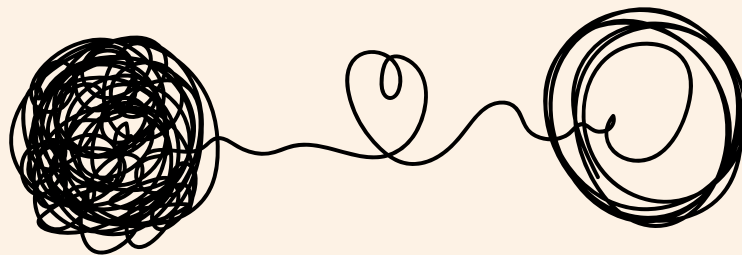
In contrast, when we engage reguarly with people who are different, we find out what we **share** with them, and what we can **learn** from them.

Thus, as community-builders, we should be aware of **how identities are formed** – in ourselves and others – and be **sensitive** to how we are seen and how we perceive others. For more on this, see the Power dynamics and bias thematic bloc. We can then work better with the dynamics in our community and in our community initiatives.

WHY IS DIVERSITY IMPORTANT IN COMMUNITY BUILDING?

When we involve people with many different ideas and points of view into community activities, we help ensure that the activity **responds to the wishes and needs of a broader range of community** members – and we make the activity **richer** by bringing in new and different ideas and assets.

Míša, a Czech CA participant, created a **network of active citizens** with different backgrounds and interests across her city to **share resources** like equipment for events, contacts and expertise. She invited everyone to join and found that many people had skills that could be helpful to others.

After members expressed a need for training in raising money, for example, one offered to lead a workshop and share her expertise as a professional fundraiser.

"I find it meaningful because each of us represents a different part of the city or different interest area, but we all want to change [it]."
-Tereza, member of the network

WHY IS DIVERSITY IMPORTANT IN COMMUNITY BUILDING?

Realising they have **different skills** to offer one another, members have also started to **work more collaboratively** to animate residents at neighbourhood and city levels.

Míša and fellow network members co-organised a festival in a city park to show the varied activities that citizens, groups and institutions lead. By showing residents how diverse the social fabric of their city is and how much various citizens' initiatives do, network members are changing how residents see and experience their city.

"I learned how enriching diversity in the community is. It is not good to have a g comprised just of well-educated, well-off people. Everyone can bring his or her v and experience to the activity. To not be afraid to open up the bubble to more p – Míša

You can learn more about the network in [Míša's case study](#) or [Míša's video](#).

WHY IS DIVERSITY IMPORTANT IN COMMUNITY BUILDING?

Abbas is a CA participant based in the city of Helsingborg in southern Sweden. He lives and works in Söder, a neighbourhood that is home to people with a diverse array of backgrounds and over 40 associations affiliated with different groups (ethnic, religious, and student groups, etc.). These groups organise many activities and events and connect people within particular social groups. He established and helps animate a small space in one of the Söder's central squares to catalyse **interaction between all residents of the community.**

Through CA, Abbas has focused on **strengthening the capacity of these associations** to pursue activities in the neighbourhood: *"There is a huge map of actors and associations that come from different cultures. We are trying to allow different voices to be heard. This was very much learned from the [CA] study visits where each group talked about what kind of diversity they aim to include."*

He and his colleagues led workshops on active citizenship, grant writing and community engagement for the associations. Encouraged, one of the associations, which works with people with disabilities, organised a virtual reality session in Söder where residents could get a feel for how people with disability experience everyday life. The workshop gave people a chance to **glimpse very different lived experiences** and approach others with **understanding** and **empathy**.

You can learn more about placemaking and capacity-building work in Söder in [Abbas' case study](#) or [Abbas' video.](#)

SOCIAL AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

Our **social identity** is derived from the groups we belong to. In other words, it is made of: [2]

- affiliations to our family, clan and/or ethnic group
- culture
- language
- lifestyle
- ethnicity, values and customs of our local community
- religion, region, social organisation
- educational level, practical skills, non-formal education, experience

Together, these attributes comprise our sense of self in relation to the world – our social identity.

Personal identity is the concept we develop about ourselves that evolves over the course of our lives. It can change over time and may include aspects of our lives that:

- we **have no control over**, such as where we grew up or the colour of our skin,

- **choices** we make in life, such as how we spend your time, which roles we take on, and what we believe.

[2] Source: Popovic, Tatiana, Presentation, CA Workshop Prague, September 2023.

SOCIAL GROUPS

A social group is any number of **people with similar norms, values, and expectations** who **interact** with one another on a regular basis.[3]

Belonging to social groups – and we can belong to many at once, or different ones over time – is tied to our **sense of belonging** to the social world. When we are part of a group or groups, we are part of something bigger than ourselves that can give us a sense of **meaning** or **purpose**.

It can be useful to distinguish between:

● **Primary groups** - personal relations are direct, face-to-face, relatively permanent, and intimate relations e.g. within your family, a group of close friends or ethnic group

● **Secondary groups** - all other person-to-person relations, especially associations, and work groups, where we are related to others through formal, often legalistic or contractual ties (city, state, political group, non-profit organisations)

The people who are within our social group(s) are our **in-group**, and the people or groups outside our group make up our **out-group**. We can also recognise groups that have more power than others in the community. For more on this see the [Power dynamics and bias thematic bloc](#).

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Identify the groups (primary & secondary) that are influential in your life. Do you think the people in these different groups would find they have similar norms, values, expectations or not? What does this mean for your own identity?

[3] Schaefer, R. T. *Sociology: A brief introduction*. 12th edition. (MCGRAW-HILL US HIGHER ED, 2010).

SOCIAL CATEGORISATION

According to Henri Tajfel and John Turner, who have written extensively about Social identity theory:[4]

We all tend to classify ourselves and other people into various social groups based on attributes that we see or hear (such as race, gender, nationality or religion).

*Categorising helps us **understand our social environment** and **identify our place** in that environment. In other words, we use social categories like black, white, Australian, Christian, Muslim, student, and bus driver because they are useful.*

*Categorisation helps individuals simplify the social environment but can also lead to **stereotyping**. It is our natural instinct to notice differences first, and only then similarities.*

*Categorising tells us things about other people and, likewise, we find out things about ourselves by considering what categories we belong to. We define appropriate behaviour by referencing the norms of groups we belong to, but you can only do this if you can tell who belongs to your group. **An individual can belong to many different groups, even groups with little in common amongst/between themselves**.*
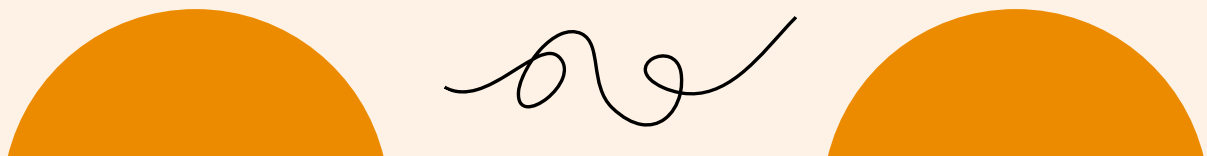
[4] Source: https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html. Retrieved 21 August, 2024. Bolding added by ebook authors.

IDENTITY AND DIVERSITY IN COMMUNITY BUILDING

As we have seen, identity is **complex** and **elastic**. It is defined by:

- a set of physical, psychological, and interpersonal **characteristics** that is **not wholly shared with any other person**, and

- a **range of affiliations to groups** and **social roles**.

To manage the complexity, we reduce others (and are ourselves reduced) to single/simpler identities (e.g. Christian/Muslim. old/young, alternative, Roma).

Confirmation bias and **availability bias** reinforce this simplification of the people and groups around us. For more on these and other types of bias and how they impact our views and behaviours, see the Power dynamics and bias thematic bloc.

This simplification highlights the differences between people, and permits us to easily **overlook, label** or **exclude** others, even without intending to.

In response, we should **pay careful attention to identifying the diversity in our community** as well as the things that are shared by community members.

There are nevertheless forms of diversity that we cannot easily see, but that still influence a person's views. **Active listening** approaches and **inclusive dialogue** are ways to begin unpacking the identities of community members, their views and what they might be prepared to offer to the community. For ideas on how to do this, see the Active listening, Inclusive dialogue and Facilitation thematic blocs.

WORKING WITH DIVERSITY - WHAT MORE CAN WE DO?

If people tend to categorise themselves and others into pre-defined groups, identify in-groups and out-groups, and compare groups between each other, **what does that mean for inclusive community building** and letting community lead?
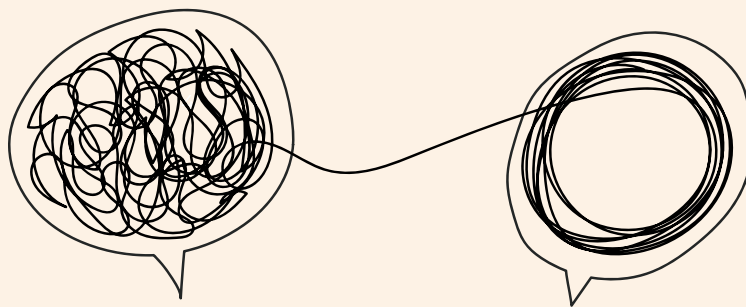
- First, it means we have to be very **careful when we define "the community**". Are we considering all kinds of identities, or do we have a bias for the groups we ourselves belong to?

- Second, it means we need to **make active choices to include a diversity of people and perspectives** into our work. It won't happen by itself, since whatever groups are more familiar to us will both be the first we think of and the ones we have the most access to. And the same goes for other community members!

- Third, it means we need to build a **preparedness to listen to and respect different perspectives**. This includes both active listening skills and a consciousness of bias and power relationships (see the Active listening and Power dynamics and bias thematic blocs).

Return to the Useful tools page.