

6 Writing in Context

Expository writing

Prompt: 'Our relationships with others help us to define who we are.'

Good afternoon. I am pleased to be joining you all for the annual 'APS College of Clinical Psychologists Conference' here at the Grand Hyatt in Melbourne. Today I have been asked to deliver this keynote speech on the impact that relationships have in helping to define who we are. What I would like to present to you today is a consideration of all the factors that contribute to our ever-changing identities. Oscar Wilde once said, 'Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation', implying that self-determination plays a limited role in who we are and that we are merely puppets playing a role in life that is determined by others. Yet on the other side of the argument we must also consider that it is the individual who chooses to be influenced by certain relationships. Importantly, too is the consideration of several other factors that contribute to identity formation and development, such as our environment and society.

There is certainly no denying the impact relationships have on identity formation. While we are each unique individuals, we are also highly interdependent and our interactions with others encourage a certain self-discovery. Henri Tajfel's work on social identity theory supports this notion. As we know his work explores the individual's desire to be part of groups in order to uncover identity and self-esteem. He outlines three aspects of the theory: categorisation, identification and comparison. We first categorise our social environment in order to understand it; then we adopt the identity of the group we have categorised as belonging to; finally we compare our groups to other groups. By classifying people into 'us' and 'them' and developing a bond with our chosen group, we are affirming our own identities. These identities are not developed in isolation, but through relationships the cognitive process of defining who we are occurs.

The type of relationships that we choose to pursue is a direct result of our inner compass. It is the individual's ethics that guide them in deciding to either respect or loathe others; to compliment or blame them; to want to be with them or distanced from them. Humans are inherently social beings who build relationships and, aside from family, the individual ultimately chooses who they want in their lives and who they want to influence their identity. Therefore there is some scope to argue that we have an inherent identity that is with us from the beginning, guiding us towards the types of relationships that will best compliment our beliefs and values.

There are many other factors that also contribute to the definition of self. In fact it is through various multi-layered experiences that we are consciously and unconsciously influenced. Our immediate environment is one factor that directly influences our traits; our immediate surroundings and physical setting contribute to the development of identity. Do you enjoy the city or the country? Do you identify as corporate power in an inner city scape or a green thumb in khaki tiding up your garden overlooking the ocean? Another element that requires a keynote speech of its own is the impact that social media has on identity formation. The messages received via the Internet, TV, film and advertising dramatically influence the messages received by the individual and help to mould one's character.

I was recently reading *Wild Cat Falling*, a novel by Mudrooroo about a 19-year-old Aboriginal protagonist who struggles with his identity and for acceptance in the world. This novel points toward the importance of family and culture in identity formation. The protagonist spends most of the novel drifting through life, from his mother's home to a boy's home, to prison. He resents society for rejecting him and creates animosity with most people. Those he does identify with are members of the 'Milk Bar' gang – a group banded together by their delinquency. As Henri Tajfel would say, he chose to 'categorise' himself as a social outcast. In the novel and in his search for identity he explores the 'other' when he associates with a university crowd, but quickly discovers that while they are his intellectual equals, his ethnic background makes him feel too different. Following an angry rebellion against society where he shoots a police officer, he meets up with an old Aboriginal trapper, who he discovers is actually his relative. His connection with this man and his cultural background allows the narrator to feel he has found some stability in his identity. Symbolically, his next interaction with a police officer showed some human connection with a 'hint of humanity' in his eyes, showing that the narrator has moved beyond simply feeling anger against the 'other'.

What this novel shows us is that identity is not stagnant. I cannot tell you the answer to the question 'how do we define our identity?' – there are far too many factors which impact on identity formation. What I

can tell you is that our relationships with others certainly contribute to the person we are, however while we continue to meet various people and form new and different relationships, our identity will continue to evolve. Oscar Wilde was right when he said that we are a product of other people, but since our relationships are always evolving, so too are our identities.

Thank you and enjoy the rest of the conference.

Persuasive writing

Prompt: 'Belonging to a group comes at a price to the individual.'

A blog post followed by readers' comments

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February 13 2015, 6.15pm, by Jenny Smith | Comments (3)

Today I visited Parliament House in Canberra and was awestruck by a momentous feeling of national pride that welled within me as I approached. Immaculate lawns, perfect symmetry and the Australian flag sitting high above the teeth of the nation. I am part of this institution. I am involved. I am Australian. Walking further around, I stumbled on the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and was slapped in the face when I realised: I am privileged. I am accepted. I am unhurt. It is no wonder I feel such a sense of patriotism, this government has never deeply wronged me. But it has wronged an entire generation of Aboriginal Australians.

Today, 13 February 2015, is an appropriate day to remind ourselves of the impact that the Australian Government had on all Indigenous Australians and to prompt ourselves that history can and does repeat itself if we do not show awareness and compassion. Seven years ago today, Kevin Rudd apologised to the stolen generation. Children were involuntarily removed from their families and forced to assimilate into white society with devastating consequences.

The Indigenous way of life is steeped in history and tradition. Daily life routines of finding food, building shelter, clothing, body decorations, storytelling and ceremonies help to build their cultural identity. Equally important are the complex social structures and kinship system which allow tribes to form and individuals each have a role to play in the group. Sure, these are different habits and beliefs to me but that doesn't make them any less valuable. Yet the Australian Government believed they were and took extreme measures to smother the beautiful way of life that existed for Aboriginal people.

I am now a parent, and tears well in my eyes and my stomach retches when I think about the possibility of my happy but innocent and vulnerable daughter being taken away from me. This is my reaction to the *thought* of such a crime, yet this actually happened to thousands of families. The closeness and love provided by the family unit was ripped away and defenceless children were sent to orphanages and foster homes where they often received brutal treatment. The possibility of these children growing up in their community with their family, traditions and history was shredded. Families lived in constant fear that their children would be taken away and often took drastic measures to avoid this. Look at Mudrooroo's protagonist in his 1965 novel *Wild Cat Falling* – his mother was so worried he would be removed that she denied her son an association with children he could relate to, disassociated with her full-blooded uncle, turned against her Noongar community, who would have accepted her, and took up with a white man in order to fit in to a community group that didn't really want her. The consequences this had on her son were tremendous: he grew up confused and without a sense of attachment to people or a culture. He turned to crime and ended up despising his mother and the society in which he lived.

It is for all of these reasons that Kevin Rudd apologised 'for the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind' and for the 'indignity and degradation thus inflicted'. The acknowledgement that the Australian Government caused such pain to an entire civilisation and the generations to follow was momentous. I am proud that my government was able to step up and take responsibility for the actions of the past. It will never make their actions right, but it does help to heal wounds and bring people together. The price of being an Indigenous Australian in this country is high. The repercussions of the decisions of our forbearers still impacts on whole indigenous communities all over the country. Rudd's apology to the group was poignant and necessary, but the government now needs to do more to improve the quality of life of those still suffering. This would make me even more proud of my country.

COMMENTS:

February 13 2015, 8.45pm

Faulkner wrote:

Well said. Indigenous Australians have suffered greatly at the hands of intolerant people. We need to be mindful that we do not allow our inherently insular and racist members of society to do the same to refugees. Many refugees flee their country because they are being persecuted for belonging to the 'wrong' group only to find that when they get here they are treated the same or worse. Children are imprisoned and individuals

not afforded fair treatment simply because they are from another country! It seems that if you belong to any group that needs our help, the price you pay is mistreatment.

February 13 2015, 10.53pm

Roodo wrote:

Your reference to *Wild Cat Falling* is interesting. The entire novel is focused on one fair-skinned Aborigine's struggle to find a place in the world. He doesn't know where he belongs and as a result fights against the society that put him in that situation in the first place. The novel opened my eyes to the impact that Australia's assimilation policies had on the Aboriginal community.

February 14 2015, 9.20am

Abbotforpm wrote:

John Howard was Prime Minister of this country for 11 years prior to Kevin Rudd and rightly refused to say sorry. He didn't apologise to the stolen generation because as he said 'one generation can accept responsibility for the acts of earlier generation'. By apologising Rudd has simply allowed Aboriginal Australians to play a wounded role, which leaves them in a position of weakness and isolation in Australia. What we should be focusing on is shifting Aborigines views of themselves away from victims of injustice towards members of a wider successful liberal, capitalist, modern society.

Imaginative writing

Prompt: 'Our sense of belonging is complicated by our cultural identity.'

A letter from the narrator to June following his return to prison and June's reply

Hi June,

Well I'm back in. Two weeks ago I would have told you hope and despair are nonsensical concepts. I was a native outcast with a failed life and no future. I just got out of jail and hated everything and everyone, including you, at first. You were so precious and privileged with your highbrow education and friends – never had to fight for anything in your life. You spoke to me as if you knew me and as if I had a chance in this world, if only I changed my ways. I was angry, you didn't understand that it wasn't up to me; the law was designed to put us natives in prison. It's a society that doesn't want us to succeed.

You see there were so many reasons for my views. People are labelled because of so many different factors: nationality, religion, social class or age. Sometimes they just don't fit in. Take me: I am a half-caste mongrel, grew up in a poor social environment, not knowing if I was black or white or somewhere in-between. I didn't belong... anywhere, except maybe with the Milk Bar gang, but they didn't really get me; I was just putting on an act. Wearing black jeans and speaking like a bodgie was easy, they were so stupid, but they accepted me. Misfits, delinquents and anti-socials... outside of jail, it's the only place I was one of the mob.

People talk of cultural identities but I don't have one. My mother wanted to be white and did everything in her power to make sure I grew up white. She took up with an old white man, Mr Willy, who housed her, for a price. She sent me to a white school but the other kids would taunt me. She wouldn't allow me to play with the Noongar kids, even though they were the same colour as me. It's no wonder I turned to petty crime and ended up in a boy's home.

Then I met this old thoroughbred trapper. I had just pulled a job, shot a cop and was on the run and he stepped out in front of me like a ghost. He took me in, fed me and let me sleep in his hut. Turns out he is my mother's uncle and used to hang around when I was growing up. It sounds crazy but for the first time I felt like he knew me, really knew me, and he looked at me without judgement. He told me about a song my grandmother used to sing to me. Basically, a lot made sense with him. When I left, for the first time I remembered being a boy in the bush and being free to roam through the tall eucalypts. I was different then, happy and free. The bush knew me, and my indifference melted away. I guess once I connected with my traditions and understood that I was no longer falling, everything stopped being so complicated.

Anyway, I'll take a risk and send this letter. Maybe you'll reply, maybe you won't. It doesn't matter either way, I just wanted to tell someone.

June's reply:

So you're back in. How is it? Still cracking rocks and skiting about your jobs?

Seriously, thanks for your letter. When you disappeared after the party I was a little worried. I thought we might have offended you. I was talking with Kate after the party (remember the girl you were chatting with at the end?) and she said you seemed terribly lonely, saying something about 'not belonging in this world'. We are all looking for a place to belong. I'll admit some find it easier than others and many have greater challenges in their search, but ultimately you have to want to be a part of something bigger in order to find out who you really are.

I'm no psychology expert (yet) but it sounds to me like you made a bit of a cultural connection with your Aboriginal heritage and that has helped you to figure out a little more about who you are.

You and I are from very different backgrounds but we have both had to figure out who we are and where we fit. I know my cultural background has made it easier for me to find this place – you are right, my family is privileged, I am getting a university education and have never had to worry about buying the latest clothes or what is for dinner. Despite this, I still struggle with my cultural identity and so do my friends – you heard them – such artificiality and ignorance about some things! They think they should be behaving in certain ways because they belong to a particular social class, but they are just trying too hard.

Mary Pipher is American clinical psychologist we have been studying at uni. She said, 'I think history is inexorably linked to identity. If you don't know your history, if you don't know your family, who are you?' There is no denying you and I have vastly different backgrounds, but it is exactly that which defines us. Our history and culture is such an important, integral component of our make up and it sounds to me like that old trapper helped you to find yours.

June