The Anatomy of Identity

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Abstract

This chapter develops a conceptual toolkit for understanding how identity shapes economic behavior and social life. Building on Akerlof and Kranton (2000), it examines three aspects of identity, beginning with the pursuit of respect. We first examine how this motivation shapes what people value, the groups with which they identify, and the social equilibria that emerge. We then explore identity prescriptions—expectations about how members of a group ought to behave—and how they arise and persist. Finally, we turn to two motivations that shape how people treat others: anger, which can drive punishment and conflict, and caring, which can be strengthened by identification or weakened by dehumanization. These mechanisms shed light on why studious students may face ridicule, why gender roles persist, why workers sometimes retaliate against managerial discipline, and why feeling looked down upon can fuel populist movements. They also help explain the extraordinary care soldiers show for comrades in battle, as well as the cruelty of schoolyard bullying.

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1 Introduction

Identity shapes what it means to succeed—and what it costs to fail. A factory worker who loses his job may lose not only income but also the respect associated with being a provider. A Black student may find that his academic accomplishment is viewed differently from that of a White classmate. A woman who asserts herself may be criticized for behavior admired in a man. Identity matters not only for the opportunities people face, but also for what they expect of themselves and others, how they judge behavior, and the respect they give and receive.

In *Economics and Identity*, Akerlof and Kranton (2000) argued that identity belongs in economic analysis. A person's utility depends not only on conventional economic payoffs, but also on the identities they hold and the expectations attached to those identities. The idea can be represented schematically as

$$U_i = \underbrace{u_i^{\text{econ}}}_{\text{economic utility}} + \underbrace{I_i(c_i)}_{\text{identity utility/respect}} - \underbrace{\ell_i}_{\text{loss from violating prescriptions}}$$

Here c_i represents the identity group (or groups) to which a person belongs. *Prescriptions* are expectations about how members of a particular identity group ought to behave—how men, for example, are expected to act. The term ℓ_i is the loss from departing from those expectations.

We consider three aspects of identity, beginning with *respect*. In the account developed here, identity utility is understood as the satisfaction of respecting oneself and feeling respected by others.[1] Norms determine which actions, achievements, and traits deserve that respect. We examine how the pursuit of self-respect and peer respect can shape those norms, social relationships, and the groups with which people identify. These forces may generate multiple social equilibria, in which norms and behavior reinforce one another.

[1] In earlier work, I used the term *esteem* (Akerlof, 2017), as have other authors (e.g., Bénabou and Tirole, 2006b). I regard the terms as essentially synonymous, but prefer *respect* here because it better conveys both what people seek and what it feels like to be looked down upon.

We then turn to prescriptions. We examine how people classify one another, how expectations about what members of a category typically do become judgments about what they *should* do, and how prescriptions and behavior reinforce one another.

Finally, we consider two motivations that shape how people treat others. *Anger* can motivate punishment for violations of identity prescriptions and other rules, and it can also fuel conflict. *Caring* may be directed especially toward those with whom people identify and withheld from outsiders. Together, these motivations help explain how identity shapes not only what people choose, but also how they treat one another.

2 Respect

The desire for respect is a powerful motive. People may even put their livelihoods at risk to secure it. In 1968, Black sanitation workers in Memphis went on strike after two of their coworkers were crushed to death by a malfunctioning garbage truck. They demanded safer working conditions, better wages, and recognition of their union. But the signs they carried expressed something more fundamental: "I AM A MAN." The workers were demanding to be treated as men whose labor and lives deserved respect. For more than two months, they endured the loss of wages and police repression rather than abandon their demands. Their struggle was not only about material conditions. It was also about dignity and the respect they believed they deserved (Honey, 2007).

An experiment in India offers particularly striking evidence of how much people may be willing to sacrifice to preserve their self-respect. In rural Odisha, Oh (2023) offered laborers a bonus worth ten times their daily wage to spend ten minutes on a task associated with another caste. Forty-three percent refused. The tasks were ordinary—washing clothes, mending leather shoes, or sweeping a latrine floor—but their caste associations made them costly to perform. The refusals persisted even when the workers' decisions were private. The concern was not simply what others might think of them, but also how

they regarded themselves.[2]

Respect is not only an incentive. It matters for welfare in its own right. Someone who loses his job may lose not just income but the pride of having a trade or supporting a family. Sen (1983) emphasized the ability to appear in public without shame; Rawls (1971) placed self-respect among the most important primary goods. An account of welfare that considers only income and consumption will miss these gains and losses. Respect belongs in welfare analysis, not just in explanations of behavior.

2.1 The Sources of Respect

What deserves respect, and how much? People disagree.

At Belten High, a suburban Detroit school studied by Eckert (1989), students were divided into two groups with different ideas about what was admirable. The Jocks took college-preparatory classes, played on school teams, and held student offices. The Burnouts looked instead toward the working-class community beyond the school gates and prized resistance to school authority. Good grades could earn a Jock respect and cost a Burnout standing. The two groups largely kept apart. The Burnouts smoked in the courtyard; the Jocks avoided it, even though it offered a shortcut between the school's wings.

We will call the standards behind such judgments *norms*. Social scientists use the word in different ways: for what people customarily do, for rules they are expected to follow, and for judgments about what is admirable or contemptible. We use it in this last sense. A norm need not imply an obligation. One can admire generosity without believing that everyone has a duty to be generous. But when a norm regards failing to do something as sufficiently bad, that action becomes, in effect, an obligation.[3]

Two distinctions will organize our discussion. The first is between *self-respect* and

[2]Recognition can also encourage effort. In a field experiment, Kosfeld and Neckermann (2011) found that offering workers the prospect of a purely symbolic award—a congratulatory card for top performance—increased productivity by about 12 percent, despite offering no additional pay.

[3]Such judgments can also be studied experimentally. Krupka and Weber (2013) elicit what people regard as socially appropriate in different versions of the dictator game, showing that these judgments help explain why giving varies across contexts.

peer respect. A student may take pride in studying even when his friends mock him for it. His own standards encourage effort; theirs discourage it. Whose respect is at stake also matters: people often care especially about the judgments of those with whom they interact.

The second distinction concerns *what* is respected. A person may be admired for what he *does or achieves*, or for the traits he is believed to possess—his *type*. Working hard is an action; earning a high mark is an achievement, shaped by effort, ability, and circumstances; intelligence is a trait. We group actions and achievements together in what follows, while distinguishing both from type.

These distinctions yield four sources of respect:

	Self-respect	**Peer respect**
Actions and achievements	My view of what I do or achieve	Others' view of what I do or achieve
Type	My view of who I am	Others' view of who I am

2.2 Respect for Actions and Achievements

2.2.1 Value Formation

The Jocks and Burnouts at Belten High attended the same school but admired different achievements. Why did they come to hold different norms?[4]

Part of the answer may lie in what students are good at. A student who finds academic success relatively easy has reason to admire it: good grades provide a ready source of self-respect. But friends' judgments matter too. Even a student who struggles academically may study hard to win their respect.

Akerlof (2017)—hereafter *Value Formation*—develops a model in which the pursuit of respect helps determine norms, effort, and social relationships. Consider two students

[4]Akerlof and Kranton (2002) emphasize how school identities—whether, in particular, they value academics—can shape students' academic effort.

who can devote effort to academics or music. Music represents another possible source of standing—for example, playing in a band. Each student chooses his effort at the two activities, which achievements to value, and whether to interact with the other. Achievement depends on both effort and ability:

$$a_{is} = \alpha_{is} e_{is}, \qquad s \in \{A, M\}, \tag{1}$$

where A denotes academics, M denotes music, and α_{is} is student i's ability at activity s.

A student's values determine which achievements he respects, in himself and in others. Let $\theta_{js} \in \{0, 1\}$ be a choice by student j, equal to one if he values achievement at activity s and zero otherwise. These are weights on normative criteria: choosing them means choosing which achievements count as worthy of respect. Respect is comparative. Let $\bar{a}_s$ denote average achievement in a comparison group, such as the whole school. The respect j accords to i is

$$R_j(a_i) = \sum_{s \in \{A,M\}} \theta_{js}(a_{is} - \bar{a}_s). \tag{2}$$

Thus, a student who values academics respects above-average academic achievement and disrespects below-average achievement. Musical achievement does not enter his judgment unless he values music too.

Students care about their judgments of themselves and, when they interact, about the judgments of the other student. Utility can be written as

$$U_i = \underbrace{R_i(a_i) + G_{ij} R_j(a_i)}_{\text{respect utility}} - \underbrace{\frac{1}{2}(e_{iA} + e_{iM})^2}_{\text{effort cost}}, \qquad j \neq i, \tag{3}$$

where $G_{ij} = 1$ if the students interact and zero otherwise (either student can initiate interaction at a positive but negligible cost).

Conformity and differentiation. Suppose one student values academics. The other can win his respect by studying. If that effort allows him to do well academically—better than

the comparison group—he gains self-respect by valuing academic achievement himself. He may thus adopt his peer's values. Importantly, the student does not benefit directly from sharing his peer's values. The desire for peer respect motivates effort; the resulting achievement makes adopting those values attractive.

But suppose the academically oriented peer is much more successful. Even with hard work, the student may struggle to match the academic performance of the comparison group. Valuing academics would then bring him little self-respect. He may instead devote his effort to music, where he has a better chance of excelling, come to value musical achievement, and seek friends who admire music.

Thus, *peer respect encourages conformity, while self-respect encourages differentiation*. These forces also shape social relationships. Students who value the same achievements have reason to respect one another and therefore to associate. Those who value different achievements have less reason to interact. The result is *value homophily*: birds of a feather flock together.

Multiple social equilibria. For some parameter values, the model has multiple equilibria. In one, both students value academic achievement, study hard, and interact. In another, they value music, devote their effort to it, and interact. Both arrangements are self-sustaining. When one student values academics, the other has an incentive to study to earn his respect. If he succeeds, academic achievement can also become a source of self-respect. The same logic can sustain a shared value for music.

The result matters well beyond these two students. *Identical economic fundamentals can support different norms, choices, and social relationships.* We might call the prevailing norms of a school or workplace its culture. Knowing people's abilities, available technologies, and material rewards does not necessarily tell us how they will behave. We must also know which norms prevail—which social equilibrium they are in. Culture is shaped by economic incentives, but it is not uniquely determined by them. It therefore matters in its own right for understanding economic outcomes.

The effect of stronger peers. Stronger peers can raise performance. A student may study harder to win the respect of a more able classmate who values academics. If academic success remains attainable, the student can also gain self-respect from the results. The model therefore permits positive peer effects.

But the effect can reverse. If a peer is far ahead, academic achievement may become an unattractive source of self-respect. The student may study less, turn to music, and associate with people who value it. In that case, a stronger peer reduces academic performance.

At the US Air Force Academy, researchers tried to help weaker cadets by placing them with stronger classmates (Carrell et al., 2013). Instead, cadets in the bottom third of the academic distribution earned grade-point averages 0.061 points lower under the intervention's negative assortment. The cadets also formed more homogeneous friendship, roommate, and study groups. Other studies find positive peer effects (Hanushek et al., 2003). These findings illustrate why peer effects need not have a single sign, although they do not establish the model's normative mechanism.

The impact of economic shocks. What happens when economic change closes a familiar path to respect? Take deindustrialization. In the model, we can think of this as a fall in α_{is} for blue-collar workers: the same effort produces less of a valued achievement.[5]

Arlie Hochschild's account of coal country gives this loss a human face (Hochschild, 2024). Andrew Scott, mayor of Coal Run, outside Pikeville, Kentucky, recalled a visit in his first year of high school from a Lexington football team whose players looked down on the locals as poor country people. But coal was booming, some of his classmates' families had grown rich overnight, and there were Mercedes cars in the school parking lot. The Pikeville students had a chant for the visitors: "You're goin' to work for us one day!" Mining was hard work, but it paid well and allowed men to support their families and take pride in their success.

[5]Deindustrialization does not reduce workers' innate ability, but it reduces their opportunities to turn skills and effort into valued accomplishments.

When the coal jobs disappeared, the standards did not disappear with them. Many residents still admired hard work, self-reliance, and supporting a family. They could no longer meet these standards as readily. Hochschild calls this the *pride paradox*: economic decline could feel like personal failure precisely because people continued to hold themselves to demanding standards. In the model, achievement falls while the norms governing self-respect remain unchanged.

The loss of respect can also create demand for other standards of worth. People may place greater weight on qualities in which they can still take pride, and seek out others who share those judgments. In interviews with working-class men, Lamont (2000) found that many valued responsibility, decency, and integrity more than income or credentials. Those standards allowed them to respect themselves—and to criticize successful people they regarded as selfish or arrogant.

Social interaction can reinforce such judgments. Cramer (2016) spent years listening to conversations among rural Wisconsin residents. Many regarded themselves as hardworking and deserving but believed that urban decision-makers ignored them, while cities and public employees received more than their fair share. Cramer calls this shared understanding *rural consciousness*. Conversations among neighbors sustained both a common standard of worth and a common sense of being disrespected.

Political leaders may offer a further route to recovering respect. Hochschild argues that Donald Trump's appeal lay partly in turning *lost pride* into *stolen pride*. Those who had blamed themselves for falling behind could instead view their diminished standing as an injustice, compounded by contempt from elites. Appeals honoring patriotism, loyalty, or practical knowledge over professional credentials may also make different normative standards and social attachments attractive. Political narratives can additionally change whom people hold responsible for their losses.[6]

Fukuyama (2018) helps explain why such appeals need not be reducible to promises

[6]One could extend the model by allowing people to form beliefs about whether low achievement reflects their own effort and ability or adverse external circumstances, and by letting respect depend on these perceived causes. Political narratives would then affect judgments of responsibility as well as the choice of norms.

of higher income. People seek recognition of their worth, sometimes as members of a community or nation. A politician who promises that *people like us* will again command respect is offering something different from a wage increase.

More direct evidence that economic shocks can reshape politics comes from the "China shock." Autor et al. (2020) exploit plausibly exogenous variation in US communities' exposure to rising Chinese import competition. More exposed areas became more politically polarized: initially majority-White counties became more likely to elect conservative Republicans, while initially majority-minority congressional districts became more likely to elect liberal Democrats, in both cases at the expense of moderates. In related survey evidence, lower subjective social status is associated with support for right-populist parties (Gidron and Hall, 2017).

In summary, deindustrialization can do more than destroy jobs. When established standards of respect become harder to meet, people have reason to seek alternative standards and the company of others who share them. An economic shock can therefore unsettle a community's social equilibrium—its norms, relationships, and political allegiances.

Motivated beliefs. The logic of *Value Formation* could also be extended to beliefs about the world. The desire for self-respect may make certain beliefs attractive, though which ones depends on circumstances. A worker who values hard work and has prospered may prefer to believe that success depends largely on effort. This allows him to take pride in his own success as a reflection of how hard he has worked. By contrast, a worker who values hard work but has lost his job may prefer to see luck or circumstance as more important.

Whether people *believe in a just world* matters for politics. Drawing on the World Values Survey, Alesina and Angeletos (2005) report that 60 percent of Americans, compared with 29 percent of Europeans, believed that poor people could become rich by trying harder. They also find that people who attribute income to luck are more likely to identify with

the political left, and that such beliefs are more prevalent in countries with greater social spending (see also Bénabou and Tirole, 2006a). The pursuit of respect may thus shape political preferences not only through norms, but also through beliefs about the causes of success and failure.

2.2.2 Other Forces Shaping Norms

Deliberate transmission. In *Value Formation*, norms emerge without anyone setting out to shape other people's values. But parents, employers, religious groups, and political leaders may deliberately try to influence what other people come to admire.

Consider an immigrant family whose children grow up surrounded by a different set of customs and values. The parents may teach them their language, observe religious holidays, and insist on the importance of obligations to family members. But children also learn from classmates and neighbors. Bisin and Verdier (2001) model this tension between socialization within families and influence from the wider society. Their striking result is that minority values need not disappear. Because minority parents cannot rely on the surrounding society to reinforce their preferences, they may invest *more* in transmitting them. When the two forms of socialization are substitutes, that response can sustain cultural diversity from one generation to the next.

Organizations, too, can try to shape what people value. At West Point, new cadets have their hair cut, put on uniforms, and practice reporting under close correction. Part of the aim is to make duty and service sources of pride, rather than merely to teach procedures (Akerlof and Kranton, 2005). A hospital faces a related problem when it wants nurses to care conscientiously for patients even if their effort is hard to observe. It can cultivate a professional identity, or recruit people who already share its mission. Besley and Ghatak (2005) show that matching workers to organizations whose objectives they value can reduce the need for powerful monetary incentives. Bénabou and Tirole (2003) show how extrinsic motivation from a firm's rewards can undermine workers' intrinsic motivation—the value they place on doing good work and the self-respect they derive

from it.

Religious organizations provide another illustration. A congregation may teach its children religious duties and celebrate members who live up to them. It may also ask members to observe demanding rules about dress, diet, or conduct. Why might costly requirements help a group survive? In Iannaccone (1992), religion provides a club good: members benefit when others participate, and costly restrictions can discourage free-riding. Carvalho (2016) connects this club logic to cultural transmission: organizations can shape the identities their members hold.

Governments can also use schools and media to shape what citizens regard as admirable or acceptable. Between 2004 and 2010, China introduced new textbooks intended to influence students' political outlook. Cantoni et al. (2017) find that students exposed to the revised curriculum expressed more favorable views of Chinese governance and greater skepticism toward free markets. In postgenocide Rwanda, government radio broadcasts sought to strengthen a common national identity across ethnic divisions. Exploiting differences in radio reception caused by the country's mountainous terrain, Blouin and Mukand (2019) find that greater exposure reduced the salience of ethnicity and increased interethnic trust and willingness to interact. The broadcasts changed how listeners regarded and interacted with members of another group.

Political leaders can also influence what people regard as socially acceptable. Bursztyn et al. (2020) find that Donald Trump's rise made people more willing to express xenophobic views publicly, and that such expression drew less disapproval where those views were perceived as more popular. By altering perceptions of social approval, political developments can change the rewards and costs of expressing particular views.

Authority. Authority provides a particularly direct way of shaping norms. Suppose employees accept the norm that they should follow their manager's instructions, or members of a committee agree to abide by its decisions. Such a norm effectively gives someone else the power to determine what they are required to do. A manager can introduce a new

dress code, for example, and employees may regard compliance as obligatory even if they think the dress code is pointless. The instruction has not necessarily made the behavior admirable in its own right; rather, disobeying the instruction is regarded as wrong. Authority thus allows someone to establish new obligations without having to persuade others of their intrinsic merits.

The more difficult question is how someone acquires authority in the first place. Weber (1978) famously distinguished three bases of legitimate authority: *traditional*, resting on established custom; *charismatic*, resting on devotion to an exceptional leader; and *legal-rational*, resting on accepted rules and procedures. Legitimacy can also depend on how authority is exercised. Tyler (1990) finds that people are more willing to obey the law when authorities give them a chance to be heard and apply rules fairly, even apart from the threat of punishment. Identity can matter as well. Hogg (2001) argues that people are more willing to follow leaders who seem to embody their group's identity. Such leaders are seen as speaking for the group, rather than merely for themselves. The broader point is that norms about who is entitled to give instructions can, in turn, give particular people the power to establish new norms.

Constraints. *Value Formation* focuses on the demand for norms: people have incentives to value behavior and achievements that bring them self-respect. But, in reality, people cannot always adopt the norms they would most like to hold. For example, someone who breaks a promise may still believe that breaking promises is wrong. What constrains the norms people can adopt?

One constraint is ethics. People may believe that promises should be kept, that one should tell the truth, and that causing needless harm is wrong. These principles, long emphasized in moral philosophy (Ross, 1930; Scanlon, 1998), have important practical consequences. Promise-keeping, for instance, allows people to make agreements without formal enforcement. An employer may promise flexible hours in return for an employee's willingness to work late when needed. Both can rely on the other's word without

a written contract. In an experiment, Vanberg (2008) finds that people value keeping their promises. Truth-telling similarly facilitates exchange when one party possesses information the other cannot verify. Reviewing 90 experiments, Abeler et al. (2019) find that people often tell the truth even when lying would pay.

Some ethical judgments are widely shared. Across 60 societies, Curry et al. (2019) find widespread moral approval of cooperative behavior. Yet agreement on broad principles leaves room for disagreement about their application. People may agree that harm is wrong but disagree over what counts as harm or when it is justified. Haidt and Joseph (2004) argue that common moral intuitions can give rise to different virtues across cultures. Ethics thus constrains the norms people can adopt without determining them uniquely. Social influences and the pursuit of self-respect can still shape their interpretation.

Another constraint comes from other people's judgments. A student whose classmates admire academic achievement may come to admire it himself, even if he struggles at school. One reason is cognitive: when we are unsure what to think, we look to see what others think. Deutsch and Gerard (1955) distinguish this *informational influence* from conformity aimed at securing others' approval. Henrich and Boyd (1998) model a related tendency to adopt prevalent beliefs and practices, while Chudek and Henrich (2011) argue that humans possess a *norm psychology* that helps them acquire and internalize community standards.

This tendency appears to apply to beliefs about the world as well as normative judgments. In a classic experiment, Sherif (1936) asked people sitting in a dark room to estimate how far a stationary point of light appeared to move. Their estimates initially varied, but converged when they judged in groups. When they later judged alone, the group standard persisted.

2.3 Respect for Type

Two students receive the same high examination mark. One has worked hard for weeks; the other has barely studied. A teacher who values hard work may think more highly of the first student. Classmates who value intelligence may be more impressed by the second: achieving the same mark with less effort suggests greater ability.

The difference lies in the norms they hold. The teacher respects the students for what they do; the classmates respect them for the traits they are believed to possess—their type. Norms about type attach respect to characteristics such as intelligence, courage, or generosity, rather than directly to actions or achievements.

2.3.1 Signaling and Self-Signaling

What incentives do such norms create? With actions and achievements, the answer is straightforward. A student who values hard work has reason to study hard; one who values academic achievement also has reason to do so, since studying improves grades. Norms about type create more complicated incentives. Suppose students admire intelligence. If classmates already knew how intelligent a student was, respect for intelligence would give him no incentive to study. But intelligence is rarely perfectly observed. A high grade may persuade classmates that a student is clever, making studying a way to signal intelligence. The same logic applies to generosity: someone may help others partly to demonstrate that he is a generous person. In both cases, the incentive comes not from respect for the action or achievement itself, but from what it reveals about type.

Because these incentives arise through signaling, respect for intelligence can encourage effort—but it can also discourage it. A good grade signals intelligence, but a good grade achieved with little studying signals even greater intelligence. Students may therefore conceal how hard they study. Some may even reduce their effort, so that poor performance can be blamed on lack of preparation rather than lack of ability. In classic experiments on *self-handicapping*, Berglas and Jones (1978) found that some participants deliber-

ately chose what they believed would impair their performance. Relatedly, Bursztyn and Jensen (2015) found that students in non-honors classes were 11 percentage points less likely to sign up for SAT preparation when their classmates would learn of their decision.

The same preference for appearing naturally gifted can be found among elites. In Bourdieu (1984)'s account of cultural distinction, appreciation of art carries particular prestige when it appears effortless and natural, rather than acquired through study. More broadly, Veblen (1899) describes how aristocrats demonstrated their superior standing by abstaining from productive work. Having to work was itself a mark of inferiority (see also Doepke and Zilibotti, 2008). Thus, norms about type can encourage people to work harder, conceal their effort, or avoid work altogether.

Monetary incentives can also have surprising effects when people care about signaling their type. Suppose people admire generosity. Someone who volunteers without pay may appear generous, while someone who is paid to volunteer may appear motivated by money. In Bénabou and Tirole (2006b), monetary rewards can therefore undermine the reputational benefit of helping others. Indeed, offering rewards may sometimes reduce rather than increase prosocial behavior.

Signaling can also generate conformity and multiple equilibria. Suppose a particular style of shoes becomes fashionable at a school. A student may prefer something different but follow the fashion to avoid being regarded as someone with strange tastes. Why should even a small departure matter so much? Because when almost everyone conforms, those who deviate are assumed to have highly unusual preferences. In Bernheim (1994), this logic generates conformity even among people with different underlying tastes. A small deviation can carry a large loss of respect, and different fashions can be sustained as equilibria.

Signaling to others is easy to understand. But can people really signal to themselves? Don't they already know what kind of people they are? Not necessarily. Someone may have a sense of how much he cares about others, but also want to reassure himself that he is generous. Helping a colleague, for instance, can provide evidence that he is the kind

of person who cares about others. He may therefore help partly to strengthen that belief about himself. Bénabou and Tirole (2011) develop a model in which people take actions to sustain favorable beliefs about their underlying values. Their earlier work examines related incentives to maintain confidence in one's ability (Bénabou and Tirole, 2002) or willpower (Bénabou and Tirole, 2004).

Self-signaling can also give rise to an unusual form of social comparison. Suppose everyone in a workplace goes home at five, telling themselves that staying late to help colleagues would be unreasonable. Then a new employee starts staying late. Rather than admire her, the others may resent her: if she can help, perhaps they could have done so too. Her behavior undermines the excuses that allow them to think well of themselves. Bénabou and Tirole (2011) show how such comparisons can lead people to ostracize do-gooders rather than free riders. This is closely related to the comparative nature of respect in *Value Formation*. In that model, self-respect depends on one's achievements relative to those of others. Here, other people's behavior affects what one can infer about one's own type.

2.3.2 The Formation of Type-Based Norms

Which traits are valued? The signaling models largely take as given which traits deserve respect. But the pursuit of self-respect and peer respect may itself shape these judgments. As in *Value Formation*, people have reason to value traits on which they compare favorably with others. Someone who is particularly intelligent may place great value on intelligence; someone who is especially courageous may regard courage as the more admirable quality.

Peer respect may also influence which traits people value, though less directly. A student may study hard to obtain high marks and impress classmates who admire intelligence. If his success also strengthens his belief in his own intelligence, through self-signaling, he may come to place greater value on intelligence himself. Thus, peer values may shape one's own values through their effects on behavior and self-perception.

Why value type? A separate question is why societies differ in the weight they place on type rather than on actions or achievements. Moral philosophers distinguish virtue ethics, which attaches merit or virtue to particular types or traits, from deontological ethics, which emphasizes actions, and consequentialist ethics, which emphasizes outcomes and achievements.

A virtue ethic might encourage socially desirable behavior—such as generosity—but it might also extol qualities such as noble birth. Indeed, in aristocratic societies, a person's ancestry may confer greater respect than his accomplishments. Moreover, as Veblen (1899) emphasizes, and as we saw in our discussion of signaling, a gentleman can demonstrate his superior standing through conspicuous leisure, showing that he does not need to work. Productive labor is a sign of inferior status.

There is a straightforward demand-side explanation for the appeal of such norms. People born into the aristocracy benefit from standards that make inherited rank admirable. They can obtain self-respect without having to achieve commercial success, and need not surrender their superiority when people of humbler origins become wealthy. This does not mean that aristocrats rejected every form of achievement: military courage and political accomplishments could carry prestige. Nor does their interest explain, by itself, why others accepted the hierarchy. But it gives them a reason to defend these norms.

A striking contrast is provided by the Protestant work ethic described by Weber (1930). In Weber's account, disciplined work in one's calling came to be valued in its own right, even among those wealthy enough not to need to work.[7] Whereas the aristocratic gentleman demonstrated his superior standing by abstaining from work, the conscientious Protestant earned respect through disciplined work. These norms therefore created very different incentives.

Cross-national studies reveal considerable geographical variation in these attitudes.

[7]Weber traces the origins of this ethic partly to Calvinism and its doctrine of predestination. Salvation depended on whether one was among the elect, something that could not be changed through one's actions. But disciplined conduct could help believers reassure themselves that they were among the elect. In our terminology, a type-based religious belief thus encouraged self-signaling through work. Weber argued that the resulting work ethic eventually outlived much of its religious foundation, becoming increasingly detached from its original concern with salvation.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997), drawing on surveys of managers in some fifty countries, distinguish cultures in which status is *achieved* from those in which it is *ascribed*, and find the former orientation strongest in the English-speaking countries and Northern Europe. Stam et al. (2013), using data from 44 European countries, find substantial variation in work ethic. Economic conditions may also shape these norms: Schilpzand and de Jong (2021) find that economic growth and development experienced during childhood are associated with the value people later place on hard work.

The economic stakes may be large. McCloskey (2010) argues that the growing dignity accorded to merchants and innovators helped make modern economic growth possible. Whatever the strength of that historical explanation, the incentive difference is clear. A society that admires enterprise, diligence, and invention encourages different behavior from one that treats commerce as degrading. Norms that serve the self-respect of an aristocracy need not serve the prosperity of the society in which it lives.

2.4 Identification

A scientist might admire a brilliant pianist's musical talent, even if he has no musical talent himself. Likewise, the pianist might admire the scientist's research. They have mutual respect for one another; however, that does not necessarily mean they *identify* with one another.

Consider instead two similarly accomplished scientists who take pride in their research and respect each other's achievements. They not only respect one another; each respects the other on the same grounds that he respects himself. This is a case where the two identify with one another.

More generally, identification depends on two things: believing that one is similar to another person along some dimension, and attaching importance to that dimension. It is a matter of degree, and can be based on shared type, actions, or achievements. Two people may identify because they take pride in being American, because they both volunteer to help others, or because they have achieved similar academic success. In each case,

what matters is that something they believe they share provides a basis for respect or disrespect.

Identification need not be mutual. Suppose one scientist places great value on scientific achievement, while another, equally accomplished scientist, takes pride instead in her musical ability and attaches little importance to science. The first may identify strongly with the second, while the second feels little identification with the first. Nor does identification necessarily involve favorable judgments: two students who have both performed poorly at school, and who regard academic achievement as important, may look down on themselves and one another for their shared lack of success—but still identify with one another.

2.4.1 Minimal-Group Experiments

How easily can people come to identify with one another? In a famous series of experiments, Tajfel et al. (1971) divided schoolboys into groups on essentially arbitrary grounds. In one experiment, the boys were shown paintings by Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky and asked which they preferred. They were told that their group assignments reflected these preferences, although the assignments were actually random. The boys did not know who else belonged to their group, had no opportunity to interact with fellow members, and had no common goal.

The boys were then asked to distribute small monetary rewards between anonymous members of the two groups. They could not allocate money to themselves. Nonetheless, they tended to favor members of their own group. Remarkably, some chose allocations that increased the difference between the groups in their own group's favor, even when doing so reduced the total amount their group received. In subsequent experiments, Billig and Tajfel (1973) found similar favoritism even when participants were explicitly told that their group assignments were random.

These experiments suggest how readily people can come to identify with others on the basis of seemingly meaningless commonalities. Merely assigning people to groups

can make those distinctions socially significant. Such groupings can also have important consequences, including favoritism toward members of one's own group. We return to these consequences in Section 4.

2.4.2 Why We Identify

What makes people identify with one another? Two things matter: which characteristics they value, and which characteristics they believe they share.

What do we value? Consider two students who both excel academically relative to their classmates. As we saw in *Value Formation*, each has an incentive to regard academic achievement as important, since it provides a source of self-respect. In doing so, they also acquire a reason to respect one another: each possesses a quality the other considers admirable. Thus, the choice of values can create identification, even when people's achievements and their assessments of one another remain unchanged.

What do we see as shared? Consider two successful scientists. They might regard their achievements as reflecting intellectual abilities they share. Or each might think his success reflects exceptional qualities that the other lacks. The evidence may allow either interpretation. Which would they prefer?

An unpublished model developed in Akerlof (2018) examines how the pursuit of respect shapes such judgments. People choose which identity groups to belong to, how highly to regard those groups, and whom to interact with. The desire for peer respect encourages identification. If two scientists see themselves as possessing a valued quality in common, each has reason to respect the other, and each can benefit from the other's respect. But the desire for self-respect pulls in the opposite direction. A scientist who regards his abilities as exceptional can take greater pride in them than one who thinks everyone possesses similar talents.

These competing forces encourage people to form identity groups, even when their achievements are identical. Belonging to a group offers the respect of fellow members,

while distinguishing that group from others makes membership a source of self-respect. People therefore have reason to see themselves as sharing valued qualities with some others, but not with everyone. How large a group they prefer depends on how much importance they attach to self-respect relative to peer respect.

This offers a possible explanation for the minimal-group experiments. An arbitrary distinction—such as membership in the Klee or Kandinsky group—provides a starting point for identification. Participants can come to regard their own group as superior, gaining self-respect from membership and respect from their fellow members. Favoring the ingroup over the outgroup then reinforces this favorable distinction. The point is not that the boys necessarily believed Klee enthusiasts possessed some objectively superior quality. Rather, even a trivial grouping can provide the basis for a flattering distinction between "us" and "them."

2.4.3 Strains on Common Identity

Inequality. What happens when people's achievements differ substantially? Consider two scientists who begin their careers with similar accomplishments and identify with one another. One subsequently becomes a leading figure in his field, while the other's career stagnates. The less successful scientist may want to continue seeing them as possessing similar underlying abilities. That would allow him to maintain a favorable view of his own ability, despite his disappointing career. The more successful scientist, however, may prefer to regard his success as evidence of exceptional abilities that his colleague lacks.

The desire for peer respect gives the successful scientist some reason to maintain a common identity with his colleagues. But this incentive has limits. As his achievements outstrip theirs, the appeal of seeing himself as exceptional grows. Inequality can therefore undermine identification.[8]

[8] Atkin et al. (2021) provide evidence that identification responds to group status. Using dietary choices in India, they find that people adhere more strongly to their religious group's prescriptions when the economic returns to occupations traditionally associated with that group rise.

Social interaction. Who interacts with whom also matters. When people must interact, they have stronger incentives to seek one another's respect and consequently to identify with one another. When they can select their social interactions, they may instead form more exclusive groups. This tendency may be particularly strong among elites.

Suppose it is costly to interact with people outside one's locality. A highly successful person may find it worthwhile to pay that cost to associate with similarly successful people elsewhere. Such relationships offer respect from people who value his accomplishments, while allowing him to identify with a group distinguished by its achievements. Someone whose main sources of respect are local may have much less reason to pay the cost. As a result, high achievers may form geographically dispersed groups, while others continue to interact and identify primarily within their local communities.

This recalls Merton (1949)'s distinction between *locals*, whose attachments center on their immediate community, and *cosmopolitans*, who look to a wider world for recognition. Gouldner (1957) explored this distinction in a study of faculty and staff at a small American liberal-arts college. He found that some were oriented primarily toward the college, while others identified more strongly with their professions and sought recognition from colleagues elsewhere. The cosmopolitans were more research-active, had published more, knew fewer colleagues at the college, and were more willing to leave for another institution. Locals, by contrast, were more attached to the college and participated more in its internal affairs.

2.4.4 National Identity and Populism

These forces help explain current strains on common identity in the United States and the rise of populism, as well as related tensions evident in many other countries.

Before modern nationalism, European elites often had closer ties to elites in other countries than to ordinary people living under the same ruler. Ruling families married across kingdoms; nobles served foreign monarchs; and Latin connected clergy and scholars across Europe. In eighteenth-century Russia, French and German were spoken at

the Romanov court, while much of the population lived in a very different social world. European aristocrats often shared languages, customs, and family connections that transcended political borders. An aristocrat might feel more in common with a foreign noble than with the peasants in nearby villages. Common residence within political borders did not necessarily create a common identity.

During the nineteenth century, this began to change. People increasingly came to see themselves as members of what Anderson (1983) calls *imagined communities*: nations comprising millions of people who would never meet, yet regarded one another as fellow members. The spread of printed books and newspapers in shared languages helped create this sense of belonging. People in distant towns could read about the same events and come to see themselves as part of a common public. Schools, railways, and armies further strengthened national ties. In *Peasants into Frenchmen*, Weber (1976) describes how, in late nineteenth-century France, schools taught children to speak French and identify with the nation, roads and railways connected formerly isolated villages, and military service brought young men from different regions together. People whose attachments had centered on their villages and regions increasingly came to think of themselves as French. These changes made shared characteristics more salient and gave greater importance to the respect of fellow citizens.

Today, rising inequality may be straining common identity in the United States and contributing to the reemergence of a separate elite. The rise of meritocratic education has also given elites greater opportunities to segregate themselves socially. In the 1930s, Harvard president James Bryant Conant sought to recruit talented students beyond the elite Eastern boarding schools, using scholarships and standardized tests to replace inherited privilege with opportunity (Sandel, 2020). But this system also drew promising young people away from their communities. In *Hollowing Out the Middle*, Carr and Kefalas (2009) describe how parents and teachers in rural Iowa encouraged their most promising students to leave for college and professional careers. Success meant departure. Selective universities and elite occupations then brought these students into contact

with other high achievers, often far from home. Meanwhile, as Markovits (2019) argues, wealthy families have increasingly used education to reproduce their advantages. Meritocracy can thus widen differences in achievement while bringing successful people together. The result may be a new kind of elite, connected by education and achievement rather than aristocratic birth, but increasingly separate from the rest of society.

This separation can fuel populist backlash. As Sandel (2020) emphasizes, when success is taken as evidence of superior merit, those without elite credentials may feel not only economically disadvantaged but looked down upon. Fukuyama (2018) similarly emphasizes the demand for recognition and dignity in populist politics. As elites increasingly identify with one another, other Americans may come to see them as people who neither share their values nor understand their lives—indeed, as less genuinely American. They may come to regard themselves as representing the *real America*, in contrast to an elite they see as detached from the nation. Donald Trump's slogan, *Make America Great Again*, can be understood partly as a promise to restore the standing of Americans who feel that those in power neither understand nor respect them. This division may also undermine trust in institutions, including government and universities, that are seen as dominated by a separate elite.

2.5 Emphasis on Similarity versus Difference

Suppose a group of people would benefit from associating with one another. One obstacle is that it is unpleasant to interact with people who do not respect us. A group is therefore easier to sustain when its members have mutual respect. There are at least two ways to achieve this.[9]

The first is through identification, as discussed above. Group members emphasize qualities they share and attach less importance to those that distinguish them. Suppose

[9]This distinction echoes Durkheim's contrast between *mechanical* and *organic solidarity*, rooted respectively in similarity and differentiation (Durkheim, 1893). Honneth likewise emphasizes the importance of recognizing individuals' distinctive abilities and contributions (Honneth, 1995). I owe the idea of examining these two bases of mutual respect in group formation to Ann Swidler.

I excel at athletics while you excel at academics. I might downplay my athletic superiority, either by placing less weight on athletic achievement or by avoiding displays of my greater ability. You might do the same with academic achievement. We can instead emphasize qualities we share and value, such as loyalty or hard work. This way of forming groups involves a certain humility: playing down differences and stressing similarities.

A second possibility is to celebrate our differences. I can take pride in my athletic ability while also respecting your academic achievements, even though I am not particularly good at academics. You can do the same in reverse. In effect, we reach an implicit understanding to value one another's distinctive strengths. Neither of us needs to downplay what makes us exceptional. Mutual respect rests not on being alike, but on appreciating what each person brings to the group.

There are interesting cultural differences in the emphasis placed on similarity and difference. In *Preschool in Three Cultures*, Tobin et al. (1989) describe Japanese preschool teachers who were reluctant to single out unusually talented children. When an American researcher suggested that one boy was exceptionally gifted, his Japanese teachers resisted the characterization. More generally, the authors describe Japanese teachers sometimes slowing down advanced children so that others could catch up, fostering a sense that everyone belonged to the same group. American preschool teachers, by contrast, placed greater emphasis on recognizing children's distinctive abilities and encouraging their individual development. These observations are consistent with broader research contrasting interdependent and independent understandings of the self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

The two approaches offer different foundations for mutual respect. In one, people emphasize what they share and downplay what distinguishes them. In the other, they recognize and celebrate one another's distinctive strengths.

2.6 Status Hierarchies

An aristocrat may regard himself as superior to a laborer because of his ancestry. That is hardly surprising. What is surprising is that the laborer may agree. He may admire the aristocrat, imitate his manners, and seek his approval, even though the prevailing standards place him below. Why do people sometimes accept hierarchies of respect that disadvantage them?

Some of the clearest evidence comes from the famous doll experiments of Kenneth and Mamie Clark. Around 1940, they presented Black American children with otherwise identical Black and White dolls. Many preferred the White doll and attributed positive characteristics to it, while associating negative characteristics with the Black doll (Clark and Clark, 1947). Children were reproducing a hierarchy that placed their own group below. These judgments could also change. In a 1970 replication, conducted against the backdrop of the Black consciousness movement, a majority of Black children preferred the Black doll (Hraba and Grant, 1970).

Colonialism provides another striking example. The British governed India with relatively few British officials, relying heavily on Indian soldiers, administrators, and local rulers. But their influence went beyond military and political control. Among some Indians, speaking English, adopting British manners, and obtaining a British education became marks of distinction. An education at Oxford could be a particularly prized achievement. In *Masks of Conquest*, Viswanathan (1989) describes how the teaching of English literature in colonial India helped establish British standards of civilization and refinement. Fanon (1952), writing about French colonial society, describes how mastery of the colonizer's language could become a measure of a person's worth. People might thus come to judge themselves by standards that placed the colonizer above them.

The Spanish conquest of Mexico raises a related puzzle. Cortés arrived in 1519 with only a few hundred men. Yet, within two years, tens of thousands of Indigenous warriors were fighting alongside the Spaniards in the siege of Tenochtitlan. These groups

had their own reasons for opposing the Mexica. But why did they rally around a band of recently arrived foreigners, and why did Cortés emerge as a leader of a coalition in which Spaniards were vastly outnumbered? Spanish military advantages and the political interests of Indigenous allies surely mattered. Indeed, historians have emphasized the initiative and independent objectives of those allies (Matthew and Oudijk, eds, 2007). The episode nevertheless raises the question of how a small outside group can acquire extraordinary influence over much larger populations.

What explains the acceptance of such hierarchies? We consider four mechanisms.

The weight of elite judgments. One possibility is that people give particular weight to what elites think. This can reinforce a hierarchy in two related ways. People may seek elite approval, giving them an incentive to conform to elite standards of behavior. Alternatively, they may adopt elites' interpretations of the world, which can directly influence their own beliefs and norms.

First, people may care especially about earning the respect of those above them. An Indian seeking the approval of British officials, for example, might learn their language, adopt their manners, or send his children to an English school. As in our earlier discussion of peer respect, placing greater weight on someone's approval creates an incentive to behave in ways that person admires. A hierarchy can therefore reproduce itself through behavior, even if those below do not privately agree with elite standards. Bhabha (1984)'s discussion of colonial mimicry also emphasizes the ambivalence of such imitation: outward conformity need not mean complete acceptance.

Second, people may give particular weight to elites' norms and interpretations of the world. Prestigious people may be regarded as worth learning from (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001). Elites may also be especially well placed to propagate particular interpretations through schools, newspapers, and other media. Consider an Indian student educated under British rule. He might learn not only English grammar and literature, but also a view of British society as cultivated and progressive and of Indian society as back-

ward. Such an education could affect his own judgments about what qualities deserve respect.

Why might exposure to a particular interpretation matter? Both Schwartzstein and Sunderam (2021) and Akerlof et al. (2025) explore how narratives can shape people's understanding of the world. Schwartzstein and Sunderam (2021) show how a persuader can influence beliefs by proposing a model that organizes existing evidence. Akerlof et al. (2025) show how narratives can become self-reinforcing: once an interpretation takes hold, it can make alternative interpretations harder to see, even when people are exposed to them. Thus, narratives propagated by elites can influence how people interpret their society and which characteristics they regard as deserving respect. In this way, elite influence can help sustain not just conformity to a hierarchy, but acceptance of the hierarchy itself.

The advantages of being in the middle. A hierarchy may benefit people who are not at its top. In his 1835 proposal for English education in India, Thomas Babington Macaulay advocated educating a class of Indians who could serve as intermediaries between British rulers and the wider population (Macaulay, 1835). Such an intermediary might remain subordinate to a British official but enjoy considerable standing relative to other Indians. Accepting the hierarchy allowed him to take pride in his own position within it.

Value Formation describes a similar figure in the school setting. Most schools have a leading crowd, the group of students others want to be like, and some students adopt its values without being fully accepted into it. Call them hangers-on. Suppose the leading crowd values athletics. The hangers-on are not strong athletes, and they could raise their self-respect by valuing something else (say, academics). But valuing athletics, and trying to fit in with the athletes, wins them more peer respect than the alternative: the leading crowd accords more respect to a hanger-on than to a nerd. The hangers-on accept a middle rank in the school's hierarchy because of the respect that rank brings them from the top.

Identification with those at the top. Identification provides another mechanism. In Shayo (2009)'s model, people are attracted to groups not only because they perceive themselves as similar to their members, but also because the groups possess high status. In his application, a poor person may identify with the nation rather than with the poor as a class. Although the nation includes wealthy people with whom he has little economically in common, its standing provides a source of satisfaction. Shayo shows how this can weaken support for redistribution.[10]

A similar logic helps explain racial identification in the American South. Consider a poor white farmer. He might identify with Black laborers on the basis of their common economic position, or with wealthy white planters on the basis of race. The latter offers a source of self-respect: he shares a characteristic regarded as superior with people at the top. In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois (1935) describes the public and psychological benefits that whiteness afforded poor white workers, helping sustain solidarity across class lines. Identification can thus support a hierarchy even among people who occupy relatively low positions within it.

Status and power. A hierarchy of respect can reinforce a hierarchy of power, and vice versa.

First, social standing can confer power. People may be more willing to follow the lead of those they respect or accept their judgments. High-status individuals may also find it easier to obtain desirable jobs, business opportunities, and influential connections. The resulting wealth and influence can, in turn, help sustain their social standing. Wealth also allows people to acquire visible markers of status: a fine house, an expensive education, or other signs of prosperity (Veblen, 1899; Charles et al., 2009).

Second, those with power can influence the standards by which people achieve respect. Universities decide which accomplishments merit admission; employers determine which qualifications count in hiring and promotion. Such criteria may favor the

[10] In an experiment, Klor and Shayo (2010) find that people sometimes support tax policies benefiting their group even when doing so comes at a personal financial cost.

groups already in positions of power (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). In the 1920s, for example, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton began placing greater weight on character, athletic achievement, and extracurricular activities, partly to limit the admission of Jewish students who had performed well under the previous, more academically oriented criteria. The new standards favored the established Protestant elite (Karabel, 2005). Because admission to prestigious institutions is itself a mark of achievement, the criteria those institutions adopt can influence broader judgments about who is talented and deserving.

Third, power can shape beliefs about the characteristics of different groups through rules and practices that influence their behavior. In the American South, slave codes restricted the education of enslaved Black people, while later Jim Crow conventions required Black people to show deference to Whites. Such practices helped sustain beliefs about Black inferiority (Hoff and Stiglitz, 2010). In experiments with Indian schoolboys, Hoff and Pandey (2006) found that boys from disadvantaged castes performed as well as high-caste boys on a maze task when caste was not announced, but worse when it was made public. In both cases, social hierarchy shaped behavior or achievement in ways that could appear to confirm the beliefs supporting it.

3 Prescriptions

Our focus thus far has been on norms that are universal—that is, they apply to everyone, regardless of who they are. But not all norms have this character. Parents have particular obligations to their children, for example, and doctors have particular obligations to their patients.

We can distinguish two types of such non-universal norms. The first are *role-related norms*. People occupy particular roles—as parents, doctors, teachers, or shopkeepers—and these roles carry expectations about how they should behave. A doctor is expected to care for her patients; a parent is expected to look after his children. The obligations arise from the responsibilities associated with the role (Hardimon, 1994).

The second type are *identity-related norms*, or what Akerlof and Kranton (2000) call *prescriptions*. Prescriptions concern how someone should behave because of the *type* of person they are perceived to be. Gender norms provide a familiar example. Men may be expected to be tough and self-reliant, while women may be expected to be gentle and nurturing. Such expectations concern what it means to behave appropriately as a man or as a woman.

Prescriptions are not fixed. In mid-twentieth-century America, a married woman pursuing a demanding professional career might be regarded as departing from her proper place, while a man who stayed home to raise his children might be regarded as failing to behave like a man. Such judgments have changed considerably. As Goldin (2006) documents, women's employment, educational choices, and aspirations have undergone a profound transformation. Prescriptions also differ across societies. Alesina et al. (2013), for example, find that societies with different agricultural histories have developed different expectations regarding the appropriate economic roles of men and women.

What explains the formation of prescriptions, and why do they change? We will argue that prescriptions grow out of a basic feature of how people understand the world: we classify people into types and form expectations about how people of each type behave. These are initially *positive* expectations—beliefs about what people are likely to do. But they can acquire normative force. Behavior that conforms to these expectations may come to seem genuine or authentic, while departures from them may be regarded as inauthentic or performative. Prescriptions, in turn, influence behavior, reinforcing the expectations from which they arose. This feedback can make prescriptions self-sustaining, but it also creates the possibility of change when economic conditions or patterns of behavior shift.

3.1 Classification

People have a basic tendency to classify the world around them. We classify animals as dogs, cats, horses, birds, and so on. We do much the same with people, classifying them by sex, religion, occupation, and a host of other characteristics. This tendency appears

early in life: in experiments, young children spontaneously keep track of the gender of people they encounter, even when gender is irrelevant to the task at hand (Weisman et al., 2015).

Classification is useful because it allows us to make predictions. On seeing an unfamiliar animal, we might recognize it as a dog from its appearance. Without knowing anything else about this particular animal, we would expect it to bark, wag its tail, and behave differently from a cat. Likewise, classifying someone as a teacher or a teenager gives us expectations about how that person is likely to behave. We need not learn everything afresh about each individual.

Our classifications are also layered. We distinguish dogs from cats, but among dogs we distinguish collies, golden retrievers, and poodles; among cats, Siamese, Persians, and Burmese. These finer categories permit finer predictions. We might expect a collie to be inclined to herd, for example. Similarly, we classify people not only as men or women, but as different kinds of men and women. A man might be regarded as *nerdy* or *brawny*. One might expect the nerdy man to enjoy mathematics and the brawny man to enjoy the gym. Such expectations are learned, and they need not be accurate for every individual. Cognitive scientists have developed models of how people learn classifications from experience and use them to generalize from a few observations. The work of Tenenbaum et al. (2011), for example, emphasizes that categories can have a hierarchical structure, allowing us to make predictions at several levels of specificity.

Not every member of a category strikes us as an equally exemplary instance of it. A robin, for example, seems a more exemplary bird than a penguin, even though both are birds. At the Westminster dog show, judges select dogs that best embody the standard for each breed. Cognitive psychologists study such judgments under the heading of *typicality*. In a series of experiments, Rosch and Mervis (1975) found that people regarded category members as more exemplary when they shared many attributes with others in their category and relatively few with members of contrasting categories.

An important implication is that the most exemplary member of a category need not

resemble its average member. Consider how we classify people as men and women. In a society where trousers are worn by both sexes but dresses predominantly by women, a woman wearing a dress may be seen as especially exemplary of the category *woman*, even if most women wear trousers most of the time. What makes the dress significant is not how commonly women wear one, but how clearly it distinguishes women from men. An exemplary member of a category may thus possess characteristics that exaggerate the differences between categories.

This intuition is central to the model of stereotypes developed by Bordalo et al. (2016). A characteristic is especially representative of a group when it is more common in that group than in a comparison group, even if it is uncommon in absolute terms. By emphasizing such distinctive characteristics, stereotypes can exaggerate differences between groups.

Stereotypes can affect not only what we expect to see, but how we interpret what we observe. In an experiment, Darley and Gross (1983) showed participants the same videotape of a schoolgirl answering some questions correctly and others incorrectly on an academic test. Some were led to believe she came from a middle-class family, others from a poor family. Those who believed she was middle class judged her academic ability considerably higher. The same performance was interpreted differently depending on the girl's perceived social class.

3.2 From Classification to Prescription

The crucial step is that an expectation about what members of a category *do* can become a judgment about what they *should do*. Suppose men are generally expected to be tough and unemotional. A man who cries openly may be told to "act like a man." His behavior is regarded not simply as unusual, but as inappropriate—as though he were failing to behave authentically as a man.

There is experimental evidence for this transition. Roberts et al. (2017) introduced children to imaginary groups called Hibbles and Glerks, whose members preferred different

kinds of berries. There was nothing morally right or wrong about either preference. Nevertheless, young children often disapproved when a member of one group chose the other group's berries. A regularity had become a rule: children came to believe that members of each group *should* behave as members of that group generally did.

What might explain this tendency? One possibility is a deeply rooted concern with *authenticity*. We expect people to behave in ways that express who they really are. We value behavior that seems genuine and disapprove of behavior that seems *performative*—an attempt to appear to be someone one is not. Psychological research finds that people commonly believe individuals possess a "true self" (Strohminger et al., 2017) and regard authenticity as an important quality in others (Bailey and Levy, 2022).

Exemplars help determine what counts as authentic. Consider again the example of women's dress. In a society where wearing a dress is seen as especially exemplary of femininity, it may come to be regarded not only as more recognizably feminine, but as more appropriately feminine. And appropriateness is a matter of degree: the more strongly a behavior or appearance reads as belonging to a category rather than a contrasting category, the more authentic and appropriate it may seem. In this way, judgments about how exemplary someone is of a type can give rise to prescriptions about how members of that type should behave.

3.2.1 Some Revealing Cases

The brawny man and the nerdy man. Suppose a nerdy man starts lifting weights and cultivating a tough manner. His friends may ridicule him for trying to be someone he is not. Yet in a society that admires physical strength, a brawny man may be respected as an exemplary man for doing much the same thing. Why should behavior admired in one man be criticized in another?

The answer lies in the distinction between exemplary types and exemplary behavior. When judging how manly someone is, we may compare him with an exemplar of the broader category of men. On this dimension, the brawny man ranks higher. But when

judging whether someone's behavior is appropriate, we may use a more specific classification: brawny man or nerdy man. Lifting weights is exemplary behavior for the former, but may seem inauthentic for the latter. Someone can therefore be judged unfavorably both for failing to possess an admired characteristic and for trying to imitate those who possess it. *Respect for type* and *behavioral prescriptions* need not point in the same direction.

Fake it until you make it. In a traditional aristocratic society, noble status is largely inherited. A commoner who adopts an aristocrat's accent and manners may be dismissed as a pretender: however convincing his imitation, he cannot change his ancestry. By contrast, an ideal of self-making, particularly associated with the United States, holds that people can transform themselves through education, achievement, and changes in behavior. Someone adopting the manners of a higher social class may initially appear inauthentic, but eventually come to be accepted as belonging to that class. This is the intuition behind *fake it until you make it*. The distinction is related to psychological research on whether people regard personal characteristics as fixed or capable of development (Dweck et al., 1995).

The tension between these views is central to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Born James Gatz, Gatsby reinvents himself, acquires a fortune, and surrounds himself with the trappings of wealth. He believes that he can become the kind of man who belongs in Daisy Buchanan's world. Tom Buchanan, born into that world, sees him quite differently. To Tom, Gatsby is an impostor, regardless of how rich he has become. Fitzgerald thus places two understandings of class identity in conflict: one in which a person can become someone new, and another in which origins determine who someone really is (Fitzgerald, 1925). Whether an attempt at self-transformation is admired or condemned as inauthentic depends on which understanding prevails.

Rites of passage. Changes in identity can be difficult because they are not always publicly visible. Suppose a young man begins to think of himself as an adult and behaves accordingly. His friends may see him as pretending to be something he is not. When does his

old identity cease to apply, and how are others to know that it has changed?

Anthropologists have long studied one way societies manage such transitions. In his classic account, van Gennep (1960) describes *rites of passage* in which people leave an old status, pass through a period of transition, and are incorporated into a new one. A coming-of-age ceremony can establish a public moment when a child becomes an adult. An investiture can turn a squire into a knight: bearing that might previously have seemed presumptuous now becomes expected. Bourdieu (1991) emphasizes that such rituals change both how others see a person and how the person sees himself. A rite need not transform someone's underlying nature overnight. It makes the new classification commonly recognized and, with it, the prescriptions that now apply.

The feminine mystique. Postwar America offered an image of the fulfilled woman: a cheerful suburban housewife, devoted to her husband and children, with a spotless kitchen and no desire for a career. Women's magazines and experts presented this not merely as an ideal to live up to, but as an expression of women's authentic nature. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan (1963) described the unease beneath this picture. One mother of four, who had left college to marry, tried gardening, canning, neighborhood committees, and PTA teas. She loved her family, but found herself asking, "But who am I?" Friedan called such dissatisfaction *the problem that has no name*. Women's devotion to homemaking appeared to confirm the prevailing picture of their nature. Yet for many, it reflected less their authentic selves than the prescriptions they felt obliged to follow.

Race: color and ancestry. The boundaries between categories also differ across societies. Consider racial classification in the United States and Latin America. Historically, the United States developed a largely binary distinction between Black and White, with the *one-drop rule* assigning people with African ancestry to the Black category. A person with one Black parent and one White parent might therefore be classified as Black, regardless of having relatively light skin. In Brazil, by contrast, racial classification has traditionally been more continuous. People are distinguished as White, Brown (*pardo*), or Black, with

classification depending more heavily on skin color, other physical characteristics, and sometimes social standing. McGee (2025) develops an economic model explaining how different political and economic conditions can produce ancestry-based or color-based racial systems. Telles and Paschel (2014) document important differences in racial classification across Latin American countries.

These contrasting classifications can also shape what counts as authentic behavior. Where racial identity is regarded as fixed by ancestry, someone who behaves in ways associated with another racial category may be accused of acting inauthentically without being reclassified. One illustration is the accusation of "acting White," which Fordham and Ogbu (1986) documented among Black students in an American high school. Academic achievement and certain ways of speaking could be treated by some peers as inconsistent with Black identity. The behavior was judged inappropriate for the person's assigned category.

In a more continuous system, by contrast, behavior and social standing may also influence how a person is classified. In Brazil, for example, Telles (2002) finds that interviewers were more likely to classify some highly educated individuals as White. Schwartzman (2007) similarly finds that education can affect how parents classify their children's race. Rather than simply being seen as violating the behavioral prescriptions associated with a fixed racial identity, a person may come to be seen as belonging to a different category. This does not eliminate racial hierarchy or the pressure to conform. But the same behavior may be treated either as inappropriate for a person's type or as evidence that the person belongs to a different type.

3.3 Prescriptions in Equilibrium

We have argued that expectations about how people behave can give rise to prescriptions about how they should behave. But the causation also runs in reverse: prescriptions influence behavior, reinforcing the expectations from which they arose. Suppose men are expected to be breadwinners and women homemakers. Men and women have incentives

to conform to these expectations, both to gain respect and to avoid the disapproval associated with behaving inauthentically. As a result, men are more likely to work outside the home and women are more likely to care for children. Their behavior, in turn, reinforces the belief that these are the appropriate roles for men and women. This feedback can make prescriptions self-sustaining. It is implicit in the original model of Akerlof and Kranton (2000), where identity-related prescriptions influence individuals' occupational choices and the division of labor within families.

Carvalho and Pradelski (2025) develop a model that makes this feedback explicit. They argue that the more heavily a group is represented in an activity, the more appropriate that activity comes to seem for members of the group. Consider a profession dominated by men. A woman contemplating entering it may feel that she does not belong, or may face disapproval from others. Fewer women consequently enter the profession, reinforcing its association with men. Carvalho and Pradelski show that this mechanism can sustain substantial differences in participation even when groups have the same productivity and face equal economic opportunities. An important implication is that the effects of past discrimination can persist long after the discrimination itself has disappeared.

The feedback between behavior and prescriptions helps explain their persistence. But what determines which prescriptions emerge in the first place? One possibility is that they depend on the broader values of a society. Akerlof and Rayo (2020) explore this idea in the context of the family. They consider two contrasting narratives, which they call the *protector narrative* and the *fulfillment narrative*.

Under the protector narrative, a central concern is avoiding *pollution*. Pollution here means moral or social contamination—exposure to influences regarded as corrupting, such as sexual impropriety, certain forms of knowledge, or contact with people considered impure. Protecting members of the family from these influences is seen as valuable. This creates an incentive to divide the family into two roles: some members are protected from the outside world, while others venture into it to earn income and provide protection. Those in the latter role must acquire worldly knowledge and toughness, potentially

sacrificing some of their own purity.

These roles can readily become gendered. Suppose men initially earn somewhat more than women. Families then have an incentive to assign men to the protector role and women to the protected role. As this division becomes common, it generates behavioral prescriptions: men should be strong, knowledgeable about the world, and capable of providing for their families; women should be innocent, modest, and protected from corrupting influences. These prescriptions reinforce the division of labor, making the roles increasingly distinct. A relatively small initial difference between men and women can thus be magnified into a much larger difference in how they are expected to behave.

The same logic can help explain why heterosexuality becomes part of what is expected of men. The family is understood as a male protector paired with a female partner whom he protects. Two men forming a household cannot reproduce this division without one of them assuming a role coded as feminine. A relationship between men can therefore be judged as departing from a prescribed form of masculinity, even apart from any independent objection to homosexuality. The argument applies to same-sex relationships between women as well. Consistent with this account, Akerlof and Rayo find that respondents with traditional family views are substantially less accepting of same-sex relationships and marriage.

The fulfillment narrative produces a different outcome. Here, what matters is that individuals have opportunities to develop their abilities, pursue meaningful activities, and lead fulfilling lives. There is less reason to divide family members into protector and protected roles. Both men and women may work outside the home, and the division of responsibilities can depend more on individual interests and abilities. Consequently, the feedback that generates strong gender prescriptions under the protector narrative is much weaker.

Akerlof and Rayo provide evidence consistent with these contrasting pictures. Using data from the General Social Survey, they find that Americans who favor traditional gender roles also tend to disapprove of premarital sex, favor obedience in children, and work

in more gender-segregated occupations. Similar patterns emerge from the World Values Survey. Across countries, they also find that the relationship between income and female labor force participation differs substantially between more traditional and more modern societies. In more traditional societies, greater earning potential is associated with lower female participation; in more modern societies, this pattern disappears. The evidence suggests that gender prescriptions form part of broader systems of values, rather than arising independently.

There is considerable variation in prescriptions concerning masculinity itself. Baranov et al. (2023) show that areas of Australia with more male-biased populations during the convict era developed stronger norms emphasizing toughness and traditionally masculine behavior. Remarkably, aspects of these differences persist today, long after the historical imbalance between men and women has disappeared. The example illustrates how particular circumstances can give rise to prescriptions that subsequently sustain themselves.

Economic changes can also unsettle established prescriptions. Consider the decline of manufacturing employment in the United States. For many working-class men, a well-paid manufacturing job offered a way to be a breadwinner and a good husband. Deindustrialization made it much harder to fulfill this role. Autor et al. (2019) show that declining manufacturing employment reduced men's marriage-market prospects and contributed to falling marriage rates. As Akerlof and Rayo emphasize, the difficulty is especially acute where gender prescriptions require men to be the principal providers: a man who cannot earn enough may be judged to be failing in his prescribed role, while the couple may be reluctant to reverse the traditional division of labor. A man who loses a manufacturing job may also be reluctant to retrain for work in nursing, childcare, or elementary-school teaching if these occupations are regarded as women's work. Prescriptions about which jobs are appropriately masculine can thus make adjustment to economic change harder.

One possible response is a change in what it means to be a respected man. When providing for a wife and children becomes less attainable, other markers of masculinity

may acquire greater importance. Physical strength, muscularity, toughness, and dominance offer alternative ways of demonstrating manliness. The contemporary *manosphere* illustrates such an emphasis: particular online communities hold up ideals of physical fitness, masculine appearance, dominance, and self-improvement (Ging, 2019; Halpin et al., 2025). Economic change can thus alter not only people's ability to fulfill existing prescriptions, but also the prescriptions themselves.

The same feedback that makes prescriptions persistent can therefore also contribute to their transformation. Changes in economic opportunities affect how people behave and which roles they can successfully occupy. As behavior changes, so too can expectations about what is appropriate for members of different groups.

3.4 The Rise of Expressive Individualism

Who gets to decide what it means to be authentic? Traditionally, communities have claimed that authority. A woman who wants a career may be told that her true calling is homemaking. A gay man may be told that a proper life requires marrying a woman. An increasingly influential norm challenges this authority: individuals should be free to reject prescriptions imposed by others and decide for themselves who they are. Friedan's critique of the housewife ideal, discussed above, and later movements for gay and transgender rights gave this principle political force and illustrate another way prescriptions can change. When people come to regard these decisions as belonging to individuals rather than communities, prescriptions of many kinds can lose their force.

The broader cultural shift is often called *expressive individualism* (Bellah et al., 1985).[11] Its central claim is that each person knows better than anyone else who they really are, and should therefore have the authority to decide which prescriptions govern their life. Taylor (1991) calls this the *ideal of authenticity*. With roots in Romantic thought, the idea became a widespread cultural force in the 1960s, reinforced by psychoanalytic notions of

[11] Bellah et al. (1985) distinguish expressive individualism from utilitarian individualism, which emphasizes the pursuit of individual advantage. They contrast both with what they call the biblical and republican traditions, which emphasize obligations to others.

a "true self" that could be concealed by social expectations (Winnicott, 1965).

Expressive individualism has helped reshape family life by making personal fulfillment, rather than conformity to prescribed roles, a central purpose of marriage. Coontz (2005) traces this historical transformation, while Cherlin (2004) describes the accompanying *deinstitutionalization of marriage*—the weakening of established norms governing spouses' behavior. The *fulfillment narrative* in Akerlof and Rayo (2020), discussed above, can be understood as expressive individualism applied to the family, helping explain the changes in gender roles, marriage, and parenting.

The shift has costs as well as benefits. Prescribed identities can be confining, but they also give people a recognized place in society and a shared understanding of who they are. Greater freedom brings the burden of continually defining oneself—what Giddens (1991) calls the self as a *reflexive project*. And a norm that strips families, religious institutions, and other leaders of the authority to define identities also strips them of the ability to supply a common one. Critics worry that, as people increasingly define themselves in individual terms, they place less weight on what they share with others, weakening common identity (Lasch, 1979; Bellah et al., 1985).

A related strand of identity politics holds that groups should define themselves rather than be defined by outsiders. In its stronger form, this means that only those with the appropriate *lived experience* can speak authoritatively for a group—for example, that only those who have experienced racial discrimination can speak authoritatively about it. Critics argue that this conflicts with liberal democracy's commitment to open debate among equal citizens (Fukuyama, 2018; Mounk, 2023). It can also create a tension between group autonomy and individual autonomy (Fukuyama, 2006). Suppose a religious community insists that women wear the burqa as a mark of authentic membership. Should the community's authority to preserve its traditions take precedence over a woman's freedom to reject that prescription? More generally, deciding whose lived experience confers authority requires drawing boundaries around identity categories. A movement that seeks to free people from identities imposed by outsiders can thus end up reinforcing those very

categories, and giving those who claim to represent them new authority over individuals (Mounk, 2023).

4 Anger and Caring

So far, we have considered how identities and norms shape individuals' own choices. They also shape how people treat others. We focus here on two motivations: anger and caring. Anger can motivate people to punish violations of rules, including identity prescriptions. It can also fuel conflict when different groups disagree about what behavior is reasonable. Caring, too, is shaped by identity. People may care particularly about the welfare of those with whom they identify, while feeling little concern for those with whom they disidentify. We explore how these motivations shape rule enforcement, conflict, and ingroup favoritism.

4.1 Anger

Anger can lead people to punish others at a cost to themselves. There is considerable experimental evidence of people's willingness to do so. In experiments by Fehr and Fischbacher (2004), one participant decided how much money to share with another, while a third could pay to reduce the first participant's earnings. Many third parties punished those who shared little, even though they had suffered no harm themselves. Participants in public-goods experiments likewise paid to punish those who contributed little to a collective project (Fehr and Gächter, 2002). Such behavior suggests that the desire to punish wrongdoing can be a motivation in its own right. But why do some violations provoke anger while others are excused?

Anger does not depend on harm alone. Consider someone who arrives ten minutes late for an appointment. If his train broke down, we may be sympathetic. If he simply could not be bothered to leave on time, we may be angry. The delay is the same; what differs is our judgment of his behavior. Reactions may also differ across settings. Lateness

that provokes irritation in one society may pass without comment in another (White et al., 2011; Mroz and Allen, 2017). Why are some lapses excused while others provoke anger?

The law offers a useful way of thinking about this question. Causing harm does not by itself establish that someone behaved negligently. Courts often ask what a *reasonable person* would have done in the same circumstances. In a famous 1947 decision, Judge Learned Hand considered a barge that broke loose in New York Harbor and sank while its attendant was absent. Should someone have been aboard? Hand argued that the answer depended on the burden of taking that precaution and the likelihood and seriousness of an accident without it. Not every accident implies negligence. The question is whether the person could reasonably have been expected to prevent it.[12]

Anger and Enforcement (Akerlof (2016)) develops a similar account of anger and punishment. Anger arises when someone fails to do what we believe could reasonably have been expected of him. Crucially, people need not agree about what is reasonable. One reason is that they may have internalized different rules. A rule is *internalized* when it becomes a norm for someone: he feels that breaking it is wrong.

The model has two people. The first decides whether to follow a rule; the second observes his choice and may punish him if he breaks it. Compliance has a cost, C. If the first person has internalized the rule, violating it also carries a cost, D, reflecting his desire to do what he believes is right. If he expects punishment p for breaking the rule, that gives him a further reason to comply. Someone who has internalized the rule therefore follows it when

$$C \leq D + p.$$

Someone who has not internalized it lacks the motivation represented by D, but may still comply to avoid punishment.

The second person asks what a reasonable person would have done. If she has internalized the rule, she regards as reasonable someone who has likewise internalized it. If she has not, she regards as reasonable someone without that motivation. If a reason-

[12] *United States v. Carroll Towing Co.*, 159 F.2d 169 (2d Cir. 1947).

able person would have broken the rule, she excuses the violation. If a reasonable person would have complied, she becomes angry. The severity of her punishment depends on how much she cares about the harm caused by the violation, whether to herself or to others.

4.1.1 Consequences for Rule Enforcement

The model brings out two consequences for the enforcement of rules.

First, *anger at rule violations depends on whether the prospective enforcer has internalized the rule*. Someone who has not internalized a rule judges the violator against a person who likewise feels no obligation to follow it. When compliance is costly, such a person may reasonably break the rule. The observer then excuses the violation rather than becoming angry. Someone who has internalized the rule, by contrast, may regard compliance as reasonably expected even when it requires some sacrifice. A violation can therefore provoke anger and punishment.

Consider how boys policed masculinity in an American high school. Pascoe (2005) describes boys mocking classmates who showed emotion or seemed too interested in their clothes. The ridicule enforced a prescription about how boys were supposed to behave. Those who had internalized the prescription regarded deviations from it as deserving punishment; someone who did not share it would have seen nothing blameworthy. As Akerlof and Kranton (2000) emphasize, identity prescriptions influence behavior not only because people feel they ought to conform, but also because others may punish them if they do not. Even a boy who rejected the prescription might therefore feel compelled to conform to avoid ridicule or exclusion.

The reverse situation arises when a formal rule conflicts with the norms of those expected to enforce it. In nineteenth-century Utah, federal law prohibited plural marriage, which many Latter-day Saints regarded as a legitimate religious practice. Enforcement was weak for several reasons, but one obstacle was that members of this community controlled local courts and juries. Many had not internalized the federal prohibition: to them,

plural marriage was not wrong, and those who practiced it did not deserve punishment. In 1880, President Rutherford B. Hayes complained that local juries were obstructing enforcement; Congress subsequently excluded polygamists and supporters of plural marriage from serving on juries hearing such cases (Driggs, 1988). But excluding sympathetic jurors did not necessarily solve the problem. Even when courts are willing to punish, they often depend on citizens to report violations. Someone who regarded plural marriage as legitimate would have little reason to report a neighbor. Both Akerlof (2016) and Acemoglu and Jackson (2017) emphasize this dependence of institutional enforcement on citizens' willingness to report wrongdoing.

Second, *rules that people do not regard as legitimate can be difficult to enforce because punishment itself may provoke anger*. Suppose someone is punished for violating a rule he has not internalized. He judges the punishment by asking what a reasonable enforcer would have done. To him, a reasonable enforcer is someone who likewise has not internalized the rule and would therefore have excused the violation. He sees the punishment as an unreasonable infliction of harm. Rather than accepting the sanction, he may feel justified in retaliating against the person who imposed it.

In his study of a gypsum plant, Gouldner (1954) describes how a new manager tried to enforce rules against unauthorized absences that workers had long treated flexibly. Coworkers were unwilling to report which absences were unjustified. When the manager punished absentees by laying them off for an equal number of days, other workers deliberately stayed away in retaliation; absenteeism rose. The manager saw a clear violation deserving punishment. The workers, however, believed that a reasonable manager would have tolerated the absences. They saw his punishment as unjustified, and their retaliation as warranted. In trying to enforce the formal rules, the manager undermined the informal understanding that had sustained cooperation in the plant.[13]

[13]Whistleblowers can face a similar reaction. An employee who reports a coworker for violating a rule she has internalized may be seen by coworkers who reject the rule as having brought unjustified punishment upon him. From their perspective, a reasonable colleague would have excused the violation and refrained from reporting it. They may therefore feel justified in retaliating against the whistleblower.

4.1.2 Conflict

Anger can also turn differences in norms into conflict. Suppose one group acts in a way it regards as reasonable, but another regards as offensive. The second group becomes angry and retaliates. Yet the first group sees this retaliation as unjustified: from its perspective, a reasonable person would not have objected to the original action. It may retaliate in turn, provoking further anger. Each group sees itself as responding to wrongdoing rather than initiating it. A feud can develop in which both sides believe their actions are justified.

Consider the disputes over Orange Order parades in Northern Ireland. Protestant Orangemen regarded marching along the Garvaghy Road in Portadown as an expression of their heritage and a legitimate right. Many Catholic residents regarded the same procession as a provocative assertion of Protestant dominance. In 1996, police initially prevented the parade, provoking angry protests and disorder among loyalists. When police reversed their decision and allowed the parade to proceed, nationalist residents were outraged. What one community regarded as an exercise of its rights, the other regarded as an affront (Jarman and Bryan, 1996).

Differences in values can also generate conflict by leaving people feeling insufficiently respected. When groups value different characteristics or achievements, each may feel that members of the other group fail to accord it the respect it deserves. Neither side need intend an insult, yet both may feel insulted. Perceived disrespect can provoke anger and retaliation, setting the same cycle in motion.

A study of merchant mariners by Ramsay (1966) provides a vivid illustration. Ramsay describes intense resentment among crewmen toward their officers. On one occasion, a broken coffee percolator was replaced with an old one discarded from the officers' saloon. The crew took this as a sign of how little the officers valued them: they were scarcely considered worthy of a decent cup of coffee. Their anger found expression in acts of resistance and sabotage, including deliberately damaging equipment and ruining officers' laundry. The grievance was not simply about the quality of the coffee. It was about the respect the crew believed they deserved.

This account complements economic theories of conflict that emphasize the stakes of fighting and incentives to mobilize. Esteban and Ray (2011), for example, analyze ethnic conflict in terms of group interests, radicalism, and the costs of participation, while Fearon (1995) examines why strategic bargaining may fail to prevent war. Anger offers another explanation for why conflicts arise and persist. Groups may fight not because they expect to gain materially, but because each believes it has been wronged and is justified in retaliating.

4.2 Caring

In an experiment with Manchester United supporters, an injured jogger was more likely to receive help when he wore a United shirt than when he wore a rival Liverpool shirt. But when the researchers encouraged participants to think of themselves as football fans rather than specifically as United supporters, they became more willing to help a Liverpool supporter too (Levine et al., 2005). The boundary of the group mattered for whether a stranger's distress called for assistance.

In more extreme circumstances, identification can inspire extraordinary sacrifices. In interviews with veterans of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, Malešević (2025) describes soldiers who developed intense bonds with comrades they had known only briefly. One Croatian soldier recalled carrying a wounded comrade under shellfire, risking his own life to save him. The soldiers often spoke of one another as family.

As we saw earlier, even arbitrary group assignments can lead people to favor their own group when allocating rewards (Tajfel et al., 1971). Chen and Li (2009) find that group identity also affects reciprocity: people are more inclined to reward good behavior by fellow group members and less inclined to punish their bad behavior. Snower and Bosworth (2016) place caring for fellow group members at the center of an economic model of identity. But why should another person's welfare matter more, or less, depending on the group to which we believe he belongs?

4.2.1 Dehumanization

One answer comes from research on *dehumanization*: seeing other people as less fully human. Haslam (2006) distinguishes two forms. In *animalistic dehumanization*, people are seen as coarse, uncivilized, and impulsive, driven by appetites and instincts rather than reason—as in racist depictions of people as apes or vermin. In *mechanistic dehumanization*, people are seen as cold, rigid, and unfeeling. A nerd, for example, might be imagined as a calculating automaton, intelligent enough to solve difficult problems but incapable of embarrassment or hurt. The first form tends to elicit disgust or contempt; the second, indifference. Related work on the perception of minds distinguishes the capacity to think and act from the capacity to feel and experience things (Gray et al., 2007). The latter is particularly important for caring: we may acknowledge someone's intelligence while scarcely recognizing his suffering.

Dehumanization is distinct from disrespect. We may think someone is foolish or bad at his job while fully recognizing that he has feelings and needs as rich as our own. Conversely, we may grant someone considerable competence while viewing him as cold and mechanical. Research on *infrahumanization* finds that people often attribute richer, distinctively human emotions to members of their own group than to outsiders, even when they do not express overt hostility toward those outsiders (Haslam and Loughnan, 2014). This difference can matter for behavior. Shortly after Hurricane Katrina, participants who attributed more complex emotions to victims from another racial group expressed a greater willingness to volunteer to help them (Cuddy et al., 2007). How fully we imagine another person's inner life is related to how much we care about his welfare.

Why should identity affect such perceptions? One reason is that dehumanization can bolster self-respect and earn peer respect. Recall the jocks and nerds. Jocks might gain a sense of superiority not merely by judging themselves better athletes, but by imagining nerds as peculiar, emotionally stunted people who lack qualities they regard as essential to being fully human. Other jocks who share this view may reward it with their respect.

Disrespect can shade into dehumanization where groups occupy different positions in

a social hierarchy. Research suggests that members of despised or marginalized groups are sometimes perceived as less fully human (Harris and Fiske, 2006; Haslam and Loughnan, 2014). India's caste hierarchy offers a striking example. In experiments on charitable giving, Deshpande and Spears (2016) find that identifying a person in need increases willingness to help when the person's name signals high caste, but not when it signals a disadvantaged caste. Caste thus appears to influence whose suffering elicits concern. The dehumanization of Dalits is especially stark. Beliefs that Dalits are ritually polluting, and that their touch can contaminate others, persist in parts of India. These beliefs exclude Dalits from sharing wells and water vessels with members of other castes (Shah et al., 2006).

Another reason for dehumanization is that it can make hurting people easier. When anger or conflict motivates one group to mistreat another, imagining its members as lacking a rich emotional life makes their suffering less troubling. In experiments by Bandura et al. (1975), dehumanizing descriptions of victims weakened restraints on aggression. Here dehumanization is attractive not because it confers superiority, but because it makes inflicting harm less uncomfortable. The resulting cruelty may, in turn, reinforce the dehumanizing view (Haslam and Loughnan, 2014).

4.2.2 Bullying

These processes help explain bullying. Research with children finds that dehumanization is associated with bullying and is distinguishable from other ways of justifying harmful behavior (van Noorden et al., 2014). In experimental studies using hypothetical bullying situations, students were more inclined to dehumanize an unlikable target than a likable one (Thornberg et al., 2020).

But bullying is often more than cruelty toward the victim: it is a public performance. Researchers have emphasized the importance of an audience of classmates who laugh, encourage, or join in; bullies can gain status through such behavior (Salmivalli, 2010; Sijtsema et al., 2009). Consider again a school divided between jocks and nerds. A jock who

trips a nerd, sending his books across the corridor, may be doing more than tormenting him. He may be showing other jocks that he regards the nerd as a comic object rather than as someone whose embarrassment deserves concern. His willingness to inflict humiliation becomes evidence that he shares the group's attitude. Bullying can therefore serve as a signal of identification, earning him the respect of other jocks.

Such performances may also change how people see the victim. A jock need not begin by sincerely believing that nerds are less human; his display of indifference may initially be put on to impress his friends. But when his classmates laugh at the victim's humiliation, they are invited to see him as a ridiculous object rather than as a person experiencing embarrassment. The bully and his audience may come to adopt the attitude that the performance initially merely expressed. As their dehumanization deepens, they care less about nerds' suffering, making further bullying easier. Bullying can thus begin as a signal of identification, foster the dehumanization it displays, and encourage still more bullying.[14]

There is a further motive. Nerds may look down on jocks as intellectually inferior. A jock who is secure in his own identity might dismiss this judgment, but someone whose self-respect is more fragile may find it threatening. One response, discussed earlier, is to avoid people whose opinions threaten one's self-respect. Another is to ridicule and dehumanize them, making their judgments seem less worthy of attention. Bullying can then both earn the respect of fellow jocks and protect the bully against the contempt of nerds. Consistent with a role for threatened self-regard, Salmivalli et al. (1999) find that adolescents with a defensive form of self-esteem were especially likely to bully or encourage bullying.

[14]The importance of peers' public behavior is borne out by the work of Paluck et al. (2016). In an experiment across 56 schools, encouraging selected students to publicly oppose harassment changed their schoolmates' perceptions of acceptable behavior and reduced disciplinary reports of conflict by roughly 25 percent. The effects were stronger when influential students took part.

4.2.3 Kinship and the Scope of Caring

People may make great sacrifices for their families yet feel little obligation to help others. In his study of a southern Italian village, Banfield (1958) describes a young man who gave up an apprenticeship as a shoemaker after two years to earn money for his sister's dowry. Yet an orphanage in the same village, which cared for girls from local families, received no help from the villagers. Its building was crumbling, but underemployed stonemasons offered no assistance with repairs. The children lacked food, but no farmer or landowner donated even a young pig. Banfield called this *amoral familism*: a system in which people pursued the interests of their immediate families while showing little concern for the wider community.

Banfield's account illustrates a broader distinction between *particularist* caring, directed especially toward family and members of one's own group, and *universalist* caring, which extends more equally to strangers.[15] Enke (2019) develops a model linking these differences to kinship structures, and finds that societies with stronger extended family and clan ties tend to be more particularist. More recently, Cappelen et al. (2025) document substantial variation in universalism across 60 countries, finding that generosity toward strangers is greater in societies with weaker kinship ties. These findings fit the account of identification and caring given above: kinship structure helps determine which shared characteristics are salient, and so how far caring extends. Where belonging to a clan is an important part of people's identities, fellow clan members have a special claim on their concern. Where clan membership becomes less central to identity, caring may extend more readily beyond kinship.

What loosens clan ties? Henrich (2020) argues that in Europe the medieval Church played a crucial role through its restrictions on marriage between relatives, eventually extending even to distant cousins. These prohibitions undermined the marriage alliances that sustained extended kinship networks, and as clans weakened, individuals increasingly formed relationships and associations outside them. Schulz et al. (2019) find that

[15] For a review of the literature on universalism and particularism, see Enke (2024).

populations with longer historical exposure to the Western Church have weaker kinship ties today, and exhibit greater individualism and more cooperation with strangers. Market exposure may have worked in the same direction (Enke, 2023).[16] The scope of caring, on this evidence, is not fixed. It is set by which identities a society makes salient, and institutions can change that.

5 Conclusion

People's identities, and their pursuit of respect, shape their choices of work and education, their willingness to cooperate, their tendency toward conflict, and their welfare directly. These are outcomes at the heart of economics. But identity cannot simply be treated as another taste, like any other preference in economics. We do not merely consume identity. It shapes how we perceive and judge ourselves and others, what we regard as right and wrong, and whom we feel moved to help or punish. Nor can identities and norms be treated as fixed. They shape economic choices, but they are also shaped by economic experiences. A worker who loses his job may lose not only income but also his identity as a provider. He may seek a new identity, and new sources of respect, in response.

This chapter has sought to provide a conceptual framework for understanding these forces. We have examined how the pursuit of respect shapes norms and identities, how prescriptions arise and influence behavior, and how anger and caring affect people's treatment of one another. Together, these ideas help explain how identity and economic outcomes interact, sometimes reinforcing existing social arrangements and sometimes transforming them. To understand economic behavior, we need to understand not only the opportunities people face, but also who they believe themselves to be, who others believe them to be, and who they might become.

[16] Relatedly, Rustagi (2024) finds that greater exposure to markets encourages cooperation and the development of rules that sustain it.

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