Sociological Methodology

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Assignment #3 – Essay Complete the Hidden Threads assignment as detailed below and explained in class. Requirements 1. Topic Selection and Approval: a. Email your topic and a rough outline to Dr. Reichard for feedback and approval well in advance of the assignment due-date deadline. (president@ogs.edu) b. Schedule a meeting with Dr. Reichard to review feedback. (president@ogs.edu) c. After receiving approval of the topic and rough outline, submit a rough draft to Dr. Reichard in advance of the turn-in deadline (president@ogs.edu). He will provide the feedback necessary for preparing the final paper. 2. The Essay – This paper should be approximately 5-7 double-spaced pages in length and may be longer. Provide an appropriate (and interesting) title for your essay. Write a short paragraph introducing the reader to the topic you will explore in your paper (i.e., This paper explores both theological and sociological dimensions of the obesity epidemic in the United States…). Then, follow the steps listed below: (Develop each in paragraph form, and clearly explicate all concepts you will develop.) Follow this pattern and organize your work under headings, or using the numbers for the parts of the assignment listed below: a. Identify a few concepts to be used for the interpretation of the problem you have chosen. (i.e., for a topic dealing with obesity, you might choose “hunger” or “emptiness.”) Define/explicate this concept(s), explaining how it will be employed in your analysis. b. Identify sub-concepts that are related to the concepts you have chosen in #1. (i.e., for obesity sub-concepts might include, “gratification,” “satisfaction,” etc.) Define/explicate these sub-concepts, explaining how they offer additional analysis of your chosen problem. This extends your analysis beyond #1, offering additional depth and nuance. c. Identify several biblical passages or concepts that provide meaning for these concepts and sub-concepts? (Perhaps something that addressed “food and drink that satisfy” … or other passages that deal with such matters as being “filled with the spirit, “gluttony,” “fasting,” “feasting,” etc.) Drawing on these passages, and related theological ideas, explain their connection to the d. concepts/sub-concepts you have employed in your analysis of the problem. Note: this is not simply attaching Bible verses that “inspire” or “shed light on…” Rather, the emphasis should center on the conceptual and analytical. (I’m SR-968 Sociological Methodology 6 © 2022 Omega Graduate School. All rights reserved. Revised Jan 2024 not as interested in “normative” [Christians must… Christians should…] approaches.) e. Identify secular (i.e., sociological) studies that utilize or address these concepts and sub-concepts. (Supersize Me [a movie], The McDonaldization of Society by George Ritzer, Studies on anorexia or bulimia, etc.) Use these to develop your analysis sociologically. You can think of this as a very short “literature review.” f. Explain how your analysis aids /offers insight into contemporary life/society. (i.e., the burgeoning fast-food industry, Western society’s focus on efficiency and calculability, etc.) Where is your chosen problem “visible” in contemporary society… what contemporary illustrations can you identify and briefly interpret using some of the analysis developed in #1- #4)? g. How does your analysis make a contribution to Christian thinking on the topic/problem? (For example, understanding the relationship between appetite, indulgence, and a life of the Spirit, and then extending these ideas to areas other than just obesity and food.) What fresh new idea(s) can you offer to fellow Christians? h. How does your analysis make a contribution to sociological thinking about this issue? Can you offer a new sociological insight or two derived from your analysis?

Who are we?A This question echoes through the pages of recorded history voiced by philosophers, musicians, poets, politicians, dramatists, and ordinary people passing through the days of their lives. This paper shall explore a recently observed phenomenon, the merging of unique and specific activist causes into one grand cause, and how this relates to the understanding of identity among these activists. Rather than defining one’s identity through provided and fixed definitions, this generation seeks to discover a self of self through dynamic interaction with others. While recent observations of protestors indicate a trend toward bridging differences to form broader coalitions, the dichotomy of "us versus them" persists. Nevertheless, these observations may signal the initial stages of a quest for solidarity, hinting at a desire for something beyond the oppositional paradigm.

# Conceptual Analysis

## The Initial Observation

At the time of this writing, the Israeli-Hamas war is front page news, as are the Pro-Palestinian protest movements on campus. Inside the news coverage of how people respond to the war, a curious evolution of intersectionality is emerging. “’Palestine is every single issue in one issue.’” This was tweeted by Scarlett Rabe, a singer-songwriter just this past February. She continued. “’It is social justice. It’s climate crisis…It’s not just one issue; it all the issues in one.’” (Zickraf, 2024, para. 6) In late March of this year the Palestinian flag was found in many marches alongside the Trans flag. One sign declared “’Liberations are linked’”. (para. 8) These recent emergences suggest questions. How is it that various social issues are merging into one? What is the common factor?

## Key Issues Be Addressed

This paper will explore the emergence of this melding of social causes in light of identity formation. Veith observes that much of Modern thought centered around economics. In the postmodern era this shifts to the question of identity. (2020, p. 259) This author asked a 21-year-old white female who she was. She answered, “I don’t know.” I asked how she knew if she had value. She answered, “We are just bags of meat floating on a rock.” How does this melding of social interests relate to our search for value and meaning? Could this be indicating a stunted or incomplete identity process? Or is this reflecting a new dimension to identity formation among young GenZ adults?

To explore identity is to consider such questions as “Who am I” and “Who are you.” Many sociologists stress that identity is not “biologically given” but is “socially created in social interactions.” (Giddens & Sutton, 2021, p. xii) A person’s self-concept is influenced by how they believe others perceive them. One’s understanding of “who I am” changes over time. (p. xii) No one exists in a vacuum. We make our lifescapes together with those in association with us, and even those beyond our horizon can affect the environment shaping how we understand our lives as their influences ripple toward us. How much of my self-concept is self-determined and how much is socially determined is a matter of debate.

Schwalbe and Mason-Shrock suggest conscious and unconscious processes are at work as a person constructs a self-image through interactions with others while relating through social structures and responding to cultural norms. While the individual makes conscious decisions informed by self-reflection, much of our identity formation is shaped and maintained by the forces and people we are embedded with. (1996) Consider this in light of the description that being true to one’s self and personal values while resisting external influences or pressure to conform to external expectations is “high authentic living”. (Xue et al., 2020, p. 516) It may be that such authentic living is a sign of a mature well-formed identity, but how others see us and what others expect of us will also have a powerful role in shaping how we see ourselves. For instance, one young Christian woman described that she tried to find her identity in the material world and in her social groups, which led her to compare her value based on how she perceived her attractiveness of physique and personality leading to anxiety and using alcohol to cope. An observation from her father, who asked her how basing her life on the values of culture could fit with her self-identification as a Christian, transformed her approach back to looking to find her identity in her Christian worldview. (Scott, 2023, para. 1) This step toward authenticity was a response to an outside observation, that of her father. Authenticity may be more about positively navigating the intertwined lifescapes of human life than escaping them.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) stresses that people define their self-concepts based on their membership in various social groups. The stronger we affiliate with a group, the more likely we are to follow its norms. (Xue, et al., p. 517) Others suggest this may relate to one’s sense of belongingness, that some are more inclined toward a need to belong than others. (p. 517) This suggests one’s degree of extroversion and introversion may play a role between the conscious/deliberative and unconscious/responsive actions in our identity formation. However, another interesting dimension is observed. One strategy that some people employ to achieve differentiation is through identification with a “numerically distinct group…a subgroup…a group that defines itself against the mainstream.” (p. 518) This suggests a postmodern twist to identity formation related to group association. This fits with SIT, which stresses that people compare their groups with other groups and tend to favor their identified “in-group.” The construction of a personal identity is a complex process. Identity is malleable, dynamic, and even contradictory at times. (Ioan, 2023, p.4)

## Sociological Methodologies to be Utilized

This paper will rely strongly on Symbolic Interactionism (SI) and more specifically on Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach. Conflict theory, Functionalism, and generational studies will provide additional insights. Blumer describes SI as being built upon three premises. “First, human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Secondly, these meanings are a product of social interaction in human society. Thirdly, these meanings are modified and handled through an interpretive process that each individual uses in dealing with the signs he/she encounters.” (Meltzer, et al., 2020, p.1) For SI the emphasis is on how symbols and most importantly language as a symbolic system, allow us to become self-conscious and aware of others. (Giddens & Sutton, p. 23) SI does not focus on objectively existing structures as would a functionalist approach, but focuses on individuals and their interactions, going as far as to say only the latter exists. (p. 85) SI’s method is interpretative and qualitative rather than gathering empirical data on large masses of people, focusing instead on day-to-day interactions and observations. (p. 850) SI explains social change comes from social movements seeking remedies to problems birthed out of dissatisfaction with current society. It is a collective behavior that forms at the primitive level and develops gaining increasing organization to take on a “character of a society.” (p. 849) This indicates the role that emotional reactions may play in conflict and alliance formation.

As this paper examines the merging of social movements beyond intersectionality the dramaturgical approach will be useful. Intersectionality applies multiple distinct social oppressions to an individual. Here we are observing a melding of social oppression. “Goffman’s dramaturgical approach can be usefully applied to situations where ‘actors’ collaborate to accomplish specific outcomes.” (Giddens & Sutton, p. 486) Using the metaphor of a theater, Goffman says the world functions as a stage and individuals perform their roles with others who are also performing for an anticipated audience. These roles follow scripts that give a person social status or social position. We are constantly acting or performing with and for others. And each person has multiple roles. (p. 483) This suggests the intended and actual audience has a strong influence on how a person is performing. Goffman also presents the concepts of each person having a front stage and a backstage, the former being how we present ourselves to the public world, and the latter being the person we are when we do not have to perform but are more relaxed and rehearsing our next performance. (p. 485) This distinction will be helpful in considering the interactive influence of self-determinative behavior and reactive behavior to social norms and expectations. This also leads us to ask what goals may be driving the actor as he or she presents to society and how this not only shapes but reflects the identity a person is constructing or seeking to construct. Again, we find the interplay of the “person I want to be” and “the person I am with others.” This may even lead us to the question of “the person I am with myself.’

# Sociological Analysis

## Performances and Roles

Our lives are situated in lifescapes with others and influenced by our circumstances. A person born a specific gender, on a specific day, in the United States will be different from a person born of the same gender, on the same day in Gaza. SI observes the self is, at least in part, and likely a large part, “a social creation that is built from a whole series of relationships and interactions with other people.” (Giddens & Sutton, p. 473) These interactions have the potential to shape and change who we think we are. (p. 473) Older generations were concerned with roles associated with work and family. Many roles define younger generations and seek to not be boxed in by any one controlling role. (Guillen, 2023, pp. 21-22)

Generational analysts observe that GenZ (born 1985 to present) is growing up more slowly than their predecessors. They prefer to remain in the roles of childhood than to adopt the roles of adulthood, leading to growing up more slowly. (Twenge, 2017, p.45) This is impacting the development of identity and self-concept. One study of 18-26-year-olds indicated that 53% expressed diffuse identity decreasing as the participants drew near to the age of 26. (Strnadova et al., 2019, p. 569) This may support the idea that the merging support for distinct social causes in the role of protestor could be related to immature identity formation still searching to firm up roles and scripts with more nuance. Stoltzfus argues more is going on with GenZ than simply deferring or avoiding adult roles. Stoltzfus supports a new developmental stage between the ages of 18 and 29, which was proposed by Jeffrey Arnett, who labels it “emerging adulthood.” Rather than focusing on this phenomenon negatively, he sees this in a more positive light as a “time of experimentation and exploration” of many different options. Gen Z may be slower in adopting adult roles, but they have a larger portfolio of roles to consider and adopt. Is the identification of all social causes as one giant cause reflective of the vast number of causes young people are exposed to through social media, leading to generalization as a coping strategy for role formation?

For younger generations, boundaries between school, life, and work are more porous than those of their predecessors. (pp. 194-198) This softening of boundaries related to role performance may enlighten regarding the melding of distinct causes into one cause. Younger people, at least some of them, may be indicating a willingness to move beyond distinctions with strong boundaries to finding what is held in common, that is not merely having multiple roles, but an expanded role play based on a softening of boundaries and inclusion of wider causes. The recent protestors find something in the specific causes they identify with inclusively.

Roleplaying for the young activists is very much a team effort. Gen Z is hyper-connected through the digital world, even earning the nickname, “digital natives.” (Hodges, 2023, para. 8) Informed by the digital world, GenZ is aware at an earlier age of the global world and more aware of its multiple social issues. (Twenge, p. 282) With so much exposure to problems in the world, it is not a surprise that GenZ experiences higher anxiety than previous generations. (p. 103) One GenZer discussed the importance of finding others he would “…trust, rally together with, and debate and refine ideas…” and having “…been blessed with the refreshing realization I am not in this alone.” (Hodges, para. 33) This unity in struggle leads to a sense of interdependence that transcends differences. (Beneke, et al., 2023, p. 375) Teaming up on the stage and adopting roles inclusive of others' roleplay counters the anxiety of heightened awareness of a broken world. Thus, identifying multiple causes as expressions of one common cause serves a functional role for these activists.

Teaming up is not unique to GenZ or activists but is a typical human phenomenon. Boyer, (2018) writes, “Humans are so attached to forming groups that they seem to create group solidarity, and conflicts between groups, on the flimsiest of excuses.” (p. 44) People are motivated to “join and remain” because alliances lead members to behave in ways that “…enhance each other’s welfare”. (p. 46) Team roleplay serves a pragmatic function.

Here we see the interplay between deliberative conscious efforts and more unconscious responses influenced by social norms and interactions with others. Social activists informed through social and other media, are motivated by empathic concern for the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza. A wider alliance, between more focused social alliances, makes sense if the motivation is a common sense of suffering at the hands of those more powerful than oneself. There is here a sense of deliberate choice. One may also suspect the proximity of diverse young people on campuses, and their mutual involvement on social media may also play an unconscious role in influencing the softening of boundaries and a wider inclusive net in alliance formation. Climate change, resisting fatphobia, trans rights, and support for the Palestinian people in a time of war, look like quite different causes. But as these young activists are shaping their performances, adjusting the scripts that society gives them, to their own lived experiences and felt needs, they are finding common cause with their own suffering in the suffering of others. Thus, while solidarity is always partial “encompassing the needs and channeling the forces of a particular group…” (Burelli & Camboni, 2023, p. 2), these activists are developing roles that are swimming against the postmodern current of increasing tribalism and splintering narratives, expressing greater solidarity and a more inclusive narrative.

## The Stage and Its Props

The stage is the place where we play out our roles. For these young activists, the stage is not just the college campus, or the downtown march, but also their online communities. When they gather on campus, or to march through downtown streets, they are forming a cohesive group in some ways entering a foreign stage, one that is not always friendly or affirming of their presence, especially if they transgress community norms. In their online communities, this is different. Their online groups may be more heterogeneous, but they are aligned with common goals and interests that create social cohesion. (Veith, 2020, p. 223) Both the public form and the online forum function as a stage to perform the roles the activist has adopted. While both may function as a front stage, where the performance is public, many online forums may also function as a sort of backstage, where individuals can be more relaxed and seek out common interests. Social media becomes a behind-the-scenes place to explore different sides of their identity and through this interaction reflect on oneself. But at the same time, there is pressure through this interaction to conform to the social norms of the group. Rejection of these norms can lead to rejection impacting self-esteem; thus, the participant is motivated out of a desire for a positive self-image in the eyes of his peers to adopt the views of the group. (Dennen, et al., 2020, p. 1648) So here the peers become not just part of one’s team, but also part of one’s stage, even one of the props on the stage. On the popular TV show “Whose Line is it Anyway,” one of the most popular games is props, where the actors are provided a box of props chosen by others that they must interact with and interpret to provide an understandable performance to the audience. Similarly, these peer groups provide ideas and values, props, that the performer must interact with to continue playing the game in a pleasing way. So, while they may be teamed up with or allied with their peers in common interest, their peers also serve as an audience to their performance shaping the performance with their expectations. Studies have demonstrated that young people are heavily influenced by their peers tending to like things based on what their social group communicates is popular. (Sherman, as cited in, Dennen et al, 2020, p. 1648) One can also suspect these activists are influenced not only by their peers but also by their teachers. Conflict theory is a common paradigm utilized on college campuses in various academic disciplines shaping a view of interaction as commonly based on conflict between those with power and those without. Students educated to view the world through this lens would be expected to engage in team-based performances of us vs. them.

## A Shared Script: Vested Interests

Gen Z loathes being treated unfairly and manipulatively. (Hodges, para 13) They have a strong desire for self-determination and dignity. Dramaturgical theory suggests that if we perform a particular self-identity formation and other actors do the same, alliances form based on particular vested interests. (Kerrigan, 2020) This can be heard in the words of alQaws, “Queer liberation is fundamentally tied to the dreams of Palestinian liberation, self-determination, dignity, and the end of all systems of oppression…In a colonial context, no clear line can be drawn where colonialism ends, and patriarchal violence begins… The fight against patriarchy and sexual oppression is intertwined with the fight against settler colonialism and capitalism. The standards for solidarity and action cannot be set by the colonizer.” (2024, Section 2) The particular activist becomes the inclusive activist, the monist, whose focus is no longer on just a specific injustice but on collective injustice, united by a shared vested interest against those who have power expressed by those who seek change. Yet the element of us vs. them remains. While a person’s self-image is influenced by how we think others perceive our performances, we are also aware of how others view our alliance. We shape how we understand the identity of our group alliances against understanding other alliances and whether they are for or against us.

## A Conflicted Audience

Gen Z and these activists in particular are highly aware of their stage. Gen Z is recognized as the aware generation, an awareness that stimulates motivation to action. (Hodges, para 13) Not only are they aware of the issues in the world, but they are also aware of how others perceive them, their audience. Thus, they are not only seen on their stage, but they also have a unique perspective informed from their stage. These performers have multiple audiences. They have the audience of fellow-minded protestors gathered in other locations and times. They have the audience of those whom they are resisting. They have audiences in the local community and thanks to the media audiences on a global scale. They have audiences that shout in support, those that shout in opposition, and even those that pass by uninterested or weary of it all. One can surmise that by injecting themselves into the settings of oppositional audiences on campus, in marches through population centers, and in disruptive acts of social protest, they are seeking the attention of the oppositional audience. But more than attention is desired. The desire is for change.

SI interprets conflict as interaction between “rule makers and rule breakers” and here it blends with Conflict and Critical Theories as a reaction to the dominant group that makes the rules about right and wrong. (Kerrigan, 2020) Dramaturgical theory suggests conflict's role in self-identity formation includes not only vested interest and an us vs. them mentality, but also an audience. There is not just the audience set up as the oppositional “them” but also the audience that observes the conflict between the two groups and how this audience responds according to their vested interest. (Kerrigan, 2020)

Gen Z observes the performances of older adults and blames them for many of the world’s ills they are inheriting such as climate change and challenging job markets. They are not applauding older generations’ fixed gender roles and sexuality boundaries. Older adults are not applauding the performances of younger people either describing them as immature and selfish. (Guillen, p. 21) Social activists joining in common cause is labeled “narcissistic identity politics on steroids”. (Zickraf, para. 9) Samuel (2024) suggests the grouping of “Queers for Palestine” is paradoxical given that LGBTQ+ individuals suffer persecution at the hands of both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. (para. 5) It is true that in Gaza homosexual activity has been outlawed since 1936. Some have likened queer support for the Palestinian cause to chickens advocating for KFC. (Tamarkin, 2024, para. 4) Samuel is critical of this alignment and believes it to be counterproductive to the goals of specific activist groups such as the LGBTQ+ community. He simply finds this alignment as indicative of an immaturity leading to an inability to understand nuance, or the specific issues of the populations involved. (para. 20) Various studies support the observation that Gen Z may suffer from delayed and superficial identity formation. (Haas, 2023) Hyper-exposure to the digital world can lead to fragmented attention, with information selected because it is popular, gleaning snippets from here and there but lacking the maturity or interest for “deep, thoughtful, focused, attention.” (Jackson, 2013, para 1.) These observations suggest that behind the scenes, the performances of Gen Z activists combining their interests supports the interpretation that identifications and associated identity formation are immature and potentially broken limiting the ability for nuanced understanding.

But is this the case? Narcissism describes a response to a form of identity crisis that results from the imperfect formation of a positive self-image, often resulting in performances with an excessive focus on validation and admiration from their audience to fill the gap. Is that the case here? Activists do deliberately act outward toward their audiences to generate influence for change. Are these monist protestors acting out revealing an immature identity formation, limited by the factors previously discussed such as growing up slowly and being potentially overwhelmed by world awareness and a wealth of options to pick from? Does the goal of the performance that purports to seek change, have a more insidious unconscious motivation?

The term collective narcissism is a form of group identification for “…those whom ‘the callous world promises less and less satisfaction’” for which “…integration into social groups allows them to compensate for something” …of which they are deprived. (Adorno, cited in Prestifilippo, 2024, p. 3) Additionally, collective narcissism references a group that believes its in-group is not appreciated or recognized as it should be. This is different from just seeing one’s in-group as valuable in itself, called in-group satisfaction. The former indicates a fragile sense of self both by the group and by those within the group compensated for by a demand for admiration and validation from their audience. Thus, collective narcissism becomes a joint acting out seeking to restore self-esteem through identity with the collective or group. (Dyduch-Hazar et al., 2019) This is akin to Communal Narcissism which describes a group united by a lack of affirmation of their identity by others (may we say, their audience) that hold the common goal of justice and fairness. These groups see themselves as empathetic and generous but become easily morally outraged and act out against anything that seems unfair. (Telloian, 2021, Communal Narcissism Section)

While it is true that older generations may perceive Gen Z as narcissistic or entitled, there is evidence that in general Gen Z is not testing out as more narcissistic than previous generations. (Grubbs et al., 2019, p. 1) (Wetzel, et al., 2017 p.31) However, these macro-level observations may not be capturing what is changing for small groups of Gen Z students who identify with specific causes connected to marginalized lifestyle or ethnicity. Conversely, these macro-level observations suggest caution in extending observations related to this merging of boundaries among some activists to the wider Gen Z population.

However, that being the case, based on the preceding observations, it can be argued that this melding of specific causes flowing from specific injustices could be manifesting a process of collective narcissism within these activist groups. It is true that the various groups observed are marginalized outgroups, and there is a demand for recognition and affirmation. These activist groups are a specific niche within Gen Z. Individuals within these groups often tell stories expressing injury and rejection by others. This suggests these groups would be ripe for collective narcissism. In this case, the melding of specific social causes into one giant cause ignoring the potential conflicts and contradictions may be more than Gen Z’s willingness to blur boundaries and be inclusive but could reflect a common vested interest of compensating for or healing an injured self-image.

## Constructing the Setting

The entire performance with its actors and audiences takes place within a setting. The dramaturgical approach examines how the performance potentially shapes the reality that the actors take for granted is out there. Good acting expresses emotion. Likewise in the performance of our personal identities on the public stage, our emotions are on the stage with us informing our performance. Steinke (2019) explains, “Nothing complex or controversial happens without confusion, resistance, or emotional reactivity.” (p. 13) The media including news sources and social media are full of graphic images from the Hamas-Israeli war showing the terrible suffering the war is incurring on the civilian population of Gaza. This generates emotional reactions. Steinke names six major anxiety triggers including disruption, feeling trapped, sensing potential harm, differences, uncertainty, or depletion. (pp. 18-19) Activists of differing stripes respond emotionally to triggers such as these to seek power over the interpreted injustice.

Conflict theorists might suggest that triggers such as these are generated by those who have privilege seeking to maintain their power and position. Conflict theory rejects functionalism’s emphasis that consensus drives the bus of grand social structures, to suggest that conflict is the common setting. Conflict theory views society as a system characterized by conflict and competition between groups with power and those seeking to gain power. It would seek to understand how power structures are established and maintained to better understand how to disrupt them. (Giddens & Sutton, p. 22) Conflict theory’s application of intersectionality helps examine the monist motion of the activist mentioned above. Intersectionality examines how a person has different identities, or as Goffman might suggest performance roles, which lead to being oppressed in different ways. For instance, a black, gay, woman might experience discrimination for being black, or gay, or woman, or any combination of these. For Conflict Theorists, this suggests in the end it all boils down to one thing, power over others is the political goal. (Veith, p. 261) The world is divided between the oppressed and the oppressor. Bontea (2023) suggests that the Palestinian cause is merely one example of how political structures in general seek to maintain power for privileged stakeholders. (p.222) Veith suggests the logical outcome of extending intersectionality is for all oppressed groups to find common cause against all those viewed as privileged. (p. 259) The activist senses the world is a threat, an oppressive force restricting their personal preferences and is motivated by various emotional responses. Empathy generates a motivation toward unity with fellow oppressed. Anger generates a desire to fight for change. The view of the world as full of oppressors and oppressed is reinforced. Melding all oppressions or injustices into one grand common oppression further cements this view. The world is further divided into oppressors and oppressed. Utilizing conflict and resistance as the way to change the world at large, reinforces the perception that the world is built on conflict and conflict is necessary. The real-world outcome is broken and lost lives. Nuance is lost. The issues of human competitive behavior and conflict compress into you either win or lose, heroes or villains, oppressor, or victim. The idea that both sides might contribute to a problem or to a solution simply no longer fits. The concept for an LGBTQ+ activist that the people he advocates for may very well choose to oppress him does not enter this streamlined compressed view of a world greased with conflict.

# Scriptural Analysis

A Christian examination of the question of “who am I” begins with the recognition of our creation and creaturely dependence upon our Creator. This cannot be discovered through reason, contemplation, or empirical examination but is revealed to us through Holy Scripture. In Genesis God says, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness…So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (English Standard Version Bible, 2007, Gen. 1:26-27) From a Christian worldview, our identity is given by God and grounded in God. Humanity’s fall into sin corrupts this identity leading to alienation between people and God and people and people. St. Paul writes as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (ESV, Rom. 3:10-12) It is recognized that within Christendom there are varying viewpoints about the degree of this corruption. Some see it as a wounding while others talk of total depravity. St. Paul further writes, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins.” (ESV, Eph. 2:1) Jesus Himself says we must be “born again”, something beyond our abilities. (ESV, John 3:3) These passages are more supportive of total depravity than mere wounding.

Our alienation from God and from our given image leads us to the not only the idolatrous creation of God-images but also our self-images. Having exorcised God’s creative act in shaping our identity from our culture, we have elevated ourselves to be masters of our existence, a world filled with billions of gods constructing billions of micro-universes that sometimes align with one another in common cause. “…Thus says the Lord GOD: “Because your heart is proud, and you have said, ‘I am a god, I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas,’ yet you are but a man, and no god…” (ESV, Eze. 28:2) Jesus warned His disciples against building lives upon soft sands.

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.” (ESV, Mat. 7:24-27)

Propositional truth exists. It is revealed through the Holy Scripture. When we seek to build out of our limited experience with our sinfully corrupted self-inclined perspectives and vested interests, we find ourselves on malleable, shifting, undependable sands. The Christian understands because he or she has been taught through the Word of God by the Holy Spirit. (ESV, John 16:13) The Christian would hope to lead others to see something more. Christianity proclaims redemption of the fallen image of humanity is possible.

St. Paul writes, “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ…For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (ESV, Eph. 2: 4-9) “…put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” (ESV, Col. 3: 10) Christ’s life, death, and resurrection enable the ability for our images to be redeemed and renewed regrounding us in our creation in the image of God. Granted, this is talking of human salvation that is appropriated through faith in Christ creating a people of God who are called out from the world, living in the world, but no longer of the world. These passages talk about what God is doing among Christians, not among the entire world, though His Gospel and redemption are offered to all people. However, most people in the world do not subscribe to this faith. This brings us to ask what potential exists for some repair of human society and how Christians should go about it.

St. John writes, “For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another… By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in action and in truth.” (ESV, 1Jo. 3: 11-18) Here we recognize the interdependence of humanity. Christians are called to love others in ways that bind the woundedness of our fallen culture. Redeeming our world, restoring the Garden of Eden in this world is beyond us, but this reality does not equate to justifying apathy. Working with others is in love and truth. Putting love into action can enable the healing of many injuries in this world, even injuries associated with broken identities.

# Implications

## Implication for Understanding the Issue in Contemporary Life

Identity and people’s identifications are having a major influence as people are increasingly interacting with others in conflictual ways heightening division and complicating the discovery of solutions that encompass the complicated needs of differing population groups. With the adoption of a postmodern worldview, contemporary culture has moved away from grounding identity in external or propositional definitions or provided metanarratives from religion, philosophy, or even culture. In such an environment emotion and experience take the place of truth, and what is called truth, “…becomes a mere by-product of the human will, nothing more than a social construction.” (Heddendorf and Vos, 2010, p. 187) The rise of diverse self-identifications, the celebration of micro-narrative, and the elevation of emotion and lived experience as the anchors for our self-understanding create malleable and soft ground upon which to understand the questions of “Who am I”. If culture teaches us to recognize no demands on who we are outside ourselves, and that all external expectations are oppressive, then liberation would have us turn inward to find our identity rejecting all boundaries. If I can be anything, then I can be nothing. But if I can be nothing, then I must entertain the possibility that I am nothing, that in the end, we are “bags of flesh floating on a rock.” So how do I know that I am not nothing, that I have value? If I cannot look outside myself to something transcendent and immutable, then I can only look into myself. But we do look outside ourselves, to our social groups, to how others perceive us. But this is changeable. These social constructions are not grounded in external realities but internal cognitive and emotional interpretations, hence identity is always floating on shifting seas never able to anchor itself. This becomes a ripe ground for narcissism and for nihilism with the will to power filling the vacuum.

## Implications for Christian Thinking on the Problem

A Christian worldview simply does not align with anti-foundational approaches or nihilism. While a Christian worldview finds affinity in the idea that people create meaning and purpose in life through their choices and actions interacting with others in interdependence, a view held by many existentialists, it would not go as far as to there is no inherent meaning or predetermined meaning in being human. We are created in God’s image which means something. Dichotomous thinking simply will not do here. The old debates about individual or community, freedom or determinism, nature or nurture, fail to understand that so much of human life is not about “either-or” but “both-and” or a little bit of alot. Adopting the anti-foundational approaches of the 21st-century academy simply will not do. There is no lasting solution to the question of “who am I” to be found here. But we can learn much about how people come to their conclusions about their identities, what they helpfully contain, and what they are sadly missing out on. It is important to understand that people do influence one another shaping how we understand our self-concept. Thus, we can endeavor to become part of the influences for the church that is not of the world, yet remains in the world.

A problem of the first part of the 21st century is that humanity is looking for identity in all the wrong places. While we look to others to help us understand who we are, we do so with a growing hermeneutic of suspicion that all interactions are grounded in attempts for power having been taught thus by the academy, the media, and our dominant discourse. The Church is relegated to a corner of the room in the interplay of discourses, but it is still in the room. We must speak up and testify to the truth of our creation in God’s image and we must do more than speak, we must translate this understanding into action, treating others as we would seek to be treated, treating others as people created in the image of God. Yes, imperfect, just as we. Yes fallen, just as we. Yet worthy of love and respect even when we may not be able to affirm and celebrate every human choice and every human action. The latter does not justify the rejection of the former. Dichotomous thinking simply will not do. Thus, we can join with others to overcome real injustice even if we do not necessarily agree with their lifestyle choices. We certainly do not celebrate terror or the actions of Hamas on October 7, 2023. We may not as Christians agree with the theological tenets of Islam. But this does not translate to uncritical rejection of concerns expressed by Palestinian Muslims and their supporters. Opinions, requests, criticisms, and even demands deserve to be evaluated on their merit and aligned against the truth that we are all created in God’s image. Identity united around the idea of conflict and power may be influencing the merging of social causes into one grand narrative of oppression vs. oppressor leading to a reduction in critical thinking and limiting real-world problem-solving. Identity returned to the ground that all people have value, that we all fall, and that we all contribute to the injury of the world, enabling a more nuanced and potentially healing approach to dealing with these injuries.

## Implications for Sociological Thinking on the Problem

This paper examines the recent behavior of a particular group of people specifically activists with different concerns aligning with Palestinian activists while proclaiming that Palestine is all issues. The reason it is “all issues” is that all the particular issues have been reduced to the smallest common denominator of oppression vs. oppressor eliminating the ability for nuance in understanding human conflict. Gay and Trans activists look past the historical record and reality of the treatment of LGBTQ people inside Palestinian territory. The shared interest in resisting oppression smooths out the differences and covers over the contradictions shaping how the actors view themselves and their corresponding role play deemed necessary on the stage of the world to secure their goals of freedom for themselves resulting in aligning their vested interests with others in a team performance. This does not necessarily indicate a trend of such merging of concerns on a wider scale among GenZ, which has been noted as being sympathetic to the needs of others and more inclusive than preceding generations. This does not necessarily mean that this group of activists is representative of GenZ in general. A survey conducted in early May of 2024, found that only 8% of college students had actively engaged in a protest on either side of the Palestinian Israeli issue and that 81% of students believed protestors should be held accountable for damaging or occupying university property. (Habeshian, 2024) However, the observed behavior of these activists may certainly be reinforced by cultural trends that have been identified and observed over the past decades.

It has been understood for some time that postmodernity rejects external truth claims, foundationalism, or metanarratives. Ironically one of the most common approaches to understanding social behavior, Conflict Theory, which once was radical, new, and innovative, has now become institutionalized and sounds very much like a metanarrative as it reduces all human social interaction to conflict, to us vs. them. But this is an understandable development. Without truth, there is a vacuum. But into these vacuum flows “will to power” and “appetite.” All that is left is to seek power over others, to “…seize power for your own group.” (Veith, 2020, pp. 19-20) Conflict theory has the power to identify and highlight injustices in human society. But it is incapable of understanding interacting causes. Conflict theory fails to recognize how all sides contribute to the dance, instead turning the world into victims and villains. The key problem, we all identify as the victim. Few are so self-aware and humble as to be able to identify as the villain. But the villain resides in us all. Conflict theory’s solution is simply more conflict, to win. It feeds the very problem it seeks to resolve. Its goal to turn the tables, merely justifies a different group of oppressors, a different group of oppressed. Before, I wrote that if I can be anything I can be nothing. Postmodern ethics would have us affirm any identity a person expresses from their lived experience. Thus, we have Palestinian voices and their supporters who would label Hamas as “freedom fighters” rather than terrorists. They would have us reason that in some way their actions were justifiable in the face of Israeli oppression. Others reject this outright. Nuance is lost. One is either a villain or a victim. The only solution is war and the elimination of the villain. Yet both sides self-identify as victim, the others as villain, and there are real-world consequences. Bontea is correct when writing, “In the Israeli-Hamas war, the rhetoric of conflict and identity politics has sustained suffering and death for civilians on both sides.” (p. 222)

Yet amidst this field of suffering, there might be a flower seeking to surface. Activists of unique and specific causes find alignment around the Palestinian issue may be signaling something positive or at least a desire for something better, whether we might agree or disagree with their interpretations or demands, and even if we find it lacks nuance or full understanding. The Postmodern era may have given us increasing tribalism, micronarratives, conflict theory, a hermeneutic of suspicion, and the dismissal of propositional truth, but it may be that young adults are growing weary of “us vs. them”. Even here with these activists where opposition is still very much on the stage, there is yet a small movement to transcend difference and seek to find unity, to find a common cause in our humanity. It is a small step. It is not a step that transcends the philosophy of *differance*. Not yet. This trend may not be a reversal of momentum toward difference and conflict, but it may be a slowing, a longing cry for something different, for a focus on building up rather than tearing down, for a desire to move beyond the destruction of conflict theory and deconstruction. This phenomenon is new and what it signals is yet to be know for sure, but it is certainly worthy of observation. Transmodernism may be trying to be born.

This brings us to consider the value of sociology for the Christian practitioner who seeks to understand and promote the role of religion in society. Sociology functions best as a reflective philosophy describing current or past human behavior rather than seeking to predict future human behavior. Sociological theories rise out of the ground of their contemporary times. They provide tools and frameworks to understand how people are working interdependently to create their communal lives in that time and place. In this regard, they are helpful to the Christian practitioner seeking to impact social change for the benefit of others and the Church. But history has indicated that human beings are creative with their rebellion against God and unpredictable beings. Thus, new theories will always be needed, and human social life will change making former ways of constructing social life making former theories obsolete. But here we are reminded that human beings have more in common with one another and our predecessors than we acknowledge. The universal truths of human nature and human interdependence transcend these worldly manifestations of society and culture. The revealed truths of Scripture stand and reveal deep truths about who we are.

Identity formation is a complex process, an interplay seeking to harmonize many impressions and many voices, a vested process as it has to do with the quality of our lives. People within our culture struggle to create a self out of lived experience and impressions of how others see them. The voice of God calling in the wilderness, you have value and worth, is largely silenced. But there is a call in the wilderness to be heard, recognized, and valued. And while recent observations of protestors indicate a trend toward bridging differences to form broader coalitions, the dichotomy of "us versus them" persists. Nevertheless, these observations may signal the initial stages of a quest for solidarity, hinting at a desire for something beyond the oppositional paradigm. And here, amidst ears that seek to hear, you have value, over the cacophony of voices that can be heard once again, “You are created in the very image of God.”

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