IDENTITY

Highlights

- Identity refers to the labels we give to ourselves, the groups we belong to, and how we distinguish ourselves from others.
- We all have multiple identities that may change or become more salient over time and that influence how we interpret information.
- Ecological, environmental, place, civic, and collective identities can influence our individual behaviors and collective actions.
- The activities we engage in influence our identities and their salience.
- Environmental education, including approaches that engage participants in environmental action, debates, and developing a sense of responsibility for nature, can foster environmental identity.

We all have multiple identities—as an environmentalist, a Muslim, a man, a conservative. Some of these identities are largely fixed or imposed from the outside (e.g., gender, race), while others we choose, like environmentalist. Identities can also change over time as a result of new information and experiences. For example, volunteering for a litter cleanup, or participating in a debate about climate change, can foster an environmental identity. Thus, performing an environmental behavior or collective action contributes to our environmental identity, which in turn can make us more likely to engage in additional behaviors and actions.
Identities influence how we interpret information, as well as our behaviors and collective actions (Kitchell, Kempton, et al. 2000; Clayton 2012; Fielding and Hornsey 2016).

**What Is Environmental Identity?**

*Identity is fundamentally a way of defining, describing, and locating oneself. . . . People have multiple identities that can vary in salience and significance over a lifetime and across different contexts.*

(Clayton 2012, 165)

Identity refers to how we label ourselves, how other people label us, and how we distinguish ourselves from other individuals and groups. Personal identities are unique to ourselves as individuals, whereas we share social identities with others (table 11.1).

Individuals who spend time in nature often form an ecological identity, which refers to how we view ourselves “in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self” (Thomashow 1995, 3). Whereas the definition of environmental identity is similar to that for ecological identity, environmental identity focuses more on environmental behaviors and actions and less on spending time in nature. Environmental identity refers to “a sense of connection to some part of the nonhuman natural environment that affects the way we perceive and act toward the world; a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are” (Clayton 2003, 45–46). Environmental identity can be a personal identity, for example our identity as a thoughtful consumer or vegetarian, and can predict individual environmental behaviors (Nigbur et al. 2010). It can also be a social identity, as when we are part of an environmental movement (Kempton and Holland 2003; Holland et al. 2008; Dono et al. 2010). Because social identities revolve around a shared understanding of group norms and goals (Tajfel and Turner 1986), they can be used to mobilize action and to exclude others. For example, hunters, African Americans, and white environmentalists may share a concern about and work collaboratively to protect the environment, but the way in which white environmentalists define environmental identity may make other groups feel excluded (Holland and Lave 2009).

Whereas environmental identity motivates action to protect the environment more broadly, place identity motivates people to protect a particular place (Stedman 2002; Clayton 2012; see also chapter 9). Place identity includes our memories, ideas, feelings, and other cognitions about a physical setting.
and the social interactions that occur in that setting (Proshansky et al. 1983; Uzzell et al. 2002). Similar to environmental identity, place identity can be either an individual (Proshansky et al. 1983) or shared, social identity (Uzzell et al. 2002). We often think about our local place identity; for example, when people ask where are you from, you might respond by naming the city where you live. However, place identities can occur at different scales, including neighborhood, city, region, and country (Lewicka 2008). When a place is central to our identity and we value its natural features, we are more likely to support preserving that place (Stedman 2002; Carrus et al. 2005; see also chapter 9).

Collective identity focuses on how group members contribute to social movements (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Saunders 2008) and how they act in a commons dilemma (De Cremer and Vugt 1998). If you were faced with a commons dilemma, you would have to choose between your own interest, which would lead to benefits for you in the short term, and conserving a common resource for the long-term benefit of everyone in your community. So, for example, if you are a farmer, utilizing the greatest amount of irrigation water helps you grow crops, but if all the region’s farmers withdraw the maximum groundwater for their own farm, eventually the groundwater dries up, and all suffer. If you share a collective identity with other farmers, and if you recognize that other farmers share the common groundwater resource, you are more likely to trust, care about, and cooperate with fellow farmers (Dovidio et al. 2007). Researchers have also shown that in situations where one’s collective identity is made more salient relative to one’s personal identity, people are more likely to support a public good such as a city park (De Cremer and Vugt 1998).

Similar to collective identity, civic identity is linked to trusting and helping fellow community members, and working toward a common goal or public good. Civic identity consists of a sense of belonging to a community and having rights and responsibilities related to that community, including contributing to its well-being (Atkins and Hart 2003).

Regardless of whether we incorporate nature, the environment, a place, our community, or civic and other values into our identity, we all balance multiple identities when we decide to change our behavior or take environmental action. For example, we might balance our identities as an athlete, an environmentalist, a person of faith, and an immigrant in deciding which volunteer activities to join. Once we have chosen certain activities, they tend to reinforce the related identity. Choosing to play sports rather than joining an environmental club will reinforce a student’s identity as an athlete (unless she has negative experiences playing sports, in which case she may stop identifying as an athlete and seek another activity and related identity).
TABLE 11.1  Types of identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF IDENTITY</th>
<th>DEFINITION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual identity</td>
<td>How we define ourselves (e.g., mother, Christian, environmentalist, nurse)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social identity</td>
<td>Aspects of self-image that derive from the social categories (e.g., environmentalist, millennial) to which we perceive ourselves as belonging (Tajfel and Turner 1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecological identity</td>
<td>How we view ourselves “in relationship to the earth as manifested in personality, values, actions, and sense of self” (Thomashow 1995, 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental identity</td>
<td>“Sense of connection to some part of the nonhuman natural environment that affects the way we perceive and act toward the world; a belief that the environment is important to us and an important part of who we are” (Clayton 2003, 45–46). Can be individual or social (e.g., part of an environmental movement).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place identity</td>
<td>Identity related to memories, ideas, attitudes, and feelings about a physical setting and the social interactions that occur in that setting (Proshansky et al. 1983; Jorgensen and Stedman 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective identity</td>
<td>Group identity focused on members’ associations with and contributions to social movements and their organizations (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Saunders 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic identity</td>
<td>Feeling of connection to a community and having rights and responsibilities related to that community (Atkins and Hart 2003)</td>
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**Why Is Identity Important?**

Identities play a critical role in determining what information we accept and what actions we take. While environmental and related identities foster environmental behaviors and collective actions, conservative political identities play a role in people’s questioning of climate change science and lack of support for climate and other environmental policies.

- Identities impact who and what information we dismiss or pay attention to, in part by determining our emotional reactions to messengers and messages (Clayton 2012).
- Identities influence our behaviors and actions (Clayton 2012).
- Identities appear to be more effective predictors of a broad spectrum of environmental behaviors than attitudes that focus more narrowly on specific behaviors (Gatersleben et al. 2014).
- If we fail to consider our audiences’ identities, we may use ineffective messages and even incite our audiences to non-environmental behaviors to protect an identity they feel is threatened.
Identity (Adapted from Clayton 2012)

Identity is a label that we use to define, describe, and locate ourselves within society.

Identities describe our personal attributes, whom we are like and unlike, and what groups we are tied to.

Identities develop over time and within particular social contexts.

We have multiple identities that differ in their strength or salience.

Some identities, like “environmentalist,” are chosen and can change over time. Other identities, like ethnicity, are fixed.

We adopt particular identities to fill needs, like the desire for belonging or self-esteem.

We filter information according to our identities.

We choose actions according to our identities.

How salient an identity is at a particular time predicts which behaviors or actions we engage with.

Sometimes we use our identities defensively—to resist influence or threats.

Identities are more powerful predictors of behavior or collective action than knowledge or attitudes.

If we create opportunities for program participants to experience belonging and self-esteem in an environmental education program, they are more likely to develop an environmental identity.

How Does Identity Contribute to Environmental Behaviors and Collective Action?

Identity contributes to individual behaviors and collective action by influencing the way we process information, how we view others, and the social norms we subscribe to (figure 11.1). It can also impact behaviors by engendering positive and negative emotions.

Social identities affect the way we process information. For example, we are more likely to pay attention to and trust information from someone who shares our political identity as a liberal or conservative. Often educators act on the belief that facts change people’s behavior. But what happens when our identities conflict with the facts we have been taught? In this case, we often interpret new information, regardless of its validity, in ways that reflect the beliefs of the groups to which we belong. The notion that our social-political identities can trump what
we know about science has been used to explain the differences in how liberals and conservatives with similar science knowledge support different climate policies (Kahan 2015).

Social identities also influence behaviors and actions through the norms or expectations of the groups with which we identify. For example, you may identify as an environmental educator and feel pressured to bring a reusable water bottle to conferences, to buy carbon offsets to compensate for your flight emissions, and to volunteer for a fund-raiser because you perceive these behaviors as norms for environmental educators. Social identity theory helps explain these behaviors. It suggests that once we categorize ourselves as belonging to a particular group, we start to accentuate our similarities with others in our group while emphasizing our differences with people in other groups. We then assimilate our attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to the norms of our group while polarizing away from norms of other groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Fielding and Hornsey 2016; see also chapter 12). Whereas adopting group norms may be helpful in spurring environmental behaviors, this polarization can thwart progress in resolving environmental conflicts or advancing environmental policy.

Emotion influences how identities interact with behaviors (Devine-Wright and Clayton 2010). When others confirm our identities, we feel better about ourselves. But when we sense our identities being threatened, negative emotions

FIGURE 11.1. Environmental identity impacts environmental behaviors and collective action by determining what information we pay attention to and believe and what group norms we adopt.
ensue, which can result in our reconsidering how we define ourselves, blaming others for our behaviors, or sticking more firmly to our original identities. Terror management theory explains how people who do not identify as environmentalists might have emotions that lead to non-environmental behaviors (Dickinson 2009). Because identities are tied to our self-image and social standing (Clayton 2012), when people who do not identify as environmentalists are confronted with a doom and gloom environmental message, they may feel that their self-image is threatened, and they may even be reminded of their mortality. In response, they may decide to undertake behaviors that make them feel more important and less vulnerable—such as driving fast in a large SUV. In short, people sometimes manage feelings of mortality or “terror” that environmental messages incite by engaging in non-environmental behaviors (Dickinson 2009).

Environmental contamination and disasters can also threaten our social or place identity, leading to feelings of hopelessness or, alternatively, to collective action. Hopelessness occurs in part when we hear negative descriptions of our community, develop a sense of insecurity, and feel as if we have limited control over our life (Edelstein 2002). Sometimes those impacted by a contamination event like the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico react by taking collective action, such as cleaning oil-covered seabirds or monitoring long-term water quality. In so doing, they may form new collective or social identities tied to place and to being an environmental citizen (Clayton 2012).

People joining an environmental group may not initially describe themselves as environmentalists but adopt an environmental identity through active participation in environmental activities (Kitchell, Kempton, et al. 2000). In one study, zoo volunteers adopted an identity as a zoo volunteer, which became important to their self-esteem, provided social support, was recognized by others, and gave them a sense of purpose and of self-efficacy. This led to them becoming active in other environmental activities outside the zoo (Fraser et al. 2009). In short, there is a strong feedback loop between behaviors and identity, with identity impacting behaviors and behaviors impacting identity.

**Author Reflections**

Although I have written largely about environmental identity in this chapter, I think about social, cultural, and political identities all the time. Americans’ social, cultural, and political identities seem to have the most influence on what the US is doing—or not doing—about the existential threat of climate change. More and more conservatives are accepting the
How Can Environmental Education Nurture Environmental Identity?

To achieve the aim of sustained action for the environment, environmental education needs to provide a pathway through a series of social settings where young people will want to belong, where their identity as an environmental actor will progressively “thicken.”

(Williams and Chawla 2016, 993)

Repeated childhood experiences in nature with a caring adult can lead to a lifelong environmental identity (Chawla and Cushing 2007). How might nature become part of one’s identity? Nature elicits strong emotions and memories while allowing us the freedom to be ourselves without judgment from others. When we succeed in a challenge presented by nature, such as reaching the summit of a mountain or growing a garden, our self-esteem and self-efficacy are enhanced, making us want to engage in additional nature-based activities. Spending time in nature also can be a means of demonstrating our social and political commitments and can spur social connections, thus satisfying a need to belong to a group (Clayton 2012; Williams and Chawla 2016). In short, nature is a setting for strong emotions, feeling good about ourselves, demonstrating our commitments, and forming connections with others, all of which contribute to an environmental identity.

Additionally, service learning (Stapleton 2015), experiences that include a focus on environmental problems in an environmental sciences classroom (Blatt 2013), and programs where students develop a sense of responsibility for
nature through modeling by teachers, foster an environmental identity (Williams and Chawla 2016). For adults, engagement with different types of environmental organizations, such as local stewardship or environmental justice nonprofits, influences specific environmental identities and actions (Kitchell, Kempton, et al. 2000; Saunders 2008). Further, storytelling describing environmental problems and actions taken to address them can help build and reinforce an environmental identity (Kitchell, Hannan, et al. 2000). Finally, because individuals balance multiple identities in deciding to take action, and identities change over time based on new experiences, repeated experiences are important to maintaining and making salient environmental and collective identities (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Williams and Chawla 2016).

Four stages in developing an environmental identity were found in a program for secondary students (Stapleton 2015). First, temporarily living alongside people who had suffered severe flooding helped students recognize the importance of environmental issues. Upon returning home, the students designed local action projects, through which they began to see themselves as individuals who take environmental action and became knowledgeable about how to engage in environmental action. Finally, recognition of their environmental action and knowledge by parents, teachers, and peers was critical to students forming an environmental identity (Stapleton 2015). In young children, nature experiences that build children’s trust in their natural environment, enable autonomy and initiative, and build a sense of accomplishment foster an environmental identity (Green et al. 2015).

Three factors help people develop a civic identity: volunteering, service, or other forms of community participation; learning about one’s community; and a commitment to fundamental democratic principles such as justice and fairness (Atkins and Hart 2003). However, the ability of children and adults to access volunteer, service learning, and other experiences that help create an environmental or civic identity may be limited among low-income individuals, communities of color, and immigrants (Flanagan and Levine 2010; Chung and Probert 2011) as well as in countries where civil society activity is curtailed. Organizations have developed strategies to address these barriers, including partnering with faith-based institutions in Chicago (Kyle and Kearns 2018) and conducting civic ecology practices in ways that are nonthreatening to local and national governments, such as litter cleanups in cities in India and Pakistan (Abhyankar and Krasny 2018) and Iran (Kassam et al. 2018), and mangrove restoration in China (Abigail 2016). Community gardening may be particularly effective in helping individuals form an environmental identity, given that gardening allows one to express oneself through planting choices, feel competent in successfully growing plants, and contribute to one’s community (Clayton 2012), and often entails cooperation among people
from different walks of life (cf. Dovidio et al. 2007) and even engagement in a larger civic agriculture movement (cf. Polletta and Jasper 2001; Lyson 2004).

Environmental educators should consider factors that influence students’ identities prior to those students’ participation in an environmental education program, including family background, cultural norms, and positive and negative nature experiences through family and school. Participants’ personal characteristics, such as openness to new knowledge and willingness to think critically, also affect their ability to form an environmental identity (Blatt 2013). When parents question their children’s emerging environmental identities, environmental educators can create situations where parents will support their children’s environmental identities, such as inviting parents to students’ public presentations about their environmental projects (Stapleton 2015). In working with urban or other populations who may have had negative experiences in nature and limited opportunities for voluntarism, providing positive experiences in nature and opportunities to engage in environmental advocacy or stewardship, and to be recognized for these actions, are especially important to forming an environmental identity.

When people identify with polarized social groups, educators can foster cooperation by invoking a superordinate identity that all participants share (Fielding and Hornsey 2016). For example, the nonprofit organization Oldman Watershed Council in Alberta, Canada, “works with a variety of people and organizations, including motorized recreationists, campers, anglers and boaters,” to engage them in restoring places where Albertans recreate, changing their behavior to reduce impacts and help them become better environmental stewards (OWC 2017). Whereas traditionally these groups have social identities that come into conflict (e.g., off-road recreationalist versus backpacker), the watershed council uses a superordinate identity garnered from in-depth interviews and conversations with diverse recreationists to help achieve its goals of people working together as land stewards. Regardless of whom they are trying to involve in stewardship, the council refers to everyone as “Good Albertans.” The council also conducts activities that appeal to all recreationalists, such as volunteer hands-on river restoration days. This cooperation can further help build their shared identity as Good Albertans, which may promote future cooperation (Dovidio et al. 2007).

In short, regardless of the type of experience you provide, keep in mind that environmental identity:

- both leads to and is developed through participation in environmental action;
- develops through social interactions, with different interactions influencing different stages of identity formation; and
- is fostered by recognition by others (Stapleton 2015).
Assessing Environmental Identity

The Environmental Identity Scale measures the extent to which the natural environment plays an important role in how one defines oneself, and is focused on an individual rather than social environmental identity (Clayton 2003). It includes five factors: how salient the natural world is to one’s identity (sample question: “I spend a lot of time in natural settings”); self-identification with nature (e.g., “I think of myself as a part of nature, not separate from it”); agreement with an environmental ideology (e.g., “Behaving responsibly toward the Earth—living a sustainable lifestyle—is part of my moral code”); positive emotions associated with nature (e.g., “I would rather live in a small room or house with a nice view than a bigger room or house with a view of other buildings”); and memories of spending time in nature (e.g., “I spent a lot of my childhood playing outside”) (Clayton 2003, 45–46; see appendix). Other researchers have used open-ended interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of environmental identities, asking respondents to list up to twenty words or phrases answering the question “Who am I?”; to describe how their awareness of environmental damage originated and developed over time and what being an environmentalist means to them; and to list their environmental behaviors (Kitchell, Kempton, et al. 2000). Finally, art projects like constructing nicho boxes (cardboard boxes where children place pictures, symbols, figurines, writing, and other small objects that express their identity) can be used as embedded assessment (Derr et al. 2018).