

Making New People

An Examination of First Year Students at Kenyon College
And the Processes That Influence Their Identity

This study is the result of a fourteen week examination of six first year students at Kenyon College, a small liberal arts school in rural Ohio. The goal of the study was to understand the ways in which these students define and affirm their individual identity while acclimating to life within the context of a well-defined social community. The project consisted of three interviews with each of the six participants as well as participant observation of their social environment. What was ultimately discovered is a mechanism by which these students interpreted and reacted to their social environment, what we have come to call the House model, and it is presented here for review in the hopes that it may be utilized in further research endeavors.

Keith Shayon
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I can still remember the first day of my freshman year. Getting out of my parents' car, I thought I had entered into some very strange and wonderful place. Everywhere around me were freshmen who felt exactly the same way, and while I believed that we were all going through a very similar experience, I strongly doubted that we would react in the same ways to our collective new world. As one might imagine, we did not. Instead, we developed into English majors, Varsity athletes, young businessmen & women, political activists, thespians, and more. While the journey that my peers and I have been on for a number of years fascinates me, it is an understanding of the process behind that path which truly beckons for attention, hidden just beyond the horizon of my social understanding.

While my perception was limited by my own lack of knowledge, it was the founders and developers of sociological thought that eventually began lighting the way towards an understanding of the social world around me and its impact on myself as well as those going through similar circumstances, though with very diverse outcomes. Finding these footholds of sociological thought prompted further investigation and deeper questioning, with each answer seemingly just another question along the path, opening more doors which each had their own questions residing within. The structures of sociological thought pointed research in any of various directions, their theories on the nature of human interaction like the wafting scent of a feast, quietly calling guests to pursue its trail to the source.

We refer to these structures as the theoretical foundation from which our thought process can go about deconstructing and analyzing the way our world functions socially and what impacts those functions have over the individual as well as the social collective.

Over time, the discipline has developed more specific ways to answer these questions, and most notably perhaps is the analysis of the process of defining oneself; of developing and practicing an identity which serves not only to give the self an important sense of “who” one is, but also enables the surrounding society to understand that individual in terms of their connection to the larger collective. From this instance of the individual, somehow communities develop shared social norms and standards of behavior that each member is forced to respond to, whether through conformity or rejection.

This research endeavor represents the culminating project of my Sociological experience, and so in finding the end we must return to the beginning; being a first year student. This project began seeking by seeking to understand how Kenyon first year students, within the context of the Kenyon community, go about shaping their identity and what are the forces or processes that influence their development. With this research question in hand, a series of discussions with first year students began to frame the path of this investigation, their insights guiding an examination of the forces they dealt with on a daily level. Ultimately, the result of this study indicates that first year students go through of process of identity shift and affirmation that exists in a moment-to-moment basis. Within the context of a given interaction, these students are identifying the social significance of the world around them, including the people they interact with, the language that facilitates the interaction and even the environment wherein the interaction takes place. From this process of finding significance, what we will come to call meaning, they can come to make decisions about how to present themselves to the world in a way that will have the most effect on their social environment, all while attempting to maintain an idea of just “who” they are.

An investigation of the development and redefining of identity at Kenyon College will, if done properly, reveal many of the connections, both tangible and abstract, between the individual and the social world as a whole. Kenyon, with its relative isolation, simply provides an environment with arguably fewer, and therefore more readily identifiable, influences on the individual, what we would call social forces.

As mentioned earlier, sociology has developed excellent theories for understanding the process by which the individual exists in relation to the society. Without a serious and well-suited footing in the work of past researchers who laid out such textured and rich methods of inquiry, there can be little hope of understanding the social dynamic which exists at Kenyon College or the process of the individual taking on an identity. Fortunately, there is a wealth of wisdom to guide us.

Literature Review

For Sociological inquiry into the nature of the self and the social world; few provide as vivid accounts and impeccable discussion as Erving Goffman, one of the most renowned American sociologists. Goffman provides an immense amount of information on the self in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1959, and in 1961 he continued the discussion with how the social structures surrounding us influence that same self with *Asylums*.

In finding an adequate term to describe what exactly Kenyon College is, we locate a quick and accurate answer in *Asylums*. The College is a “Social establishment” meaning that it is an “institution in the everyday sense of that term – [that] are places such as rooms, suites of rooms, buildings or plant in which activity of a particular kind regularly goes on.” (Goffman 1961, 1) While Goffman is examining a mental hospital and not a

liberal arts college, he finds structures and stratifications that lend themselves readily to application in nearly any setting. The College exists both as physical *and* social, with rules and regulations that exist in both, and as such, members of its community are constricted to a certain required conformity in order to be considered a member of that social community. (Goffman, 1961).

The recognition of the social influences of the environment in existence at Kenyon College requires the use of the theory of Symbolic Interaction; a social model which suggests that meaning for the individual exists as a result of those around him, as well as the environment itself, engaging in interaction which is facilitated by shared symbols, images and conceptions of a communal culture. For this, we turn to George H. Mead and his text *Mind, Self and Society*:

When the response of the other becomes an essential part in the experience or conduct of the individual; when taking the attitude of the other becomes an essential part in his behavior – then the individual appears in his own experience as a self; and until this happens he does not appear as a self.
Mead 1934, 195

The effect of this culture is to give the members of its community a contextual base for understanding their world and defining themselves within it. This world is therefore one with tacit information that is essential to be a part of the community about Kenyon College that no one outside of that community would have need of. It is important to note here that not all members in the community use this information in the same way, but it is *necessary* to be aware of this information in order to participate in and be recognized as a member of this society (Mead, 1934)

Because of the different ways in which members of the community use their shared set of symbols, Mead theorized that social interactions, though all somewhat

influenced by the generally shared social notions understood by members of the community, are not static between the members of it (Mead, 1934). Each individual has their own notions of these shared symbols, and the result of this is that when two or more of these individuals with differing notions interact, the interaction they produce is based within the participants as well as the context. Due to this fact, no two interactions are *ever* the same; they are instead constantly being influenced by the world around them.

For all of the different interpretations of the symbols presented to them, individuals always come to their definitions of the social reality in similar ways, through finding meaning in them. This meaning can be described as a kind of social resonance (Mead, 1934). In developing an identity, individuals at Kenyon College look to find those symbols which present them with the most resonance and therefore establish a connection with them, a sort of anchor into the social world that allows them to define themselves, both internally and externally, by their association to that symbol. Mead suggested that the behavior of the individual comes from their need to have meaning (resonance) in the world around them, and that the self, the social self presented to the world as an identity, was more an “agent of interpretation, differentiation and action within a social field or relational matrix” (Ditton, 1980) 688) than an autonomous and concrete self standing separate from the world.

This notion of behaving in a way so as to produce meaning suggests that individuals pursue their identity through purposefully associating with those things that they find resonance with, “Mead saw behavior as the bodily manifestation of the socially symbolic acts of group members. Mead’s theory of the social self can serve as the basis for theorizing identity.” (Ditton, 700) The individual is, in this construction, less a single

being independent of his world, but is instead partially *produced* by it. In every social interaction, regardless of duration or intensity, every individual looks for meanings, cues if you will, that allow them to understand the context of that interaction and therefore are influenced by it (Ditton, 1980).

With an understanding of the atmosphere surrounding individuals in a given social interaction, we now look back to Goffman to analyze the individuals themselves. Goffman suggested that the individual is aware, on both conscious and subconscious levels, that the meaning they present to others interacting with them will determine how the interaction develops and can have either positive or negative effects on the self based entirely off the reaction of the others around (Goffman, 1959). With this in mind, the individual will then be motivated to gain as much as possible, consciously or subconsciously, from all interactions, and when this individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation. (Goffman, 1959) As Goffman's individual pursues interacting with others in the most beneficial way, we come to see that when an individual is "performing" in the sense of interacting with an audience, any amalgamation of "other" and external individuals, and he is "acting" in whatever way best serves his own purpose, namely the derivation and assigning of meanings to both himself and the "audience" around him (Goffman, 1959).

Focusing more on the nature of identity and how it forms, a study from Peter Burke and Donald Reitzes further accentuates Goffman's performances and social actors through suggesting the presence of Roles. Burke and Reitzes studied how college level students measure their identities for value in a given social environment. Their study allows us to find an excellent definition of identity which they first stipulate serves a very

different function than self-esteem, and go on to explain that “thus, while self-esteem refers to self meanings such as good or bad, identity refers to self meaning such as being academic or sociable.” (Burke, Reitzes, 46) This definition of identity formation based on the individual’s effort to incorporate different social roles into their lives highlights it as an active (though sometimes subconscious) process of adapting, rejecting and fine tuning behaviors that correspond to particular social roles (Burke & Reitzes, 1980) Defined as “A given behavior or action that is taken on by one as a function of their identity” (Burke & Reitzes, 1980 45) roles allow us to better understand our place in society and what is expected of us – a teacher teaches, a chef cooks food, a bad student does not pay attention in a class, etc. The roles to which we identify as individuals in a collective society allow us to better understand and demonstrate our own identity. In studying how college students measure their own identities, we find that locating meaningful roles is essential for the self to develop an identity, both because of our internal needs to be *somehow* connected to the world around us as well as the external’s need to understand where we fit into the society.

It is important to note, however, that all identities (people) have layers upon layers of roles from which they choose what is appropriate and when; identity is a “role-specific” conceptualization of the self. It focuses on the connection between the self and interpersonal meanings in a social situation.” (Burke & Reitzes, 1980 46) This is to say that when a professor leaves the classroom and returns to their home with their children, they “shift” from a teacher role to one of a parent. The professor still exists as a social being, and still has all of the knowledge that makes them “a professor”, but they are no longer in a social situation where it is appropriate to be a professor and have entered one

where it is *more* appropriate for them to be a parent. This indicates that there must be a process by which an individual goes about prioritizing their roles within their identity to best “perform” for their intended audience in any and all social interaction. (Burke & Reitzes, 1980)

Through the course of their study, Burke and Reitzes come to find that the individuals they studied; students in a medium sized college campus understood their identities through a process of understanding their various roles. This line of thought ultimately comes down to four criteria upon which the individual judges a particular role as worthy, or not worthy, of being fed into their identity at any given time (Burke & Reitzes, 1980). In the first place is the selection of “counter-roles”, roles that allow the individual to define themselves based on the roles being “acted out” around them. Here we find basic truths that seem obvious but should be stated all the same; the student cannot be a student without a teacher, the husband cannot be a husband without a wife, the brother cannot be a brother without a sibling, etc. (Burke & Reitzes, 1980)

In addition to the positioning uses of selecting appropriate counter-roles, the individual will also, according to Burke and Reitzes, attempt to organize his roles along with their uses to as to better understand the appropriate time to employ what role, which they call the use of discriminate analysis, and allows the individual to therefore use his or her various roles for the best possible benefit (Burke & Reitzes, 1980). The final two measuring methods for identity have to do with the internal self and its view of the roles it has taken on. In organizing adjectives in a semantic differential format for each role, the third criteria, individuals are able to “dream up” their ideal identity and attempt to take on that identity using appropriate roles (Burke & Reitzes, 1980). Finally, the

applicability of the dimensions of a role to one's self-descriptions presents the individual with a mirror image from which to judge which roles are right for their identity as well as how well those roles mesh together with the objective of forming a complete social self (Burke & Reitzes, 1980).

As these factors influence an individual into actively selecting the roles that most suit their identity and that their identity most easily conforms to, a process of abstract give and take emerges within the individual; on the one hand they are consciously invested in a given role, but on the other hand the social norms that are shared in the individuals given social environment are also influencing and shaping their identity; the social world is actively telling individual, via counter-roles, the social implications of that role and more, how they are supposed to behave. (Burke & Reitzes, 1980) This negotiation results in the forming of a social self that is presented to the external world as the social actor, performing roles in a way so as to reaffirm the identity of the internal self (Burke & Reitzes, 1980).

In our next step in understanding the individual, Ronit Bogler and Anit Somech examine what they call students' motives to study, which is essentially an effort to understand exactly why these students attend centers of higher education and what they hope to gain from the experience. In their study of 243 undergraduates at an Israeli research university (Bogler & Somech, 2002 237), Bogler and Somech found that students undergo a process of socialization in their new environment, defining socialization as "the process by which persons acquire more knowledge, skills and dispositions that make them more or less effective members of their society." (Bogler & Somech, 2002 235) They enhance this definition by describing three mechanisms of

socialization; “role exploration, giving up the previous role and adjusting self and new role to each other.” (Bogler & Somech, 2002, 235)

The process of acclimating to a role is essentially the process of socialization on a very localized level, and it is this process that ultimately functions to change the identity of the student (Bogler & Somech, 2002). Just as important as the process of socialization, however, is the initial disposition of the individual seeking, consciously or subconsciously, to be socialized. These they describe as the motives to study, and point to this as one of the most important elements in the equation of variables that comes to represent the individual identity. In short, there are three main motives to study, and a student’s inclination to one over another will determine what aspect of the college life they seek out most proactively. (Bogler & Somech, 2002) The first of these three motives is defined as instrumental; “which applies to students who... acquire degrees that pave the way to social and occupational mobility.” (Bogler & Somech, 2002, 234) the second of these is the scholastic motive, “which refers to students driven by intellectual stimulation and purely academic reasons.” (Bogler & Somech, 2002, 234) and the final motive is that of collegiate, “which corresponds to students’ aspirations for their social life on campus.” (Bogler & Somech, 2002, 234)

Selecting between these motives are essential for students, and this choice is one of the first choices they make during their process of socialization into a college environment such as Kenyon. Each of the participants of this study may approach their lives from their own unique identity, but all of them have, at least in some way, shape or form, come upon this decision and made it according to the things they desire to obtain

from their college experience, be they academic achievement, social advancement or intellectual enlightenment.

With this foundational background laid out, we can pursue an understanding of the identity of Kenyon College first years that seeks to discover how these students utilize their various motivations as well as the social roles they use to define themselves in producing an identity. This study will seek to add to the general knowledge base by submitting a possible theory for understanding how a student defines and maintains their individual identity.

Methods

This project consisted of participant observation and one on one interview sessions. Over the course of the first semester of the 2008 academic year six first year student volunteers were selected to participate. The interviews were generally less than an hour, being mostly between 30 and 45 minutes.

In addition to the interview sessions, participant observations of two different social settings were conducted in an effort to view general socialization of first years as well as specific interview participant socialization. The first of these settings is the only dining hall of the 1700 students, and was therefore a major hub of social activity. The second was a set of social environments, including a party of roughly 40 students, an orientation event during the first few weeks of the semester including only first years and an intramural sporting event between a team of first years and upperclassmen.

First year students were targeted as participants because of the nature of the experience of a freshman student in a new social environment. Simply put, the transition from high school senior to College first year is one of the most dramatic in the American

education system. The majority of the participants in this study had done very little traveling from home or away from family, resulting in their having a somewhat overwhelming shift in their immediate social world once they made the move from home to Kenyon.

In order to actually "see" the social forces at work which the researcher hoped to track, it was essential to interview participants at least twice and over a span of time long enough to allow one to notice actual changes in the participants responses, this was the reasoning behind a three interview set staggered over the course of an entire semester. The six participants were interviewed over intervals of generally three to six weeks, with some being conducted over the school breaks. Interview settings range from somewhat socially open to very private. Locations included a classroom, a dorm room, a small, diner sized area in which other students were present but not able to hear the session, and a large empty study lounge. The interviews took place over the course of the first semester, with the first round occurring two to three weeks in, the second round after mid-semester break and the third being immediately before or after the end of the semester vacation.

In Warren and Karner's *Discovering Qualitative Methods*, qualitative methods are presented as inductive inquiries which allow the sociologist to examine not just how an individual feels or reacts, as they would with a quantitative study, but also how the individual articulates the social forces affecting them.(Warren & Karner, 2005, 8) This methodology raises questions of generalizability from the individual to the social collective, but this is precisely why these methods can be such effective inquiry; they do not seek to understand the individual as a social "island"; instead they are methods which

enable one to view how individuals react to similar social forces and, almost more importantly, how they go about internalizing and eventually articulating those forces and their effects. (Warren & Karner, 2005) It is here that the central importance of the study lies. Both interviews and participant observation allow the researcher to examine a given individual not just for a single, isolated moment as quantitative methods do, but instead provide a continuum of observation. This continuum allows the researcher to see the individual participant's reaction to social forces, and if carried on for long enough, the effects of those forces on the participants can become quantifiable.

Participants were asked questions designed to achieve two goals; articulating how they had come to feel the way they do and defining their social world. In attempting to elicit personal narratives from participants, questions which required less specific answers proved to be the most successful. The initial questions were intended to provide biographical data and cause the participant to begin, in their own mind, to contrast their home life from their school life. As the interviews continued, the participant was asked questions with less predictable responses, ones designed to cause the participant to prioritize the different facets of their life that compete for attention (such as classes, social life, etc).

The purpose of the prioritization comes as the merging of two study methods cited in this study's references. The first is Bogler & Somech's study of student motivations to study in higher education and the second is Hielbrun & Loftus' study of sexual aggression in male college students. Hielbrun & Loftus conduct a study of college males on sexual aggression in part by asking the participants to rank a series of photos of female facial expressions ranging from happiness to terror according to the level of the

males' ensuing attraction/revulsion. They discovered that males who ranked images of fear and pain higher had a higher chance of also being potential sexual offenders. In lending this thought process to notions of social and academic inclinations, we find that students who "rank" their social life over their academic life or vice versa also are generally more likely to find the greatest resonance with their social world through these facets of their lives. This will be revisited later as it is essential to understanding the social processes the participants were engaging in.

The interviews often extended beyond the list of pre-selected questions, and were generally steered by the participants themselves. This was again to provide an opportunity for the participants to make clear the hierarchy of their social reality. Discussion themes that they brought up consistently were often integral parts of their identity; for instance there was a strong correlation between topics the participants deemed troubling and the importance of these issues to their personal narratives, and this will be addressed later on in the discussion section. Issues which seem to be cause for carefully worded responses were also revisited at this stage, and the participant often finds their own issues to elaborate on; niches of their social or academic lives which prove ultimately to be invaluable additions to their narrative that the researcher would otherwise have had little hope of writing questions for.

The researcher also spent time observing the first year students, both during times of first-year only interaction as well as inter- class instances. These observations provide a much more candid construction of the first year students, though none of the observations included study participants. While there was little personal interaction with the researcher, the social divisions felt by the first year students were plainly visible

during these times, allowing for insight into the nature of how students' identities either resonated or dissonated with one another in a social setting.

There is one major consideration before proceeding however, and that is that our definition of identity stems largely from the roles represented in each interaction, and this varies immensely from interaction to interaction. Simply put, as a member of this campus, the researcher took on certain roles to which the first years recognize and respond. It must be understood that the researcher's own interaction with the participants, even though conducted along the guidelines of scientifically sound inquiry, is still a social interaction, in which each individual plays a social role. While this is a constant theme throughout most ethnography, it deserves special attention in this case because of the way it affects responses from first years. These interviewer effects are important to remain aware of, but do not impede or reduce the significance of the inquiry because, aside from the fact there simply is no way to "be rid of them" by nature of the social reality in place at Kenyon, the researcher was also guided by an IRB certified training process to ensure that little to no influence was imposed on the participants. In addition to this, the interviewer remained the same throughout the study, and this repetition of role, while partially influential on the participant, was a consistent presence throughout.

Results

During the course of the interview sessions, as well as the participant observation periods, there were many vivid examples of not just shifts in the identity of an individual, but even the social forces occurring during and partially because of those processes. In order to best describe these instances, the results are presented along three lines; instances of the definition of identity, instances of the description of social pressure, instances of

direct social connection between the participant and the social world. Additionally, because we are trying to understand *both* the identity and how that identity has changed in the six first year students, it is only logical to present the result of these interviews through providing the most complete picture of each participant.

¹Tony came to Kenyon from a wealthy town near Miami. When asked to describe himself, the first words out of his mouth were, "well, I'm a suburb kid, but don't hold that against me." Instantly Tony has defined himself in a way that he believes may need defending in the environment Kenyon engenders. As his description of himself continued, Tony weaved a narrative within which his identity was his, and only his to control,

"When I was a kid, I wasn't really all that into school or sports or anything. It wasn't that I didn't care, it was just that, well, yea, I just didn't care what I did with other people. That changed a little bit once I got into my junior and senior year, I started hanging out it with friends more and more, but even the friends I hung out with, we didn't really do anything together because we didn't have all that similar interests, it was more just people to pass the time with."

This semi-detachment continued at Kenyon, and Tony remarked repeatedly that the change in season reinforced this, "It's kinda funny, at the beginning of the year, when all the orientation stuff was going on, I was interested by it and liked to meet the students and all, but I just didn't really care all that much. Now that its gotten cold, its like its "Ok" for me to not bother going out to party all the time." Tony has managed to form a sense of identity that is not really dependant on those around him, or the forces affecting his world. Instead, he looks at these outside forces not as indicators of what it means to be a Kenyon student, but as requirements to simply call oneself a Kenyon student. In summing up his social

¹ All names have been changed to protect study participants.

life of the first semester he remarked, "it's gotten better because I've learned what's Ok and what's not Ok. It's not like high school where you have to fit in or not be cool. People don't seem to care as much, so I get to just be myself and not worry about other people." While this nonchalance about the concern of others is certainly not isolated to only Tony, the extent of it indicates that he views his identity as one disconnected from his environment. He makes less effort to "plug in" to the community around him because he does not see it as a necessary part of being a student at Kenyon, "Don't get me wrong, this place is cool and I like it, its just that I don't think its changed who I am, just exposed me to more people. But I'd still be the same if I was back home or if I went to school somewhere else." The social forces of the college community have affected Tony, but not in the way some would expect. Instead, this exposure has reinforced Tony's conception of his own identity, and the social forces he is cognizant of allow him to find his place in the community as somewhat isolated, protected from what he called, "fake people, I have a real problem when I feel like I'm not allowed to be myself and have to pretend to be something I'm not, even if that's just someone who likes to go out a lot or likes to do a lot of extracurricular stuff. I just like to hang out."

Also strongly tied to an independent sense of identity was Fay, a young woman from the east coast, "I'm a Long Island girl." This introduction was again followed with a rebuttal that demonstrated an initially defensive posture regarding who she was, " well, I'm actually from New York, so I'm not as bad as some of those other girls, I just like to say I'm from the beach rather than the city." Fay described herself as much more outgoing than most people, and even her

vernacular and body language indicated a desire to reach out into the social community, "my favorite thing about getting here was how nice everyone was, how much they all seemed to want to meet me, and how much that made me want to meet them."

Fay often went about describing social situations to the fullest extent possible, and when asked to describe her home and favorite room in it, her response was a nearly 10 minute answer. This focus paid to providing a complete description came, in her mind, from what she called "painting my world. I know its weird but I really like to tell people everything I can, and I really like it when they do the same. I just feel like I'm not communicating as well as I could be when I give and get short answers." This attention to detail was reflected in her description of college's academic courses, "I love my professors, they let me really reach out and try new things. Even though I'm in really basic stuff, they kinda push me but mostly just let me go for it on my own." It was very important for Fay to be able to explore the limits of both her academic and social world, something she believed Kenyon was a "great place for".

While conversations with Tony were steered towards social interaction and the larger meaning of "being a freshman", discussions with Fay often doubled back on academics and her interest in learning as much as she could. "I don't know what I want to be, but my dream job would be to just write, just put what I see and hear into words that everyone can understand and see for themselves." Fay describes what Bogler & Somech call a scholastic motive to study, one that is not bound to the institutional aspect of the school, reflective in her lack of a plan

for her future, but also one that suggests Fay seeks knowledge simply to know her world better. From here we come to understand that her identity is very much tied to the social pressures she is experiencing at Kenyon. The professors that have given her so much "free reign" are pressuring her scholastic motivations to develop, suggesting to her that in describing the world around her, she can find resonance for herself and a place in the community in which to function. This process of explaining the world around her in order to find her place in it was also reflected in her discussion of her hall mates and their social lives, "well, its awesome, I love everyone. We do things a lot differently from back home, but that's fine by me, I like the way things work here. I go to parties and have a great time meeting lots of people. I don't really drink much, but I don't need to, I have all these cool people to talk to."

In describing her first semester, Fay used much of the same language, she spoke of all the "great" people she had met while at the same time repeating that she is glad to be confident enough in herself to enter into these new, but more and more familiar situations as "ways to expand my world. I feel like if I keep my eyes open enough, I can be whoever I want to be here. Its great." Fay sees her identity as very much separate from the social world around, as though her identity interacts with that world from behind a layer of self-confident protection, and while the social forces of Kenyon are clearly influencing her, it is only in the ways, in her mind, that are beneficial to her identity and her intellectual future.

While these two participants saw themselves as less connected to the social world, though implicitly anchored within it, others saw more tangible

connections. John, a student from a west-coast town similar to Gambier with its own small liberal arts school, saw the social world at Kenyon differently than the first two participants, "I don't know I feel like it was pretty alarming to me how quickly everybody withdrew into their little cliques, not cliques, well, cliques, it was sorta disappointing and especially this huge distance between the quad and the McBride Mather people." (dorm complexes) John explained his experience first semester primarily in social terms, "I don't really know what I want to do in terms of major. Like yea, there's a lot of cool stuff here I guess, but I don't know, I don't see this place as like a "oh you have to do this or you have to take that" it just seems more about the people you're interacting with rather than the classes you take." Bogler & Somech label this the collegiate motive to study and John's construction of the world around him, as well as his own identity are ready examples of this, "I've met a lot of really quality people out here, its like I can already tell, I fell bad about doing this, but I know, I can tell what kind of person like someone is, or what like social group they were back home."

John's perception of the social aspect of life as more important than the others at Kenyon is also reflected in the way he describes people not as students, but as members of social groups, "I can already tell the preppy's and the study-bugs and I definitely find myself liking people from both of those groups, but I just find it kinda funny to think about them as they might have been back home." John's identity is also based heavily in the social realm, and he described his life back home as "mostly just hanging out with friends listening to music." This was the most significant description of his home life, as he described his school simply

with, "yea, I mean, it was school and it was alright, but c'mon who really likes high school anyway?"

As John sees his world through a lens of social significance, his identity is affected in ways that he sees as providing better insight into the understanding of the social functioning of others. And while this process relies heavily on the observation of that which is "other" from him, it enables him to define his own identity in relation to those around him. This is what Burke & Reitzes would describe as John finding his role through the observation of counter-roles around him. The counter-roles presented to him are not just those of "preppy" or "study-bug" but also those of the professors he encounters, the maintenance staff he meets and even the relationship between himself and his roommate, "I'm sure people are also aware of it, I mean its still kind of early on in our college career, so like you know I'm pretty good friends with some people who are in that particular social group, but I don't know, I think there's some stratification going on." It is precisely John's awareness of this "stratification" that is pressuring him, though not in an overt or harmful way, into finding a niche in the Kenyon community different than the intellectual perspective of Fay or the social nonchalance of Tony.

Of all the participants of the study, Amy's identity underwent the most dynamic changes during her first semester. Though she grew up less than two hundred miles from Kenyon, "I've never been any place like this before" she said in her first interview, "everyone is so eager to meet me, and sometimes it's a little overwhelming, I just feel like I need a few hours to be in my room just collecting

myself or whatever or else its all too much." That was Amy during the first interview, but by the third session, which occurred at the end of the semester, "I'm a totally different person, which is pretty weird to say. When I went back home, all of my friends were kind of like "woah, what happened?" not in a bad way or anything, but I just feel so much more confident in myself."

Though Amy has found more self-confidence thanks to the social pressures of Kenyon's environment, her first semester brought other changes in her identity. In asking her to describe her home and her dorm room, Amy explained, "I really think that my room says a lot about me, and I want it to. Right now I've got three posters hanging on my walls, one of Frank Sinatra, a postcard of chocolates from France and a little picture of the Virgin Mary." Amy proceeded to explain the connections these three images had for her and what she believed they present to others when they come into her room. All significant facets of her identity early on in the year, these images' importance changed over the semester. "I've kind of had, I don't know, a crisis of faith since we last spoke. A very close family member died a few weeks ago and I just can't seem to look at that little picture (of the Virgin Mary) in my room anymore."

Raised a devout Catholic, Amy's crisis of Faith comes mostly from the personal trauma of losing a loved one, "but it's also not a big deal out here. There aren't a lot of people who really do the whole religion thing, so on the one hand I feel kind of bad that I'm not as into it as I used to be, but on the other its kinda nice to just not have it around. It makes it easier for me to be OK with what happened." Amy's internal shift away from her Catholicism is also being

reinforced by the lax nature of the religious aspect of Kenyon College. She feels some remorse over losing that aspect of her personality, but is also relieved to be in an environment in which she does not need to defend that shift from those who, until now, had been large influences on her and pushed her to retain that aspect of herself.

Overall, Amy sees herself as "changed" by the environment more than any of the other participants in the study. She is aware of this change also much more acutely than any of the other participants were aware of any changes they had undergone. Her increase in self-confidence and change in religious views come as the result of neither her own desires or the social world around her, but instead as a very nuanced combination of both. Amy defines her college experience thus far along lines which indicate her awareness of those shifts, and conversations were dominated by themes of what its like to meet new people, how she reacted to different people's lifestyles and dispositions, and particularly how those different individuals made her think about herself.

Discussion

Two of the participants have yet to be reviewed from the study, and this is because it is in their words that we find some of the most significant clues as to how first year students go about constructing their identity. For several interviews, questioning began with "describe your favorite room of your house." This simple question, intended to be an easy way to begin the session, often yielded instances of this definition of identity. Michael, a male from the Cleveland area, spoke about his brother's room as his favorite place, "all the fun stuff is up there, my brother has a TV, our parents can't hear us. Sometimes I eat up there, it's our space." Michael spoke many other times about his

. □ o9relationship with his brother as “there are many things that carry over, jokes or personality traits, they rub off on one another, so my brother and I sometimes say the same thing, so like my problem is I get compared to him too much, so many times I can’t be myself.”

Michael sees himself in relation to his brother and what his brother has done at Kenyon to establish an identity for himself here. The difficulty inherent in this, however, arises from the fact that Michael has begun to define his identity along a comparison with his brother. Even when discussing his family life back home, Michael characterizes his social experience through the lens of a relationship with his brothers, “I’m the youngest, it was actually pretty interesting, I don’t know if like my brain developed faster but like even from a young age I knew that like my oldest brother was my mothers favorite, and my middle brother was my dad’s favorite, so I was kind , you know by myself a lot, but it was pretty cool though.” It is clear that Michael’s relationship with his brothers is one that both causes tension and allows him to relate to the world around him, “so many times I can’t be myself, and I get sick of that, because like many times I’ll hear people being like, oh he’s just like his brother or he sounds just like your brother and its like hard to change that.”

While Michael maintained that his identity hadn’t changed much since coming to Kenyon, “I’ve always tried to be a really genuine person, how sincere someone is really important to me, and I’ve always tried to be very honest and real with people”, but in his new social environment Michael believes that the community is defining him in relation to his brother. This leads to an inability for him to separate his own identity with the identity the community has, in his mind at least, already imposed upon him. This process

has resulted in Michael viewing almost his entire social reality as taking on a role of being “that guy’s little brother.”

Michael has come to view his place in the Kenyon community as defined by the identities surrounding him, what Burke & Reitzes call counter-role selection. Because the roles, other people, around him are pressuring him socially into taking on a certain self-description, in this case being very similar to his brother, Michael’s identity has come to be dominated, while in the contextual environment of Kenyon college, by his brother’s presence and influence. But Michael is not alone in terms of his acceptance of a social role leading to becoming a major factor in his identity, and the final participant, Tom, actually puts plain the way in which all these participants form, evaluate and even shift their identity.

As with other interviews, Tom’s began with a series of very simple fact questions, but his response to “Where are you from?” was rather blunt compared with the rest, “I’m from Sudan, do you know where that is?” Over the course of our discussions, Tom stressed time and time again that Kenyon students knew either very little about his home country, or didn’t care to know at all, “Sometimes I find it difficult to be an international student, like I see all these people just being, I don’t want to call it normal, but just being with each other, and sometimes I wish I could be on the inside.” What Tom expressed could not be considered frustration so much as acceptance of the notion that if the campus considered him an international student, then that was what he would be.

It is clear that Tom’s view of himself has been affected by the social forces of Kenyon College, “I’m not an international student when I’m at home, I’m Tom. It’s only here, where people don’t really seem to know much about where I’m from, that I become

this international student.” It is also important to note here that Tom does not feel negative about this situation, but instead sees his role as an international student to be calling him, to a certain extent, to enlighten others about his home country,

When I came to Kenyon I actually considered myself as bringing my country with me. I’m here as a cultural ambassador.” Tom also later explained that “I see myself as kind of like sitting in a house and there’s this door that needs to be opened. And I cannot go around and say I am from Sudan, I have something cool to say about my country, they’ve got to knock on that door, and then I can let you in.”

It is this analogy of Tom and his House that can provide very real insight into how all of these participants go about forming their daily identity, and in turn their social reality.

When Tom engages in a social interaction, he goes about finding points of resonance with the other social actors around him. These points of resonance are what Mead describes as meaning, and they are the currency by which social interactions are facilitated. Because Tom picks out being an international student as such an important part of his identity at Kenyon, it serves as the primary point of resonance for his social interactions with Kenyon students. If we are to continue with his house analogy, we can say that Tom is receiving social actors for an interaction in the same way one would bring a guest into the home. Tom makes initial observations about his counterparts in a given interaction, “do they know anything about my country?”, “have they ever traveled abroad” or even “sometimes I just wonder how it is people know so little about the outside world here” and then he goes about determining how best to facilitate the interaction; what aspects of his identity are most important to present so as to have the “best” social interaction possible.

In this moment, Tom receives these guests into the house of his identity, and chooses which roles can best facilitate the interaction. An obvious choice is the role of the international student, what Tom himself describes as “the outsider”. We can go further with Tom’s house and suggest that his role as an international student is very much like a room in his house. This room’s décor is that of an international student, with sub-roles, such as Tom’s passion for soccer, present to a smaller extent. In the same way that the dining room of a house serves only the purpose of a place to eat meals, the international student room of Tom’s house serves to identify him in a very specific way to a very specific audience, being that of a “cultural ambassador” to those whom he believes view him as an international student.

As I mentioned earlier, Tom has many rooms in his house, and they each serve a specific purpose. The other participants had similar arrangements, and we can carry our house metaphor easily onto their identities to determine the ways they not only form their identity but also how they go about shifting their rooms. In Amy’s case, we see that she spent many years with a fairly large religious presence in her life, and we can use our house model to suggest that her Catholicism had a somewhat large room in her house because it had a large role in her identity. However, Amy has shifted her identity, and the role of being a Catholic has been downgraded to of lesser significance not only because she allowed herself to stop participating in that role but also because of the social forces, in this case a low-key religious community, that allowed her to believe she

could make that shift. We can describe this rather simply though almost comically as Amy is simply rearranging her house.

Amy is going about changing her identity through shifting her social roles, and this causes tension in her life that can be displayed as her “feeling bad because I’m not as into it as I used to be.” She will no longer receive visitors, other social actors, in a room dominated by the role of Catholicism, what’s more is that her increase in confidence can be compared to simply putting more social oriented objects in her home. This two sided shift has caused the religious aspects of her life to recede and her to actively seek more social interaction; Amy has rearranged her house to fit more people, one could say.

Again we find this model working well with Michael’s case. Michael has come to believe that when he engages in social interaction at Kenyon, he must utilize the role of being “that guy’s little brother” instead of one of the various roles he is used to from his high school life. This is not the only role Michael utilizes on a daily basis, but it is clear from conversations with him that its influence is felt, at least in some sense, on every facet of his daily life. Michael receives social actors from Kenyon into a room that reminds people of his older brothers home, his identity, and because of this, Michael cannot help but come to his own conclusion that this similarity between himself and his brother is one of the most poignant aspects of his identity at Kenyon.

But surely this model is too rigid and comically impractical for us to actually suggest that a person is a house with a handful of rooms. And yet, one cannot help but pause on Goffman’s explanation of social actors using their

audience to help define whom they become. These participants are in various stages of identity formation. Some of them are more secure in their identities, some are finding an urge to shift various aspects of them, but all of them are engaged in the process of interacting with others, what we have called receiving social actors into their home and bringing them into a specific room wherein they can utilize the role that they believe will be the most effective and resonating way to carry the social interaction; in John's case, this is to be more cognizant of the social world around him, in Tom's case it is to become "an international student" and in Fays it is to be as descriptive of her world as possible, hoping for social reciprocation from those around her.

Conclusion

This study was intended to examine the forces and processes governing the shifting identities of Kenyon College first year students. What was found was less a perspective on the external forces and more how the first years themselves went about constructing their identities for the most social benefit, what we have come to understand as making social interaction as easy, fluid and controllable as possible for the individual.

This process of finding meaning that allows them to resonate in their particular social roles is what ultimately leads to the shaping of their identity. For students like Tony and John, their socialization has caused them to find their place in the society as one they believe to lie more or less independent of the social reality surrounding them, though we know this to be untrue simply by nature of their interaction with that reality. For students like Amy and Tom, their socialization has led them to take on new roles,

thus shifting their identities to find a more meaningful connection to the society they exist within.

This project offers one perspective of the development of identity, and it needs much refinement in order to develop. What it does offer, however, is an understanding of how the individual goes about acting and reacting with the social actors in the world around them. Future research into this idea should perhaps step away from the socially isolated college world, and pursue an understanding of the individual's "house" in the context of the larger society. For now, the journey of college and its possibilities for the development of the self remains wide open for these young students to make of it what they will.

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