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Cris Mayo

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Strategies of Authenticity

CRIS MAYO
University of Vermont

In her thoughtful examination of the complexities of identity, Lauren Bialystok provides a full and incisive vocabulary for thinking through the tensions among authentic, political, and social recognition-requiring aspects of identity. This is a welcome article, adeptly bridging the concerns of those who find identity claims hopelessly contradictory and the concerns of those whose lives are circumscribed by misrecognitions. I will address what I see as strategic and complex forms of authenticity. These are only meant to continue the conversation, not contest Bialystok's excellent points.

First, my guess is that the problem of authenticity is well understood by anyone making a claim to identity, considering whether they have common cause with an already-existing community or one that is newly emergent. This complicated authenticity acknowledges some necessary connections with others like oneself but also sees one's subject position as more complicated than that single identification. How does one belong and how does one find community likely to provide community? Having found some sense of belonging, not surprisingly, the first response one may have is: why do I not agree with all these people? In other words, groups bound together by some common history of experience (Feinberg, 1999) or by a shared positioning by the law (Spade, 2011) may be quite diverse and not share all aspects of their experiences or subjectivity.

But such groups do form communities and may even engage in interest group or identity politics because they are living in a context in which they are not yet recognized. Identity politics intends to repair omissions. To use the U. S.-based formulation: "we, the people" did not involve an expansive enough "we." Assertions against the crypto-inclusion of democracy, then, have sometimes been fairly specific in their demands. That sense of shared exclusion may help bring a sense of identity for people who otherwise would have been different from one another in a different context. White people who enslaved people stolen from the African continent separated language groups from one another to try to destroy Black solidarities. Communities of enslaved people created common cultures, practices, and shared understandings based on experience under slavery and freedom. Those commonalities endure as conditions of racism endure and, simultaneously, as those creative and resilient communities grow. Like the other examples Bialystok analyzes, time and place shapes the identity- (or subjectivity-) based claims. Because "identity politics" has used the word identity, sometimes it appears that political groups are making psychological or sociological claims to ground a particular epistemology or politics. Better, I think, to consider the use of identity in "identity politics" as a calling together of the recognition of how histories and current conditions have shaped subjectivity in that two-fold sense Foucault uses: both subject to the law and becoming a subject through self-knowledge and resistance (Foucault, 1982).

Rather than seeing those identity formations as metaphysical, it may be better to see them as a form of resistant strategic authenticity, likely not terribly different from strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1987). That is, as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) describes black women's epistemology, shared traditions of experience and shared understanding of histories and positionalities generate shared epistemological

resources for resistance and organizing. Among those strategies may also be strategies for maintaining a sense of cohesion in the face of dispute. So what looks like claims to authenticity may be strategies for asserting a claim about one's "people" and their needs, even if those claims might not map onto one's individual particular feelings. As Arendt (1994) put it, "when one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew" (p. 12).

It may be that strategic authenticity is a response to not only hostility but the hostility of those who believe they are normative and unmarked. Using authenticity as a strategy marks a position and may also call on others to also acknowledge their positionality. As Lauren Berlant (1997) has put it, those in the majority now seem frustrated that what used to be their universalist claims are now recognized as claims situated in their identity: "they now sense that they have identities when it used to be that only other people who had them" (p. 2). Are identity-based assertions, in other words, frustrations that one is not being heard and perhaps are those assertions both pointing out exclusion and even countering with strategic epistemic exclusion in response? Using the discourse of authenticity, in other words, may be another way of asserting agency or, at least, trying to assert agency in a way that makes others understand that they don't understand because they don't share experience. Or maybe even more to the point, the assertion of a particular subject position is intended for others to understand their complicity in not having previously recognized that subject position.

Authenticity need not be an endpoint but a starting point. To take the example of transgender people and the use of the term authenticity, one need not assume that transgender people will remain exactly and forever as they are in a particular moment of affirming their gender identity. Rather, their decision to affirm their gender identity means that they are no longer pressured to conform to the gender identity attributed to them at birth. Transpeople's process of affirmation and claim to authenticity, in other words, are the start of a process of identity, not the sum total of it. Further, seeking recognition from those with whom one shares experience and identity is not the same as seeking recognition from those who are or seem to one to be intent on withholding it. So, for instance, discussion among transpeople about the form or extent of affirmation processes is different from requests or demands to be called by one's name and pronouns by others. The undergirding concepts are not unusual to philosophers. Moral philosophers and political philosophers have described a similar complex process in relation to tradition. Transgender communities, then, are engaged in process that should look similar to communitarians like MacIntyre (1988) who characterize a tradition as "an argument extended through time" (12) or political philosophers who understand tradition as a process that is "neither fixed nor finished" (Oakeshott, 1991, p. 11).

This same unfinished conversation about gender identity has been going on for the long duration of LGBTQIA+ communities. Even key terms in that internal queer and trans community discussion have shifted from gender to sexuality and back again. As Bialystok points out, too much of public conversation is "inert," but that may well be because the outward facing conversation is defensive and unified, while internal ones are vigorous. Internal discussions over changing terminology, subject positions, and generational differences can be challenging, especially when new formations like genderqueer appear to be implicit critiques of transgender lives, but, for the most part, gender identity diversities have formed alliance, if sometimes uneasily (Wilkins, 2012). But when someone external to the community, who hasn't thought in detail or lived through the disjuncture between their sense of themselves and their gender presentation inquires "haven't trans people realized that gender itself should change and not their individual embodiment?," that strategically-minded transgender community may easily unify. "Yes, we've

all thought that. Remarkable that after two seconds of learning about transgender people that you're wondering if a key concept has eluded us for decades."

If authenticity is used as a strategy, then, it may be an expression of anger or frustration at those who seem determined to not recognize that complicated conversations have already happened within minoritized communities. Those who have not yet had to think of themselves as having identities jump into the fray as if those in minoritized communities have also not thought about key concepts related to their experience *as* members of minoritized communities. There is a cruel disingenuousness, if not outright ignorance, to that kind of fast forward to "all lives matter," without consideration of why Black lives, in particular, have to matter here and now because Black lives, in particular, are under a specific series of threats here and now. If social power to misrecognize a call for recognition itself circulates misrecognition, then the strategic decision to use one's minoritized identity claim in response is an act of authentic anger. "You wouldn't understand, you're not x" may not be so much an assertion of ontological grounding as it is a simple observation that without shared experiences and a longer duration of consideration of a topic that has been important to a minoritized perspective, the "all lives" perspective literally does not have access to the strategic reasoning behind an organizing slogan. Nor does the "all lives" (or whatever the equivalent in different context might be) perspective grant any complexity of thought to those who are asserting that their position should be recognized. What that sort of assertion does, though, is presume that the speaker has the authority to authenticate a claim.

This authentication process becomes perhaps even more challenging when the goods related to an identity can be redistributed by a state. The examples Bialystok explores are complicated ones, bound up in centuries of genocide and in more recent manipulations by medical authorities.

I agree with Bialystok that this authentication/authenticity problem becomes complicated if young people are not yet at the age of consent for gender affirmation, but too many have too quickly assumed the biggest problem is "desistence," rather than gender complexity. The problem with medical authorities pushing trans and nonbinary youth to try to conform to normative gender is that those young people are already telling adults that is not who they are. If the therapy becomes another form of misrecognition, quite clearly it is not therapy at all but a de-authenticating process like the other alienating experiences related to gender that have mobilized young people's claims for recognition in the first place. Supporting young people until they are an age when they can consent to whatever affirmation process makes sense to them is a better approach than adding to socially-produced gender dysphoria. If, instead of rejecting trans and nonbinary youths' claims, they are supported in their gender identity, they do not experience any of the negative outcomes that have been associated with gender dysphoria like suicide, substance abuse, suicide ideation, and on so (Olson et al, 2016). Intersex youth, too, deserve the ability to understand their own gender identity and not be subject to genital surgery as infants. Recognizing that gender identity is something one does and is related to a recognition one seeks, rather than having it foisted on one, is a basic form of respect. Like other potentially medicalized forms of subjectivity, the person at the center of the process should have agency and should that agency be rooted in a claim to authenticity, that claim does not stall them from continuing to grow and change, as all people do.

Pronoun usage among some trans and nonbinary people is, in some areas, starting to mobilize an "official" administrative pronoun and a "familiar" more complicated form of address, known to closer associates in response to understanding recognition by authorities is different than recognition by those with whom one has community or affective ties. Strategic decisions to withhold information—or what might be called passing—is another strategy for navigating administrative spaces. In the words of a trans

colleague who represents trans and nonbinary people in court, "What would you like me to call you? What would you like me to call you in front of the judge?" Such strategies acknowledge the necessity for respectful engagement when it is possible and carefully remind everyone that it simply is not always possible yet. Authenticating powers are often just waiting for a chance to misrecognize and erase again.

Bialystok is right: we do need to do more educating about these complexities, understanding why, too, people may deploy strategies of authenticity to resist, to organize, and also, sometimes, to not be known by everyone. That negative lesson, that spaces are not yet as welcoming as we might hope or pretend they are, may also startle people into rethinking their own claims for enacting authentic inclusion.

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About the Author

Cris Mayo is the director of Interdisciplinary Studies in Education and Professor in the Department of Education at the University of Vermont. Mayo is the past-president of the Philosophy of Education Society, author of books on sex education, LGBTQ+ issues in education, and gay straight alliances in high schools as well as co-editor of two collections on transgender and queer pedagogies and articles in *Educational Theory, Educational Researcher, Philosophy of Education,* and *Educational Policy and Theory*, among others.