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Who Do You Think You Are?

Elizabeth A. Rupert
Gettysburg College

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Who Do You Think You Are?

Abstract

Now, I understand that labels are a natural part of our society. We've even posted recently about our editor's tendency to [label other people](#) based off of their clothes or attitudes.

But which labels do we get to choose for ourselves? Ideally, I'd like to say that I can label myself any way that I want to. Don't you think that in a society like ours we should be at liberty to choose our own identity?

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, social identity

Disciplines

Educational Sociology | Place and Environment | Social Psychology and Interaction | Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

May 6, 2013

Now, I understand that labels are a natural part of our society. We've even posted recently about our editor's tendency to [label other people](#) based off of their clothes or attitudes.

But which labels do we get to choose for ourselves? Ideally, I'd like to say that I can label myself any way that I want to. Don't you think that in a society like ours we should be at liberty to choose our own identity?

In a lot of cases, we do. Political Party: I decided that all on my own, without anyone else deciding for me with what party I should align. My major in college: With some guidance from my professors, I got to pick which subjects interested me most and explored those throughout my four years at Gettysburg. Some of the ways that I identify have changed as I've gotten older, but it's all been totally fine. Religion: I grew up Catholic, but I currently identify with Liberation Theology. Hair Color: I grew up blonde, but now I'm usually a ginger...

...but also sometimes my hair's purple. Many have questioned why I've changed the way I identify, but **nobody has questioned whether or not I'm allowed to do so**. If I want to be Catholic and I believe that I'm Catholic, I can be Catholic. If I want to be a ginger, I can be a ginger. Others may not agree with the choices that I've made, but it's understood that these are my choices and it is my life, so they don't have to agree with them.

Last year I had a conversation with another student at Gettysburg College in which I was naming female actresses that I find attractive. He stopped me to ask me if I am bisexual. I have never been asked that before, and had never had to come up with a response before, so when he asked me I had to do something that surprised me – I had to think about it. If you know me, this may surprise you too – I have been in a serious relationship with someone who identifies as a man for the past 8 years, which to most people would indicate that I am heterosexual. But that's the thing, isn't it? Other people can look at my life and assume that I am heterosexual because I have chosen to take part in a heterosexual relationship, but whose identity are we talking about



here? *Oh right, mine.* Perhaps I do identify as heterosexual, but that doesn't stop me from being able to find other women attractive. Some might define that as bisexual –

But guess who gets to make the rules about my identity? Me.

But in our society, this is not really the truth. We label others based on the way that we might label ourselves. What makes someone a lesbian? Is it how many times they've had sex with another woman? Is it how many relationships they've had with other women? Can a woman be a lesbian just because she finds other women attractive, even if she's in a heterosexual relationship?

The other day I overheard a conversation between two female Gettysburg students talking about a male student. One of the women asked the other if their male friend is gay. The other one responded that she often thinks that he is...he just "doesn't know it yet." Wait – *what?* He doesn't know it yet? But *we* do? We get to decide that we know that about him, and then get to create an identity for him?

Think about it this way: Imagine if when I was younger someone said about me, "She might think she's a Catholic, but she's a Liberationist. She just doesn't know it yet." Or, "Yeahhhh she says now that she's blonde, but we all know she's really a ginger; she'll say it eventually."

It turns out, folks, that we don't get to make these kinds of decisions for other people. And we also don't get to choose our own definitions for labels and then apply them to everyone else. I may believe that someone who identifies as a lesbian has particular feelings about other women or has particular sexual experiences, but guess what – **I'm wrong**. When someone chooses their identity, they get to decide what that identity actually means. But that only applies to themselves – my lesbian friends don't get to decide whether or not their other lesbian friends are "true" lesbians or not, just like I don't get to decide whether or not my friends are hetero or homosexual. One of the most respected men in my life identified as gay for twenty-three years...and then married a woman. And you know what? He still identifies as gay.

And that's the thing. You do and should get to decide for yourself how you identify. When I was asked if I am a bisexual, I had the opportunity to think about the question and create an answer. I got to decide how I choose to identify, and the answer that I chose really only matters to me, because **the definition of my identity applies to me and me alone**.

Our identities are important. Because I have had the agency to choose my own identity, I am proud of it. I am a feminist, a dancer, a television-fanatic. As someone involved with Surge, I call myself an Insurgent. Oddly enough, even though my hair hasn't been blonde in years, I still identify as a blonde. Today I might consider myself to be a member of the Green Party, but I might wake up tomorrow and realize that I identify more with the Tea Party. Who knows? What I do know is that I should have the opportunity to change my identity, to decide what is important to me, and that no one else should take that right away from me. And this applies to everyone – Catholics, gingers, lesbians, fraternity brothers, Republicans, environmental activists, men, women.

I need to work hard to not label others and not let others label me. That way I can maintain the right to define myself as I see fit. Because, at the end of the day, it's my identity. So I get to **own it**.

Elizabeth Rupert '13
Blog Manager

<http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/05/06/who-do-you-think-you-are/>