

# Inquiring Minds topic – 15 June 2018

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## Are We Individuals Anymore?

Let's discuss:

Are you thought of mostly as part of a group?

Are we group-think or tribal-think people?

Has your own manner of responding to news and events changed over the years?

How can our schools foster reason and truth-telling?

Do you hold others accountable for their own reasoned comments and views, or do you think only in terms of “my group” and “theirs”?

*This article edited for brevity and clarity (thanks to Roger Palms):*

by David Brooks/The New York Times – 22 March 2018

[nytimes.com /2018/03/22/opinion/speaking-as-a-white-male.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/22/opinion/speaking-as-a-white-male.html)

How much are you in control of your own opinions?

If you go back to the intellectuals of the 1950s, you get the impression that they thought individuals could very much determine their own beliefs.

Writers like George Orwell believed that experience was more important than identity, that if you put yourself in other people's shoes, you could feel what other groups were feeling and communicate that experience.

Busy fighting communism and fascism, people back then emphasized individual reason and were deeply allergic to group-think.

We don't think this way anymore, and in fact thinking this way can get you into trouble. I guess the first step was the rise of perspectivism. This is the belief, often traced back to Nietzsche, that what you believe is determined by where you stand: Our opinions are not guided by objective truth, because there is no such thing; they are guided by our own spot in society.

Then came Michel Foucault and critical race theorists, and the argument that society is structured by elites to preserve their privilege. Beliefs and culture are part of the structure elites use to preserve that inequality. This led, in the common parlance, to the assumption that your beliefs are determined by your group's privilege or lack of privilege, by where your group is within the power structure.

Now we are at a place where it is commonly assumed that your perceptions are something that come to you through your group, through your demographic identity. How many times have we all heard somebody rise up in conversation and say, “Speaking as a Latina. ...” or “Speaking as a queer person...” or “Speaking as a Jew. ...”?

What does that mean? After you’ve stated your group identity, what is the therefore that follows?

We’ve shifted from an emphasis on individual judgment toward a greater emphasis on collective experience. I notice that even in my own line of work. When I started, it was very important for opinion writers to never think of themselves as a Republican or a Democrat. We were individual inquirers, not polemicists for some political team. Over the years, many people stopped making that distinction.

Today, group labels matter a lot. When you read discussions of op-ed writers you see that we’re often not thought of as individual thinkers, but as spokesmen who are here to represent a point of view. People get upset when a certain group is not represented on the page.

Under what circumstances should we embrace the idea that collective identity shapes our thinking? Under what circumstances should we resist collective identity and insist on the primacy of individual discretion, and our common humanity?

On the one hand, the drive to bring in formerly marginalized groups has obviously been one of the great achievements of our era. When you put together a panel discussion or a work team, even on a subject like oncology, you don’t want to have a bunch of white males sitting up there. We know that something valuable will be lost.

Wider inclusion has vastly improved public debate. For example, in the 1990s, African-Americans strongly supported tougher criminal justice laws. Now opinion has shifted and a majority of African-Americans strongly oppose them. That shift, born out of a direct and unique experience, reveals that, say, mandatory minimum sentencing laws have had harsh unintended effects.

But other times group identity seems irrelevant to many issues. How does being gay shape your view of U.S.-German relations or breaking up big tech? How does being Latina influence how you read a black writer like St. Augustine?

And there are other times when collective thinking seems positively corrupting. Why are people’s views of global warming, genetically modified foods and other scientific issues strongly determined by political label?

Our whole education system is based on the idea that we train individuals to be critical thinkers. Our political system is based on the idea that persuasion and deliberation lead to compromise and toward truth. The basis of human dignity is our capacity to make up our own minds. One of the things I’ve learned in a lifetime in journalism is that people are always more unpredictable than their categories.

But the notion that group membership determines opinion undermines all that. If it’s just group against group, deliberation is a sham, beliefs are just masks groups use to preserve power structures, and democracy is a fraud.

The epistemological foundation of our system is in surprisingly radical flux.