

1 QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY

This chapter is about questions of identity. Identity itself seems to be about a question, 'who am I?' We are going to focus on three key questions:

- How are identities formed?
- How much control do we have in shaping our own identities?
- Are there particular uncertainties about identity in the contemporary UK?

First, we need to think a bit more about what we mean by identity.

1.1 What is identity?

If identity provides us with the means of answering the question 'who am I?' it might appear to be about personality; the sort of person I am. That is only part of the story. Identity is different from personality in important respects. We may share personality traits with other people, but sharing an identity suggests some *active* engagement on our part. We choose to *identify* with a particular identity or group. Sometimes we have more choice than others. This chapter will address the relative importance of *structures*, the forces beyond our control which shape our identities, and *agency*, the degree of control which we ourselves can exert over who we are. Identity requires some awareness on our part. *Personality* describes qualities individuals may have, such as being outgoing or shy, internal characteristics, but identity requires some element of choice. For example, I may go to football matches on Saturdays because I enjoy shouting loudly with a crowd of lively extroverts, but I go to watch Sheffield Wednesday because I want to *identify* with that particular team, to wear that scarf and make a statement about who I am, and, of course, because I want to state that I support *one* Sheffield team and *not* the other (Sheffield United). We may be characterized by having personality traits, but we have to identify with – that is, actively take up – an identity.

This example also illustrates the importance of marking oneself as having the *same* identity as one group of people and a *different* one from others. Think about a situation where you meet someone for the first time and, in trying to find out who they are, ask questions about where they come from and what they do. In such situations we are trying to find out what makes up this person and also what makes them the *same* as us – that is, what we have in common – and what makes them *different*. If you see somebody wearing the badge of an organization to which you also belong, it marks that person out as being the same as you, as sharing an identity. Or consider a situation where, travelling abroad, hearing the voices of those who speak your own

language, you feel both a sense of recognition and of belonging. In a strange place, finding people who share our language provides us with something and someone with whom we can identify. Or imagine that you are on a train, and a stranger in the compartment is reading the local newspaper from the town where you were born. You might strike up a conversation which includes references to what you have in common. This presents a moment of recognition and of having something in common with another person who shares an identity with you. Identity is marked by similarity, that is of the people like us, and by difference, of those who are not. There are other examples which are less reassuring, where the appropriate identity is *not* established, and where, for example, one may be denied access to credit or hire purchase, pension or sickness benefits, or entry to a club or restaurant, or, even more significantly, to a country.

How do we know which people are the same as us? What information do we use to categorize others and ourselves? In the examples above, what is often important is a *symbol*, like a badge, a team scarf, a newspaper, the language we speak, or perhaps the clothes we wear. Sometimes it is obvious. A badge can be a clear public statement that we identify with a particular group. Sometimes it is more subtle, but symbols and representations are important in marking the ways in which we share identities with some people and distinguish ourselves as different from others.

In this sense, although as individuals we have to take up identities actively, those identities are necessarily the product of the society in which we live and our relationship with others. Identity provides a link between individuals and the world in which they live. Identity combines how I see myself and how others see me. Identity involves the internal and the subjective, and the external. It is a socially recognized position, recognized by others, not just by me.

However, how I see myself and how others see me do not always fit. For example, individuals may view themselves as high achievers, worthy of promotion, yet be viewed by their employer as less than successful. The young people noisily returning home from a club in the early hours of the morning may be seen by others as troublemakers. Think about some of the ways in which how you see yourself may be at variance with others' perception of you. This could be at a more personal level, in the context of family and friendship relationships, or at a more public or even global level, where particular characteristics are attributed to specific national or ethnic groups. A sense of conflicting identities may result from the tensions between having to be a student, a parent, and an employee at the same time: these are examples of the *multiple identities* which people have.

The link between myself and others is not only indicated by the connection between how I see myself and how other people see me, but also by the connection between what I want to be and the influences, pressures and opportunities which are available. Material, social and physical constraints prevent us from successfully presenting ourselves in some identity positions – constraints which include the perceptions of others. Criminal identities are

often produced through the exaggeration of stereotyping, where newspaper reports reproduce the notion of a criminal identity as young, male and black (Mooney *et al.*, 2000). Criminality can be produced by others who construct this category of person. This process of stereotyping certain groups as criminal also illustrates some of the imbalances and inequalities in the relationship between the individual and the world outside.

The subject, 'I' or 'we' in the identity equation, involves some element of choice, however limited. The concept of identity encompasses some notion of human agency; an idea that we can have some control in constructing our own identities. There are, of course, constraints which may lie in the external world, where material and social factors may limit the degree of agency which individuals may have. Lack of material resources severely limits the opportunities we have, as we will consider in the case of poverty and economic constraints in Chapter 3. It is impossible to have an identity as a successful career woman if one is without a job and if there are no employment opportunities. Other limitations to our autonomy may reside within us, for example in the bodies which we inhabit, as illustrated by the ageing process, by physical impairments, illness and the actual size and shape of our bodies.

SUMMARY

Identity involves:

- a link between the personal and the social;
- some active engagement by those who take up identities;
- being the same as some people and different from others, as indicated by symbols and representations;
- a tension between how much control I have in constructing my identities and how much control or constraint is exercised over me.

2

WHO AM I?

Let us start with an example of an individual and his identity which illustrates the link between the personal and the social. The social scientist Madan Sarup uses the example of his passport, which gives information about his identity in an official sense. Our passports name, describe and place us. A passport describes an individual; it names *one* person. It also states to which *group*, in particular which nation, that person belongs:

I have three passports, all British ... In the first one, I am a young man with a lot of hair and a confident smile. My height is 5ft 8in and I am a school teacher. In my second passport photograph, most of the hair has gone. I have a white beard and a serious expression. My height is now 1.73 metres and I am a college lecturer. In the

third passport, the smaller red one, I am bald. Again I have a serious expression, but now my face is heavily lined. A friend asks: which is the *real* you? Of course, people see me in many different ways ... I want to have a closer look at my red passport ... At the top are the words 'European community' ... The passport refers to my nationality – British Citizen.

(Sarup, 1996, p.xiv)



FIGURE 1.1 Examples of UK passports

Three passports offer details about identities, which are different, yet each belongs to the same person. Physical appearance is important, but it changes over time. Sarup's friend asks, 'which is the real you?' This suggests that there is not only continuity in the name of the person who possesses the passports, but that there might be a fixed, true, 'real' identity which could be uncovered. The personal identity of the named person includes their experience and life story. Continuity is important to our understanding of who we are, but changes suggest that identities are not fixed and constant; they change too.

We have some information here about what Sarup looks like. At one level physical appearance is how we 'read' people when we meet them. The body is also an important component of personal identity. Sarup cites physical appearance as the principal example of what is revealed here, but there are many other aspects of the body which have an impact on identity. Size, shape, disability, sex, all influence our experience of who we are and who we can be.

A passport picks out other key aspects of identity, which include occupation, nationality and age, all of which position us and give us a place in the society in which we live. However, it does not say anything about *how* we occupy these positions or about what they mean to us. We do not know how Sarup himself feels. Passport details cannot reveal a person's feelings. We need more information:

I think of [British Citizenship] as a formal category, because it does not express how I feel about it. I am not proud to be 'British'; it reminds me of the scars of imperialism, the days of the Raj. I feel more sympathetic to being a citizen of the

European Community, but here too I feel ambivalent. I would rather be a citizen of a federal European Community, but friends remind me that the concept of the 'Fortress Europe' is a Euro-centric strategy to maintain the power and privilege of the 'First World'.

(Sarup, 1996, p.xv)

Here Sarup suggests that he identifies more actively with being a European than a British citizen. To identify with a nation or group like this is to take up a *collective identity*. However, only one UK identity is offered by the passport. I notice that my own passport gives my place of birth, in Wales, but currently calls me a British and not a Welsh citizen. That Britain is a multi-ethnic, multicultural society is not acknowledged here either. Sarup refers to the colonial past which positions him in a particular relationship with 'Britishness'. This history is not recognized in the passport. The British Empire, however, used to have a place, with the old blue passport which referred to 'The United Kingdom of Great Britain and her Colonies', but the more recent EC and the new EU passports have no place for multi-ethnicity as yet. Those who hold the UK passport are grouped together as if we share one British identity. What we have in common is that we do not have another national identity (unless we have dual citizenship). We are not French or Chinese nationals. Identity is thus also marked by difference; that is, by indicating what we are not. We shall return to the importance of nation in the creation of identities in Chapter 4.

The very fact of having a passport at all confers identity. Particular passports provide rights of citizenship which are denied those who do not possess a passport at all. The passport illustrates some of the ways in which identities are institutionally constructed, and in this case the UK state, through legislation, plays a very powerful part in defining the identities of its citizens, especially in making some identities possible and others impossible. In the UK, birth has to be registered in order for the child to exist officially at all. Birth certificates, like death certificates, require that the person be classified as female or male. There is no alternative or scope for negotiation. At present, whatever an individual does in life to change their gender identity, the death certificate has to accord with the birth certificate, which cannot be changed retrospectively. Other examples of the official production and classification of an identity include ID cards, credit cards, membership cards, driving licences or any other sort of licence.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Think about your own passport or any other identity card or official document. What does it say about you? Does it suggest groups with whom you share an identity and those from whom you are different? Does this suggest several different identities? What is omitted? What is the importance of such institutional identities?

C O M M E N T

The kind of information revealed in an official document like a passport has many omissions about what identities and allegiances may be important in our daily lives. Fortunately, the state does not expose our political allegiances, community involvement, sexuality or status as a parent, although these also combine to produce our identities. The apparently single identity of citizenship leaves out all the contradictions about who we are and the multiplicity of identities each of us has.

Institutions like the state do have the power to restrict individual or collective freedom to adopt some identities. We probably do not think about these restrictions nor about national identity or citizenship very often, except when we are denied the rights associated with citizenship.

SUMMARY

- The passport example illustrates the tension between how I see myself and how I am seen by others, between the personal and the social.
- Institutions such as the state play an important role in constructing identities.
- Difference is very clearly marked in relation to national identity.
- Such official categories contain omissions and cannot fully accommodate the personal investment we have in our identities, nor the multiple identities we have.

In the next section we explore some of the ways in which social science can clarify some of the definitions of identity which have been offered and begin to address some of the questions which have been asked.

3 WHO ARE YOU? WHAT CAN SOCIAL SCIENCE TELL US?

In Sections 1 and 2, I argued that identity possessed the following characteristics:

- It links how I see myself and how others see me.
- It links the individual and the social.
- It is marked by similarity and difference.
- It involves some active engagement on our part and a tension between human agency and social structures.

- There are single and multiple identities.
- Identities can be seen as fixed or fluid and changing.

In this section we return to the definition of identity and ask how social scientists have attempted to address these two questions:

How are identities formed?

How much control do we have in the construction of our identities?

3.1 Imagining ourselves

The work of the social philosopher George Herbert Mead, published in the 1930s, has been extensively used in thinking about identity because he offered useful insights into the link between how we see ourselves and the ability of human beings to *imagine* how others might see us (Mead, 1934). Think about it this way. Imagine that you have an interview for a job. You think about the interview before the 'big day' and consider what to wear. You want to look smart but perhaps that new suit would be too hot and you would end up feeling, and looking, very uncomfortable, especially if the heating was turned up high. Maybe you should try not to look too formal? What is going on here? In order to make the decision about what to wear you have to imagine yourself, to look at yourself from the outside. Mead argued that it is the capacity to imagine how others would see us and our capacity to carry images in our heads which is an important distinguishing feature of human beings. We do this, he argued, through **symbolizing**. This is best illustrated in our use of language, where words operate as symbols. Pictures, images and gestures are also symbolic in that they too *represent* something else. A symbol stands for something else. For example, the word 'table' stands for the object which we call a table. Having the word allows us to talk and think about the object, namely the table, even when there is no table within view. The suit worn at the interview in the scenario above signifies or stands for the serious candidate. We symbolize the sort of person we want others to think we are through the clothes we wear and the ways in which we behave. In the interview example we have an image of ourselves at the interview, either in the disastrous overheated scenario or preferably in another more confident, successful scene where we might *visualize* ourselves appropriately dressed and getting the job.

Symbols and representations are important in the production of identities. This is how we signal our identities to others and how we know which people we identify with and those who are distinguished as being different. How we speak, the clothes we wear, badges, scarves, uniforms or flags all offer symbols of identity. Judith Williamson, whose work focuses on representational systems, writing within the discipline of cultural studies, describes the process of choosing an identity in the following way:

Symbolizing

Making one object, word or image stand for or signify another. For example, a red light at traffic lights symbolizes 'stop', and green means 'you can go'.

When I rummage through my wardrobe in the morning I am not merely faced with the choice of what to wear. I am faced with the choice of images: the difference between a smart suit and a pair of overalls, a leather skirt and a cotton skirt, is not one of fabric and style, but one of identity. You know perfectly well that you will be seen differently for the whole day, depending on what you put on; you will appear as a particular kind of woman with one particular identity which excludes others. The black leather skirt rather rules out girlish innocence, oily overalls tend to exclude sophistication ... often I have wished I could put them all on together – just to say, 'how dare you think any of these is me. But also, see, I can be all of them'.

(Williamson, 1986, p.91)

Williamson suggests that we can choose the image that we present to others. She assumes that we have a choice, and that we know other people will understand our choices. In different cultures, these clothes, for example, would be interpreted in very different ways.

How does this develop our understanding of identity? Considering the claim that identity involves how I see myself and how others see me has led to some suggestions about how this takes place. First, we have to be able to imagine ourselves, to reflect on who we are and how we appear to others. Second, we do this through symbolizing, through producing images and visualizing ourselves. The ability to visualize ourselves and to represent ourselves gives us some degree of agency, although the repertoire of symbols upon which we can draw is always limited by the particular culture which we inhabit, as illustrated in the quotation from Williamson. This approach to the notion of identity puts more emphasis on the control which individuals have, rather than the constraints which they experience.

SUMMARY

- In constructing identities we imagine ourselves.
- We do this by visualizing ourselves, thinking in symbols.

In addressing the question about how identities are formed we have focused on the processes which are involved in constructing an identity within the individual; what happens in the social situation is left out. What else do we need to know? What happens when people present themselves to others, in everyday interaction?

and to ...

3.2 Everyday interaction

Erving Goffman, the sociologist whose work has been very influential in sociology and social psychology, focused on analysis of everyday interaction, conversations and encounters. How do we communicate with others?

Goffman suggested that how we present ourselves to others was rather like acting out a part in a play where the scripts are already written. In the work which we discuss here he refers to roles not to identities, but his focus on the detail of everyday interaction is also useful in exploring how we understand the identities of others and how we present ourselves. He based his work on a theatrical metaphor. He states in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) that his perspective on the self is dramaturgical – that is, based on the idea of a performance. What we are is not given (that is, there already), it must be created. We act out in a whole range of different **roles** which are rather like parts in a play. Actors in a play cannot act out any old part and say what they like. They have to speak the lines written. However, even if the roles are written we can improvise and interpret our roles, although there are constraints.

Roles

The society into which we are born presents us with a series of roles, which are patterns of behaviour, routines and responses, like parts in a play.

Individuals, like actors, are performing for an audience. Speech, acts and gestures all require someone else to be watching or listening. The parts we play may be already written but we bring our own expectations and interpretations to these roles. We have to be convincing in order to persuade others in the audience that this is an authentic part that we are playing. For example, as a student you have to persuade your tutor that this is a serious role – that you are *really* a student. How do you do this? Perhaps you ensure that you submit your assignments on time, look earnest, carry piles of books around with you and deny any involvement in late-night party-going? The bank manager, the teacher or the doctor; each has to give a performance which convinces others of their authenticity. This is not quite the same as investing in an identity – that is, having personal commitment to an identity – but it does give us more detail about how we ‘read’ people and about how we get the message about ‘who they are’.

A society like the contemporary UK offers a whole range of social roles which we as individuals can take up. Stop and think for a moment about the number of such positions that you occupy – in your home life, in familial relationships, at work, as a consumer, as a citizen, as a client of the welfare state or social or medical services. This involves a combination of our own expectations about a role and those of the society in which we live.

Not all of our actions in these scenarios are conscious or explicit. Sometimes we give information to other people directly. In these instances Goffman describes the public display which we intend to make when we *give* information as front stage. Appearance, clothes and gestures are crucial in the presentation of self, but sometimes the information presented may

inadvertently reveal more about a person than the information directly or intentionally given. We *give off* information which we do not quite intend; for example, the nervous interview candidate who twists his fingers unintentionally is *giving off* an impression of anxiety whilst attempting to give a confident performance. The friend who is trying to look interested but who is all the while drumming her fingers and looking around may be *giving off* an impression of boredom.

The focus of Goffman's work is on everyday interactions. It offers us more ideas about answers to our first question at the beginning of Section 3: how are identities formed? His emphasis is on the social dimensions of identity and the relationship between identity, with its concern with personal investment, and roles which tells us more about the social aspects and social exchanges between people. Goffman's approach suggests that there are links between the society in which we live and the limitations offered by the roles or parts we play in that society, because the scripts have, in a sense, already been written. However, there is also scope for agency because those who play the parts can improvise and offer their own interpretation.

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SUMMARY

There are some important features of Goffman's original theory which contribute to our understanding of identity and which offer more detail about how identities are presented in linking the personal and the social:

- All performances are addressed to an audience.
- Information can be given intentionally or *given off*, where we might reveal things unintentionally.

What is the source of the information which is *given off*, revealed without our consciously intending to do so? Identity relies upon a conscious, active presentation, but it might also involve thoughts and feelings about which we might not be conscious. Unintentional signs, 'slips of the tongue' are manifestations of the *unconscious* mind.

3.3 The unconscious

What mechanisms, of which we might not be consciously aware, determine our identities? Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory gives us some ways in which to answer this question. One of the major contributions of Freudian psychoanalysis is his understanding of the **unconscious**, an idea which has passed into everyday language in Western societies through popular culture, the advertising industry and through psychoanalytically inspired practices like therapy. Think about the language in problem pages or used on television in the personal confession programmes on daytime TV.

Unconscious

The unconscious mind is the repository of repressed feelings and desires – often from childhood. These feelings can emerge, for example, in dreams. They can influence the choices we make in later life.



STANLEY WAS DEEPLY DISAPPOINTED WHEN, HIGH IN THE TIBETAN MOUNTAINS, HE FINALLY FOUND HIS TRUE SELF.

You may be familiar with the idea of *Freudian slips*, when the word we actually say is not the word we intended, which reveal something about our hidden desires. There may be occasions on which you have said one thing when you meant another and what you have said has been embarrassing or humorous. I can think of an example in a handwritten essay where the student wrote 'of coffee' instead of 'of course', suggesting that it might have been time for a break! Another wrote 'sexy' instead of 'sexist' in an essay on gender, which might indicate other preoccupations in the unconscious mind rather than feminist critiques of social institutions. Freud argued that these slips, jokes and dreams can reveal our 'true' feelings.

The unconscious is separate from the conscious mind and has its own rules and its own language. Freud argued, based on case studies of people he had analysed, that through early development children repress all their anti-social needs and wants, all the things a child is not allowed to do

or to have. This repressed material enters the unconscious and, although it cannot be directly accessed by the conscious mind, is revealed in dreams or slips of the tongue (see Bocock, 1983). Who we are is not given in advance, we are not born with an identity, but it emerges in a number of different forms through a series of identifications which combine and emerge in an infinite number of forms so there is never one fixed, coherent identity but several in play.

You will recall that in the definition of identity in Section 1.1 it was suggested that we have to identify with an identity – that is, actively engage with a position. It is not enough to be classified by someone else, we have to take it up ourselves; for example, identify with a political party or a social movement or with enthusiasts for a type of music. **Identification** is a term often associated with psychoanalysis. Identification does not just involve copying; it involves taking that identity *into* yourself. Freud focused on male children and suggests that the little boy is especially interested in his father, although he loves his mother. He wants to grow up like his father and to take his place.

Psychoanalysis is one of the social theories which is organized around a concern with sex, sexuality and gender. In Freud's approach, children are seen as having sexual desires of a diverse kind. Some of these desires are repressed into the unconscious. Freud argued that the most important psychological drive is sexuality. By sexuality he meant a broad category of pleasure-seeking desires which are experienced even by newborn babies, who, for example, derive pleasure from sucking. If a child's needs are met in

Identification

The psychological process of association between oneself and something else (originally someone else).

infancy, the child is more likely to develop into an adult with a positive outlook on life, whereas the child whose needs are not met will grow up with a pessimistic, negative disposition.

Not only did Freud argue that children were sexual but also that the most significant aspect of development was psycho-sexual. Identification with the parent of the same sex was vital for the satisfactory development of the child into adulthood. This has implications for our exploration of identity. Freud's focus on the unconscious adds to our understanding of the processes at work in the formation of identities. It suggests that we bring childhood experiences, even those about which we are not conscious, to the decisions we make as adults. This might suggest that we have limited control over the identities which we take up. They may be determined by this early childhood experience. However, Freud argues that we may be able to exercise more agency through coming to an understanding of those things which we have repressed into our unconscious minds from childhood experience, notably through therapy which can help us to understand ourselves.

SUMMARY

The importance of psychoanalytic theory for our investigation of identity can be summarized as follows:

- The identity positions which we take up may be the result of unconscious feelings which we may try to rationalize but which we do not know for sure.
- Many aspects of identity derive from childhood experience so that identity is constructed by the past as well as through the present.
- Identity is not fixed and unchanging, but the result of a series of conflicts and of different identifications.
- Both gender and sexuality are important to our understanding of identity. Our sense of who we are is most significantly linked to our awareness of our identities as women or as men.

Structure and agency in Section 3

Section 3 has focused on the question of how identities are formed and some of the processes which are involved when people take up identities and present these to other people. As we have seen, identity presents a link between the personal – that is, individuals taking up identities – and the social – that is, the social situations in which people find themselves, including social roles, everyday interactions with others and the language which we use. These accounts of identity formation offer different emphases on the role of individuals in shaping their own identities. How do these accounts address our second question:

How much control do we have in shaping our own identities?

Table 1.1 illustrates how each of the approaches discussed in Section 3 addresses this question. Each involves an interrelationship between agency and structure, but some offer more scope for agency.

TABLE 1.1

	Agency	Structure
Mead	Visualization, symbolization, imagination of individuals. We have autonomy in imagining ourselves	We have to use existing language and symbols
Goffman	Negotiation of roles; we can interpret the parts we play	The parts or scripts have already been written for the roles we play
Freud	Individuals can come to understand their childhood experience and shape their own identities. Identities are never completely fixed	Social forces can operate through the unconscious, which shapes our identities



LINKING THE PERSONAL AND THE SOCIAL

Identity presents the interface between the personal – what is going on inside our heads, how we as individuals feel about who we are – and the social – the societies in which we live and the social, cultural and economic factors which shape experience and make it possible for people to take up some identities and render others inaccessible or impossible. In this section, we look at other views of how identities are formed, continuing to address our first question, but shifting the emphasis on to the social aspect of the identity equation, so that we can begin to consider the third question about uncertainty and about how identities change. In order to explore the possibility that there might be some uncertainties about who we are in the contemporary UK, we need to look in more detail at the relationship between changing social structures and changing identities.

4.1 Hey you! Who me? Interpellation

What happens when individuals take up a particular identity position? You will recall that in the earlier discussion in Section 3.1 we considered the importance of symbolization and the ways in which human beings can imagine themselves occupying a particular identity. What is actually

happening when we imagine ourselves as the successful candidate, the streetwise teenager or the sporting hero? Why do some identities 'work' so that we are drawn into them?

One important attempt to resolve the problem of where the individual stands in relation to socially constructed and even determined identity positions was developed by Louis Althusser who argued that when people are recruited into identity positions they are **interpellated** or hailed (Althusser, 1971).

It works like this. Imagine that you are walking down the street and someone calls out your name. You stop, turn round and think 'that's me, they're calling me'. Althusser argued that this is how we come to feel that an identity is the one which fits us – as a member of a religious community, as a New Labour voter, as a lad, as a mother, as a 'new man', as a European. The process is one of recognition, of looking at yourself and thinking 'that's me!' Advertising offers plenty of opportunities to think about how this works. Let me show

Interpellation

A process whereby people recognize themselves in a particular identity and think 'that's me'.



August 1966

Make Him

Cooking's more fun in a gay kitchen.

See how **ALKATHENE** Houseware brightens things up!

BRIGHT COLOURS make a lot of difference to your home. To your mood, and to your life. Bright things made from 'Alkathene' make cooking most pleasant, less like hard work. 'Alkathene' is long-lasting, begins virtually self-cleaning. It will not chip, scratch or burn. It can be washed down in a sink with soap and water. It is as light as a feather.

LOOK FOR THE LABEL

MADE FROM **ALKATHENE**

It's light! It's bright!

ALKATHENE

IT'S MADE FROM

IMPERIAL CHEMICAL INDUSTRIES LIMITED - LONDON - S.W.1

FIGURE 1.2 Domestic bliss: the appeal of home life (when 'gay' had a different meaning)

9282601



FIGURE 1.3 Women in the workplace: the independent mother

you an example of how some women, as mothers, might have felt 'yes that's me' in the 1950s and more recently. In the 1950s, women's magazines encouraged women, who might have worked outside the home during the wartime, to return to their domestic duties. Women were actively recruited into being housewives and mothers. And some might have felt that was the sort of mother they wanted to be, and that they fitted this identity. Women's magazines at this time sought to both promote this notion of motherhood and to enable their readers to identify with it (see Figure 1.2).

Such promotions were used in the 1950s to encourage women back into the home and into domesticity. This example illustrates a maternal identity at a particular moment in history. By 1999 a rather different maternal identity was being presented and, if the figures for women's participation in the labour market and the sale of women's magazines are to be believed, this is an identity which had purchase at this time (see Figure 1.3). In 1999, mothers might have been more likely to be 'hailed' by the pregnant woman in the workplace than by images of domestic bliss. Advertisements in women's magazines at this time plug into mothers' concerns with juggling paid work and child care.

Advertisements present us with commodities which are promoted as part of a lifestyle. Consumers can purchase symbols of the identities that they want to possess.

Can you think of examples of such advertisements which seek to interpellate the consumer in particular ways? Those for cars, for example? What sort of associations are you expected to make? Would buying a particular model of car make you seem successful, sexy, modern?

Next time you see advertisements on television or in newspapers or magazines, think about the identities which you are being invited to adopt by association.

- Interpellation links the individual to the social.
- It may work consciously or unconsciously.

The work of social scientists which has been considered so far has given us more information about the processes whereby identities are formed. Some of the views discussed focused on the individual and on the details of social interaction rather than the broader picture of social structures which might constrain us. Althusser's work sought to link the individual and the social and to show how some social structures work to recruit people into identities. What can social science tell us about the ways in which these aspects of society shape our identities? What are these social structures? Are some more important than others? Are they changing?

4.2 Social structures: concepts and explanations

At this point, I am going to shift the emphasis from personal identity in the context of everyday situations to some of the social structures, such as occupation, nation, and gender, which I suggested in Section 2 were significant influences on identity. How do social scientists explain these structures? I picked out work, gender and nation, ethnicity and place as being useful examples. Each of the remaining chapters of this book focuses on one of these aspects of identity but they are introduced here to signpost what follows and to offer some preliminary discussion of the concepts which are used.

One of the ways in which social scientists have attempted to explain work-based identities is to relate them to class. Social **class** is used by social scientists as a means of classifying the economic and social divisions of a society. Different economic systems create social class groupings, which involve some degree of inequality. Chapter 3 offers a fuller discussion of different analyses of class, but it is included here as an important factor influencing the life chances and identities of those who share a class position. The *unequal* distribution of material resources is a key feature of class division.

Another source of inequality can be found in **gender** relations (gender and identity are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2). There are areas of the labour market and of domestic work, including unpaid caring work within the home, which are seen as 'men's work' or 'women's work'. In industrial societies, paid work is exchanged for remuneration and is hence more valued and has higher status than unpaid domestic work or caring work. The former has been seen as masculine and the latter as feminine. This has been enacted in most Western societies through the notion of a male breadwinner which is primary to a man's identity, whereas women's work has been seen as an extension of their roles as wives and mothers and thus as a secondary activity.

This indicates the importance of gender as part of the organization of a society and not just a part of each individual's experience. It is part of the

Class

Class is a large grouping of people who share common economic interests, experiences and lifestyles.

Gender

Gender describes the systematic structuring of certain behaviour and practices which are associated with women or with men in particular societies.

Culture ✓

The culture of a society is its shared meanings, values and practices. Culture provides us with some of the categories and means of organizing ideas through which we make sense of our lives.

culture of a society. Assumptions about what is appropriate for women and for men can shape and influence our identities and the scope which we have for deciding both 'who we are' and 'who we want to be'.

National identity is an important part of the culture of a society. Think back to the example of the passport, in Section 2. It highlighted the importance of place, of where we come from and of institutional constructions of citizenship. The passport was proof of British citizenship but obscured gender and ethnic differences. Rights of citizenship can provide people with either considerable freedom or with restraint. Not only were women not accorded the same voting rights as men in the UK until 1928, but other rights, for example to welfare benefits, have depended on gender. The rights conferred by citizenship are often gender-related. In the UK, rights to civil citizenship have depended on gender because historically the main criterion for citizenship has been independence, based mainly on economic status. Carole Pateman argues that:

men, but not women, have been seen as possessing the capacities required of 'individuals', 'workers' and citizens' through the dichotomy breadwinner/housewife and the masculine meaning of independence. A 'worker' became a man who has an economically dependent wife to take care of his daily needs and look after his home and children ...

(Pateman, 1992, p.228)

The purpose of this example about gendered citizenship here is to illustrate the importance of gender in the construction of identities like those of the worker and the citizen, and to stress the importance of these different interrelated aspects of social organization.

SUMMARY

- The organization of society is important in shaping our identities.
- Class, gender, ethnicity and place are important dimensions of identity.
- These factors illustrate the tension between the individual and the social and between the individual's control or agency and that of social structures.

In Section 3 we briefly examined some of the explanations and concepts which social science offers in response to the two questions posed at the start: How are identities formed? How much control can we exercise over the construction of our identities? The discussion in Section 4 focused on the relationship between individuals and social structures. Changing social structures – for example, changing gender roles, patterns of employment, changing class and ethnic composition of the UK – might mean different identities are becoming available and others are disappearing. What sort of social changes have taken place in the last 50 years? In the next section we look more carefully at the changing times.

5

WHO ARE WE?

Why are we interested in identity at this point in history? Identity is certainly something of interest to academics, as illustrated by the number of books and even whole courses organized around the subject, but why should this be the case at this moment in time? Could current concerns about identity be a reflection of broad social and cultural uncertainties produced by rapid social change?

Stop and think for a moment about some of the differences between your own life and that of your parents or grandparents. What social changes might these experiences represent? What are the differences, in terms of family, marriage, divorce, parenting, work – paid and unpaid?

One of the most significant changes in the post-war period has been the move away from heavy manufacturing industry, for example steel production, ship manufacturing and coal-mining, and the increase in service sector work. Evidence shows that in the 1950s only 21 per cent of married women were in paid employment (EOC, 1981). Now the vast majority of women, married and unmarried, are in paid work or seeking work, albeit often part-time work on short-term contracts (*Social Trends*, 1998).

Whereas in the 1950s and 1960s 90 per cent of people in the UK married at least once in their lives, in 1999 the figure is down to 70 per cent with nearly half of those who marry predicted to divorce. This is very different from the number of divorces prior to the 1969 Divorce Reform Act, when the proportion was 4 per cent. In the late 1990s more people married late if they did marry, at an average age of 28 rather than 21 as was the case in the 1950s. The number of births to never-married single mothers was the fastest growing family group in the UK in 1999.

Of course there are continuities; children have to be born and to be looked after, but how and by whom? What does it mean to be a mother or a father in the twenty-first century? Is it very different from the experience of our grandparents' generation? Should mothers or fathers stay at home to look after young children, should parents pay for child care or should the state or employers provide nurseries? Even those things which we might have thought to be immutable, rooted in biological certainty, have been challenged – for example, through the use of IVF (in-vitro fertilization), a reproductive technology which enabled Liz Buttle, a 60-year-old grandmother, to give birth in 1998. New technologies appear to challenge certainties and the constraints of biology, opening up questions about 'who we are' in situations where we might have thought there was no question. All of these social changes,

economic, social and technological, present questions about identity. How do we construct ourselves, for example as parents or as workers, when society's expectations are changing and new technologies create new, hitherto unthought of, possibilities? The sociologist, Anthony Giddens, has argued (1991) that these questions are a feature of contemporary life in the West. Giddens maintains that identities become both more uncertain and more diverse in a rapidly changing globalized culture.



- Social changes taking place at global and personal levels can produce uncertainties in relation to who we are and our place in the world.
- Change is characterized by uncertainties and insecurities as well as by diversity and opportunities for the formation of new identities.

5.1 Is there a crisis?

Kobena Mercer, the cultural critic, argues that 'Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis' (Mercer, 1990). Is it 'in crisis?' There is evidence that this may be the case, for example in the ethnic and national conflicts across the world. Michael Ignatieff (1993) argues that one explanation of current concern with identity is that it is a useful explanatory concept providing a means of exploring conflict in the global context, such as in Yugoslavia, in Rwanda, in parts of the former USSR and in Ireland. Identity matters. People have a strong personal investment in political and ethnic identities, even to the extent of being willing to die for them. In such contexts, crisis might be the appropriate word.

On which other occasions have you encountered the word 'crisis', for example in the news media? The term is also employed in media constructions of social change within the UK, for example in relation to familial relations such as the increase in divorce, lone parenting and teenage pregnancies which have been identified as a 'crisis in the family' and linked to the 'crisis in masculinity', manifest in boys' underachievement at school, which is discussed in Chapter 2, or in deviant behaviour by young men (Mooney *et al.*, 2000). Such examples may involve overstatement and a failure to address the complexities of the situations in which people find themselves. Uncertainty is not only characterized by crises. It also offers opportunities and greater diversity.

In the remainder of this chapter we are going to look at some examples of questions which involve situations where changes lead us to explore the issue of who we are and what we can now be. Uncertainty is not a new historical phenomenon but it is given different expression at different times. Have the

goalposts been moved, or, perhaps more appropriately, are we now expected to play by different rules and wear a new strip?

SUMMARY

- Contemporary concerns with identity have been described as crises.
- There are also opportunities offered by the changes which are taking place.
- There are continuities as well as changes.

What are the particular uncertainties about identity at this point in history? A possible starting-point for finding out how uncertainties are expressed is to ask someone whose own life has changed.

6

WHAT DO YOU DO?

When we meet someone for the first time we are quite likely to ask them what they do in order to find out more about 'who they are'. A whole set of associated ideas about the person's identity may follow. The following extract is by John Greaves. John worked at the coal-face at Goldthorpe pit, South Yorkshire, for 20 years. For social scientists this is a particular form of evidence. It gives us information from a personal point of view. Here, in a piece of writing produced at a 'Return to Learn' course, run by the trade union UNISON and the Worker's Educational Association for unemployed miners, John describes the contrast between the mining village of Goldthorpe before 1984 and in 1997, 13 years after the pit was closed down.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Read the extract and think about these questions:

What does this autobiographical piece of writing tell us about identity?

How does John identify with the community and place in which he lived and worked?

How much control do you think John is able to exercise over the identities which he might want to adopt?

How important are social divisions like class and gender in the formation of those identities?

What are the uncertainties expressed here?



FIGURE 1.4 South Yorkshire miners

READING 11

John Greaves: 'The walk to work'

Pre-1984

Woken at 4 am by a twin belled wind up alarm clock, placed out of arms' reach. Boil the kettle while having a wash and brush up. Fill a flask, snatch a quick cup of tea before making off for the day shift at Goldthorpe Colliery. Flask in pocket, acme snap tin under my arm I make my way along Furlong Road, which is busy with similar looking men travelling to their work ... The odd pair of bicycles would creak past, no matter where you worked everyone said good morning or something of the like when passing. Passing the Jungle Club at five to five the odd light would still be burning, with a customer or two still putting the world to rights, or maybe they were piloting a round the clock drinking licence. Crossing the railway bridge on the sound of diesel locomotive pulling coal wagons away from the pit. Turning into Goldthorpe's Main Street just as the five o'clock buzzer at Hickleton Colliery was sounding. Three out of Goldthorpe's five butchers' shops would have been swept and swilled down, and the owners inside cutting and slicing ready for the day's trading. All three newsagents were brightly lit, with placards outside promising news hot off the press. By far most popular was Barry's, he had lost his right arm up to the shoulder as a young man. But an artist when it came to folding newspapers, or distributing chewing gum, snuff or cigarettes. All ... would soon be discussing Saturday's match, or who would win the 3.30 at Doncaster, while Barry struggled on manfully with his task. Once served, onward towards the Pit Lane with the mouth watering smell of fresh baked bread drifting from Mr Brown's Bakers shop past all the well kept shop fronts, then reaching the Goldthorpe Hotel, which was also taking part in

the open all hours scheme. Into the Pit Lane, a long concrete road with a swing park, football pitches and rugby pitches on the left and, on the right an allotment site with a shanty town of huts and greenhouses, a few with smoking chimneys. The first stop in the pit yard was the time office ... Then making a move for the pit head baths, this was where the transformation took place from normal human being into a coal miner. Off with jeans and tee shirt and on with bright orange overalls, helmet, knee pads and steel toe capped boots. Fill a large plastic bottle with drinking water before going into the hot acid smelling area known as the lamp cabin. On with a cap lamp and battery and out the

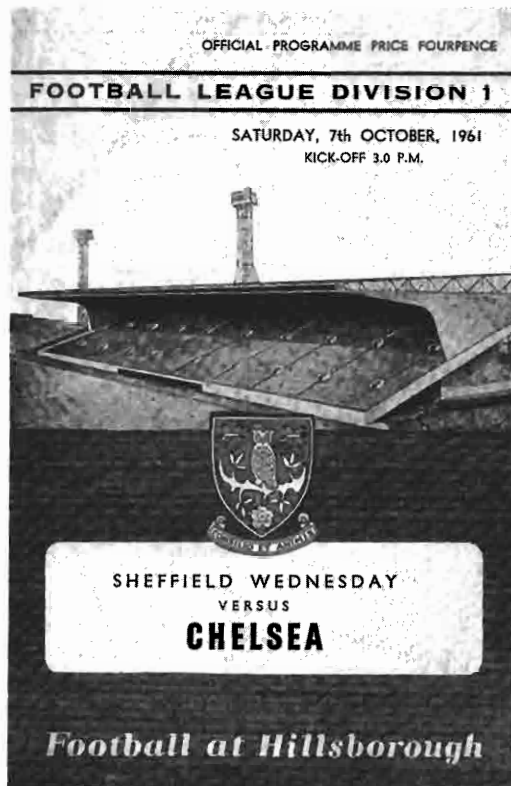



FIGURE 1.5 The National Coal Board recruits for a job with a future (below). This advertisement appeared in a football programme, October 1961 (left)

there's a career for you in

COAL

one with a real future

The thriving Yorkshire Coal Industry offers an interesting, well paid, **SECURE** life to young men and boys leaving school. There are vacancies at most Collieries for trainee Mine Operatives and Apprentice Craftsmen. The increasing use of modern machinery makes the work interesting and varied, training is thorough, and good wages are paid for a **GUARANTEED** five day week. Apply to any Colliery Manager or write to:



NATIONAL COAL BOARD
NORTH EASTERN DIVISION
South Parade, Doncaster.

other side for a breath of fresh air, before being searched for smoking materials. Boarding the paddy train along with another 120 men to be lowered down the tunnel known as the drift, to where we worked in the black water sodden seam, that was called by people locally 'The Sludge'. Everybody was happy, hard worked but happy.

The NCB recruiting posters used to say 'A Job for Life'.

1997

Woken by a noisy milk float at 4.10 am, boiled the kettle, made a cup of tea. No need for the flask these days, and the wash and brush up seems less important. Set off for a walk, into Furlong Road towards Goldthorpe, not a soul in sight, not a house light on. Then a sign of life, a postman whistles by on his regulation Royal Mail bicycle on his way to Goldthorpe small sorting office, again I am alone. Reaching the Jungle Club at five to five, paint flaking, all in darkness no more all night sitting, too many empty pockets. Crossing the railway bridge no longer the sound of locomotives pulling coal wagons. Looking over into the cutting is a depressing sight, rails that once shone now rusting, grass growing over the once well maintained sleepers and ballast. Landing on Goldthorpe's main street at five o'clock the buzzer does not sound anymore, Hickleton Colliery no longer exists. No butchers sweeping and swilling, only one newsagent open. 'Mick's News' has retired, the shop has been extended,



FIGURE 1.6 Demolition of a colliery, South Yorkshire

brightened but lacks customers. Walking towards the Pit Land passing boarded up shops that once thrived, no longer the smell of fresh baked bread. It seems the only new traders are second hand dealers. Reaching the Goldthorpe Hotel all in darkness, silent. Turning into the pit lane to find grass growing out of every crack and joint in the concrete road. What happened to the dozens of lorries and their drivers, that used to travel this way? The pavement that was once trodden by hundreds of men a day has been lost to the grass verge. Passing the swing park, seats broken the rocking horse on its side dead! Both the football and rugger pitches look in good condition, the council took them over. The shanty town on the allotment site is thriving, perhaps looked after by people in search of the 'good life'. Into the pit yard, no time office, no canteen, no pit head baths. Just odd bits of rubble left of what was the life blood of the local community. Going down to what was the mouth of the drift, all that's left there is a steel pipe coming up from the ground, to drain away gas from underground workings. It stands like a monument to all the men who worked there, and to some who lost their lives there.

The NCB recruiting poster used to say 'A Job for Life'.

Source: John Greaves

COMMENT

Although John does not use the word identity, his account focuses on his sense of who he is, especially as a member of a community located within a specific *place*. In the pre-1984 period, John made sense of himself by being part of a community with a *collective identity*. Pre-1984, John was interpellated by that collective identity. By 1997 he had lost that identification.

Post-1997, his identity is fragmented and uncertain. His account tells us that this personal sense of who we are is closely tied to having a shared position linked to work (in particular, to paid work), community and place. John has lost the identity of being part of a coal-mining community which has gone with the closure of the pits. He describes economic and material changes and his regret, not only for loss of financial security, but also for the loss of a sense of belonging and the symbols with which it was associated. There is nostalgia for past security and an ambivalence about the present. What is most striking about the reconstruction of the past is the importance of the material basis of identity and its links here with paid work.

Remember the question posed in Section 5, about the extent to which there might be greater uncertainty about identity at this historical moment. An area of life which seemed to offer certainty ('a job for life'), with a clearly defined identity and sense of belonging, no longer does so. This change in economic structure and in employment forces individuals to redefine themselves. It indicates that identities are not secure but fluid and that they are constantly being re-created and redefined. The concept of identity is used here to link how people feel inside and social and material changes around them. But the

extract only gives us a feel for the situation from one person's perspective. We need more and different types of evidence. Chapter 3 will look at another kind of evidence, namely quantitative, statistical evidence, that describes some of these economic changes.

The dilemma presented in this first-person narrative tells us more about the process of identity formation and about which factors might be important. What are the important dimensions of identity here? Remember the aspects of social structure which we addressed in Section 4.2. The *unequal* distribution of material resources as a feature of class division illustrated in John Greaves's account highlights the impact of structural economic change, in the form of the closure of coal-mines, on individuals' life chances and perceptions of who they are. Whilst most social scientists accept that economic changes, especially since the Second World War, have affected class relations, the impact of class on identity is debated. Class is one factor which influences identity. In John's example, although class and work-based identity may seem particularly important, other social structures also impact on the individual's experience. Coal-mining was, and is, where it still exists in the UK, a predominantly male activity with a whole string of associations about the male breadwinner and a particular brand of masculinity linked to hard physical labour.

Thus, the personal narrative also indicated the links between *class* and *gender*, where uncertainty about employment and sources of income are paralleled by uncertainty about gendered identity, notably that of the male breadwinner. Significantly higher numbers of women are in paid employment in the late 1990s than in the 1950s, although women's pay is still only 75 per cent of men's (*Social Trends*, 1999). All of these material changes have an impact on how women and men see themselves and offer structural constraints within which people have to negotiate their identities.

SUMMARY

- A first-person narrative account offers one sort of evidence of the link between the personal and the social in the formation of identities.
- The work we do is an important factor influencing the identities which we can take up.
- This example indicates the influence of structural factors, including class and gender.
- The areas of experience addressed here suggest changing times and some degree of uncertainty about 'who we are?' in relation to 'what we are'.

In the next section we turn to one of the 'everyday' questions that we might ask when we meet someone for the first time, after 'what do you do?': Where do you come from?

7 WHERE DO YOU COME FROM? RACE AND PLACE

The following poem was written by Jackie Kay who was born in Glasgow in 1961. Her mother was a white Scottish woman and her father was a black Nigerian student. She has written extensively about the subject of identity in the context of her own experience – for example, of being an adopted child, brought up in Glasgow.

ACTIVITY 1.3

Now read the poem.

SO YOU THINK I'M A MULE?

'Where do you come from?'
 'I'm from Glasgow.'
 'Glasgow?'
 'Uh huh. Glasgow.'
 The white face hesitates
 the eyebrows raise
 the mouth opens
 then snaps shut
 incredulous
 yet too polite to say outright
 liar
 she tries another manoeuvre
 'And you parents?'
 'Glasgow and Fife.'
 'Oh?'
 'Yes. Oh?'
 Snookered she wonders where she should go
 from here –
 'Ah, but you're not pure'
 'Pure? Pure what.'
 'Pure white? Ugh. What a plight
 Pure? Sure I'm pure
 I'm rare ...'
 'Well, that's not exactly what I mean,
 I mean ... you're a mulatto, just look at ...'
 'Listen. My original father was Nigerian
 to help with your confusion
 But hold on right there
 If you Dare mutter mulatto

hover around hybrid
 hobbie on half-caste
 and intellectualize on the
 'mixed race problem'
 I have to tell you:
 take your beady eyes offa my skin;
 don't concern yourself with
 the 'dialectics of mixtures';
 don't pull that strange blood crap
 on me Great White Mother.
 Say, I'm no mating of a
 she-ass and a stallion
 no half of this and half of that
 to put it plainly purely
 I am Black
 My blood flows evenly, powerfully
 and when they shout 'Nigger'
 and you shout 'Shame'
 ain't nobody debating my blackness.
 You see that fine African nose of mine,
 my lips, my hair, You see lady
 I'm not mixed up about it.
 So take your questions, your interest,
 your patronage. Run along.
 Just leave me.
 I'm going to my Black sisters
 to women who nourish each other
 on belonging
 There's a lot of us
 Black women struggling to define
 just who we are
 where we belong
 and if we know no home
 we know one thing:
 we are Black
 we're at home with that,
 'Well, that's all very well, but ...'
 'I know it's very well.
 No But. Good bye.'
 Source: Kay, 1991

What is meant by the question 'where do you come from'?

What is the relationship being drawn between place and identity here?

What does Kay mean when she writes 'I am Black' and then 'we are Black'?

COMMENT

The poem indicates some of the ways in which we link identity to place and the criteria which are used for making those connections. As we saw in Section 3.2, in everyday interactions we interpret the clues which are *given* and *given off* and classify people accordingly. For many of us it is no longer possible to 'read off' identity from the same signals we might have used in the past. This poem represents a contemporary question about identity. In attempting to classify people according to where they come from we may be thrown, when there are contradictory messages given off.

In this situation it is suggested that the white woman is confused by Kay's claims to be 'from Glasgow' because she apparently feels that black people cannot be 'really' Scottish (or British). The poem describes how the white woman here ignores the replies (and Kay's Glaswegian accent presumably) and insists that to be black is to be an outsider.

The poem also highlights the way in which identity is marked by **difference**. We have already seen that people mark their identities by some symbols of difference – scarves, badges, clothes, ways of speaking. This time the difference suggests that the white woman defines Kay as an outsider, in an *unequal* relationship of 'us and them'. 'Us' includes people who are the same as us, using the criteria which we think mark us out as the same, for example being white; 'them' are marked out as different because 'they' are not the same as 'us'. This suggests that 'we British' should be a superior category to 'those foreigners'. The key point about difference in the example of the poem is that being black or white is not only a way of marking difference but is used as a means of asserting superiority. Such assertions of superiority and the attempt to exclude people on grounds of race can be described as racist.

This poem is also about a search for certainty and disquiet about uncertainty. When 'snookered' by her earlier questions the white woman resorts to questions about 'purity'. She is seeking to locate identity in a category which we can mark off as fixed and certain. Kay's response to the misconceptions of the white woman is to deny any uncertainty on her own part. She gives voice to a collective identity which has meaning for her as an individual. She may be unclear about where she 'comes from' but is quite certain about who she is, who she wants to be and with whom she belongs. In her response Kay is offering one possible solution to the uncertainties posed by the question 'where do you come from?' in a multicultural society.

Difference

Difference is relational. It has to be defined in relation to something else. For example, Monday is the day after Sunday and the day before Tuesday. Difference often involves oppositions which are unequal.

Multi-ethnicity and cultural diversity arising from the cultural differences in the contemporary UK raise a number of questions about uncertainty and diversity and about the ways in which people have the possibility, or not, of constructing their own identities. How can people respond so that they can actively engage with shaping their own identities? What kind of action is appropriate and how do we resolve the dilemmas with which we are presented? One strategy is to assert and celebrate difference as Kay does in



FIGURE 1.7 Newbury Bypass protesters



FIGURE 1.8 Disability rights protestors, Whitehall, July 1994



FIGURE 1.9 Gay rights protestors campaigning for the age of consent to be lowered to 16 for gay men



FIGURE 1.7 Newbury Bypass protesters



FIGURE 1.8 Disability rights protestors, Whitehall, July 1994



FIGURE 1.9 Gay rights protestors campaigning for the age of consent to be lowered to 16 for gay men

One of the concerns of *new social movements* has been to make us think in different ways about traditional ideas. Through collective action the word *gay* became a more positive representation of a sexual identity. Such social movements attempt to subvert stereotypes, shape new identities and celebrate diversity.

8.1 Body projects

In contemporary society the body has become a project. People attempt to alter or improve the appearance, size and shape of their bodies in line with the their own designs. Think about the situations where this might happen: some people train at the gym or decorate their bodies with tattoos or even alter the appearance of their bodies through plastic surgery, such as face-lifts, liposuction and breast implants. Such body projects have become a feature of contemporary society, perhaps because of the consciousness people have of the inescapable reality of death: bodies age, become infirm and are subject to illness and disease. Body-building and boxing are examples of projects which challenge accepted notions of what is natural, especially when it is women who are involved in the activity. This can be seen as a form of resistance to constraining stereotypes of femininity.

ACTIVITY 1.4

Look at Figures 1.10 and 1.11.

How important are the constraints of the body and of biology here?

What do these pictures tell us about the ways in which it is possible to assert an identity through the body?



FIGURE 1.10 A woman body-builder demonstrates posing



FIGURE 1.11 The boxer Jane Couch training

COMMENT

Arguments about what is 'natural' and about biology have been used to justify women's exclusion from particular activities. The women in these pictures can be seen as exercising agency to develop a particular kind of body which challenges cultural stereotypes. They are challenging what is thought appropriate gender behaviour. This illustrates one of the ways in which people use the body as a site for the construction of identity. Sometimes people engage in body projects which conform to existing stereotypes, but sometimes, as here, they assert resistance and create new identities. The body itself clearly offers some restrictions on what it is possible to do, but it is often difficult to disentangle what is biological and what is cultural. This is because we represent ourselves through the body itself as well as through what we wear. Sometimes campaigning groups which seek to present more positive images of themselves and to represent their collective identities do so through reconstructing the body and its images and challenging traditional expectations.

ACTIVITY 1.5

Look at the poster in Figure 1.12.



FIGURE 1.12 Hello boys?

Without looking at the words on the poster, what is the first thing you notice?

What is the stereotype which this image is designed to subvert?

9 CONCLUSION

Are we now better equipped to answer the three questions posed in the introduction?

How are identities formed?

We present ourselves to others through everyday interactions, through the way we speak and dress, marking ourselves as the same as those with whom we share an identity and different from those with whom we do not. Symbols and representations are important in the marking of difference and in both presenting ourselves to others and in visualizing or imagining who we are. We use symbols in order to make sense of ourselves in relation to the world we inhabit. This world is characterized by structures which may limit our choices, but which may also provide more opportunities.

How much constraint is exercised by social structures and how much control do we have in shaping our own identities?

Both as individuals and through collective action it is possible to redefine and reconstruct our identities. We can negotiate and interpret the roles we adopt. Through collective action it is also possible to influence the social structures which constrain us, but there are clearly restrictions and limits. The scripts of our everyday interactions are already written and at the wider level structures are deeply embedded in contemporary culture, economy and society. Identity formation continues to illustrate the interrelationship between structure and agency.

Is there more uncertainty about 'who we are' in the contemporary UK?

There have been changes in our lives, in the domestic arena, in the workplace, in our communities and at the level of the nation and its place in the world. Some of these changes have been translated into questions of identity, for example in concerns about how people cope with change. Change has also created new opportunities for redefining ourselves, at home and in the workplace and as members of different ethnicities and nations within the UK. There is both uncertainty and diversity. Identity is a particularly useful concept for explaining how people cope with change and uncertainty and the opportunities presented by diversity. Identities are fluid and changing. This, in itself, produces uncertainties.

This chapter has introduced not only some concepts and theories used by social scientists but also some of the ways in which they approach their task. We have started with *questions* and some tentative *claims*. What is happening

to identities? How are they formed? Having offered some *definitions* which included the marking of difference and similarity and the link between the personal and the social, we then went on to find some *evidence*. Some of the evidence suggested that we know about the marking of difference through symbols and representation, which itself suggested *more questions* about how these symbols work. Could they work at the level of the unconscious? In order to explore further the link between the personal and the social we read an autobiographical account, another piece of evidence to which we applied some of the concepts about social structures which had been introduced earlier. This chapter has only introduced these ideas of social scientists starting with a question, seeking evidence and using concepts and theories to begin to offer an explanation. At each stage new questions emerge. The remaining chapters of this book extend this process, focusing on specific dimensions of identity. In Chapter 2 we look at something which appears to be grounded in biology, gendered identities. In Chapter 3 we focus on the economic bases of identity, and in Chapter 4, using the example of the nation, we explore further the role of culture in shaping identities. The questions which were posed at the outset in this chapter and to which we have returned will inform the rest of the book so that we can produce a more complex picture of how identities are formed, the link between the personal and the social, the tension between structure and agency, and the degree to which identities are formed at a time of uncertainty which also offers diversity and opportunity for change.

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FURTHER READING

Richard Jenkins (1996) *Social Identity*, London, Routledge. This is an accessible introduction to debates about social identity which draws mainly on the disciplines of sociology and anthropology. It offers a well-illustrated discussion which elaborates the theories introduced in this chapter.

Madan Sarup (1996) *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press. This book integrates ethnical material on identity with personal narrative about events in the author's autobiography. He provides accessible coverage of a range of approaches to identity with a focus on culture and representation.

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