

[Kath Woodward]

We've looked at some of the ways in which structures – social structures, which are changing – may appear to have shaped our sense of who we are and the ways in which our identities are formed. We've also looked at the kind of psychic processes that are going on. We've put the spotlight on two different sides, in a way, which is not to suggest that the two are separate and distinct. Because how we feel about an identity is very important in relation to how we construct our sense of ourselves and who we are. But also important is what's available to us and what the society we live in offers us as possibilities.

One of the things which, in looking at how identities are formed, has been difficult to avoid is looking at how much control we exercise over this process. This is another of the big questions that we address in this block. The extent to which we can be seen may be shaped by unconscious forces – as Wendy might have suggested in relation to her iceberg metaphor – and also by some of the social structures that we've suggested, which place constraints upon us: either the categories that are created through legal, political, social institutions or the kind of material constraints, those of social class, situations such as poverty, which severely constrain the amounts of autonomy we have in deciding who we are, certainly in deciding whether we can buy products that create our identity. This question relates to our concern with the tension between how much agency we have and how much control is exercised by the different kinds of structures. How much constraint is there and are we as severely constrained as perhaps was hinted at in your use of the unconscious.

[Wendy Hollway]

Well, paradoxically, I don't think this emphasis on nine-tenths being under the surface and out of the control of our conscious intention ends up amounting to an argument that we aren't agents of our own lives. Because, I think the unconscious is a very creative source of agency. If we were just produced by our social environment you could read off who somebody was from all the social positions and social relations in which they were contained. And, what's wonderful about human beings is that they always defy those categories. I think maybe the changes that we've seen in the last 30 years or so for gay people in Britain is a good example of this. Because the socialization theory, if it worked, would have turned all little boys into tough 'I don't cry', 'I love guns' and 'I'll be like my dad' sort of boys and little girls would have liked to have babies and preferred pink and all those things. Well, we don't slip easily into those gendered roles and what gay liberation did was take this up at a conscious intentional level.

[Kath Woodward]

That is illustrated in relation to other social movements as well. In terms of gender, you could look at the women's movement also as having had a transformative impact on the kind of relations that you were talking about earlier as being one of the main sources of change. What would you add to that, Karim, in terms of the extent to which collective action might effect changes in terms of our identities?

[Karim Murji]

What's interesting for me about thinking about collective ways of changing peoples' identities is the way in which we can see that ideas about what it means to be a woman, or ideas about what it means to be a man for that matter, ought to be black or white but can change over time. These things are not simply fixed. For example, in the 1980s it was quite common for Asian people to regard themselves as being black: they belonged to groups like the black

section of the Labour Party (there's still something called Southall Black Sisters, which is largely made up of Asian people) and so on. To some extent, that terminology has moved on and lots of Asian people don't describe themselves as being black any more. But at that time, when African-Caribbean and Asian people all saw themselves as being black, there was something quite powerful being said about identity and identification because we're not just giving ourselves an identity, we're also identifying collectively with a group of people. And that group identity also gives us the sense of who we are and what our goals are, what we're trying to achieve and so on. So I think collective identification, such as the nation or the football crowd or a group of people who are interested in hunting or other similar hobbies are quite powerful ways of thinking about the part both agency and structure play in identity. To some extent we belong to groups because they give us an identity but also, to some extent, we fashion some of the meanings of those identities while we're in those groups by the ways in which we behave and they behave towards us.

[Kath Woodward]

How important are the names, do you think, in terms of these categories, because Wendy mentioned the gay movement and earlier on you talked quite a lot about the issue of being black and Asian or Asian and British?

[Karim Murji]

There's a good example in the block of a quote from Henry Louis Gates where he says 'My grandfather was a Negro, my father was coloured and I'm black.' Well, if you move on from that, you'd now say you're a person of colour, because in the USA people like Henry Louis Gates, who's a black professor in the USA, describe themselves as people of colour.

[Kath Woodward]

So it is important what words we use and the names we use. It isn't just about merely a label. It actually illustrates how dynamic the process of changing identities is and it also illustrates the ways in which, through taking action, it is possible for people to reshape, reform, identities.

[Karim Murji]

Yes, it is possible but we shouldn't assume that people can always transform their identities. If we take the example of race and ethnicity, the language may have changed from negro to coloured to black to person of colour or ethnic minority (some are all those) but somewhere along the line the inequalities within groups of people one might broadly label 'white' and 'black' are still very marked and very clear. So, we can change something about the categories and we can change something about our identities and we can change something about the way in which people might see us, but some of those material factors that you were referring to earlier on do persist – not in exactly the same way, but they do persist.

[Wendy Hollway]

I think language unfortunately only works because it emphasizes the difference between things in one category and things in another. Black means black because of white, in the context of racial difference. But, of course, people don't fit into those categories. They are extremely fuzzy. In fact they just don't work, as Hitler found out when he tried to categorize Jews and Arians in the 1930s. It was an impossible task and so he kept on changing the rules, because who we are, even just simply in terms of ethnicity, is massively multiple and

complex and words can only fix something which will not be fixed, which is more mixed and fluid than that underneath.

[Karim Murji]

Yes. It operates in complicated ways because, for example, in the wake of devolution in Britain there are now all kinds of people who assert their identity as English. And one of the controversies around the 2001 census categories was a number of people saying things like 'Why isn't English a category amongst these things?'

And there is, to some extent, an English nationalism. I think identity does work relationally. We know that some people are black because other people are white. We often assume that one of these terms is dominant – white is dominant, black is subordinate – and to some extent that also works with male/female, able bodied/ disabled and so on. And that's true, but if we overdo that sense of them and us, sameness and difference, we sometimes don't recognize the extent to which both sides are themselves internally differentiated. So, for example, white is not a homogenous category any more than black or minority is. But, curiously, if we look at things like census categories, we see that white remains almost undivided, whereas all the other categories are heavily divided and so on. Yet we know that historically, as well as in current times, there are many degrees of whiteness – people who do and don't belong to whiteness. The example of Jews is a good one because it's very hard to say whether Jewish people are regarded as being white or not. At various times, particularly in Victorian times, the Irish have been regarded as not being quite fully white. And there are many examples of people of 'Mediterranean' origin who, particularly in the USA, were regarded as being black and not as being white at all.

[Kath Woodward]

I think it's very useful to point out the ways in which, although we have in part offered a definition of identity which is based on sameness and difference, we mark ourselves out as the same as one group of people and different from another. I think what you've suggested shows the ways in which this is never as clear cut as it might appear. A category which might seem to be the same, whether this is women or men or black people or white people, is always itself sub-divided and also there are differences that cross these categories. However, one of the ways in which we are seen to belong to one identity does involve the ways in which we mark ourselves out as being the same. And one of the ways in which we mark ourselves out as being the same as some people or different from others is through the kind of symbols we use to identify with a particular position. And these things can be, in some situations, taken for granted but, where we take up an identity, they are explicit – even if they can be misunderstood and misinterpreted. We've pointed to the ways in which identities might be seen to be changing, and we've looked at a particular period of time. But identities are of concern to us because there are some uncertainties. Some of the uncertainties are the result of changing times, of changing social relations and changing social structures; others are due to the very nature of identity in that it's always a balancing act between what's inside and what's outside. Also, each of us has multiple identities and, even with a very brief discussion, we've picked out a whole range of different identities that each of us has, and that some of these may be more certain at some moments than at others. We've also looked at the ways in which identities are formed through a number of processes that take place, both inside and outside, that largely involve a link between the two, and the ways in which identities are dynamic, changing and are important to us because we still seek some way of belonging and of finding out who we are. So, thank you very much Wendy and Karim.