

Audio 3A

Block 1 overview

Kath Woodward, Karim Murji and Wendy Hollway

[Kath Woodward]

This is DD100 Audio 3A. I'm Kath Woodward and I'm joined today by two of my colleagues on the DD100 course team, Wendy Hollway and Karim Murji. I won't say any more about Wendy and Karim as this is an audio about identity – I'll leave them to say a bit about themselves. Wendy, if you were asked about your own identity, what sort of things would you say?

[Wendy Hollway]

Well, you've just introduced me in a work context, so I suppose I'd start by saying what I am in The Open University. I'm a Professor of Psychology and that's relevant because of the approach that I will take to these discussions. But what else would I say about myself? I'm a white English woman and a mother and I suppose I would also like to describe myself in terms of certain personality characteristics. I'm energetic, I'm quick-witted. Somebody described me as charismatic over lunch and I thought 'Oh, that's nice.'

[Kath Woodward]

You said several things there. It's a very short amount of time to say it, but you've said things about yourself in the world and about who you feel you are. What would you say Karim?

[Karim Murji]

I think my answer would depend on whom I'm with and where I am, so the answer may not be the same at all times. But, for current purposes, I suppose I might say people often ask me 'Are you a British Asian?' and I find these things a bit confusing because I've never felt very Asian, even though I might look Asian. I was born in

East Africa and I have no conception of myself being Asian until I arrived in the UK and people started thinking of me, referring to me, in these ways. I'd actually never been to Asia in my life until quite recently. And, for people like me, calling yourself British is not very clear. It's not very clear whether you are British or not because of the whole problem around what British identity represents. But I think it became clear I was British when I went abroad to Europe, or to countries like France, where suddenly it became very clear because of behaviour, but also because of language. But, yes, clearly I was British because they treated me as if I was British.

[Kath Woodward]

I think this shows the ways in which identities are multiple. Even just the very brief description that you've both offered suggests that identities are varied and it may be more useful to talk about identities rather than identity, because each of us has several. Also, that our identities change with the context in which we find ourselves. And another of the aspects of identity that we offer in the course – in Block 1, looking at definitions – is that identity links the personal to the social. It links who we think we are with how others see us, as Karim suggested. We're often aware of who we are through how other people define us and categorize us. It's also about the ways in which we're marked as 'different' from some people and 'the same' as other people. There is also the way in which identities change in different situations and also change across time. I wonder why it is that we are interested in identity at this point in the course, because this is where we start in Block 1 – with looking at the concept of identity. But it's a work with which we're familiar in our everyday life. In fact it's quite a buzzword, not only in academic circles but also in a whole range of different contexts. Why do you think it is that we are interested in identity now? Is it about change?

[Wendy Hollway]

I think that it is partly about change and, although we might exaggerate the fact, there were times in the past where probably people led more settled lives in which their main sources of identity

were taken for granted. Now we travel more and we change jobs more and there is a lot more movement and possibility. One example, which I think is particularly striking, is the change in gender relations that has occurred over the last, say, 30 or 40 years in Britain. One of the most fixed forms of identity that each of us felt from very early on was whether we were male or female. I think one of the things that has changed is that women are allowed to be much more like men, and men are even allowed to be quite a lot more like women than they were in the past. Women have more work roles and do similar work to men in many cases. Men are taking on the kind of parenting, caring roles in greater numbers than they were. So, I think that uncertainty has affected our identity in terms of our genders.

[Kath Woodward]

That's one area of our lives in which change has taken place. Can you think of others, perhaps over a similar kind of period – over perhaps the last 50 years – in which there have been changes taking place that might make identity a more interesting issue at this point?

[Karim Murji]

Well, like Wendy, I think that the issue of movement is quite important because of why identity matters and why identities might have changed. But the kind of movement I'm thinking about takes place on a larger scale. It's about movement of peoples, movement of goods, movement of consumable items, movement of capital across national borders – perhaps even at a global level. And I think that throws up all kinds of new challenges because what appeared to be stable features of identity, for example our national identity – we might have thought of ourselves as British – no longer seems so settled. For example, look at the relationship between Britain and the EU. It's not clear exactly what's British and what's European. If we think about devolution, it's not clear that all people subscribe equally to a British identity. In fact, there are multiple identities even within the nation state. And so the idea that nations were imagined communities becomes more complicated because, in fact, there are multiple imagined communities within the nation.

And, for example, there might be Welsh people who think of themselves as being Welsh and British or Welsh and not British because British is seen to be largely something that's dominated by England and the English. So I think movement of people, movement of goods across borders and so on has thrown up new challenges. Sometimes all of this is referred to as globalization, but that throws up new challenges which make identities more complicated and it becomes harder to say where peoples' loyalties really lie.

[Kath Woodward]

This raises some questions about the ways in which identities are formed in relation to different contexts. Whilst you suggest, Karim, that our identities are changing in terms of national identity and the place that we belong, we also in that context are British or not British, and we are also at the same time mothers, fathers, workers. All of these identities work together in different ways. But this raises one of the big questions that we address in this block, which is what's going on when we go as far as to say that we've taken up an identity? The question, as we form it in the course, is how are identities formed? What sorts of processes are involved? There have been these changes in work, in politics, in movement – movement in different ways – but how do these things influence our identities? And do they contribute to them, and what sorts of things are happening? So, perhaps if we could look now at how we might address this question about how identities are formed in relation to the kind of changes that have taken place. Karim?

[Karim Murji]

I think I'd approach the question of how our identities are formed more from a structural perspective. In other words, while I think there are things people can do to change their own identities, I'm more interested in the ways in which peoples' identities are shaped or given to them. And we shouldn't ignore important but basic things such as legal categories of identity. For example, your citizenship – your ability to belong to a nation state – is an important marker of your identity because, for example, possession of a British or European passport has a cachet and a value that

other passports would not carry, for example in terms of your ability to travel around the world. So there are, I think, basic things like that, which sometimes go unmarked but are important.

[Kath Woodward]

So the law is, in a sense, a structure too ...

[Karim Murji]

Yes.

[Kath Woodward]

... as well as the state.

[Karim Murji]

But I think talking about the state leads us to other ways in which... our identities are shaped or moulded for us. For example, the state or the government uses various kinds of categories of identity. The census is an obvious example that appears in the block. And, although those categories change and are sometimes decided in consultation with people, nevertheless they are not, in a sense, very natural identities. They are not identities that we might feel ourselves to have naturally in terms of how we might describe ourselves. Nevertheless, the extent to which people describe themselves in terms of census categories shows the ways in which those things are interpolating us. In other words, we've come to identify with those identifications.

[Wendy Hollway]

I could add to that. I think I said right at the beginning that I'm white English. Of course I grew up not thinking that I was white. I grew up in a part of rural northern England where I didn't meet a black person for years, I'm sure. And the fact that I was white was completely irrelevant until I started mixing with black people. I remember being on a bus in East Africa where I was the only white person. At that point I was extremely self-conscious of the fact that I was white. By that time I was in my twenties. So these categories

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are given in language but they don't necessarily map on to the way we've learned to experience ourselves as we've grown up.

[Kath Woodward]

So the categories are imposed upon us through the kind of structures – social structures – in which we operate.

[Karim Murji]

They are imposed in some ways, but the fact that we come to live those identities and see them as part of our lived experience suggests that they're not simply imposed; we must take them on board. And sometimes in taking on board those identities we might refashion them, we might change the meaning of them. So structures can to some extent be changed by agency.