

[Kath Woodward]

This illustrates the ways in which our identities are formed in relation to how we perceive ourselves and also how others see us – by the kind of clothes we wear – or how others hear us, and the example of the ways in which we speak. The relationship between how we see ourselves and how others see us is very important in the kind of processes that are involved in looking at how identities are formed; and the ways in which we have some investment in an identity at a particular time. Karim, you started your response with an emphasis on some of the structures which create the possibility of certain identities rather than others. Another dimension of the formation of identity might give more emphasis to the personal element in the equation between the personal and the social. What would you say Wendy – that the sort of examples of ways in which identities are formed might give more emphasis to the ways in which we engage with a particular identity?

[Wendy Hollway]

Yes. I think the way other people see us is hugely important. This starts long before we are language-speaking young people who are beginning to organize and understand the world around us and the way we are treated by other people. It becomes embedded in

our experience. And because one of the definitions of being human is that we are self-conscious individuals, we learn a lot about who we are from the way people treat us. As George Herbert Mead pointed out, we have an 'I' which is the experiencing part of us and the 'me' which is the response to the way we are experienced. And that means that we are very influenced by the people around us who, as it were, hold up a mirror to us through which we see ourselves. It's the way that they hold up that mirror, but it's also how we imagine they are responding to us, and both of those things intermingle to create, over time, a sense of our identities. That's one emphasis – on our social relations with others. But psychologists also emphasize how we develop, particularly through childhood, and how we acquire the basic kind of building blocks of ourselves from the moment we're born. A lot of this happens without our conscious awareness of it. It's often joked that however hard we try not to be like our parents we'll end up being more like them than we think. That's because it happens at a level that is below conscious awareness. And so through identifications we acquire many of the building blocks that create us.

[Karim Murji]

What I find interesting in what Wendy's saying is that there are certain identities we may think we have which we take for granted – the most obvious ones being things around gender, perhaps ethnicity, perhaps whether we're able-bodied or disabled or not. So, for example, we both said that we only recognized ourselves as being white or British when we were somewhere else, where it was brought home to us. I think another point which might be helpful is that Goffman, for example, is often criticized for sometimes suggesting that there are only a certain number of roles or ways in which we can perform these roles and so on. But it may well be that through social practices – through, for example, the practice of consumption – the various kinds of identities or roles are created for us all the time. Other examples are whether we buy our clothes at store type x or y, whether we drive a particular kind of car, where we live in the country, how we speak, what kind of schools people send their children to and so on. All these things are ways in which people can fashion their identity in the social

world. But sometimes these options, or these choices, are offered to us through advertising, the media and so on.

[Kath Woodward]

But there are points at which there are severe constraints on how free we are to fashion ourselves in these situations, when you say about the cars we drive and the clothes we buy. But that shifts the emphasis from perhaps the processes – the personal individual level processes of identity formation – to what is available in the social world. When you suggest that there are points at which we might not know what's happening – we might not be aware of the identities which we are taking up – how else might we look at what's happening in these situations, Wendy?

[Wendy Hollway]

I think that most of the time we are not aware of the self by which we live. I think it's very popular at the moment, not just in social science but in broad culture, certainly in the west, for people to say 'I can be whoever I choose.' The idea is that through the clothes that you wear and the performances – in a sense, who you enact yourself as being amongst other people – you can create an identity for yourself, which is chosen. Now, psychoanalysis emphasizes this nine-tenths below the surface and I think the implications of that for identity is to say, well, most of the time we are who we are without even being aware that this is what's going on. And if we tried to change those things we'd be hard put to it, because we've never formulated them in language, we've never been very conscious of them – they just are.

[Karim Murji]

I also agree that there are limits to what we can do, but I think I'd approach it slightly differently. Sometimes we get the impression – or perhaps it's better referred to as an illusion – that we can fashion identities in any way we want. But there are things about our lives that are very hard to change. For example, no matter what anybody says, it's very hard to change physically how old you are – you can lie about it but, nevertheless, it doesn't change the truth, I don't think.

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[Kath Woodward]

You can use anti-wrinkle cream.

[Wendy Hollway]

But that raises the question of the new technologies which are about manipulating identities. So not only can people have nips and tucks to make them look younger than their chronological age, but they can change sex and pass themselves off as women or men in a way which completely goes against the old idea that a sexual identity is something that is biologically fixed for life. And this has given people new realms of choice, which we wouldn't have dreamt of until recently.

[Kath Woodward]

This is an element of change that we didn't identify in the earlier discussion about changes, perhaps over the last 50 years – the advent of new technologies. For example, reproductive technologies have enabled women in their later years to give birth, and women who had thought they would be infertile to give birth. That's another component in the changes that have taken place; also, communications technology that speeds up the process of communication across the world. ~~We've looked at some of the~~