

Identity in question

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Introduction

This course looks at identity, focusing upon the individual's perception of self in relation to others; the relationships between multi-ethnicity, cultural diversity and identity; and the effects of inequality and social class upon identity. It also looks at inequality and social class as they relate to perceived identity.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in [Sociology](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- provide a definition of identity
- recognise how gender and socio-economic categories such as class can be used as a source of identity
- discuss social structures in terms of gender, class and nation.

1 Questions of identity

1.1 What is identity?

This course 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 in this section:

- 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.

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 chunk 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 characterised 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 organisation 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 categorise 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 recognised position, recognised 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 in the case of poverty and economic constraints. 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.

1.1.1 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.

1.2 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: 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 recognised 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 more recent 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.

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. 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

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?

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.

1.2.1 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.

2 Gender identity and gender development

2.1 The development of gender identity

In this section we are going to look at where we come from in terms of childhood experience and the development of gender identities in childhood. Gender identity involves the construction and use of gender categories. Children's gender categories are at first rather simplistic; but, as we shall see, children refine their categories so that they become more reliable and useful for their social lives. Studying the development of gender identity in children reveals that this is a story of a search for certainty. Self-categorisation is a necessary part of developing a gender identity. In exploring the formation of gender identity in children it would therefore be sensible to ask questions about children's construction and use of gender categories.

We look at four key questions:

- At what age do children display behaviour that suggests they are using gender categories?
- At what age can children categorise themselves (and others) as belonging to a gender category, and what does this categorisation mean to them?
- Are young children's gender categories different from those of adults, and if so in what ways?
- How are gender identities maintained in later childhood?

What evidence exists about children's use of gender categories? Children's preference for particular toys is some of the earliest behaviour indicating a categorisation of masculine and feminine. Preferences, behaviours or traits that mirror the views of one's society about what is masculine and what is feminine are termed **gender-appropriate**. Opting for gender-appropriate toys (masculine toys such as trucks, toolkits, and construction kits if one is a boy and feminine toys such as dolls, tea-sets, and domestic items if a girl) can usually be seen by 2 years of age. There is evidence that from 3 or 4 years, children are able to categorise toys as suitable for boys or girls, and knowledge of the gender-appropriateness of toys strongly influences preferences.

Definition

Gender-appropriate

Preferences, behaviours or traits deemed to be suitable or proper with regard to masculinity and femininity in a particular culture.



Figure 2: Some toys are considered to be appropriate for boys and others for girls

Our second question asked about children's ability to categorise themselves appropriately. Some researchers believe that consistent gender labelling is a particularly important milestone. Most children can categorise themselves appropriately and consistently as a boy or girl at some time between 2 and 3 years of age. Durkin (1995) describes this as a gradual process:

... the child slowly becomes aware that he or she is a member of a particular sex. At first, this knowledge constitutes little more than a label for the child, equivalent to a personal name. The child begins to discover which other individuals fall into the same category, and elaborates his or her gender labels to include terms such as man, woman, boy, girl. But knowledge is not perfect.

(Durkin, 1995, p. 180)

There is evidence that some important gender-appropriate behaviours result from the child's ability to categorise themselves as a boy or girl. Such behaviours include having a greater preference for same-gender peers. However, some gender-appropriate behaviours such as toy preference, as we have seen, occur before this milestone is typically reached. Once children are able to categorise themselves and others appropriately, they can draw upon (and build upon) their previously acquired knowledge to refine their construction of gender categories, and further develop their own sense of gender identity. So from quite an early age children are able to categorise themselves as male or female. Perhaps this is early evidence of the formation of gender identity. What, though, does the label that children initially apply to themselves actually mean to them? What did Durkin (in the quotation above) mean when he noted that children's knowledge 'is not perfect'? The answer to these questions depends upon evidence relating to our third question about the development of gender identity. This question asked whether the gender categories used by young children differed from those of adults. Learning more about the characteristics of children's gender categories can tell us more about the sorts of gender identity they are forming.

Research has found that gender categories typically constructed by young children under about 5 years of age have particular and distinct characteristics (Kolhberg, 1966). The evidence for this is revealed through mistakes that children make. They may, for example, suggest that girls can become uncles, and boys become aunts. In addition to misunderstandings about the stability of gender over time, children are often also fooled by context. If outward appearances change, if, for example, a man dresses in woman's clothing, or if a man engages in activities considered to be typically feminine, then children may consider such a man to have changed into a woman.

2.2 Gender categories

Young children's gender categories are highly stereotyped. This can lead to assured predictions of an individual's preferences based upon knowledge of their gender, and the kinds of activities that they may typically engage in. Children develop such rigid gender categories in their search for certainty about gender. These categories are essentialist, having a simple in-group and out-group distinction that children use for understanding masculinity and femininity, and for defining their own gender identity. However, because the categories they use are inflexible, this leads them to make mistakes about gender. Given these distinctive characteristics of young children's gender categories, we can describe children as being *naively certain* about gender.

How might the construction of children's gender categories lead them to believe that gender may not be stable throughout life? Although a few people may change their gender identity, as adults we need a sophisticated understanding of this, rather than a naive belief that when surface characteristics change (such as clothes and make-up) so does gender. Take a look at the quotation below:

Johnny (age 4^{1/2}) I'm going to be an airplane builder when I grow up.

Jimmy (age 4) When I grow up, I'll be a mommy.

Johnny No, you can't be a mommy. You have to be a daddy.

Jimmy No, I'm going to be a mommy.

Johnny No, you're not a girl, you can't be a mommy.

Jimmy Yes, I can.

Source: Kohlberg, 1966, p. 95

Jimmy, although of an age where he can presumably label himself as a boy, believes that he can be a mommy when he grows up. The current construction of his own gender identity does not restrict him to remaining the same gender throughout life. Why might this be? Research conducted by Bem (1989), described in Box 1, illustrates that young children look for certainty in gender categories that they construct using *social* and *cultural* characteristics. Bem's study reveals that young children's categories are less influenced by *biological* knowledge, and this, claims Bem, is principally because they simply do not have this knowledge.

Box 1 What are young children's gender categories made of?

In an experimental study, Bem (1989) found that only about half of 3, 4, and early 5-year-olds were able to draw upon biological knowledge (genitalia) in deciding whether pictures of nude toddlers were boys or girls. Most of the children who were successfully able to identify boys and girls from biological cues were subsequently able to categorise the same children consistently as boys or girls when they were shown pictures of them in clothes and with hairstyles characteristically associated with the opposite gender. In other words, most children who were able to categorise gender on the basis of biological cues were not swayed in their judgements by the contradictory gender-cues presented through surface appearances. Most of those children who could not correctly identify boys and girls from seeing their genitalia were more likely to decide the gender of the same child in subsequent pictures on the basis of appearance.

So early gender categorisation is particularly dependent upon social and cultural experiences. Perhaps this can help us to understand why young children make mistakes about the stability and constancy of gender, and why their gender categories are defined in highly stereotypical ways. As adults, we know that just because someone changes appearance from one gender to another (for a fancy dress party, for example), or just because they engage in activities that are considered to be typically appropriate to the opposite gender, they nevertheless remain the same gender. This is because our understanding of gender embodies both biological and social knowledge – our understanding of gender is complex and sophisticated. We understand (unlike young children) that changing our gender identity takes more than changing our outward appearance or the activities that we do. In addition, we also understand that just because someone prefers woodwork, football, and beer over needlework, netball, and wine, it does not necessarily mean that person is a man. This is because we are aware that the links between our stereotypes do not correspond neatly to being a man or a woman; there is indeed diversity with regard to gender in our society. However, if we were made to place a bet about someone's gender given particular characteristics, we might draw upon our stereotypical knowledge in doing so; but stereotypes cannot be relied upon, and as adults we know this.

Gradually, children's culturally defined gender categories are supplemented with biological knowledge. Children from about 5 years of age onwards learn that their own and others' gender identity generally remains the same across time and across contexts. This is a profound development in the gradual construction of gender identity. As the gender categories that children develop become more reliable, they also become more flexible and are no longer essentialist. Children learn that there are **multiple gender identities**, masculinities and femininities, rather than one masculine and one feminine type. Children are still certain about gender, just as we generally are as adults; but this is now because, like adults' categories, their categories become more reliable and adaptive.

Definition

Multiple gender identities

Masculinities and femininities, rather than one masculine and one feminine type. In any society there is a whole range of ways in which femininity can masculinity can be expressed.

Although gender categories become more flexible, they continue to work as powerful social tools. The gender categories used in the construction of gender identity are actively maintained and re-constructed throughout our lives. But, as our fourth question asks, how does this come about? Francis (1997, 1998) has conducted some interesting research with school children, that examines the construction and maintenance of their gender identities. This research is described in Box 2.

Box 2 Gender identity and gender maintenance

Francis (1997, 1998) asked primary school children (aged 7 to 11 years) to engage in some pretend role play. The groups of children were asked to choose between play situations of a hospital, hotel, or school, and they had to choose the roles that they were going to play from a set provided. Francis observed the children's play and examined their talk. In choosing their roles, boys took the high-status positions of doctor, manager and head teacher slightly

more often than girls. Those boys taking high-status positions used their role to exert domination and power far more often than did girls.

The gender roles the boys took on and constructed could be described as 'typically masculine' and those of the girls as 'typically feminine'. Particularly when playing in mixed groups, the children constructed the gender roles as oppositional to each other. In general, Francis found that the girls took on sensible, selfless, mature, and facilitating behaviours, and boys took on silly, selfish, immature, and demanding behaviours. Such gender-typical behaviours correspond to previous research with school children which has consistently found girls at school to be diligent, sensible and quiet and boys to be rowdy, disruptive, and preoccupied with violence. Francis interprets the children's constructions of oppositional gender roles to be part of a process of identity maintenance.

Adoption of typical gender identities generated situations in the role play in which the girls (typically feminine) behaviours, such as willingly accepting low-status roles, and facilitating the role play with their sensible suggestions, supported the boys' (typically masculine) behaviours of taking up high-status roles and behaving in a demanding and selfish way. Francis notes how the girls' adoption of such feminine positions is simply demonstrative of socially appropriate feminine behaviour, which she describes as exemplifying a 'properly female' identity.

Francis is careful to point out that these gender-appropriate identities and behaviours were not taken up by all children; instead, they were fluid, and some children challenged or ignored them. Francis suggests that children work quite hard in constructing and maintaining their gender identities; but it also highlights that the behaviours typical of masculine and feminine roles are not binding, and that there is opportunity for diversity. Why are gender categories and gender identities not fixed? One reason, as Francis points out, is that gender constructions are only one part of our identities, alongside ethnicity and social class, for example. Sometimes the influences of these other factors may reinforce those of gender; at other times they may outweigh them, and this affords diversity. Because many factors interact in the construction of identity, there can be no single masculinity or femininity; there must instead be a diversity of masculinities and femininities.

This section has discussed the typical pattern of gender identity development and has shown that gender is crucial to identity and our understanding of who we are. But just as there is diversity in terms of masculinity and femininity, there is diversity too in children's acquisition of gender identity. Children have different experiences and develop at different rates. It is also important to note that research takes place at a particular time, and in a particular place, so the story of the typical may also be culturally biased.

2.2.1 Summary

- Children's developing understanding of gender can be described as a search for certainty.
- Young children make mistakes about gender illustrating their rigidity and their naive certainty regarding gender.
- As children's knowledge of gender grows in complexity, basic biological knowledge is added to their social-cultural understanding.
- Research by Francis illustrating girls' 'sensible-selfless' and boys' 'silly-selfish' behaviour demonstrates how gender identities are constructed and maintained.

- Children's knowledge of gender in relation to their own identity and that of others develops both in terms of flexibility (in that they can accommodate diversity) and in reliability.
- Masculine and feminine identities are not fixed, partly because identities are multidimensional. Diversity arises through the existence of masculinities and femininities.

It is possible to continue to follow this story of what is typical through investigating how constructions and perceptions of gender identities may affect experience of school and subsequently performance at school. One could explore the claim that performance in exams may to a certain extent be dependent upon gender, both in terms of one's own identity, and in terms of how schooling as a social process deals with masculinity and femininity.

3 Identity, inequality and social class: what it is to be poor

3.1 'Making ends meet'

When you say that someone is 'poor', what do you mean?

Do people whom others call 'poor' always see themselves in that way?

One group whose identities are greatly constrained by income are the poor. But, as the questions above suggest, poverty is not a simple fact of some lives: rather, it is a concept with different meanings, and a label that we may accept or reject. This section considers how poverty shapes identity.

When people talk about being poor, they often talk about the difficulty of being able to 'make ends meet' on low incomes. The phrase evokes people's experience of the daily struggle to feed and clothe a family on very little money, to keep them warm, dry, clean and safe, and to do this without getting into debt or getting into trouble. Some low income families in the UK live on social security benefits alone and have very little other access to cash or formal sources of credit. The result is a very basic existence:

I don't smoke, I don't drink, I don't go out, I don't eat meat. I have thought of getting rid of the TV but I can't because it's for [my son] ... I think, 'Shall I get rid of the cat?' but I can't ... There's absolutely nothing I spend money on except just surviving, you know, paying bills and buying food.

(quoted in Kempson, 1996, p. 49)

This quotation is drawn from a survey of life on low incomes in the early to mid 1990s (Kempson, 1996). The survey was based on 31 studies that had been funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The people interviewed in the studies were diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, geographical location and life experience. Kempson's survey concluded that people who had been 'on benefits' for a while generally faced a hard choice between going without essentials or falling behind with their bills for water, electricity, gas or rent. The longer people live on low incomes, the harder it gets to cope. Children grow, clothes wear out, appliances need replacing, school activities cost money, isolation gets worse because of lack of money to socialise, and health and mental energy are undermined. Kempson concluded that UK benefit rates in the early 1990s generally gave people insufficient money to cover even basic needs. As one benefit recipient said: 'You're on the poverty line whichever way you look at it ... Nobody can manage on £46 a week. You can't exist on that. You can't manage it. It's degrading' (quoted in Kempson, 1996, p. 6).

Many low income households in the UK, however, do not claim state benefits. Many people live on low wages, and the extent of very low paid work increased in the 1980s and 1990s. In the Rowntree studies reported in Kempson, wages of £70–£90 a week for such full-time jobs as shop assistant, and around £100 for male manual jobs, were quite commonly reported.

So how much is enough to 'make ends meet'? The Rowntree studies asked this question in a variety of ways. The people interviewed were asked how much money they needed to cover basic outgoings, to live on, to avoid the need to supplement low wages, to create a low likelihood of problem debt. The different calculations produced some remarkably similar answers despite the diversity of people interviewed. Single people reckoned that in the early 1990s they needed about £150 a week, or less if they were not a householder. Lone parents came up with a figure of around £180 a week. Couples with children needed around £200 to avoid arrears on bills. Many people on low wages were working long hours to try to bring their incomes up to these figures (Kempson, 1996).

The consistency of these estimates suggests that, in a particular time and place, there tends to be a shared view about what goods and services are necessities. The UK government also takes a view on this issue. It states that the level of Income Support – the basic benefit for adults – should be 'the amount needed to bring their income up to their "applicable amount". This is the level the law says they need to live on' (DSS, 1997, p. 21). Income Support payments vary according to family circumstances and housing costs. The number of people living at or below the Income Support 'poverty line' is frequently used as one definition of those counted as 'poor' in the UK. The Rowntree studies showed that by the early 1990s these benefit payments had fallen below a social consensus on the level that was necessary.



Figure 3: Possilpark is one of the most deprived areas in Scotland

3.2 Necessities and luxuries

As the division of opinion between the government and low income people illustrates, definitions of poverty are the stuff of political debate. People in the Rowntree studies tended to focus on 'paying bills and food'. Most people's list of basic needs would also include adequate food and clean water, clothing, shelter and heating. But are there also less apparently physiological, more evidently social, necessities of life?

Activity 2

Look back at the quotation in [section 3.1. A woman on a low income seems to be arguing that a TV is a 'necessity' for her son.](#)

What do you think of her argument? Do you think a TV is a 'luxury' or a 'necessity' in the contemporary UK?

Decide what you think and why before reading the discussion.

Televisions were not a necessity in the 1930s since they were not available. But how about in the UK today? You may have answered, no, a TV cannot be a 'necessity' because one can stay alive without a TV. But what about living a human life, with enough sociability and communication to make life worthwhile? Many accounts of the experience of poverty include the pain of social isolation: of not being able to afford to socialise with your peers. Communication with others is part of being human, and in a society where virtually everyone has access to a TV at home, people without television are deprived of access to one of the staples of conversation, jokes and information exchange. Children can suffer particularly from limited access to a shared culture – something the mother quoted in [section 3.1 was trying to avoid for her son](#).

So one might conclude that in the UK, where 96 per cent of households had a television in 1994, it is now a 'necessity'. A lack of a TV constitutes relative deprivation if all the other children in the class have access to one *and* it has become a basic means of communication and cultural reference point. By the same token we could argue that a radio was a necessity in Britain in the 1940s. A TV seems to be a necessity at the end of the twentieth century; a computer may become a necessity in future years if using one becomes a common way to bank, shop and communicate.

There is no 'right answer' to Activity 2. Necessities are a matter of social and political judgement. But that does not mean our definitions are arbitrary. In 1990 a study called *Breadline Britain* asked 1800 people whether a number of items were 'necessities'; 58 per cent put a TV in that category, up from 51 per cent in a similar survey in 1983 (Goodman et al., 1997, p. 244). Our ideas about what we need depend on what others have and what others expect. Even notions of what constitutes adequate food and heating have changed over time. Social scientists therefore generally recognise that there is a strong 'relative' element in definitions of **poverty**. That is, there are some irreducible human needs, but poverty in a society is also defined relative to the goods, services and opportunities *available* to the non-poor.

Definition

Poverty

Poverty is more than a lack of money. It carries a stigma because it is defined relative to what people think is needed for a decent life.

3.3 How others see us

The relative nature of poverty is an old theme in social science. Adam Smith, the eighteenth century writer who is often regarded as the founding father of economics, put it this way: 'By necessities I understand not only the commodities that are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even the lowest orders, to be without' (Smith, 1776, quoted in Sen, 1981).

Ideas of what it is to be poor are thus closely tied up with difficulty in maintaining the basic decencies of life. In the Rowntree studies, people on low incomes repeatedly referred to fear, for example fear of homelessness or disconnection from water, heat and power; to

shame, especially shame at getting into debt; and to guilt about having to ask others for help. 'When they turned the water tap off, I felt very upset, I can't explain ... I feel personally ashamed. I feel ashamed at myself' (quoted in Kempson, 1996, p. 37).

As a result, the idea of being 'poor' carries a **stigma**: it is a label that many people living on low incomes resist. For example, in a set of interviews in the early 1990s, 85 social security claimants were asked whether they thought 'poverty' existed in Britain, and if so, who were the poor and were they themselves 'poor'? Almost everyone could answer these questions, and almost two thirds of interviewees said that they did not consider themselves to be poor. Half of the rest admitted reluctance in defining themselves as poor. The answers were also gendered. Men were more likely than women to deny poverty, suggesting that men may be more likely to be ashamed and women more realistic, as this short extract from an interview shows:

Definition

Stigma

An attribute that is perceived by others as demeaning or discrediting for those who have it. It can be social or physical or a characteristic shared by a whole group or by a few individuals. Stigma is used to justify exclusion.

Interviewer: Do you think poverty still exists in this country?

Respondent (man): It don't.

Respondent's wife: It does!

Respondent: We're not poverty-stricken, nowhere near it yet. We've got all the stuff we can sell.

Respondent's wife: But that doesn't mean we've got food in the cupboard ...

(quoted in Dean, 1992, p. 83)

The interviewees in the survey expressed many different meanings of the word poverty. Some saw poverty more as a state of mind than a fact: poor people were 'people who think they're poor', an idea often associated with the notion that people bring poverty upon themselves. The survey author comments that some interviewees seemed to see the admission of poverty as a kind of self-indulgence: they insisted that there were many worse off than themselves, or that 'real' poverty no longer existed. Others felt that poverty implied a lack of dignity or cleanliness and cited their clean homes as evidence that they were not poor. Others straightforwardly resisted what they saw as an undesirable classification: some said that they did not 'class' themselves as 'poor', but as 'ordinary working class'.

Poverty is therefore not only a relative matter. Representations of the poor in British culture are often demeaning. As a result of these derogatory meanings, it is hard for people struggling on low incomes to identify themselves as 'poor' and to use that identity in campaigning at the level of national policy. National anti-poverty lobbying has been largely conducted by 'experts' and professional campaign groups. This is in contrast to the effective organisation and national lobbying carried out on their own behalf by, for example, people with disabilities (many of whom suffer from poverty) who have fought to change public representations of disability and to change social and individual expectations (Beresford and Croft, 1995). Campaigns of this kind require people to

identify with a label; but, as a participant in one conference that brought together anti-poverty campaigners and people with experience of poverty put it: 'I think this word poverty is a real crusher' (Lister and Beresford, 1991, p. 10).



Figure 4: A homeless man begging from commuters

3.3.1 Summary

- Claims about who is *poor* are rooted in shared and contested ideas about the basic necessities of life.
- The experience of *poverty* is both *relative* and *relational*. It is defined by what people have, and what they can do, relative to the opportunities of others.
- *Poverty* carries derogatory meanings, so it does not easily provide a basis for collective identity.

3.4 Audio activity

Using audio is a very idiosyncratic practice amongst Open University students. Some listen to them in the car, others on a personal stereo on the train, some while washing up, others at their desk. Flexibility of use is certainly one of their virtues. However you use them, some of the following may be useful guidelines.

- Read the notes for the activity before you listen. At the very least try and fix in your head or note down the main purpose of the audio and listen out for the key questions of the course.
- If you can, have a pen and paper handy for short notes.
- Audio can be stopped and replayed – when something is complex or interesting. It can also be fast-forwarded.
- After listening to the audio – and this is really the most important thing – spend five minutes organising your notes and thoughts. What are the key points, new ideas, new connections sparked by the audio? Is there anything you need to look up or check over? If you can't do it now, make a note to do it later.

Listening to audio files

Participants: Dr Kath Woodward, Dr Karim Murji and Professor Wendy Hollway.

While listening to the audio files below you will hear a discussion of the key questions posed about identity in this course.

How are identities formed?

How much protocol do we have over shaping our identities?

Are there any particular uncertainties about identity in contemporary life?

Key points

The key points discussed are:

- Changing times have led to particular interest in matters of identity.
- Migration and movement mean identities are changing and people's sense of who they are and where they belong becomes more important.
- There may be greater uncertainty about identity now than in the past.
- Identity involves links between the personal, how we see ourselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, and the social, how others see us and the structures that make up the society in which we live.
- Identity is marked by differences, including how we look, such as the clothes we wear, and how we sound, such as language and accent.
- Identity requires some personal engagement on our part; we have to take up identities for ourselves.
- We are constrained by others' perception of us and by the societies in which we live, but we are also able to effect changes, for example through collective action.

Before listening

Think about these questions:

- What is identity?
- How are identities formed and what processes are involved?
- Do we have multiple identities?
- What sort of changes are there in the contemporary world and how might they impact upon our identities?
- How might uncertainties create new opportunities for shaping our identities as well as insecurities?
- Do we shape our own identities?
- What sort of constraints are there and which structures might influence the identities we have?

The original audio for this course was 30 minutes in length. For the purpose of this web delivered course it has been subdivided into three shorter sections. You may choose to listen to all three audio sections one after the other or you may listen to them at different times. Remember that the notes in the section 'before listening' apply to all three sections.

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 1

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 2

Audio content is not available in this format.



Audio 3

After listening

Make some brief notes in response to the questions above and think about how the discussion in the audio files has illustrated some of the ways in which identities are formed. People both make individual and collective investment in identity positions and are themselves categorised as having particular identities, sometimes not of their own choice, such as through census categories or ethnicised or racialised stereotypes. Structures can be changed through agency, although there are constraints at some times and in some situations which make this very difficult. In the discussion Karim Murji, as a sociologist, cites examples of 'outside' structures in the personal–social interrelationship, whereas Wendy Hollway, as a psychologist, places more emphasis on personal, 'inside' dimensions, including conscious and unconscious forces influencing individuals' experience and sense of who they are. Identity is not always apparent or transparent and we may not always be fully aware of our different identities or of why we have taken up these positions.

An investigation into identity, especially in changing times, raises issues about different relationships and tensions between the personal and the social, structure and agency, conscious and unconscious factors and between sameness and difference. Whilst structures may be very influential in shaping our identities there are always uncertainties and changes which often take place through agency, either that of individuals or collectively through groups of people. Uncertainties can lead to confusion, but change can also create diversity and new opportunities for us to shape our identities. Identity is a dynamic concept that has considerable significance within the social sciences and in our everyday lives.

4 Where do you come from?

4.1 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 4

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
hobble on half-caste
and intellectualise 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'?

The poem indicates some of the ways in which we link identity to place and the criteria which are used for making those connections. 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**. 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' could 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' and ethnicity 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 and multi-ethnic society.

Definition

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 her poem, in order to take control of her own identity. We can see here the unequal power relations that shape and influence the construction of identities, shown in this context in relation to racist ideas and practices.

4.1.4 Summary

- Identity is based on being the same as some people and different from others.
- Identities are constructed in relation to place.
- Difference is unequally weighted and can create categories of outsiders.
- Individuals and groups have to negotiate both the uncertainties of social change and the constraints of inequality.

5 Conclusion

Are we now better equipped to answer the three questions posed in [Section 1.1?](#)

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. We use symbols in order to make sense of ourselves in relation to the world we inhabit. This world is characterised 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 unit 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* 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 looked at and applied some of the concepts about social structures. This unit 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 questions which were posed at the outset produce a more complex picture of how identities are formed, the link between the personal and the social, the tension and relationship 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 for section 1

Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1993) *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*, London, Yale University Press. This book argues that, to achieve true gender equality, we need to study the hidden assumptions about sex and gender that pervade our society and culture. Bem's thought-provoking book tries to reveal and then dismantle these assumptions, arguing that society need not – and should not – be organised around the difference between men and women.

Vivien Burr (1998) *Gender and Social Psychology*, London, Routledge. This book gives a clear introduction to the psychology of gender, without assuming a detailed knowledge of psychology. Burr looks at gender differences in a variety of arenas – education, work, and the media – and at some methods used to study gender.

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 social science 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.

Kath Woodward (2002) *Understanding Identity*, London, Arnold. This book maps out a range of theoretical debates about the concept of identity, linking them to contemporary issues and recent discussion about the importance of identity. Recent concerns, drawing on a wide range of examples, are located within historical debates.

On inequality: John Hill's report to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Inquiring into Income and Wealth*, vols. 1 and 2, is written for a general audience, and is very readable. It has a lot more on the income parade.

Fran Abrams (2002) *Below the Breadline*, London, Profile Books, offers a more recent discussion of poverty in the UK.

Polly Toynbee (2003) *Hard Work: Life in Low Pay Britain*, London, Bloomsbury, presents an accessible account of the experiences of people on very low wages.

On social class: Rosemary Crompton's book, *Class and Stratification* (1998) is a fairly accessible survey.

On consumption: Edgell, S., Hetherington, K. and Warde, A. (eds) (1996) *Consumption Matters*, Oxford, Blackwell, can be recommended.

Harriet Bradley (1996) *Fractured Identities*, Cambridge, Polity, is a useful discussion of interrelationship between class and gender.

Gerth, H. and Mills, C.W. (1948) *From Max Weber*, London, Routledge – has excerpts from original texts by Weber and useful introductory commentary.

Karl Marx, *Communist Manifesto* – the real thing. Clear polemic which highlights key parts of Marxist mystique. A good read!

Acknowledgements

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Woodward, K (2004) *Questioning Identity: gender, class, ethnicity*, London, Routledge / The Open University, chapter 1, pages 6-11, 31-34, 39-40; chapter 2, pages 55-60; chapter 3, pages 82-87.

Kay, J. (1991) 'So you think I'm a mule?' *The Adoption Papers*, Sheba Feminist Publishers, Copyright (c)© 1991 Jackie Kay.

Figure 1: examples of UK passports. Crown copyright is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office; Figure 2: Mike Levers/The Open University; Figure 3: Stephen Mansfield/The Scotsman; Figure 4: John Harris/Report Digital

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