IDENTITY

Sociological Perspectives
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Introduction: Identity as a Question

> However it has been posited in our times and however it presents itself in our reflections, 'identity' is not a 'private matter' and a 'private worry'.
>
> (Bauman, 2009: 4)

> What is this thing – this identity – which people are supposed to carry around with them?
>
> (Billig, 1995: 7)

'Identity' is a difficult term: more or less everyone knows more or less what it means, and yet its precise definition proves slippery. In popular culture, it tends to be explicitly invoked only when it is seen as 'being in trouble'. So we are accustomed to hear of 'identity crises', in which people are not quite sure who they are. Films such as *Identity* or *The Bourne Identity* signal identity's absence or its pathology. Milan Kundera's novel *Identity* (1999) is precisely about a perceived *absence* of, or misunderstanding about, identity, as both primary characters are in important ways unable to recognize each other. Various crises are said to provoke anxieties in people knowing 'who they really are'. In all these examples, identity is foregrounded through its apparent loss or instability. That is, it becomes visible when it is seen to be missing. This emphasis is mirrored in some academic accounts, in which it is argued (implicitly or explicitly) that identity has become an issue because rapid social changes have led to identity disease (see, for example, Bauman, 2004).

Yet there is a problem with casting identity as something to be considered only when it is in trouble, and that is that 'normal', everyday processes of identity-making can too

easily become obscured. Put differently, when identity is considered only in terms of an obvious and manifest loss or insecurity, forms of identity which appear *not to be* lost, insecure or in other ways problematic can be left untheorized and unexplored. They can stand as the normative dimension against which apparently trickier kinds of identity are measured. An emphasis on identity *as* trouble or as *in* trouble underlines a belief in a normative (silent, non-troubling) identity, but it also underlines a belief that taken-for-granted forms of identity are unworthy of sociological or other scrutiny.

Against this, one of the central premises of this book is that identity itself is worthy of sociological exploration. This includes the taken-for-granted, supremely ordinary aspects of identity in which all of us are engaged all the time. I want to try to challenge the divide between normal and abnormal forms of identity and to argue that *all* identity-making is an accomplishment. There is no silent, untroubled, normal or natural identity.

Nevertheless, it is clear that those occasions when identity is seen to have gone wrong, to cause trouble or to be trouble, can cast light on what gets to count as normal or normative forms of identity. It is in the 'breaching' of rules and norms that those rules and norms can be most clearly seen (Garfinkel, 2004). In this respect, it is worth considering the ways in which notions of identity are at the heart of many of the contemporary 'troubles' of Western[1] – and especially anglophone – cultures. When we see trouble, we usually look to identity – 'what kinds of people do this?' All kinds of issues, from criminality, to school failure, to an inability to be socially mobile, are attributed to some failing in the person's self, or identity. This can look like an individualizing move, in that social issues become located within individual persons. However, it is my argument here and throughout this book that identity itself is a social and

collective process and not, as Western traditions would have it, a unique and individual possession.

This book is about some of those identity troubles, and it takes them as lenses through which to look at identity itself. It is my argument that looking at responses to identity troubles/troubled identities can tell us a great deal about what gets to count as normal or normative forms of identity. Throughout, I want to consider identities as being socially produced. That is, I consider how, through what mechanisms and in what ways, we can be said to achieve identity. Instead of seeing identity as something located 'within' the person – a property of the person, we might say – I consider it as something produced through social relations. As the title of the book implies, I take a specifically sociological approach to the issue of identity. While not all of the theorists or perspectives discussed here are distinctively sociological, my aim has been throughout to use the various works discussed here to develop a sociological analysis. This is about more than just offering a(nother) disciplinary perspective. Taking a sociological approach, I argue, enables the development of an expanded and fundamentally social and collective approach to identity, in contrast to the individualist and psychologistic perspectives that have tended to dominate discussions of this issue.

This chapter is in five parts. In the first, I briefly consider some of the history and context involved in thinking about identity. My aim here is not to provide a thoroughgoing history of the concept, but to highlight some of the key issues. I then discuss some preliminary forms of definition of the term 'identity', moving on, in the third section, to consider how identity depends on processes of identification and disidentification. In the fourth section, I discuss some of the problems inherent in seeing identity as

an individual attribute – something owned by the person. Finally, I outline the structure of the book.

Why identity? Why now?

It is clear that, in the last decade or so, there has been a proliferation of texts that have taken 'identity' as their focus. To what extent does this represent a radical departure in social thought? Stuart Hall (1992) has argued that various developments within twentieth-century social thought have forced an attention to identity. He is referring in particular to developments such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and what is often termed the 'linguistic turn' – a turn to attention given to language as something that does not simply *carry* meaning, but *makes* meanings. These developments have not simply highlighted issues of identity: they have problematized identity.

These theoretical developments have been linked with developments in the social world in which, several commentators have argued, questions of identity have become more pressing over the last fifty or so years. Bauman (2004), for example, argues that, with the collapse of apparently fixed and stable identities around gender, nation, etc., there is more of a social fluidity – and insecurity – around identity. Or, more accurately, he argues that the fluidity and insecurity that have *always* existed around identity have become more apparent. We no longer believe the 'hoax' that identity is stable, because social changes such as the collapse of nation-states, globalization, and shifts in family form have made its instability obvious. Bauman notes that the 'founding fathers' of sociology showed little interest in explicitly theorizing identity because 'the problem of identity' was not a problem of their time: it was not a troubling issue. It has become so, he suggests, because 'identity' is now seen to be in trouble:

'You tend to notice things and put them into the focus of your scrutiny and contemplation only when they vanish, go bust, start to behave oddly or otherwise let you down' (Bauman, 2004: 17). For Bauman, then, *theoretical* concern with identity stems from a *social* concern with identity. Put simply, he argues that sociologists have newly become interested in identity because it has newly arisen as a concern in the social world. As he argues:

> [O]nly a few decades ago 'identity' was nowhere near the centre of our thoughts, remaining but an object of philosophical meditation. Today, though, 'identity' is 'the loudest talk in town', the burning issue on everybody's mind and tongue. It would be this sudden fascination with identity, rather than identity itself, that would draw the attention of the classics of sociology were they to have lived long enough to confront it. (Ibid.: 16–17)

Bauman presents a dystopian picture of the contemporary world as one in which we are all cut loose from everything (good and bad) that would anchor us: we live, he suggests, in a time of instant gratification and consumerism, in which loyalties and commitments are always contingent, so that we end relationships with little thought. Bauman's essay depicts us as disconnected from one another, relying on the virtual communication of the internet and the mobile phone rather than doing the difficult work of maintaining relationships that last. For him, our short attention spans mean that we constantly crave the new in all things. Within this space of choice and consumption, the question 'who am I?' – a question that makes sense only when there is seen to be some option – rings loud.

Bauman's essay is of a piece with much contemporary sociological theorizing that stresses fluidity and change. And clearly there have been important social, political,

economic and cultural developments that have made identity a particular kind of troubling issue. But is it really the case that people, in living their lives, see their identities as endlessly contingent, endlessly 'choose-able' and changeable? While analysts highlight the instability and fragmentation of identities, is it the case that this is how identities are necessarily experienced? There may be instability around national identities, for example, but we see attempts to restabilize such identities too – most notably with far-right parties' appeals to an authentic 'nation', but in other ways as well, for example in the constitution of *new* nations and national identities, but also in the 'banal' nationalisms of the everyday (Billig, 1995). Similarly, it has become a truism that identities of gender and sexuality have become more 'fluid': yet, outside of academic discourse (and sometimes even within it!), gender is still usually seen as relatively fixed and unproblematic. While gender *roles* may be seen as changeable, the idea that people believe that identities as 'men' or 'women' are altogether contingent is a rather different claim. Again, while important social, legal and political changes have led to an increased visibility of non-heterosexual forms of sexual expression, this is a different thing to arguing that people see 'sexuality' itself as contingent; that sexuality is only contingently related to identity; or that, in the end, people believe that what we call 'sexuality' is nothing more than the name we give to a set of disparate sensations.

I mention these examples – there are many others – to suggest that, as well as fluidity, we see very powerful expressions of fixity around identity. Moreover, it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that identity was not theorized sociologically – or otherwise – until the late twentieth century. It is true that there has been a tendency within social thought to treat identity as a 'black box':

something not amenable (or perhaps something not interesting) to sociological theorizing. As Craig Calhoun (1994) has argued, the legacy of Parsons's socialization theory has meant that the *primary* way in which identity has been considered – until recently – is only in terms of the child's entry into adulthood . However, there have been other attempts to consider identity as a question, to consider how it is possible, and to locate it socially. Such attempts are found in the work of George Herbert Mead, Norbert Elias and Erving Goffman.[2] In all their work, we find attempts to understand identity as process, as something achieved rather than something innate, as done rather than 'owned'. Indeed, in the work of George Herbert Mead, we find an early elaboration of the self as thoroughly social and reflexive. Yet, as Stevi Jackson (2010) has noted, later accounts of Mead's work have tended to occlude its radical elements and to cast it as more or less conventionally differentiating between a 'social self' and a 'real self' – or a 'true self' onto which sets of social expectations are grafted. Indeed, sociology textbooks consistently (mis)represent his work in this way. Yet a closer examination reveals that this is far from the case, and that Mead's concerns were not entirely different to those emerging half a century later.

Mead (1934) proposes a distinction between two dynamic aspects of the self: the 'me' who moves through the social world, existing in complex social relations (Mead uses the analogy of play), and the 'I' whose exact definition proves difficult, but which represents a *post hoc* reflection on the actions, perceptions and understandings of the 'me'. As Robin Williams (2000) notes, the 'I' cannot be grasped since, as soon as we become aware of it, it becomes an object: it becomes, in effect, a 'me'. Mead writes:

If you ask, then, where directly in your own experience the 'I' comes in, the answer is that it comes in as a historical figure. It is what you were a second ago that is the 'I' of the 'me'. It is another 'me' that has to take that role. You cannot get the immediate response of the 'I' in the process. (Mead, 1934: 174)

Yet without the concept of an 'I' there would be no way to explain the reflexive, self-scrutinizing aspect of the self: persons would be reducible to a series of roles.

For Mead, all aspects of identity are interrelated, all are processual (Williams, 2000) and *all are social*. Both 'I' and 'me' are forged out of language and communication and interaction with others – all profoundly social phenomena. As Stevi Jackson notes, the American pragmatist tradition – in which Mead was writing – was important in developing the concept of a social self: 'a product of relations with others' (Jackson, 2010: 124).

Mead was concerned, then, to show how identities are in process, and how self-consciousness – and identity – are produced through the interpretation of experience (Williams, 2000). His work shows how people both live and reflect on their existence, and how the process of reflection in turn reworks and reinterprets experience (Jackson, 2010) (an issue explored further in chapter 2). Jackson argues:

For Mead, time, self and sociality interconnect: the self is a social phenomenon and also a temporal one, reflecting back on itself, in time, and forward from the present in anticipating others' responses and orienting future action in the world. It is always in the process of becoming as well as being. (Ibid.: 125)

The example of Mead's work – and we could also in this context include writers such as Anselm Strauss (see

Strauss, 1959) or Cooley (1964 [1902]) – indicates that concerns about identity have a longer history than is often acknowledged. It is fair to say that recent developments have taken these concerns in new directions: not least towards an emphasis on anti-humanism (in which the person ceases to be seen as the source of all action) and on fluidity and fragmentation. Nevertheless, I think we should be careful both not to exaggerate the novelty of recent approaches and not to notice elements of change and instability in the social world at the expense of noticing expressions of, and attempts at, fixity. In this I am not arguing that identity *really is* fixed and stable: as I will go on to discuss, it is clear that there is a fundamental instability at its heart; but it is to argue that, as analysts, we cannot simply overlook attempts on the part of social actors to make it *seem* so, to suppress and cover over cracks and instabilities.

What is identity? Some preliminary explorations

Part of the slipperiness of the term 'identity' derives from the difficulties of defining it adequately. It is not possible to provide a single, overarching definition of what it is, how it is developed and how it works. Indeed, it is important not to try, because what identity *means* depends on how it is *thought about*. There are, in other words, various ways of theorizing the concept, each of which develops different kinds of definition. Thus it is not entirely possible to answer the question 'what is identity?' in advance of theorizing about it. Each of the chapters will consider what identity means in the context of particular modes of analysis.[3] However, it is useful, I think, to consider briefly the kinds of issues that arise in any discussion about 'identity': what

kinds of things are we talking about when we engage in 'identity talk'?

Throughout this book, I use the term 'identity' in a wide-ranging and inclusive way to mean both its public manifestations – which might be called 'roles' or identity categories – *and* the more personal, ambivalent, reflective and reflexive sense that people have of who they are. I do this so as to avoid *reducing* identity to categories of gender, race, nation, class, sexuality, etc., with which it is often associated. While, clearly, such categories are important both individually and collectively, they cannot in any way account for the complexity of identity as it is lived. For one thing, identities cross categories (no one belongs to only one category), and different forms of categorical identity must be managed. For another, publicly available categories of identity may not easily map on to how people live, experience and understand themselves within those categories. And, again, people's subjective feelings may not map on to the ways in which other people position and identify them. As Regina Gagnier has wryly observed, 'I may feel like a king but I won't be treated like one at the bank' (Gagnier, 2000: 238). It becomes immediately clear that one problem with the term 'identity' is that it can be used to refer to a range of phenomena. My sense of myself, others' perceptions of me, my reactions to others' perceptions, the social categories that attach themselves to me and to which I attach myself – all may be referred to as 'identity', yet clearly there are important differences between them. Any discussion of identity always means we are in the presence of not one but many persons – or perceptions of a person.

The potential for analytic confusion here has led some writers to distinguish between different forms or aspects of identity. Erving Goffman distinguishes, in his work on stigma (Goffman, 1968), between three forms of identity:

personal identity (the unique characteristics of the person, both in themselves and in terms of their relations with others); social identity (what we might call a 'categorical' identity – an identity that persons have by virtue of their membership of social categories); and ego identity or felt identity. This last refers to a subjective sense of 'who we are' or who we believe ourselves to be. It is about how the person thinks of themselves *as* a person.

For Goffman, 'ego identity' does not represent a true core of an authentic identity: it might be more accurate to think of it as what people *make of* themselves, drawing on the raw materials to hand, which will inevitably include their membership of social identity categories organized around race, gender, nation, age, sexuality, bodily ability, etc.: 'Of course the individual constructs his image of himself [*sic*] out of the same materials from which others first construct a social and personal identification of him, but he exercises considerable liberties in regard to what he fashions' (Goffman, 1968: 106).

More recently, and again, in trying to provide a way of analysing different dimensions of self and identity, various writers have posited a distinction between 'identity' and 'subjectivity', where identity stands for an association with social categories (race, gender, class, nation, etc.) – categories that are normative and ideological – and subjectivity refers to the more conflictual, complex and cross-category processes by which a person or a self gets to be produced (see, e.g., Venn, 2006). As Margaret Wetherell puts it, commenting on Couze Venn's work, within this formulation 'it is "subjectivity" that makes it possible for any particular social identity to be lived either thoroughly or ambivalently, while "identity" helps specify what there is to be lived' (Wetherell, 2008: 75). Again, it is important to note that the identity/subjectivity split should not be seen as a distinction between a 'real', innate self and

a 'social' (by implication unreal) self (even though, as Wetherell notes, there are dangers that it could be interpreted this way). Rather, it seems to me that, like Goffman's and Mead's delineations (though coming from different theoretical roots), a distinction between identity and subjectivity represents an attempt to consider the ways in which people negotiate the social categories of identity that are available to them. Indeed this relationship between the ways in which people live and understand their lives and the kinds of social categories available to them is at the heart of struggles – both lay and academic – to understand identity. I discuss this more fully in the next section, but for now I want to emphasize that, while there is undoubted value in giving academic attention to different kinds or aspects of identity (or identity and subjectivity), I have not used these distinctions in this book. In part, this is because to do so would be to impose a particular theoretical framework on all the conceptualizations of identity I discuss here – and therefore to do violence to many of these analyses. It is also because I want to emphasize the connections between all these aspects of identity. For example, 'public' perceptions and inner senses of oneself are not identical but nevertheless exist in a relationship, albeit undoubtedly a complex one. Available forms of recognition about who people are can never sum them up; neither can how others see and understand them. But they are not unrelated, either. They constitute what (following Wittgenstein) we might call 'family resemblances' (Wittgenstein, 2009 [1958]). Just as members of a family exist in relationship and are said to resemble one another without being identical with one another, so, by analogy, different uses of a concept exist without being identical but are related to one another. Rather than looking for the one, essential definition, or splitting the concept into multiple definitions, the task is to consider the different conceptualizations in terms of their *relationship*.

This is why I disagree with writers such as Brubaker and Cooper (2000) who argue that 'identity' as a term has come to mean both too much and too little; that its use to mean different kinds of phenomena, from the basis of collective action to a sense of self-understanding, means that it lacks any analytic purchase. While I agree that 'identity' as a term is often used without much precision, I think the answer is to apply such precision, rather than jettisoning the term or dividing it into ever increasing numbers of other terms. While identity should always be treated as a question rather than an answer, to treat its different uses as entirely different phenomena is to miss the relationship – the 'family resemblance' between them. Identity works as an object (or a set of related objects) in the social world: it works to delineate both persons and types of person, and to differentiate between them. Furthermore, it cannot be meaningfully split into different phenomena without losing, at least potentially, the sense of the relationship between those phenomena.

What is identity? The one and the many

Michael Jackson (2002) points out that Western notions of identity hinge on an apparently paradoxical combination of sameness and difference. The root of the word 'identity' is the Latin *idem* (same), from which we also get 'identical'. One important meaning of the term, then, rests on the idea that we are not only identical with ourselves (that is, the same being from birth to death) but we are identical with others. That is, we *share* common identities – as humans, say, but also, within this, as 'women', 'men', 'British', 'American', 'white', 'black', etc., etc. At the same time, however, there is another aspect of identity, which suggests people's uniqueness, their *difference* from others. Western

notions of identity rely on these two modes of understanding, so that people are understood as being simultaneously the same and different. As Michael Jackson puts it, people work with an awareness that 'one's humanity is simultaneously shared and singular' (Jackson, 2002: 142).

Part of people's shared identities involves identity 'categories': social categories, formed on the basis of social divisions. Yet, as I briefly discussed above, to see identity as reducible to such categories would be to obscure the tensions within and between identities and to see identities as 'finished' products, rather than as active, processual engagements with the social world:

> To see identities only as reflections of 'objective' social positions or circumstances is to see them always retrospectively. It does not make sense of the dynamic potential implicit – for better or worse – in the tensions within persons and among the contending cultural discourses that locate persons. Identities are often personal and political projects in which we participate, empowered to greater or lesser extents by resources of experience and ability, culture and social organization. (Calhoun, 1994: 28)

Identities, in other words, are better seen as ongoing processes (and achievements) rather than as a sort of sociological filing system. This is not to claim that identity categories are unimportant: far from it. Such categories will *inform* (though they may not determine, and they cannot sum up) people's sense of themselves, and how they view one another. Yet, instead of a passive categorization, it is possible to see identity-making in terms of more active processes of *identification*. In identifying myself as a woman, for example, I am identifying with a wider category 'woman'. This overstates the case, of course: I may identify

as a woman at the same time as dis-identifying from certain features of being a 'woman' that I find unattractive or unpalatable. I may identify myself as a woman but be identified by others as something else – as a man, perhaps, or a girl. Furthermore, varying and often contradictory identities must be managed. No one belongs to or identifies with only one identity category.

Although this process of multiple identities has, rather unhelpfully, been considered in terms of an 'additive' model (in which various identity categories are added to one another), this doesn't do justice to the ways in which identities are lived out. It is not as though one could have a gender and then, in addition to that, a race and then, in addition to that, a class (and so on). As feminist theorists have long argued, identities are not lived in this way and cannot be theorized as such. To be a black woman is not to be a white woman with the addition of 'race' disadvantage (the so-called double or triple oppression approach): rather the category 'woman' *itself* is raced, classed, and the rest. And so too with all categories. As Nira Yuval-Davis comments, on her early intervention in these debates with Floya Anthias (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983):

> Our argument against the 'triple oppression' approach was that there is no such thing as suffering from oppression 'as Black', 'as a woman', 'as a working-class person'. We argued that each social division has a different ontological basis, which is irreducible to other social divisions .... However, this does not make it less important to acknowledge that, in concrete experiences of oppression, being oppressed, for example, as 'a Black person' is always constructed and intermeshed in other social divisions (for example, gender, social class, disability status, sexuality, age, nationality, immigration status, geography, etc.). Any attempt to essentialize 'Blackness' or 'womanhood' or 'working classness' as specific forms of concrete oppression in additive ways inevitably conflates narratives of identity politics with descriptions of positionality as well as constructing identities within the terms of specific political projects. (Yuval-Davis, 2006: 195)[4]

I have argued, then, that forms or categories of identities cannot exist in isolation. Some forms of identity are mutually constitutive (e.g., race and class and gender). Some forms of identity, however, are understood to be mutually exclusive and, indeed, rely on *not* being able to be combined. Examples include the binaries of man/woman, black/white, homosexual/heterosexual, and so on. In these cases, identity categories are understood as being oppositional, and, in this context, identifications rely on their own *dis*-identifications. In identifying as a woman, for example, one must reject an identification with the opposing category, 'man'. All identities are relational in this sense: all rely on *not* being something else. In this negation, the 'something else' is always there, as a haunting, as a possibility, as what could be or might have been. As Charles Lemert (2006: 284) notes, a red light at a traffic crossing cannot mean 'go', but it signals the

possibility of 'go': it gets its meaning only from the relationship with 'go'.

This is what Stuart Hall calls the 'constitutive outside' to identity. Hall argues:

> Throughout their careers, identities can function as points of identification and attachment only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render 'outside', abjected. Every identity has at its 'margin' an excess, something more. The unity, the internal homogeneity, which the term identity treats as foundational[,] is not a natural, but a constructed form of closure, every identity naming as its necessary, even if silenced and unspoken other, that which it 'lacks'.... So the 'unities' which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion, and are the result, not of a natural and inevitable or primordial totality but of the naturalized, overdetermined process of 'closure'. (Hall, 1996: 5)

So, one threat to the notion of a stable, coherent self – its 'internal homogeneity' – is the recognition that no one has only one identity; and, indeed, those identities may be in tension (one example would be the ways in which 'mother' and 'worker' are often understood as existing in tension). A second threat comes in the recognition that identities, equally, rely on the expulsion of what they are not. And yet, if we return to the concept of a 'common humanity', discussed earlier, what is going on here? Why are different identities asserted within this category of 'humanity'?

One answer to this question is that identities are asserted because people have 'obvious' differences: and yet differences are not necessarily at all obvious – although this does not stop blood being shed in their name. So wars and conflicts between Serbs, Croats and Bosnians in the former Yugoslavia, between Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, between

Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, and many other conflicts – all have relied on the precept that there are fundamental differences in identity between different groups. Yet these differences are not simply 'there'; they are not 'given in nature' but need to be *made* (see Ignatieff, 1994). In similar ways, the distinctions of Nazi race laws had to be produced *as* distinctions, and the German government of the 1930s and 1940s had to go to great lengths to determine, for example, who was and who was not Jewish.

Hence, while it may appear that differences in the ways in which people are treated, and their experience of the world, arise out of innate differences, we need to consider that causation may run in the opposite direction – that differences – including differences in identity – are produced out of discriminatory processes that establish some identities as more or less valuable than others. In this respect, to see people as 'different' is to obscure the history and the politics of the making of both social distinctions and social identities. I noted above some of the problems with taking a 'categorical' approach to identity. A further problem is that such an approach tends to explore only the *effects* of being identified with a category (for example, why are women paid less than men?) rather than investigating the category itself (for example, how is gender such a powerful and overarching mechanism for dividing up the world? Why do we become one gender rather than another? Why are there assumed to be only two genders? And so on). This is not to claim that questions about the effects of categories (such as pay differentials) are unimportant. Far from it: they are part of any fight for social justice. However, such questions do not exhaust the possibilities of the kinds of questions that can be asked and, when it comes to thinking about identities, cannot

adequately address issues of what identity is and how it is possible.

Joan Scott (1992) has pointed out that such a categorical approach tends to naturalize identity (making a natural foundation of the person's existence), stemming from biology, or culture. Moreover, when used in discussions of inequality and discrimination, it works with the assumption that:

> people are discriminated against because they are already different when, in fact, I would argue, it is the other way around: difference and the salience of different identities are produced by discrimination, a process that establishes the superiority or the typicality or the universality of some in terms of the inferiority or atypicality or particularity of others. (Scott, 1992: 14–15)

In other words, for Scott, the very identity categories we use are products of social processes, themselves connected with power and systems of inequality. She illustrates her argument by quoting Stuart Hall:

> The fact is 'black' has never been just there either. It has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally, and politically. It, too, is a narrative, a story, a history. Something constructed, told, spoken, not simply found. People now speak of the society I come from in totally unrecognizable ways. Of course Jamaica is a black society, they say. In reality it is a society of black and brown people who lived for three or four hundred years without ever being able to speak of themselves as 'black'. Black is an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment. In Jamaica that moment is the 1970s. (Hall, 1987: 45, quoted in Scott, 1992: 15)

Not only, then, are all identities relational, but all are produced within systems of inequality. For Scott, the task of the analyst is to look at the political, historical and social conditions by which categories are formed rather than solely to consider the effects of such categories. Her example of race is an informative one, since 'race' as a category is now generally agreed to have no credible biological basis. Its effects – which are very real – stem not from real differences 'within' the person, but from the stigmatizing and unequal mechanisms of racism. It is racism that brings 'race' into being. What gets to count as racial difference, in other words, is whatever racism makes *into* those differences. If this is so for race, it is also so for other categories of social life, all of which rely on the heightening of differences and the suppression of samenesses. Sexual difference, for example, is frequently understood as being objectively marked by bodily difference, but, here too, small differences are made into defining characteristics, such that two sexes become 'opposites'. As Gayle Rubin comments:

> In fact, from the standpoint of nature, men and women are closer to each other than either is to anything else – for instance, mountains, kangaroos or coconut palms … though there is an average difference between males and females in a variety of traits, the range of variation of those traits shows a considerable overlap … [E]xclusive gender identity … requires repression, in men, of whatever is the local version of 'feminine' traits; in women of the local version of 'masculine' traits. (Rubin, 1975: 179–80)

So too with other forms of apparently 'natural' and 'obvious' difference.

Several commentators, following Freud (1918), have termed this creation of difference 'the narcissism of small

differences'. In wanting to see ourselves as unique, we magnify small differences until they become defining characteristics. What is shared is played down, what is different is played up, until identities come to seem 'opposites'. What is being suggested here is that what is similar must be suppressed to produce differences that come to seem so obvious and 'natural'. As we shall see in the final chapter, the extreme form of this move results in expelling certain people or groups of people even from the category 'human'. In the next section, however, I want to consider the notion of 'uniqueness' in identity and to consider both what this uniqueness might consist in and what might be suppressed to make it, in turn, seem of overriding significance.

'I am who I am': the unique kernel of identity?

If, as I have argued, identity turns on both sameness and uniqueness, what is it that makes each of us unique? One answer might be that nobody has exactly the same life: even siblings – even identical twins – do not share every aspect of life. But, more commonly, uniqueness is seen as something which belongs to the person in question and is nothing to do with the social world. The social world might impact upon it and shape it, but (it is generally assumed) it does not make it. What the 'it' in question is depends on the position taken. In some versions, it might be a unique combination of genes; in others, it is a 'soul'. However, in every case that posits some notion of some part of a person that is not produced by the social world, what is being posited is an *essence*: something that makes the person what she or he is. It is often seen as what lies 'inside' and is understood as being 'deeper' or 'truer' than what is 'outside'. So, although Western persons are probably

comfortable with the idea that the social world produces *part of* who they are, and indeed with the idea that who they are can and will change, this is often accompanied by a notion of a 'true' or 'deep' self, which is seen as somehow outside all the social.

I would not want to deny that, in important ways, everyone is different, but I do want to question the assumption that this difference inheres within a core which is outside the social world. I also want to consider both how such beliefs come to be so strong and what work such an assumption does – that is, what are its effects?

The book as a whole represents my attempt to address these questions, but it is worth at this point highlighting what I see as the importance of such an enquiry for sociology. Norbert Elias (1994 [1939]) has argued that it is impossible to have a satisfactory sociology of persons while seeing 'the individual' or some part of the individual as standing outside 'society'. Elias recognizes that there is a widespread *perception* that one's 'true identity' is somehow 'locked away inside', and that one is a bounded, self-contained individual. He is concerned, however, to question whether this perception is an adequate foundation for analysis; after all, if we relied on perception as an adequate decider of truth, we would be left with the view that the sun does indeed go round the earth. For Elias, this view of a true, 'inner core' is so taken for granted that questions are rarely asked of it. As a result, identity becomes a 'black box', unknown and unknowable, and this is true for much social scientific knowledge (including sociology) as well as for literary representations and generalized 'lay' assumptions. Elias writes:

The question is whether this self-perception, and the image of man [*sic*] in which it is usually crystallized quite spontaneously and without reflection, can serve as a reliable starting point for an attempt to gain adequate understanding of human beings … Is it justified – that is the question – to place at the foundation of philosophical theories of perception and knowledge, and of sociological and other theories in the human sciences, as a self-evident assumption incapable of further explanation, the sharp dividing line between what is 'inside' man and the 'external world', a division which often appears directly given in self-awareness, and furthermore has put down deep roots in European intellectual and linguistic traditions, without a critical and systematic examination of its validity? (Elias, 1994: 206)

Instead of starting with this perception, Elias starts with the social conditions that give rise to the perception. In other words, instead of taking the perception of a unique inner core to be the basis on which the social world works, he asks what it is about the culture and history of the social world that has given rise to such a widespread belief and perception.

For Elias, this notion of an 'inner' 'hidden' core to the self, experienced as 'inside' (even if we could not quite say what is the border between 'inside' and 'outside'), is not an inevitable feature of the human condition but a consequence of what he famously calls 'the civilizing process' in the West. This process – from about the time of the Renaissance – involved increasing emphases on notions of self-control. Manners must be observed; people ought not to act on sensory or other bodily impulses. In important senses, for Elias, manners make the person; that is, Western persons *became* self-controlled beings as a result of injunctions to self-control. This notion of the need to

manage 'internal' states has led to a perception of 'true identity' being contained 'inside', while the social world is firmly 'outside': 'What is encapsulated are the restrained instinctual and affective impulses denied direct access to the motor apparatus. They appear in self-perception as what is hidden from all others, and often as the true self, the core of individuality' (Elias, 1994: 211).

So, for Elias, the notion that the 'true self' or a 'true identity' is 'inside', and is fundamentally separated from the social world, is an effect not of any innate feature of human identity itself, but of social processes of (self-)control. In turn, the notion has become reified so that it has become a feature of various modes of understanding identity. In other words, Elias suggests, how we understand ourselves is an effect of knowledges or truths that circulate about the self.

This 'inner/outer' split identified by Elias also has other effects, one of them being to mask human interdependency. As Elias notes, Westerners are accustomed to thinking of themselves as their own little self-enclosed world – *homo clausus*, as he terms it. But – and as I suggested above – this process involves the suppression of an alternative perception, one which understands the person in terms of their relations with others, and hence understands identity as formed *between* rather than *within* persons. This view, to quote Elias again, conceptualizes the person as being

> fundamentally oriented toward and dependent on other people through-out his [*sic*] life. The network of interdependencies between human beings is what binds them together. Such interdependencies are the nexus of what is here called the figuration, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people … [People] exist, one might venture to say, only as pluralities, only as figurations. (Elias, 1994: 213–14)

'Without you I'm nothing': without a nexus of others, none of us could be 'who we are'. The Western notion of the individual, however, rests on a massive suppression of this complex interdependency and suggests a model of identity which is, at its heart, outside the social world. As Elias suggests, sociological analysis has to challenge this notion rather than incorporating it.

Elias's position rests on an argument that selfhood and identity are produced through social relations that people then take up and use as resources for self-understanding. Such a social constructionist position is formulated in contrast to, and as critique of, an alternative formulation: that of essentialism. Essentialism has a long intellectual legacy in the West, such that it could be said to structure the 'common sense' of identity. It posits identity – or some part of identity – as stemming from some aspect of the person's nature rather than from social relations. That is, identity is understood as an *essence*.

In this context, an essence refers to something fundamental and integral to the person, which is not alterable (it is not possible to 'be' contrary to one's essence) and is held to persist throughout time and despite other social changes. As I noted above, this essence may be understood either as coming from some aspect of the body (biological essentialism) or the mind (psychological essentialism) or as existing in a 'soul' (religious essentialism). Whatever the form, an essence of identity is understood as being 'internal' and as divided from the 'external' world of others (the social world) (Fuss, 1989; Spelman, 1990).

Although not necessarily spelt out as such, this understanding of the person is one that has held sway in the West for at least several centuries and can be said to form an important part of the Western tradition for thinking about issues of identity, selfhood and person-hood. The

entrenchment of such normative understandings is no doubt one reason why conceptualizing identity as a social product can seem counter-intuitive. However, in addition, we are dealing with knowledge not about a world 'out there', but about *what one is*. In this respect, our most dearly held assumptions about our selves can be difficult to question. We are all subject to what Hacking (1995) has called 'looping effects', or 'interactions'. That is, in knowing something of the group to which we belong, we know ourselves through that knowledge. What we become is what we know ourselves to be. People are aware that they are classified in the way they are – as members of groups such as 'men', 'women', 'children', 'British people', and so on. While, as I argued above, such classifications cannot sum up or contain the person, people may nevertheless use such classifications, and their behaviour and responses may well have effects on how the classifications change in the future. Thus, for Hacking, a matrix of socially constructed categorizations is produced:

> [People] can make tacit or even explicit choices, adapt or adopt ways of living so as to fit or get away from the very classifications that have been applied to them. These very choices, adaptations or adoptions have consequences for the very group, for the kind of people that is invoked. What was known about people of a kind may become false because people of that kind have changed in what they believe about themselves. (Hacking, 1999: 34)

Hacking's argument here raises two important issues. First, that people take up notions of 'identity' (for example) and view themselves through the lens of what is socially said and thought about 'identity'. Hence, if identity is socially constituted as a natural or essential state, that is how people themselves will see themselves. Second, this is not static: socially constructed understandings are not fixed

forever but are changed by people's own take-up and understandings of them. What it means to be a woman in the early twenty-first century, for example, is not what it meant to be a woman in the seventeenth century, even in the same geographical space. However, this does not mean that we could simply change social and cultural understandings at will. It is not a question of 'attitudes': to see the situation so would be a voluntarism and would suggest we could change the world simply by changing our minds. To claim that identities are socially produced is not to claim they could easily be changed.

About the book

Following on from this, the central claim of this book is that identity needs to be understood not as belonging 'within' the individual person, but as produced between persons and within social relations. Its overall aim is to consider some of the ways in which identity can be understood sociologically. This is not because all the perspectives I discuss here are from the discipline of sociology, but because, I believe, they all throw sociological light on the topic of identity. They enable us to think about identity as socially produced, socially embedded and worked out in people's everyday social lives.

I referred earlier in this chapter to contemporary 'troubles' that cohere around identity. These will be discussed throughout the book and include (but are not limited to) a concern with memory, history and storytelling; a concern with sameness and difference in relation to others; a concern with the government of private life and the maintenance of a moral order; a concern with the limits of agency; a concern with authenticity; and a concern with who is like and who is unlike us. I shall suggest that these troubles tell us a great deal about when identities are seen to go 'wrong'. As a result, they tell us about what the 'right' identities are held to be like. 'Identity talk', sometimes explicitly but more usually implicitly, is about the 'ought' as well as the 'is' of identities.

The book opens with a consideration of the significance of memory, history and storytelling: chapter 2 discusses the role of narratives and stories in the production of identities and, specifically, the relationship between 'life' and 'story' through the notion of narrative identity. Chapter 3 analyses identity in the context of kinship. In the face of a considerable emphasis on a decline in the significance of kinship, I argue that it remains an important way in which

Westerners conceptualize their identities. In chapter 4, I discuss the ways in which identity has increasingly become a project to be worked on. I examine the argument that one important way in which people in the West have come to be governed is precisely through this project of the self – through the self working on itself. Chapter 5 turns to questions of the unconscious and asks how far subjectivities are the products of unknown, unconscious motivations: the hidden desires, fears and envies that are theorized within psychoanalysis. In chapter 6, I discuss whether and to what extent identity can be seen in terms of a performance – not because it is 'false' but because that is precisely how even truthful forms of identity get to be done. I then turn, in chapter 7, to one particular form of identity politics, as I examine how middle-class identities can be seen to be formulated on the basis of a repudiation of working-class identities that are themselves seen as being founded on the basis of a lack of 'taste'. Chapter 8 continues a discussion of identity politics and argues for an expanded definition of the term so that the political dimensions of all identity claims can be highlighted. I end the book by returning to the concept of 'identity ties' and considering how the repression of ties between self and other can be linked with ideas of value: who does, and who does not, have a worthwhile, a valuable, identity?

I have already pointed to what I see as some of the inadequacies of a categorical approach to identity. Hence it is important to note that the book does not take identity categories and work through them: I hope I have shown that to do this would not do justice to the ways in which identities are lived and, furthermore, would proceed from the categories themselves rather than asking questions about their existence and their possibilities. Yet social categories – and social divisions – are embedded in this book, as I discuss how inequalities based around