IDENTITY

Sociological Perspectives
Second edition
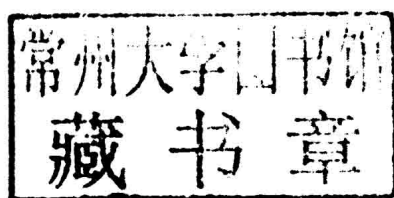
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1   Introduction: Identity as a Question

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 dis-ease (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 grati- fication 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