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IDENTITY MATTERS

Many of us, much of the time, are able to take identity for granted. We seem to know who we are, we have a good enough working sense of who the others in our lives are, and they appear to relate to us in the same way. Sooner or later, however, a time arrives when identity becomes an issue . . .

Someone calls your name and you turn round. His face is familiar, but that's all. There are no clues. He seems to know who you are, however: he knows your name at least. You ask each other how it's going, and agree that meeting up for a drink sometime would be good. 'I'll call you', he says. He's got my number? 'Say hello to Alan', he says and then you each go your separate ways. With luck it'll come back to you.

It's a cold Friday night, rainy and windy. You're dressed for dancing, not the weather. Finally, shivering, you reach the head of the queue outside the club. The bouncer – or, as he prefers to be known, the doorman – raises his arm and admits your flat mate. He takes one look at you and demands proof of your age. All you have is money. But you don't have enough. You walk home alone.

You hand your passport to the immigration officer behind her glass screen. She looks at your nationality, at where you were born. Your name. She checks your visa. She looks at the photograph, she looks at you. She asks you the purpose of your visit. She stamps the passport and wishes you a pleasant stay. Already she is looking over your shoulder at the person behind you.

> Finally you get through to the order line of a clothing catalogue. You want to buy a new jacket. The young woman who answers is called Angela, although her voice suggests an origin in the Indian subcontinent. She asks for your name, address, credit card number and expiry date, your customer reference number if you have one, establishing your status as someone to whom, in the absence of a face-to-face encounter, goods can be dispatched in confidence. And also, of course, putting you on the mailing list if you're not already there.

Others may speculate about our identity without us noticing it, or it becoming a particular issue.

> On a train, the stranger in the opposite seat smiles and excuses herself: she has noticed you reading last week's newspaper from a small town several hundred miles to the east. You explain that your mother posts it to you, so that you can keep up with the news from home. She recognised the newspaper because she is married to a man from your home town. You, it turns out, were at school with her sister-in-law, and can remember, vaguely, her husband. He was something of a bully, if memory serves, but you don't tell your fellow passenger that. Before leaving the train she gives you her telephone number. On balance, you aren't going to use it.

In situations such as the above identity is, or has to be, established or verified but the stakes are not high, one way or the other, and life goes on much as before. Identification is not always so mundane or trivial, however.

One of the central themes of this book is that identification, whether of ourselves or of others, is a process; something that we do. As a consequence, we may get it wrong, particularly when we consciously try to influence how other people see us, and it may matter:

> You're getting ready for a blind date with a woman who you have 'met' on the lonely hearts page of a national newspaper. It's the first time you've dipped your toe in the pond since a messy break up seven months ago. You are very nervous. You've showered twice, the second time to scrub off some of the overdose of eau de toilette and aftershave. But what to wear? Not too smart or she might think you're a bit full on. Too casual and she'll think that, well, that you're too casual. It takes hours, or so it seems. Clothes are scattered everywhere, but eventually you get it about right. You think so, anyway. That grey

cotton-linen mix jacket you picked up in a sale last year, the black Dockers that you bought last week, a plain white button-down Oxford shirt. Should do the trick. It's a nice night, no risk of rain. Off you go. The wine bar where you've arranged to meet is about ten minutes away, and just before you get there you stop and have a look in a shop window. Fine. Then you look down and you can't believe it. How did you do *that*? Nerves? Absent-mindedness? You've put on your favourite trainers. *Trainers*, for goodness sake. Scruffy, old, *favourite* trainers. *Smelly* trainers. Too late to go back and change. You take a deep breath. What will she think? Just got to hope that she really does have a GSOH.

There are, however, many situations in which we only have a limited ability to influence how others identify us.

The morning of your sixty-fifth birthday, in addition to birthday cards and presents, brings the prospect of imminent retirement: a pension instead of a salary, a concessionary public transport pass, and special rates every Tuesday at the hairdresser's. Beyond that, free medical prescriptions and invitations to the Senior Citizens Club at something called the 'Day Centre' are intimations of dependence and disability. Death. It may be the same face you see in the bathroom mirror but you will no longer be quite the person that you were yesterday. Nor can you ever be again.

It is the annual company dinner. You have always gone alone, and always left alone, early. This year, however, you have someone to bring. What will your colleagues, the MD especially, think of her? There is a promotion coming up in February, and you know what they're like about that kind of thing. You take a deep breath, push open the glass door, and walk into the bar of the hotel restaurant that has been booked for the evening. Your boss, smarmy Mark, comes across, hand out, glass of red – certainly not his first – in his hand: 'Susie, lovely to see you.' He turns slightly, there is a question in his eyes . . . Big deep breath: 'Mark, this is my partner, Alison.'

You hand your passport to the immigration officer behind her glass screen. She looks at your nationality, at where you were born. Your name. She checks your visa. She looks at the photograph, she looks at you. She types something into her computer terminal. She asks you the purpose of your visit. During the conversation she checks again the

screen beside her and presses a button under her desk, to alert airport security. Abruptly you find yourself being removed from the queue of incoming passengers by two male officers and led away to an interview room. Already she is dealing with the person who had been in line behind you.

A rainy afternoon in Belfast in 1973 and you leave work early to discover that the buses are off. Finding a public phone box that works you try for a taxi. Your usual number has nothing available: a bomb scare's tying up the traffic. Do you walk home? No, it's too far and it wouldn't be safe. You find what's left of the phone book and start dialling other taxi companies. Eventually you get one. Ten minutes later it comes and you settle in for the ride home. It doesn't take you long to realise that instead of heading up Divis Street to the Falls Road you're driving over the bridge into Protestant East Belfast. The next afternoon, when you come round in hospital, a distant voice that you don't recognise is telling you that you're going to be alright. You were lucky to get off with a shot through the kneecap, some burns and a bad beating.

So, who we are, or who we are *seen* to be, can matter enormously. Nor is identification just a matter of the encounters and thresholds of individual lives. Although identification always involves individuals, something else – collectivity and history – may also be at stake.

Mass public occasions such as the Sydney Mardi Gras, or Gay Pride in London, are public affirmations that being gay or being lesbian are shared, as well as individual, identifications. For participants these occasions may, or may not, affirm their individual sexual identities, and it may also be an occasion to have a good time, but they are also shared rituals, celebrations of collective identification and political mobilisation.

Imagine a contested border region. It might be anywhere in the world. There is a range of ways to settle the issue: violence, a referendum, international arbitration. Whatever the means adopted, or imposed, the outcome will have consequences for people on both sides, depending on who they are. While some will accept it, some may not. Populations may move, towns and regions may be 'cleansed', genealogies may be rewritten. The boundaries of collective identity may be redrawn.

Finally, here are two cases that are not drawn from my own experience or general knowledge. They illustrate the interplay of individual and collective identity, the consequences of identification, and the magnitude of the historical themes that everyday situations may evoke.

> In 1935 a fair-skinned Australian of part-indigenous descent was ejected from a hotel for being an Aboriginal. He returned to his home on the mission station to find himself refused entry because he was not an Aboriginal. He tried to remove his children but was told he could not because they were Aboriginal. He walked to the next town where he was arrested for being an Aboriginal vagrant and placed on the local reserve. During the Second World War he tried to enlist but was told he could not because he was Aboriginal. He went interstate and joined up as a non-Aboriginal. After the war he could not acquire a passport without permission because he was Aboriginal. He received exemption from the Aborigines Protection Act – and was told that he could no longer visit his relations on the reserve because he was not an Aboriginal. He was denied permission to enter the Returned Servicemen's Club because he was.[1]

> When Youssra's three-and-a-half-year-old son started nursery school, he really wanted his mum to come on a school trip. So she signed up to help out on a cinema visit. She buttoned the children's coats outside their classroom and accompanied them to the front hall. But there, she was stopped by the headteacher, who told her, in front of the baffled children: 'You don't have the right to accompany the class because you're wearing a headscarf.' She was told to remove her hijab, or basic Muslim head covering, because it was an affront to the secular French Republic. 'I fought back', she says. 'I brought up all the arguments about equality and freedom for all. But I was forced home, humiliated. The last thing I saw was my distressed son in tears. He didn't understand why I'd been made to leave.' [2]

Each situation above illustrates how identification affects real human experience: it is the most mundane of things and it can be the most extraordinary. Whichever way we look at it, identification seems to *matter*, in everyday life and in sociology.

BUT . . . DOES IDENTITY MATTER?

It isn't enough for me simply to insist that identity matters. Some contributors to the literature have expressed serious doubts about whether

identity and identification matter as much as social science appears to think they do. Their scepticism has some justification, and is a useful reminder that we should not take identity for granted.

First, and most fundamentally, there are doubts about whether identity, in itself, actually influences or causes behaviour. Martin, for example, has insisted that despite the high profile of 'identity' in accounts of recent conflicts, such as in the Balkans, it 'fails to provide an explanation . . . [for] *why* actors are making certain utterances or *why* certain events are happening' (1995: 5). This was a response to claims that explicitly connected identity to actions, assertions that under the circumstances the people concerned could not have done otherwise (and were, hence, blameless). Subsequently Malešević (2006) also put forward arguments broadly similar to Martin's.

In order to begin thinking about this issue, we must decide what we mean by 'identity'. As a very basic starting point, identity is the human capacity – rooted in language – to know 'who's who' (and hence 'what's what'). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are and so on. This is a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectivities (cf. Ashton *et al*. 2004). Ethnomethodologists, developing the work of Harvey Sacks, call this 'membership categorisation' (Eglin and Hester 2003; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002, 2009; Leudar *et al*. 2004; Stokoe 2003). It is a process – *identification* – not a 'thing'; it is not something that one can *have*, or not, it is something that one *does*.

So, following Martin and Malešević, it cannot be said too often that identification doesn't *determine* what humans do, although this claim is often made by politicians and others. Knowing 'the map' – or even just approximately where we are – does not necessarily tell us where we should go next (although a better or worse route to our destination might be suggested). However, without such a map we would not know where we are or what we, and others, are doing.

The matter is made more complex by the fact – which is also something that the literature on 'membership categorisation' referred to in the previous paragraph teaches us – that classification is rarely neutral (something that I discuss further in Chapter 9). At the very least, classification implies evaluation, and often much more. Humans are generally not disinterested classifiers. This is spectacularly so when it comes to classifying our fellow humans (and them us). Cognitively, classification is organised hierarchically: A and B may be different from each other at one level, but both are members of the meta-category C.

Classification is also hierarchical interactionally and socially: one may be identified as a C in one context, but as an A in another. In addition, because identification makes no sense outside of relationships, whether between individuals or groups, there are hierarchies or scales of preference, of ambivalence, of hostility, of competition, of partnership and co-operation, and so on.

From this perspective, identification and motives for behaviour might seem to be connected: to identify someone could be enough to decide how to treat her. This is one of the claims made by social psychology's 'social identity theory', discussed further in Chapter 9. However, our classificatory models of self and others are multi-dimensional, unlikely to be internally consistent and may not easily map on to each other. Hierarchies of collective identification may conflict with hierarchies of individual identification, which means that the following can make complete interactional sense: I hate all As; you are an A; but you are my friend. Taken together, these points suggest that categorical imperatives are unlikely to be a sufficient guide on their own, and that the ability to discriminate between others in subtle and fine-grained ways is an everyday necessity.

A further issue, to which I will not give extensive attention here because it is discussed in Chapter 14, is the emotional charge that may, or may not, attach to identification. There are perhaps two things to say about this, the first of which is that, even allowing for social psychological studies of identity (see Chapter 9), we do not have a clear picture of the relation between emotion and identity. Perhaps the most that we are entitled to say at the moment is that emotion appears to be bound up with identification – typically through attachment – in some circumstances but not in others (Ashton *et al*. 2004: 90-92). The second point, which can perhaps be made with greater confidence, is that where identity does appear to be an emotional matter – and hence capable of influencing actions – this does not seem to be inevitable, or natural. Identification has to be *made* to matter, through the power of symbols and ritual experiences, for example. Flags and other symbols of collective identification may, probably as a result of early socialisation and not necessarily obviously, call forth the 'inarticulate speech of the heart' in powerful and consequential ways (Jenkins 2007, 2012a: 115-51).

So, while identification may be connected to motivation and behaviour, the connection is neither straightforward nor predictable. Which suggests that when Rogers Brubaker, for example, insists that ethnicity is a cognitive matter, of classification and categorisation (Brubaker 2004: 64-87; Brubaker *et al*. 2004), the key point is not that he is wrong – because he

isn't – but that other factors must also be taken into account. To repeat, classification is rarely disinterested.

This raises the question of the role of interests: is it the pursuit of interests, material or otherwise, which matters, or is it identity? This debate has a considerable history, and the alternative positions appear in useful contrast if we compare two influential perspectives on identity: Barth's social anthropology (1969) and Tajfel's social psychology (1981a). Despite points at which their understandings of identification resemble each other – not least in their emphases on process – they differ sharply in this important respect. Barth argued that identification and collectivity are generated as emergent by-products of the transactions and negotiations of individuals pursuing their interests. He was dissenting from a taken for granted, structural-functionalist orthodoxy in social anthropology that explained what people did by reference to their identity, in particular their membership of corporate groups or 'cultures', such as lineages, clans and tribes. Tajfel, by contrast, argued that group membership – even if it was only arbitrary assignation to a group under laboratory conditions – is sufficient *in itself* to generate identification with that group and to channel behaviour towards in-group favouritism and discrimination against out-group members. He was taking issue with social psychological accounts of identity (e.g. Sherif 1967) that emphasised 'realistic competition' and conflicts of interest as the basis for co-operation and group formation.

In fact, identification and interests are not easily distinguished. How I identify myself has a bearing on how I define my interests. How I define my interests may encourage me to identify myself in particular ways. How other people identify me has a bearing on how they define my interests, and, indeed, their own interests. My pursuit of particular interests might cause me to be identified in this way or that by others. How I identify others may have a bearing on which interests I pursue. And so on. Even the apparently single-minded, calculative pursuit of material self-interest does not exist in isolation from organisational and other identifications – jobs, positions and reputations – and shared understandings of value and optimal behaviour that are informed by more abstract identity categories such as 'rich', 'clever' or 'successful'.

This is not to deny that people may sometimes pursue interests that appear to conflict with how they are publicly identified, individually or collectively. It does, however, return us to the proposition that classification (identification) is unlikely to be disinterested. Identification is, at the very least, consequential and reciprocally entailed in the specification and pursuit of individual and collective interests:

> in practice, interest and identity claims are closely intertwined. What I want is in some sense shaped by my sense of who I am. On the other hand, in clarifying my interests I may sometimes begin to redefine my sense of self. But there remains for me a fundamental distinction between my objectives that do not threaten my identity and those that do.
> (Goldstein and Rayner 1994: 367-368)

Can this really mean that a threat to my identity is more serious than a threat to my interests? Given that it is not easy to distinguish one from the other, the answer has to be: only if I think or feel it is. There is no evidence that everyone does think or feel that.

In fact, identity 'in itself', independent of other considerations such as interests, may not be a plausible proposition. Just because much contemporary political, and other, rhetoric seems to set a supreme price on identity (Malešević 2006) doesn't mean that we should. As critical social scientists we, in fact, are obliged not to. Even where individual or collective 'identity politics' appear to be intense, the extent to which collective or individual interests are subordinated to the categorical imperatives of 'identity' should be a matter for empirical discovery, rather than *a priori* theoretical presumption (although there are epistemological issues here, since identifying the interests of an individual or a group is not a straightforward matter).

As the final thread in this debate, scepticism about whether identity matters has inspired scepticism about the nature of social groups. This reflects the fact that group identities are often treated as the most powerful forms of identification, in terms of their capacities – whether rooted in socialisation, peer pressure, perceived shared interests or Tajfel's social identity effects – to mobilise people. It is in this context that doubts about whether groups are real can sensibly be raised. Given that 'the group' is among the most fundamental of social scientific concepts, this is not a minor matter.

'The group' is such a basic notion, in fact, that most social scientists take it completely for granted, as part of the conceptual furniture. Not everyone does, however. As one of the most consistent critical voices in this respect, Rogers Brubaker (2002; 2004: 7-27) insists that ethnic groups, as he believes they are generally conceptualised within social science – as clearly bounded, internally fairly homogenous and distinguished from other groups of the same kind – are not real. What is real is a shared sense of 'groupness', of group membership. By this argument, the participants in ethnic conflicts are individuals and organisations, rather than ethnic groups. Ethnicity, for Brubaker, is cognitive, a point

of view of individuals, a way of seeing the world (Brubaker 2004: 64-87; Brubaker *et al*. 2004). But it is not how the substance of the human world is really organised.

Brubaker goes on to argue, using similar logic, that identity in general is not a 'thing' that people can be said to have, or that they can be; thus it is not real, either (Brubaker 2004: 28-63; Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In this sense identity does not, and cannot, make people do anything; it is, rather, people who make and do identity, for their own reasons and purposes. So, instead of 'identity', we should only talk about ongoing and open-ended processes of 'identification'.

Brubaker's arguments have much to commend them. It's true, for example, that the only reality that we should attribute to a group derives from people thinking that it exists and that they belong to it (an issue that I discuss further in Chapter 9). It's also true that identity is a matter of processes of identification that do not determine, in any sense, what individuals do. Individual behaviour is a complex and constantly evolving combination of planning, improvisation and habit, influenced by emotional responses, health and well-being, access to resources, knowledge and world-view, the impact of the behaviour of others, and other factors, too. Group membership and identity are likely to have some part to play, but they cannot be said to *determine* anything.

In the above respects, Brubaker is in considerable agreement with the arguments that have been put forward in earlier editions of this book. But he is right only up to a point.[3] The definition of groups that he presents as wrong-headed, social science conventional wisdom – as clearly demarcated and bounded, relatively homogenous collectivities that are distinct from other groups – is not universally accepted. Another, more minimal definition, which commands considerable support across a broad social science spectrum, simply says that a group is a human collectivity the members of which recognise its existence and their membership of it: there are no implications of homogeneity or definite boundaries. From this point of view, Brubaker's distinction between non-existent groups and real 'groupness' doesn't make sense, in that groups are constituted in and by their 'groupness'.

In a search for unambiguous '*really* real' analytical categories, Brubaker is attempting to impose theoretical order on a human world in which indeterminacy, ambiguity and paradox are part of the normal pattern of everyday life (Jenkins 2012a: 17-19, 292-297). Although as social scientists we must aim for the greatest possible clarity, our concepts must also be grounded in the observable realities of the human world. If we try to impose concepts that are too straight-edged on this messy reality we

risk divorcing ourselves from it, substituting the 'reality of the model' for a 'model of reality' (Bourdieu 1990: 39).

What, then, of groups? Brubaker's argument is underpinned by the well-worn proposition that the collective-stuff-of-human-life is not a substantial reality and does not have the same ontological status as individuals. Human individuals are actual entities; groups are not. They cannot behave or act, and they do not have a definite, bounded material existence in time and space. Only the individuals who constitute supposed groups – their members – can be said to exhibit these attributes, not the groups themselves. Although Calhoun's characterisation of Brubaker, as offering a social theoretical version of Margaret Thatcher's observation that there is 'no such thing as society', is uncharitable (Calhoun 2003a: 536), it is not hard to understand its inspiration. One of the reasons why it can be described as uncharitable is because the 'Thatcher position' is not as foolish as it is often taken to be; it has real foundations in everyday experience. Groups and other collectivities are more elusive than embodied individuals (Jenkins 2002a: 73-76). They are difficult to grasp. They are not merely arithmetical aggregates: what constitutes and defines them is more than merely the fact of their members, even if those members could all be gathered in one place. What's more, although individuals can't be in two or more places at once, in some senses a collectivity can (and is quite likely to be).

Organisations – which can be formal or informal, extending in size and complexity from a regular pub quiz team to a multi-national corporation or a nation-state – are perhaps the most substantial kind of group. But even organisations are somewhat fuzzy and unclear. In addition to their members – and who counts as a member is not always obvious – organisations are constituted in implicit behavioural norms and customs, in explicit rules and procedures, in criteria for recruitment, in divisions of labour, in hierarchies of control and authority, and in shared objectives. None of these things are necessarily obvious at any given moment, let alone all at the same time. To complicate the matter further, organisations may persist despite membership turnover. People come and go, but the organisation can continue. There is more to an organisation than its membership, and the same is true for any group or collectivity.

So there is a sensible issue to be addressed with respect to the ontological status, the *reality*, of groups and other collectivities. There is a question to be asked, and its answer isn't self-evident. Brubaker's response is that groups are imaginary, and since we don't treat imaginary entities as analytical categories, we should not accord this status to groups. It is only the sense of 'groupness' that is real. Real, but illusory:

an important part of his argument is that beliefs in the reality of ethnic groups, and actions informed by these beliefs, create pressing contemporary problems. In a world of ethno-political entrepreneurs and organisations, 'groupness' constrains the landscape of options, and offers foci of identification to which uncompromising loyalty can legitimately be demanded, which transcend and disguise the sordid pursuit of base interests. There is more than a suggestion of 'false knowledge' about his argument at this point.

And once again, Brubaker is right in part . . . but definitely wrong in the end. Groups may be imagined, but this does not mean that they are imaginary. They are experientially real in everyday life. In this respect, the empirical questions we should ask are: Why do people believe in groups? Why do they believe that they themselves belong to them? And why do they believe that others belong to them? The first reason that they do so is that we live in an everyday world of observable, very real – even if modest – groups. Small informal groups exist, and are an aspect of local reality for each of us. Whether they are families, peer groups or friendship circles, our own experience tells us that groups are real. Formal organisations – also groups, let's remember – are real, too. So whether informal or formal, whether more or less organised, groups look and feel real enough. They are actually anything but elusive. We all belong to some groups.

These small local groups are embedded within, and help to produce and reproduce, larger groups. To stay with Brubaker's primary interest, ethnicity, families, peer groups and friendship circles are regularly identified along ethnic lines and help to constitute larger ethnic groups. Small-scale formal organisations may also be deeply implicated in the everyday construction of ethnic collectivity: sports clubs, religious congregations, schools, voluntary organisations, businesses and political party branches may all be significant in this respect. So, in local everyday experience, there is a three-dimensional experiential materiality to supra-local ethnic groups. They can be grasped and 'seen' without having to make any effort of the imagination. They are, in other words, 'real'. Small wonder that people should believe in their existence.

There are also other reasons why people might sensibly believe in the existence of ethnic, or other, groups. Size, for example, doesn't seem to be a barrier to the social reality of groups. There is no reason why all the members of any particular group should be capable of assembling in one place, for example, or should know every other member of the group. This is manifestly true for large organisations and there's no reason why it shouldn't hold for groups of any kind. Large collectivities may be very

abstract indeed to their members, but may nonetheless have observable local, immediate representation or presence. The absence of formal co-ordination or collective decision-making across a large ethnic population – the fact that there is no central committee, and the group may be internally divided in various respects – does not necessarily undermine its status as a group, either. Even small groups can be unco-ordinated, leaderless, fractious or amorphous: families are often good examples of this (and are no less 'real' because of it).

Returning to my earlier argument, the minimal reality of a group is that its members know that it exists and that they belong to it (although what counts as belonging may take many forms). Returning to Brubaker, it is only the definition of groups that he uses – as definitely bounded, internally more or less homogenous and clearly differentiated from other groups of the same basic kind – that allows him to reject their reality. Judged against the observable realities of the human world, the concept of 'the group' that Brubaker uses as his yardstick is, indeed, a mirage. That does not, however, mean that groups do not exist.

A further important issue also needs to be considered, albeit briefly: people categorise others, all the time and as a matter of course. Categorisation is as much a part of our subject matter as self-identification. This is the external aspect of the process of identification, which I will discuss at length in subsequent chapters. The point in this context is that categorisation makes a powerful contribution to the everyday reality – the realisation, if you will – of groups. Attributions of group membership are fundamental to our categorisation of others (Eglin and Hester 2003; Housley and Fitzgerald 2002, 2009; Leudar *et al*. 2004; Stokoe 2003), and the categorisation of out-groups is intrinsic to in-group identification. Who we think *we* are is intimately related to who we think *others* are, and vice versa. Categorisation also makes an important contribution to the distribution of resources and penalties, and is central to both conflict and conflict avoidance strategies: part of the experience of being a group member is categorisation by others and its attendant consequences. It is very real.

To invoke the first principle of social constructionism, groups are real if people think they are: they then behave in ways that assume that groups are real and, in so doing, construct that reality. They *realise* it. That groups are social constructions doesn't mean that they are illusions. Ordinary everyday life is full of real encounters with small groups and manifestations of larger groups. It is the distinction that Brubaker draws between groups and 'groupness' that is an illusion, and it does not help us to understand the local realities of the human world.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE ABOUT IDENTITY?

My argument so far is that, if for no other reason, *identification* matters because it is the basic cognitive mechanism that humans use to sort out themselves and their fellows, individually and collectively. This is a 'baseline' sorting that is fundamental to the organisation of the human world: it is how we know *who's who* and *what's what*. We couldn't do whatever we do, as humans, without also being able to do this.

On the other hand, identification doesn't determine behaviour, and patterns of identification don't allow us to predict who will do what. This is so for a number of reasons: people work with various 'maps' or hierarchies of identification, these hierarchies of identification are never clear-cut, unambiguous or in consistent agreement with each other, and the relationship between interests and identification is too complex for individual behaviour to be predictable in these terms.

Given these conclusions, what should social science do about 'identity' and 'identification'? Let's turn to Brubaker once again (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; reprinted in Brubaker 2004: 28-63):

> [Identity] . . . is too ambiguous, too torn between 'hard' and 'soft' meanings, essentialist connotations and constructivist qualifiers, to be of any further use to sociology.
>
> (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 2)

> the term 'identity' is made to do a great deal of work. It is used to highlight non-instrumental modes of action; to focus on self-understanding rather than self-interest; to designate sameness across persons or sameness over time; to capture allegedly core, foundational aspects of selfhood; to deny that such core, foundational aspects exist; to highlight the processual, interactive development of solidarity and collective self-understanding; and to stress the fragmented quality of the contemporary experience of 'self', a self unstably patched together through shards of discourse and contingently 'activated' in differing contexts.
>
> (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 8)

> People everywhere and always have had particular ties, self-understandings, stories, trajectories, histories, predicaments. And these inform the sorts of claims they make. To subsume such pervasive particularity under the flat, undifferentiated rubric of 'identity', however, does nearly as much violence to its unruly and multifarious forms as

> would an attempt to subsume it under 'universalist' categories such as 'interest'.
>
> (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 34)

On the one hand, Brubaker and Cooper argue that the term 'identity' is overused to the point of becoming almost meaningless. On the other, they insist that one blanket term cannot adequately deal with the human word's rich variety of identification processes. Either conclusion suggests that we should abandon the term.

Brubaker isn't the only person to have pronounced a death sentence on 'identity'. Siniša Malešević (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2011) offers a sustained and impressive argument that, as an analytical concept, identity – by which he generally means *ethnic* or *national* identity – is confused and confusing, means too many things and encompasses too many different processes, to be of any social analytical value. Identity has, he suggests, become reified in social science as a phenomenon, the existence and importance of which can be taken for granted. Nor is Malešević more kindly disposed to everyday, commonsense uses of 'identity': he argues that it is an ideological notion – basically 'false knowledge' – of recent historical origin, which power elites manipulate politically to their own advantage. It is certainly not, in his eyes, a generic or universal aspect of the human repertoire.

I agree with some of Brubaker's and Malešević's arguments. I certainly sympathise with their impatience with a good deal of writing about identity. However, discarding the notion of 'identity' for social analytical purposes is no solution (cf. Ashton *et al*. 2004: 82). It cannot really be done, if only because the genie is already out of the bottle. 'Identity' is not only an item in sociology's established conceptual toolbox, it also features in a host of public discourses, from politics to marketing to self-help. If we want to talk to the world outside academia, denying ourselves one of its words of power is not a good communications policy.

What's more, even were we to stop talking about 'identity', we would still need a way of talking about the fundamental human processes that I have been discussing in this chapter. We would still require abstract, shorthand terms that allow us to think about 'knowing who's who', and the fact that people are, in their own eyes and the eyes of others, identified as 'this, that or the other'. While replacing 'identity' with 'identification' is an alternative that has its attractions, in that it refers explicitly to a process, it isn't much of an improvement, because it is stylistically somewhat cumbersome.

We need to find a compromise between a complete rejection of 'identity', in the style of Brubaker and Malešević, and an uncritical acceptance

of its ontological status and axiomatic significance. Such a compromise calls for more care about what we say, and more modesty in how we say it. Since both 'identity' and 'identification' are nouns, and therefore potentially vulnerable to reification, what matters most is how we write and talk about them, not an artificial and mutually exclusive choice between them. Throughout this book I shall, unapologetically, use both terms.

So, how should we write and talk about 'identity' and 'identification'? Well, first we need to recognise the limitations of both terms, when it comes to explaining or predicting what people do (as opposed to how they do it). We also need to recognise that if we use 'identity' to talk about everything, we are likely to end up talking about very little of any moment. We need to remember that we are talking about processes, and to beware of casual reification. We need to unpack these processes of identification, rather than treating them as a 'black box'. We need to recognise that identification is often most consequential as the categorisation of others, rather than as self-identification. Last and absolutely not least, we need to adopt a critical stance towards public discourses about 'identity', rather than simply taking them at face value. This book, I hope, takes all of these cautionary suggestions to heart. Not least, because identity – and understanding identity – really does matter.

2

SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE

There are many questions to ask about identity and identification. How do we know who we are, and how do others identify us? How do our senses of ourselves as unique individuals square with the realisation that, always and everywhere, we share aspects of our identity with many others? How can we reconcile our routine sense of ourselves as consistently 'who we are' with the knowledge that we can be different things to different people and in different circumstances? To what extent is it possible to become someone, or something, other than what we now are? And is it possible to 'just be myself'?

This book offers a sociological framework[1] within which to think about these questions. Identification is a particularly seductive sociological topic because of the way in which it focuses the sociological imagination on the mundane dramas, dreams and perplexities of everyday human life. It brings together C. Wright Mills' 'public issues' and 'private troubles' and makes sense of each in terms of the other. To put this in another context, 'identity', as a meta-concept that, unusually, makes as much sense individually as collectively, is strategically significant for social theoretical debates about 'structuration' and the relationship between the individual and the collective (Martin and Dennis 2010; Parker 2000; Stones 2005).

DEFINING IDENTITY

In principle, the notion of identity applies to the entire universe of creatures, things and substances, as well as to humans. Its general, non-sociological, meanings are worth considering. *The Oxford English*

Dictionary offers a Latin root – *identitas*, from *idem*, 'the same' – and two basic meanings:

- first, the sameness of objects, as in A1 is identical to A2 but not to B1;
- second, the consistency or continuity over time that is the basis for establishing and grasping the definiteness and distinctiveness of something.

From either angle, the notion of identity involves two criteria of comparison between persons or things: *similarity* and *difference*. Exploring further, the verb 'to identify' is a necessary accompaniment of identity. There is something active about identity that cannot be ignored: it isn't 'just there', it's not a 'thing', it must *always* be established. This adds two further items to our starter pack:

- third, to classify things or persons;
- fourth, to associate oneself with, or attach oneself to, something or someone else (such as a friend, a sports team, or an ideology).

Each of these locates identity in practice: they are both things that people do. The latter also implies a degree of reflexivity.

Which brings us back to *social* identity. While this fourth edition retains the book's original title – marketing considerations carry some weight, after all – I prefer, wherever possible, simply to talk about 'identity' or 'identification'. This is for two reasons. First, if my argument is correct, all human identities are, by definition, *social* identities. Identifying ourselves, or others, is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation. To add the 'social' in this context is somewhat redundant (cf. Ashton *et al*. 2004: 81). Second, I have argued elsewhere that to distinguish analytically between the 'social' and the 'cultural' misrepresents the observable realities of the human world (Jenkins 2002a: 39-62). Sticking with plain 'identity' and 'identification' prevents me from being seen to do so.

Much writing about identity treats it as some*thing* that simply *is*. Careless reification of this kind pays insufficient attention to how identification works or is done, to process and reflexivity, to the social construction of identity in interaction and institutionally. Identity can only be understood as a process of 'being' or 'becoming'. One's identity – one's identities, indeed, for who we are is always multi-dimensional, singular *and* plural – is never a final or settled matter. Not even death freezes

the picture: identity or reputation may be reassessed after death, some identities – sainthood or martyrdom, for example – can only be achieved beyond the grave, and graves and memorials – testaments of identity, in some respects – are not unchanging points in a static landscape (Hallam and Hockey 2001; Sudnow 1967). Bearing this in mind, for sociological purposes identification can be defined minimally thus:

- 'Identity' denotes the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectivities.
- 'Identification' is the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectivities and between individuals and collectivities, of relationships of similarity and difference.
- Taken – as they can only be – together, similarity and difference are the dynamic principles of identification, and are at the heart of the human world.

Like most of the ideas in this book, the notion that similarity and difference play off each other is not new. In 1844 Karl Marx wrote the following, in a letter to Feuerbach:

> The unity of man with man, which is based on real differences between men . . . what is this but the concept of society!
>
> (Marx, quoted in Wheen 1999: 55)

More than seventy years later, in a similar vein, Simmel argued that:

> the practical significance of men for one another . . . is determined by both similarities and differences among them. Similarity as fact or tendency is no less important than difference. In the most varied forms, both are the great principles of all internal and external development. In fact the cultural history of mankind can be conceived as the history of the struggles and conciliatory attempts between the two.
>
> (Simmel 1950: 30)

Thus, identification is a game of 'playing the *vis-à-vis*' (Boon 1982: 26). Identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us). It is a very practical matter, synthesising relationships of similarity and difference. The outcome of agreement and disagreement, and at least in principle always negotiable, identification is not fixed.

DISCOURSES OF DIFFERENCE

The approach to identity and identification that I explore in this book is at odds with an influential body of contemporary social theory that distinguishes between 'identity' and 'difference', as different *kinds* of phenomena, and emphasises the pre-eminence of difference. Identity is, at best, confined to a supporting role, in relationships based either on similarity alone, or on identification with someone or something.

This 'difference paradigm' has roots in a varied range of debates over the last three or more decades. One such debate was about theoretical alternatives to structuralism: inspiration was sought in Derrida's notion of *différance*, and psychoanalytic models which understood identification as dissociation from ego's earliest significant other(s). Elsewhere, a celebratory emphasis on difference was part of postmodernism's abandonment of modernist grand narratives and universalism. The reconstruction of theory and strategy on the political broad left, following the collapse of European state socialism and the rightward reorientation of politics in the Western social democracies, was also significant. New political alliances were expressed in ideas such as 'identity politics', for which 'difference' provided an organising theme. In this context, the campaigns of a range of interest groups and movements – women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, disabled people, for example – have asserted the positivity of diversity and difference, and the ethical and political value of pluralism.

The theoretical emphasis on difference emerged and flourished during the 1990s, and notable contributors to the literature have included Seyla Benhabib (1996), Judith Butler (1990), Paul Gilroy (2006), Stuart Hall (1996), Luce Irigaray (1993), Steven Seidman (1997) and Charles Taylor (1994). If nothing else, this brief roll call suggests that theoretical discourses focusing on difference are, as one might perhaps expect, characterised by intellectual and political heterogeneity (for useful surveys, see: du Gay *et al.* 2000; Taylor and Spencer 2004; Woodward 1997a). Even so, there is some agreement, and, in the context of my argument, it is important to emphasise that key elements of this broad understanding of identification are right.

Anti-essentialism is perhaps the most obvious of these. To insist that identity is not fixed, immutable or primordial, that it is utterly sociocultural in its origins and that it is somewhat negotiable and flexible, is the right place to begin if we are to understand how identification works. However, this perspective is not new – it is certainly not post-modern – nor is it as radical as it is often presented. It has been particularly influential

in social anthropology, post-Barth (1969), but it has an even longer history in interactionist sociology, stretching back through Goffman, to Hughes, Simmel and Weber. At best, this wheel has been reinvented.

A healthy distrust of political universalism – of inclusive, apparently equal, citizenship – also imbues the work of many of these authors. Gutmann, introducing Taylor's seminal essay 'The Politics of Recognition', describes universalism as 'totalitarian' (1994: 7), while Irigaray puts it thus: 'supposedly universal values. . .turn out to entail *one part of humanity* having *a hold on the other*' (1993: 16, her emphasis). These are important and defensible views: difficult questions need to be asked about the potential tyranny of compulsory inclusion. The recent convergence in Western Europe of social integrationist policies – of which the French banning of the *burqa* is only a very visible example – with the 'war on terror' and a crackdown on immigration is only one case in point. Arguments that diversity is valuable – necessary even – do not conflict with the understanding of identification set out in this book.

Having acknowledged common ground, I must now disagree with two core propositions that are broadly shared by difference theorists. The first insists that knowing who's who is primarily – if not wholly – a matter of establishing and marking differences between people. Hall summarises this point of view with particular clarity:

> [identities] are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity . . . Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference . . . identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude . . .
>
> (Hall 1996: 4-5)

From this perspective, knowing who I am is a matter of distinguishing and distancing myself from you and you, and from that person over there. The recognition of 'us' hinges mainly upon our not being 'them'. In Benhabib's words, 'Since every search for identity includes differentiating oneself from what one is not, identity politics is always and necessarily a politics of the creation of difference . . .' (1996: 3). Note the use of words such as 'only', 'always' and 'necessarily'. Note too that identification *with* and differentiation *from* are seen as dissimilar processes: 'differentiation from' permits 'identification with' to happen, and is thus logically prior and apparently more significant. Difference almost appears to have become the defining principle of collectivity, the fulcrum around which the human world revolves.

The second proposition shared by the difference theorists about which one should, at least, be very sceptical, is their argument that difference and identity have become more marked and more significant over the last few decades: 'cultural diversity is, indeed, the fate of the modern world' (Hall 1992: 8). We are, apparently, living in a new epoch of diversity and identity politics. Since I will discuss this further in Chapter 3, I will merely register my disagreement here and move on, to focus on two reasons for rejecting outright the notion that knowing who's who is primarily a matter of difference.

SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE

In the first place, and leaving aside the established meanings of the word 'identity' discussed earlier in this chapter – for definitions can always be contested – emphasising difference misses the utter interdependence, whether in abstract logic or messy everyday practice, of similarity and difference. Neither makes sense without the other, and identification requires both. And, indeed, some of the writers against whom I am arguing appear to recognise, to some extent, the necessary interplay of similarity and difference:

> identity is always particular, as much about difference as about shared belonging . . . identity can help us to comprehend the formation of the fateful pronoun 'we' and to reckon with the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that it cannot help but to create. This may be one of the most troubling aspects of all: the fact that the formation of every 'we' must leave out or exclude a 'they', that identities depend on the marking of difference.
>
> (Gilroy 1997: 301–302)

Gilroy appears to acknowledge the role of similarity, or 'shared belonging'. Having done so, he nonetheless privileges difference: it remains, for him, the active principle upon which knowing who's who depends.

Against this, the point is that, logically and in everyday interaction, it doesn't make sense to separate similarity and difference in this way, or to accord one a greater significance. We cannot have one without the other: to identify something as an A is to assert that it has certain properties in common with all other As, and that it differs from Bs, Cs and so on. To say who I am is to say who or what I am not, but it is also to say with whom I have things in common. For example, one's personal name is one of the definitive markers of individual difference. But, to name oneself is

generally also to establish one's public gender. To those with the appropriate contextual knowledge it also positions one in terms of family or kin-group membership. Further local knowledge may enable one's ethnicity, or religion, or both, to be established. Thus, while a personal name signifies individual distinctiveness, it also positions its bearer in terms of collective similarities (and, of course, differences).

And there is a more serious problem. If it were possible to assert one's distinctive difference from others without simultaneously indicating those with whom one might have stuff in common, all one could actually do is communicate who or what one is not. Unless one could exhaustively deny the entire array of possible persons, or kinds of person, that one might be – bar one, of course – it would not be sufficient to communicate who or what one is. Even if one could perform such an implausible feat, it is not clear how one would then give substance to what or who one might claim to be. Difference on its own is simply not enough to establish 'who's who'. It doesn't work.

The conventional solution to this problem is to use the concept of 'identity' to denote relationships of similarity, and to say that 'identity' and 'difference', although utterly distinct, should be thought about together, a view that can be traced back at least as far as Locke in the late seventeenth century (see Anthias 1998; Benhabib 1996; Taylor 1998; Woodward 1997b). This might be fair enough, although it arguably underestimates the degree to which similarity and difference, in order to make any sense at all, must each imply the other. It also flies in the face of what some of the difference theorists actually say. Hall, for example, is emphatic that he is not concerned with 'identity in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness . . . without internal differentiation)' (1996: 4). His model of identification and attachment – derived from a cultural reading of psychoanalysis – depends upon the exclusion of others and the establishment of difference as the foundation of personal meaning and self-regard. Similarity is not even in the frame.

A more significant difficulty with this position is that separating identification and differentiation from each other seems, in practice, to end up privileging the notion of 'identification *with*'. In this mode, identity becomes coterminous with uniformity and conformity, if not outright conformism. Butler, for example, seems only able to understand identity as attachment and subjective conformism. In pursuit of the liberating power of difference, her argument for the subversion and transcendence of identity – or, rather, of what she sees as the illusion, or trap, of identity – is grounded in 'the presumption that identities are self-identical, persisting through time as the same, unified and internally coherent' (Butler

1990: 16). The similarity to Hall's view, quoted above, is striking. It is only Butler's understandings of identity and difference as utterly distinct from each other, and of identity as identification *with*, that allows her the luxury of even imagining the transcendence of identity. The emphasis upon 'identification with' ignores two linked realities: that identification is also a matter of classifying oneself and others, and that classification depends upon the interplay of similarity and difference. Against the utopian possibilities evoked by Butler, it is vital to recognise that absolute differentiation from others – no less than absolute absorption in others – is likely to be a very rare bird indeed (not to mention flightless and in constant danger of extinction).

To summarise the argument so far, knowing who's who involves processes of classification and signification that necessarily invoke criteria of similarity and difference. Attending to difference on its own, or even simply emphasising difference, cannot provide us with a proper account of how it is that we know who's who, or what's what, in the human world. To say this does not, of course, imply any 'objectively real' sense of similarity or difference. It is constructions or attributions of similarity and difference, made by people engaging in the identification of self and others, with which I am concerned.

The above criticisms converge in a recognition that foregrounding difference underestimates the reality and significance of human collectivity. Whatever else might be involved in knowing who's who, it is undeniably a matter of similarity and solidarity, of belonging and community, of 'us' and 'we'. In this, as in other respects, the focus on difference arguably flies in the face of the observable realities of the human world.

'Us', 'we', 'community', 'solidarity' are, however, words that should carry a health warning. They are deeply political – communitarianism and nationalism are good examples of their ideological potential – and we should at least approach them with apposite caution. Charles Taylor's or Judith Butler's discussions of the dangers inherent in 'identity as sameness', and their arguments for, respectively, the foundational necessity to democracy of the recognition of difference, or the progressively subversive character of difference, are worth remembering. So, too, is Samuel Johnson's famous eighteenth-century characterisation of patriotism as the last refuge of the scoundrel. We should also remember that these notions are imagined: in Cohen's words (1985), they are 'symbolic constructs'. They are, however, capable of being extremely powerful imaginings, in terms of which people act. They are anything but imaginary, in that they are enormously consequential. Solidarity, once it is successfully conjured up, is a powerful force.

We should also recognise that invocations of similarity are intimately entangled with the conjuring up of difference. One of the things that people have in common in any group is precisely the recognition of other groups or categories from whom they differ. It cannot be otherwise: Hughes understood this in the late 1940s, and Barth developed the idea further (Barth 1969; Hughes 1994: 91-6). But to acknowledge this is a far cry from calling up difference alone – or even mainly – as the primary arbiter of who's who. The human world simply doesn't work like that.

THEORISING IDENTITY

My other basic objection to the difference paradigm is that concentrating on difference makes it difficult to deal with the core questions of social theory, or even, perhaps, to engage in social theory at all. In this context, I take the consistent, and connected, core concerns of social theory to be: 'How should we understand social change?' and 'How are we to understand the relationship between the individual and the collective?' (Jenkins 2002a: 15-20).

Focusing only, or even mainly, on difference is unhelpful if one wants to understand social change, in that it doesn't accord with observable realities. Put simply, collective mobilisation in the pursuit of shared objectives is a characteristic theme of history and social change. It may not be the only important process at work, but it is to be found wherever one looks, and, unavoidably, collective politics involves collective imaginings of similarity as well as of difference (witness the remarks of Marx and Simmel, quoted earlier). To make the point from a different direction, the consequences and processes of the change from agrarian to industrial lifestyles and production – as Durkheim outlined in 1893, in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1984) – can, at least in part, be understood by looking at the interplay and significance of relationships of similarity and difference.

Moving on to the relationship between individuality and collectivity, the problem is even more fundamental. I am not sure that it is possible to have any comprehension of the collective dimensions of social life – other than a merely additive, arithmetical model – if we emphasise difference. If knowing who's who is essentially, or even largely, a matter of fission and exclusion, then where does the 'more-than-the-sum-of-the-parts' that is an enduring mystery of everyday human life come from? In this context, it is noteworthy that most theorists of difference – with the exception of Butler – routinely use collective notions such as 'culture' or 'society' that are in considerable tension with their fetishisation of difference. Perhaps they simply have no choice.

There is also a more general point to be made. Theory of all kinds depends upon three linked processes: abstraction, generalisation and comparison. Social theory is no exception. A model of the human world that prioritises difference offers, at best, only very limited scope for generalisation and comparison. At least one difference theorist has acknowledged this:

> One of the dangers of focusing on difference may be a retreat into empiricism. For the very assertion of the existence of *differences* involves taking at face value the appearance of living in a diverse and fragmented universe. There is a failure to interrogate what may lie behind or beneath these surface appearances, to find connections and commonalities.
>
> (Anthias 1998: 509, her emphasis).

Apropos empiricism, Anthias is right, although she may understate the case. The problem that she identifies may – and only apparently paradoxically – explain why discussions of difference are so rarely based in systematic empirical research; why there is a dependence, at best, on loose qualitative description; and why the impressionistic essay is the dominant form. Perhaps this is the only way to disguise, and keep at bay, the ever-present threats of empiricism and a-theoria.

Finally, there is something other to think about than social theory, and something more important. One source of the difference paradigm was the post-1989 realignment and reorientation of left-wing politics, and it is easy to sympathise with it as a political move that was appropriate to the times. One of the ethical impulses that stand behind the emphasis on difference is a plea, not just for tolerance of difference, but for its enthusiastic embrace:

> If ever-growing social complexity, cultural diversity and a proliferation of identities are indeed a mark of the postmodern world, then all the appeals to our common interest as humans will be as naught unless we can at the same time learn to live with difference.
>
> (Weeks 1990: 92).

Leaving aside the supposed historical novelty or postmodernity of difference, we have returned to Taylor's 'politics of recognition' (1994), a call to arms, whether liberal or radical, on behalf of pluralism. A call that is difficult to ignore. These are values that need to be defended, nurtured and supported, no less today than fifty or a hundred years ago.

They are not, however, enough. There are pressing public issues that are simply not addressed by proclaiming the positivities of difference, or arguing for tolerance and pluralism. They concern collective belonging, collective disadvantage and, not least, the relationship between the freedom to be different, on the one hand, and equality and collective responsibility, on the other. Thinking about these issues – none of which is either new or simple – requires a model of identification that places similarity and difference at its heart, on an equal footing with each other. Even if it is not, to echo Bauman (1999: 190), time to 'recall universalism from exile' – certainly not an unreconstructed universalism, anyway – it is, perhaps, time for a return to a politics which recognises responses to collective ills other than the purely privatised and individualised.

WHO'S WHO (AND WHAT'S WHAT)

I have argued here, and in Chapter 1, that the human world is unimaginable without some means of knowing who others are and some sense of who we are. Since, unlike other primates, we don't rely on smell or non-verbals – although these aren't insignificant in face-to-face identification – one of the first things that we do on meeting a stranger is attempt to identify them, to locate them on our 'mindscapes' (Zerubavel 1997). The cues that we rely upon include embodiment, clothing, language, answers to questions, incidental or accidental disclosures of information, and information from third parties. Our efforts are not always successful, either: 'mistaken identity' is a common enough experience to be a staple of folktales and literature. Equally familiar is the theme of 'lost' or 'confused' identity: people who can't prove who they are, who appear not to know 'who they are', who are one thing one moment and something else the next, who are in the throes of 'identity crises'.

Situations such as these provide occasional cause to reflect upon identity. We try to work out who strangers are even when we are merely observing them. We work at presenting ourselves, so that others will work out who we are along the lines that we wish them to. We speculate about whether so-and-so is doing *that* because of 'their identity'. And we talk. We talk about whether people are born gay or become gay because of their upbringing; about what it means to be 'grown up'; about the differences between the English and the Scots (or the Welsh, or the Irish). We shake our head about the family who have just moved in round the corner: after all you can't expect anything else, they're from the wrong part of town. Worried words such 'Arabs', 'Muslims', 'rag heads' and 'terrorists' become almost interchangeable in everyday talk. We talk about identity all the time (although we may not always use the word itself).

Change, or its prospect, is particularly likely to provoke concerns about identity. The transformation of everyday life in the affluent West during the 1950s and 1960s, for example, occurred amid argument and conflict about gender, sexuality, generation, race, class, imperialism and patriotism. All of which speak very directly to our topic here. More recently in the United Kingdom, European issues – everything from monetary union and the Eurozone crisis, to decision making in the Council of Ministers, to the European Court of Human Rights, to regulations governing sausage manufacture – conjure up the spectres of centuries of strife with our continental neighbours and are interpreted as creeping attempts to undermine British national identity.

Public concern about identity may wax and wane, but the perpetual bottom line is that we can't live routine lives as humans without identification, without knowing – and sometimes puzzling about – who we are and who others are. This is true no matter where we are, or what our way of life or language. Without repertoires of identification we would not be able to relate to each other meaningfully or consistently. We would lack that vital sense of who's who and what's what. Without identity there could simply be no human world, as we know it. This is the most basic sense in which identity matters. Accordingly, my focus in the rest of this book is primarily on the mundane matter of how identification works, and the production and reproduction of identities during interaction. Before getting down to this in detail, however, there is one final issue to address, the relationship between modernity and identity. This is the subject of the next chapter.