



Identity - Where does it come from?

What do we mean by identity?

People tend to see identity as simple, fixed and unitary.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines identity as:

'Identity: the sameness of a person.... at all times or in all circumstances; the condition or fact that a person or thing is itself and not something else; individuality, personality'.

Identities are based on our membership of, or identification with, particular social groups. Sometimes these identities are given to us at birth – we are born male or female or with black or white skin, for example. This is the **biological determinism** view. However, some social identities involve a greater degree of choice, for example, we may actively seek to identify with some groups such as punk rockers. This is the **Social Constructionist** view – our identity is based on 'nurture'. People are, in part, socialised into their identities.

For **Cooley (1969)** our self is developed through interactions with other people. For **Mead (1934)** we develop our sense of self in interaction with others; because we interact in many different social contexts, we have many different selves. For **Harriet Bradley (1996)** we all belong to social groups, class groups, ethnic groups, gender groups, and national groups and each of these provides us with an identity. These identities are rarely unified. In fact, the idea that we have many identities is part of the complexities of the modern world.

Is it possible to have more than one identity?

Each individual is made up of numerous identities including:

Primary identity develops from birth as a result of the interaction with the child's family.

Class identity refers to the social class you are born into or develop throughout your life.

Gender identity refers to the way in which our identity connects to the culturally learned characteristics of being 'masculine' or 'feminine'.

Secondary identity develops through involvement at school, work and through leisure activities.

National identity refers to the way our identity is connected to our nationality.

Ethnic identity refers to the way in which our identity connects to our ethnic group and the expectations of that group.



IDENTITY

Exam Hint: It is a good idea to show an understanding of different identities and how these inter-relate.

Where does our identity come from?

Agents of Socialisation

We learn our identities through a variety of agents of socialisation, including the family, school, media and peer groups. These are particularly influential in childhood as we are establishing our identities.

Social Class.**Institutions that shape Class Identity****Family**

Family life has an important influence on our individual identities. **Diana Reay (1998)** made a detailed study of 33 mothers in London. She identified that middle-class mothers had time and energy to spend time reading to their children and were confident when talking to teachers. The working class mothers had more of a struggle to make ends meet and so had less time and energy. They also had fewer cultural resources such as verbal confidence and knowledge of how the education system operates. Children learn about social norms by imitating their parents. They may copy the way adults talk, or the table manners for example. Lower social class families generally have lower income. After allowing for inflation, from 1976 to 1996 the average income of the richest 10% has risen from about £300 to over £5000 per week, whereas the poorest 10% have stayed at about £60 per week.

Average gross weekly earnings, 1995

Doctor	£764
Solicitor	£585
Caretaker	£227
Cleaner	£181

Income affects not only what activities individuals can take part in but can also determine the education a child receives, where they live and the peer group they associate with. These all have an impact on an individual's identity. The work of **Bernstein (1990)** identified a difference in the language of the home and that of the school. He identified two types of 'language codes' – the restricted code and the elaborate code. Middle class families, whose relationships are more negotiated and explained than in working class families, negotiate in the elaborate code. These adults deliberately use the elaborate code in child-rearing practices, to help their child learn the appropriate ways of speaking in school and work. In working class families, Bernstein believes the restricted code is more often the norm. The language used by individuals also affects their identity. Language has also been shown to have an effect on the educational achievements of children as teachers tend to use the elaborate code which disadvantages children from working class backgrounds who use the restricted code.

Peer Groups

In play situations children learn about social norms and they develop social skills. When they become teenagers they spend more time in the presence of their friends than their parents. **Adler and Adler (1998)** studied a group of middle class children in America. They found that the peer group was enormously important in the lives of pre-adolescent children. Children tended to mix with children of a similar class and therefore shared the norms and values of this class. It has also been shown that some boys may gain 'street cred' and peer group status from behaving in ways that are accepted by their peer group. Therefore, they may not work in schools and they may see schoolwork as 'uncool' and 'unmasculine'. In particular, reading may be regarded as boring, feminine and to be avoided at all costs. This reinforces their class identity.

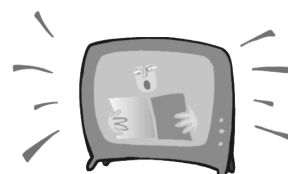
**Education**

The structure of the education system and the subjects taught have an effect on identity. **Christine Skelton (2001)** found that schools tend to reflect the values of the surrounding neighbourhood. She studied a primary school in the North East which was set in an economically deprived area. When young boys came to the school they brought with them the attitudes they picked up from the local 'lads' – physical toughness, aggressiveness etc. The school attempted to maintain control by relying on firm measures – locked gates, security cameras etc. The school's control strategies were a reflection of the tough values that were prized in the local community. Some sociologists argue that what is taught in schools actually disadvantages the working class, thus reinforcing their working class identity. The education system is mostly controlled by middle class people. Children from this background tend to achieve higher than children from working class backgrounds. Many working class pupils may feel under-valued and de-motivated by an educational system that does not recognise their qualities, which are based on their class. This often leads to the self-fulfilling prophecy. **Bourdieu (1977)** suggested that schools are middle class institutions run by the middle class. The forms of knowledge, values, ways of interacting and communicating ideas that middle class children possess are developed further and rewarded by the education system. Working class children may lack these qualities and so do not have the same chances to succeed.

**Media**

Mass media consume an enormous amount of our time. The media helps to create the cultural climate within which we live. They give us a sense of what values and behaviour are acceptable in the modern world. The upper class are often seen in nostalgic representations which paint a rosy picture of a time when Britain was great. Wealth and social inequality are rarely critically examined. Examples of this type of representation include TV costume dramas such as *Pride and Prejudice*, and films such as *A Room with a View*. The middle classes are over represented in the media – particularly in news and current affairs – the expert is often middle class. **Jhally and Lewis (1992)** found that on American TV between 1971 and 1989, 90% of characters were middle class, whilst the percentage of working class characters over the period fell from 4% to only 1%. In Britain the working class tend to appear as criminals, single parents, or delinquent children. However, soaps in Britain have tended to show working class life in a more positive light – presenting an ideal of a tight knit community with a shared history of mutual obligations. In these ways, the media helps to reinforce individual identities.

Exam Hint: Use studies as evidence when describing how identities develop.



Gender.

Our biological make-up determines our sex – whether we are boys or girls. However, sociologists argue that gender is a social construction and that we learn to behave in certain ways that reflect the physical differences between the sexes. These expectations are then culturally transmitted from one generation to the next through institutions such as the workplace, family, religion, peers, education and the media.

Institutions that shape Gender Identity.**Family**

Beverly Fagot studied twenty four American families, each with a child between 20 and 24 months old. She visited the family five times, observing parents interacting with their children for an hour on each visit. They found that girls were generally encouraged to ask for help when it was needed, to follow and stay near to a parent, to dance, to take an interest in girls' clothes and to play with dolls. Boys were encouraged to play with and explore toys such as trucks and building blocks in an active, manipulative way which would help build strong muscles. They were strongly discouraged from playing with dolls, asking for assistance, and anything the parents considered feminine.

Jeffrey Rubin (1974) found that parents expect gender differences because within 24 hours of their baby's birth they described their girls as softer and smaller than parents of boys, who thought their boys were more alert, stronger and better co-ordinated. **Robert Sears (1977)** found parents tolerated aggression in their sons much more than in their daughters. All these studies emphasise the influence of the family in the development of gender identity.

Education

Studies suggest that by the time children start school they have already picked up gender stereotypes from family, peer groups and the mass media. Even at this early stage, they are often very aware of gender differences between boys and girls. Some of these attitudes may be reinforced by their experiences in school.

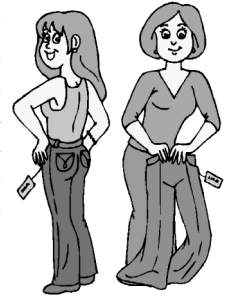
This is the view of **Christine Skelton (2002)** who found in a Benwood primary school gender stereotypes were created and maintained. Research shows that girls spend their leisure time differently from boys. Whereas boys relate to their peers by doing (e.g. being active in a range

of ways), girls relate to one another by talking. This puts girls at an advantage because school is essentially a language experience, and most subjects require good levels of comprehension and writing skills.

Paul Willis (1977) identified pro-school (nicknamed 'earoles') and anti-school (nicknamed 'lads') subcultures. 'Earoles' did what the teachers expected of them, whereas the 'lads' took little notice of school rules, teachers and work. In developing strategies for coping with the boredom of school, the 'lads' were also reinforcing their own identities and developing a way of coping with the boring and routine type of work that they would ultimately end up in.

**Media**

Magazines provide us with role models by showing certain sports stars or showbiz celebrities for us to admire and copy. Women magazines, for example Cosmopolitan seem to project an image of women as obsessed with men and fashion. Likewise, men's magazines such as Maxim have been criticised for celebrating a crude 'lad culture' of lager louts, football and 'babes'.



The following quotation by **Tunstall (1983)** provides a summary of the main findings of research into gender representation in the media from the 1960s and 70s.

'The presentation of women in the media is biased because it emphasises women's domestic, sexual, consumer and marital activities to the exclusion of all else. Women are depicted as busy housewives, as contented mothers, as eager consumers and as sex objects. This does indeed indicate bias because, although similar numbers of men are fathers and husbands, the media has far less to say about these males roles'. (Tunstall 1983)

In children's fairy stories there are beautiful helpless heroines who are rescued by strong adventurous princes. However, there is evidence that the representation of gender roles has become more equal and less stereotyped. **Gauntlett's** content analysis studies of gender representations on prime time television identified the following changes:

- A significant increase in the proportion of main female characters, from 18% in 1992–93, to 43% in 1995–96.
- A massive decrease since the 1970s in the proportion of women whose main occupation was represented as a housewife – now only 3%.
- A marked shift towards equality within the last two decades. 'Female and male characters are likely to be intelligent, talented and resourceful – or as stupid – as each other' (Gauntlett 2002). Therefore, there seems to be a change in the portrayed image of males and females which will consequently affect the development of gender identity.

Peer Groups

Michael Lamb studied 3 to 5 year old boys and girls playing with a variety of toys. When the children played with their toys in a way that was appropriate to their sex the games were inventive and enjoyable. If a child picked up a toy which its same-sex peers thought was a cross-sex toy (e.g. boy playing with doll), then they became critical and the doll would soon be abandoned as the child rejoined its friends.

Ethnicity.

Members of an ethnic group may share biological racial traits (e.g. skin colour) as well as sharing other cultural characteristics, e.g. their religion, food, education, family life, language, politics. This is what is meant by 'ethnicity' and it is this experience that can shape what sociologists refer to as 'ethnic identities.'

Institutions that shape Ethnic Identity.**Family**

Elliot (1996) has argued that South Asian communities have adapted to the British environment but according to 'their own cultural logic.' **Anwar(1981)** indicates that the Asian family – regardless of whether they are Hindu, Muslim or Sikh – socialise their children into a pattern of obligation, loyalty and religious commitment, which in most cases, they accept. **Charlotte Butler's study (1995)** of a group of teenage Muslim girls in the East Midlands shows how the religious beliefs of their family can be adapted to fit changing circumstances. These young women, born in Britain, were moving away from the traditions of their parents. They remained firmly committed to their Muslim identity but they were modifying it in certain ways. Their experience of living in Britain had led them to regard certain Pakistani and Bangladeshi customs as irrelevant to their lives. Consequently, they were rejecting customs such as arranged marriages which were not regarded as essential features of Islam. These young women were therefore adapting their identities to fit more easily into the British way of life, while at the same time maintaining their commitment to Islam. All these studies emphasise the influence of the family in the development of ethnic identity.

Education

Bourdieu (1977) showed how the dominant culture penetrates many educational institutions and is reproduced in the minds, values and activities of dominant groups in the wider society. Those children from ethnic backgrounds may therefore be at a disadvantage in the British education system. **Mason** points out that as a result of this possible sense of exclusion from the identity 'British', the family becomes a refuge from the problems they experience in the wider community. **Coard (1971)** showed how the content of education ignored black people. Coard argued that this led to low self-esteem amongst black pupils. The National Curriculum has been criticised for being ethnocentric – emphasising the white middle class culture at the expense of other cultures.

Media

Marie Gillespie (1993) studies Sikhs in Southall. She shows how the videos produced by the Indian film industry ('Bollywood') are enormously popular in this community. Whole families watch them together. Gillespie found that these videos have important socialising functions – they create links between Asian communities throughout the world, they socialise younger children into Asian cultures and languages and they help to reinforce a sense of Asian identity.

Peer Groups

Young Afro-Caribbeans often adopt identities based on their shared identity with their peers. **Gilroy (1993)** notes that music such as hip-hop is shared by youngsters of their culture.

Nationality.**Institutions that shape National Identity.****Family**

Families tend to follow National traditions e.g. family outings to support the National football teams, tennis players etc. The type of food eaten within families, the type of clothing worn and the participation in traditional celebrations all tend to reinforce national identity.

Education

Andy Green (1997) argued that education helps form national identities by giving us one National Curriculum where we are socialised into one national culture through a common language and the teaching of a national history, literature and religion. The teaching of these subjects aims to promote nationalism.

Media

Stuart Hall (1992) points out that every nation has a collection of stories about its shared experiences, sorrows, triumphs and disasters. These stories are told through the media (e.g. Olympic games, Royal family, world cup football, wars.) People draw on these stories in order to construct their sense of national identity.

Peer Groups

National Identities are also reinforced through peer groups and peer pressure. The wearing of appropriate football shirts is an example of how peer groups help to construct and reinforce national identities.

All the agents of socialisation discussed in this factsheet, the family, education, media and peer groups all have an impact on the formation of our individual identity, whether it be social class, ethnicity, gender or national identity. They all have an important part to play, particularly in our childhood. Our individual identities ultimately affect life chances.

Example Exam Questions.

Identify and briefly explain two ways in which families socialise children into gender roles. (12 marks)

Identify and briefly explain two sources of identity in modern societies. (12 marks)



Acknowledgements: This Sociology Factsheet was researched and written by Rosie Owens. Curriculum Press, Bank House, 105 King Street, Wellington, TF1 1NU. Sociology Factsheets may be copied free of charge by teaching staff or students, provided that their school is a registered subscriber. No part of these Factsheets may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any other form or by any other means, without the prior permission of the publisher. ISSN 1351-5136