

CHAPTER 2

Identity and Difference

Introduction

In chapter 1 we examined a range of meanings for the term 'culture'. Culture, as we saw, is inextricably linked with the social groupings and social institutions which constitute society at any given time and in any specific place. Hence culture requires and implies interactions between people, between groups of people and between institutions. All of this might seem to suggest that individuals, you and I as unique, autonomous human subjects, have very little to do with the workings of culture. None the less, although the cultural forms and practices produced in any society are shaped by the structures of that society, they are also shaped by the **subjectivities** of individual women and men in our roles as social actors. For example, in chapter 1 we suggested that Matthew Arnold was part of the social grouping (the gender and class positions he occupied at a specific historical moment) whose interests his version of culture expressed. Yet he was also an individual who experienced himself in daily life as a unique human being with the ability to act autonomously, despite the social structures within which he was necessarily located. This ability to act independently is often referred to as **agency**. Equally, the **identities** that individuals adopt in order to define themselves are produced, at least in part, from the cultural and social contexts in which we find ourselves and from which we draw certain assumptions about 'human nature', 'individuality' and 'the self'.

By the end of this chapter we shall have explored more precisely what is meant by the concepts of identity and difference and why they are significant for the study of culture. (Although we have mentioned subjectivity here we shall deal with this more fully in chapter 8.) You will also have a brief opportunity to consider how these differing ideas about individual identity are represented in a specific representational form: the personal life narrative or autobiography. This will lead into the next chapter, which takes up and develops further the idea of representation and its relation to reality.

Who am I?

2.1

Write a short paragraph – no more than two or three lines – describing yourself. Alternatively, make a list of things which comprise the way you see yourself.



It would be impossible to cover all the possibilities you may have included but the following are probably some of the things you mentioned. You may well have mentioned things not listed here. If so, try to identify which aspects of identity they are concerned with. Here is our list:

- sex, age, occupation, ethnicity, sexual orientation (social);
- hair colour, skin colour, eye colour, bodyshape, physical disabilities, height, kind of clothes worn (physical appearance);
- lively, quiet, shy, concerned for others, morose, a loner, gregarious (personality);
- Irish, Chinese, American, Nigerian (nationality);
- Catholic, Jewish, Muslim (religion);
- mother, father, daughter, son, niece, grandfather (family relationships);
- barman, waitress, postman; student, teacher, architect (occupation);
- interested in music, a film goer, football-mad, politically committed (cultural).

These categories, as you have probably realised by now, are not watertight. Skin colour can also be a mark of social identity; physical disability may not simply be about appearance, but may have ramifications for all other aspects of identity; sex may have some bearing on how far appearance is important to identity (women are more likely to experience their identity as linked to how they look); political commitment may derive from being born into a certain class or nationality. Some of you may have defined yourselves according to a specific religious faith, and this could be linked to nationality, to ethnicity, to personality and to cultural markers. Or you may have felt that your occupational identity (for example, 'student') is currently the most significant marker of who you are. On the other hand, you may feel that none of these categories captures the 'real you'. You might see yourself as a self detached from society, nation, faith – an individual defined less by the categories above than by an inner sense of a unique self that is the 'true' you and that cannot be fitted easily into these external categories. We shall return to the ways in which identities are marked, but for now we want to explore further the idea that at the heart of each individual there is a 'real' self in which resides some essence of authentic personhood.

However we describe ourselves and however many categories we draw upon (social, personal, biological, cultural etc.), we tend and want to believe that there

is a 'real me' in which resides the essence or core of our nature. We want to believe that this 'real' self pre-exists or is independent of the categories mentioned above. We sometimes believe that this 'real me' is hidden or suppressed by the demands of social roles or cultural conventions that require a public facade. A persistent narrative found in novels, films and TV plays is the man or woman whose story traces a quest for this kind of private, inner identity. How often have you heard people say, and you may well have said it yourself, 'I need time to find myself? This belief that a unique 'true' selfhood lies within the psyche of each individual and that each individual has the right to express and protect that uniqueness has provided the basis of **humanism**, the predominant philosophy of the individual over the past two centuries in the Western world.

Matthew Arnold appealed to humanist beliefs when he argued that culture could offer every human being the means to a fully realized moral life. Arnold assumed that human beings, more or less evolved, are the same everywhere and in all times, and that culture, as defined by him, would speak to some essential human nature that transcends social, historical and biological differences. Arnold also espoused **liberalism**, in that he believed that education and 'Culture' were the keys which would unlock individual potential and that such opportunities should be open to all, regardless of social distinctions.



2.2

How far do you think this is true, i.e. that access to culture (as defined by Arnold) will provide opportunities for self-fulfilment? Can you see any problems with this argument? Can you think of any examples where culture, in Arnold's sense, might have different meanings for different groups? Look at reading 1.2 and reading 3.3. How are the experiences narrated here linked to a sense of identity?

It does seem that a belief in a fundamental, ahistorical human nature is problematic. Historical moment, nationality, ethnicity, sex and social circumstances do make a difference, and therefore do determine the way we see ourselves and the way we think and act. Yet we continue to experience ourselves as individuals with the feelings, beliefs and attitudes that make us autonomous, unique beings, and prefer to believe that we are not simply the products of external forces such as social structures or historical circumstances. Perhaps it is more accurate to understand identity as the interface between a private sense of self that includes conscious and unconscious feelings, rational and irrational motivations, personal beliefs and values, and those factors that constitute the social context in which we experience those feelings and motivations (for example, age, ethnicity, sex). If our deepest desires and our most personal experiences constitute an individual consciousness, then identity is the way we may choose to represent ourselves and act out our thoughts, beliefs and emotions in the social world.

One of the differences between individual consciousness and identity is that individual consciousness, despite its acquisition in a social context, is an internalized combination of ideas and feelings, while identity may be bestowed by others

as well as chosen by ourselves. For example, a woman experiencing her first childbirth may find herself identified by medical experts, midwives and health visitors as a mother, long before she herself has consciously adopted this identity. Another example is the identity of patient which is conferred upon those in hospital; an identity which requires and expects certain behaviours which may be at odds with other aspects of the individual. Throughout our lives we are offered a variety of possible social identities as part of our experience of work, family, sexuality, culture and leisure. Sometimes different identities are contradictory and seemingly impossible to reconcile; nearly always identity positions are located in relations of power, in the binary opposition 'us/them'. Now read the following extract by the artist Rasheed Araeen. Araeen is the founding editor of a quarterly journal, *Third Text*, published in Britain since 1987. *Third Text* provides a space in which 'Third World perspectives on contemporary art and culture' can be expressed, debated and heard (Jordan and Weedon, 1995, pp. 316, 435–42).

2.1

I was born in India, when India was under the British Raj. As a teenager I grew up, spent my early youth and was educated in Pakistan. At the age of 29, inspired by the West's achievement in art in the 20th century, and to fulfil my own aspirations to be a modern artist, I left my country to live in Europe. I have now lived and worked in London for 27 years. I often travel to Pakistan to see my mother, brothers and sisters, and also some friends. I can say I'm Asian, Indian, Pakistani, British, European, Muslim, Oriental, secular, modernist, postmodernist, and so on . . . But what do these things mean? Do they define my identity? Can I accept all of them as part of my life, or must I choose one thing or another according to someone else's notion about my identity? I have no problem in saying that I'm all of these things, and perhaps none of these things at the same time . . .



In the summer of 1970 we had a grand party, to which hundreds of people from the art world were invited . . . As I was having drinks and chatting with my friends in my studio, an elderly well-dressed gentleman moved towards us . . . 'I like your work very much' he said as we began to talk. I thanked him and we moved around together in the studio. As we were looking at various works something suddenly occurred to me, and I asked him. 'How did you know that this was my work?' 'Aren't you an Arab?' he replied looking at my face. 'No, I'm from Pakistan,' I said, becoming rather puzzled by all this: 'Oh, it's all the same. You are Muslim.' 'Yes,' I said reluctantly. 'You see, this kind of work could have been conceived only by a Muslim. I cannot imagine a European doing this work,' he began to explain politely.

Next day somebody told me that the person I had met was the Professor of Fine Art at the Slade School of Art, and that he was an important member of the art establishment . . . It was the first time that I became aware that my work had something to do with Islamic tradition. It was a disturbing discovery, because I have never made any connection between my work and my being a Muslim. They were two different things. Moreover I was never interested in Islamic art, or concerned with the expression of my cultural identity. My interest was in modernism. (Rasheed Araeen, 'How I discovered my Oriental soul in the wilderness of the West', cited in Jordan and Weedon, 1995, pp. 439–40)

As Jordan and Weedon suggest, in this extract Rasheed Araeen is forced to confront the way in which his work and, by extension, his identity is defined by others. He aspires to be 'a modern artist' working in the European tradition of modernism. However, the professor of fine art sees him as 'Arab', producing Islamic art, and insists that his work cannot be seen as 'European'. The professor's comments, despite his praise and kindness, fix Araeen in a particular identity that by definition excludes him from other possible identities. Because he is perceived as 'Muslim' he cannot, at the same time, be 'European'. To be identified as 'Muslim' is to be identified as 'not-European', 'not-Christian'. Identity definitions function to classify and categorize: the identity 'Muslim' is a marker of **difference** from those who are categorized as 'European' or 'Christian'. That Araeen sees himself as both non-religious and Muslim, as Pakistani, Indian and British, and his work as modernist, doesn't matter. Because the professor represents the British art establishment he has the power to define what is and what is not art, how it should be valued and how Araeen and his art fit into this. The binary logic of Western thought insists that it is impossible to be simultaneously 'Oriental' and 'Western' – each identity depends upon the other for its meaning. Identity and difference are about inclusion and exclusion. If you are British you cannot also be Japanese, if you are male you cannot also be female, if you are young you cannot also be old. Or can you?



2.3

Can you think of any occasions when you have been given an identity that did not fit? Have the identity labels you use changed over your lifetime?

The point to grasp is that identities are relational and contingent rather than permanently fixed. They depend upon what they are defined against, and this may change over time or be understood differently in different places. In Britain in the 1960s, Araeen is defined by the professor as 'Arab', a generic identity that signifies his difference from Europeans. In other circumstances, possibly when he visits his family in Pakistan, he might find himself defined as Pakistani in order to mark his difference from Indians. The other point to note is that the identity positions within which we locate ourselves or are located by others are neither neutral nor equal. The act of naming, as we saw with the professor of fine art, is, however liberal and kindly meant, an act of power. It is he who defines and places Araeen from his position as a representative of Western Eurocentric knowledge, and it is Western logic and knowledge that have defined the ways in which it is possible for us to think about who we are. For example, have you ever heard Europeans described as non-Asians, have you ever heard white people described as non-blacks? Yet the terms 'non-European' and 'non-white' are frequently used to define those from Asia or Africa.

Going back to the account by Araeen, did you notice how the professor of fine art was able to define Araeen by reference to his appearance ('Aren't you an

Arab?’’ he replied looking at my face’)? Differences are marked symbolically as well as experienced socially. In the case of Araeen, the symbolic marker of difference is his physical appearance and skin colour. Henry Louis Gates Jr, a professor of African-American studies in the United States, argues, in the extract that follows, that ‘race’ is not a biological given but a linguistic construct that functions to mark symbolically difference and ‘otherness’. Race, Gates insists, is not an objective term of categorization but ‘a dangerous trope’. As he comments, later in the article from which this extract is taken, ‘who has seen a black or red person, a white, yellow, or brown? These terms are arbitrary constructs, not reports of reality’ (Gates, 1986, p. 5).

2.2

Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of ‘the white race’ or ‘the black race,’ ‘the Jewish race’ or ‘the Aryan race,’ we speak in biological misnomers and, more generally, in metaphors . . .



The sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term ‘race’ has both described and *inscribed* differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool as well as all sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, cerebration, usury, fidelity, and so forth. The relation between ‘racial character’ and these sorts of characteristics has been inscribed through tropes of race, lending the sanction of God, biology, or the natural order to even presumably unbiased descriptions of cultural tendencies and differences . . . In 1973 I was amazed to hear a member of the House of Lords describe the differences between Irish Protestants and Catholics in terms of their ‘distinct and clearly definable differences of race.’ ‘You mean to say that you can tell them apart?’ I asked incredulously. ‘Of course,’ responded the Lord. ‘Any Englishman can.’ (Gates, 1986, p. 4)

Identity also operates through social and material conditions. The symbolic markers of difference will have real effects on the lived experience of people’s social relations. So, for example, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and America black Africans were symbolically and socially marked by their colour as ‘inferior’ to white people. As a result, they were treated as less than human, sold into slavery and transported from their homelands, prevented from learning to read and write, physically abused and materially and socially disadvantaged long after the specific practices of slavery were abolished. The ways in which groups are symbolically marked (represented) will shape the social relations and practices that constitute lived experience. Equally, social practices of inclusion and exclusion are based on classification systems (e.g. man/woman, black/white, European/American/Eastern, First World/Third World, lesbian/homosexual/heterosexual) that rely on symbolic representation for their maintenance. For example, the assertion of national identities is frequently represented symbolically by national flags or songs. In Britain the monarchy has stood as a symbolic marker of national identity for over 300 years. In some countries the carrying of a small

handbag by a man would be seen as a symbol or marker of his 'effeminacy': 'real' men don't carry handbags. Femininity has been symbolically marked in a variety of ways at different times and in different places. In nineteenth-century Europe a tiny waist was a mark of femininity. In the 1950s blonde hair and an hourglass figure were the symbols of femininity, with Marilyn Monroe as its cinematic epitome. The things people use, the rituals they follow, the way they dress and appear function to define who they are and, importantly, who they are not. Symbolic markers are vital to the construction and maintenance of identities and differences and are inextricably intertwined and interdependent with social processes and practices. Thus, the man carrying a handbag can be seen to be 'effeminate' and can therefore be treated in certain ways; Araeen can be seen to be 'Oriental' and this, in the eyes of the art establishment, legitimates the exclusion of his work from the modernist tradition of European art and his exclusion from the category 'European modern artist'.

This discussion of identity would not be complete without considering the tension between **essentialist** and **non-essentialist** perspectives on identity. By essentialist we mean the idea that identity is fixed in an originating moment, that there is a 'true', authentic, unchanging set of characteristics that belong to, say, Asians, and an equally authentic, fixed set of characteristics that can be attributed to Europeans. An essentialist perspective would maintain that these characteristics do not change across time and are shared by all Asians and all Europeans. An essentialist perspective would maintain that there is something intrinsically 'Asian' or 'British' or 'Japanese' that transcends history or is inherent in the person. The English lord cited by Gates had adopted an essentialist position with regard to Irish Protestants and Catholics. A non-essentialist perspective questions whether it is possible to speak of a 'true' identity that is fixed for all time and in all places. For example, in what sense is it possible to define a third-generation Japanese woman, living in America, who is unable to speak Japanese, as 'Japanese'. What is it that determines her identity as Japanese or not-Japanese? Is it biological genes, citizenship in the sense, for example, of holding an American or Japanese passport as a naturalized citizen, language, place of birth, place of current residence or a personal and subjective sense of herself as 'Japanese' or 'American'?

To complete your work on this section you should now read the following extract from Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality, and Feminism*. Trinh T. Minh-ha is a filmmaker and composer, as well as a writer and teacher, living in the USA.

2.3



A critical difference from myself means that I am not i, am within and without i. I/i can be I or i, you and me both involved. We (with capital W) sometimes include(s), other times exclude(s) me. You and I are close, we intertwine, you may stand on the other side of the hill once in a while, but you may also be me, while remaining what you are and what i am not. The differences made *between* entities comprehended as absolute presences – hence the notions of *pure origin* and

true self – are an outgrowth of a dualistic system of thought peculiar to the Occident (the 'ontotheology' which characterizes Western metaphysics). They should be distinguished from the differences grasped *both between and within* entities, each of these being understood as multiple presence. Not One, not two either. 'I' is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually to peel off before one can see its true face. 'I' is, itself, *infinite layers*. Its complexity can hardly be conveyed through such typographic conventions as I, i, or I/i. Thus, I/i am compelled by the will to say/unsay, to resort to the entire gamut of personal pronouns to stay near this fleeing *and* static essence of Not-I. Whether I accept it or not, the natures of *I, i, you, s/he, We, we, they, and wo/man* constantly overlap. They all display a necessary ambivalence, for the line dividing I and *Not-I, us and them, or him and her* is not (cannot) always (be) as clear as we would like it to be. Despite our desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend, categories always leak. Of all the layers that form the open (never finite) totality of 'I', which is to be filtered out as superfluous, fake, corrupt, and which is to be called pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic? Which, indeed, since all interchange, revolving in an endless process? . . . *Authenticity* as a need to rely on an 'undisputed origin,' is prey to an obsessive fear: that of *losing a connection*. Everything must hold together (Minh-ha, 1989, p. 90)

2.4

- What do you think Minh-ha means when she says that the 'line dividing I and *Not-I, us and them, or him and her* is not (cannot) always (be) as clear as we would like it to be'?
- Think about the pronouns Minh-ha refers to: what meanings are associated with these? Can you think of circumstances in which the use of these pronouns and their meanings might shape how a person is *treated* or *treats* others? Try to find specific examples from your own experience.
- Why do you think Minh-ha distinguishes between 'I' and 'I'?
- Do you think Minh-ha is right when she says we make a 'desperate, eternal attempt to separate, contain, and mend'? If you agree with her, why do you think this is? Who is the 'our' she refers to here?



Social constructivist approaches to identity

Individuals experience their lives within a particular society at a particular time. The ways in which we act and experience ourselves are shaped by the social environment within which we exist and our relations with others. We are defined and define ourselves in terms of how others see us, how we see others, how we act with other people and how other people respond to us, not only on an individual basis but also within social institutions such as the family, the workplace, the school. Equally, the ways in which we are able to act, respond and see ourselves may be shaped by the material and economic circumstances of our environment. Karl

Marx famously asserted that 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' (Marx, 1859). Marx was particularly concerned with the relationship people had to modes of economic production and exchange, but in order to argue this he first had to show that human consciousness did not pre-exist the actual circumstances and experiences of people's lives, but was produced by those circumstances and experiences, what is sometimes called a **materialist** view of society. In order to clarify for yourself what this means you should attempt the exercise below.

ACTIVITIES



2.5

Imagine you are a woman with no educational qualifications, a low-paid job and a family to care for, living in a rural village, many miles from the nearest town, and you want to become a writer. In what ways might these circumstances influence your realization of this ambition? Be as specific as possible in detailing the ways in which you might be constrained or aided in your aspirations.

You may have noted any of the following:

- Lack of money might make it impossible to purchase the equipment you would need, e.g. word processor, typewriter, books, paper.
- The necessity of earning an income, however small, might make it impossible to find the time to write.
- The lack of formal education might mean limited access to other books from which to discover the tricks of the trade. It might also mean difficulties with reading and writing generally.
- The lack of formal education might have developed a sense that 'people like me don't become writers' and a consequent lack of confidence.
- A sense of guilt that the time being used to write rightfully belonged to the family; the belief that it is a mother's role to give time and care to her family and that spending time in activities outside this role is 'selfish'.
- The physical isolation and distance from the centres of publishing would be an obstacle to getting anything into print.

It does seem, doesn't it, as if material circumstances would determine the way in which this woman viewed herself and would mitigate against her becoming a writer. It does seem as if 'her social being' would foster a consciousness of her own limitations and 'the place' she should occupy in society. Yet . . .

Women with similar circumstances to those detailed above have written and published books. For example, Evelyn Haythorne, who grew up in a Yorkshire mining village during the Second World War, wrote and published an autobiographical account of her childhood (Haythorne, 1990). She kept diaries, despite her mother's discouragement, wrote in secret and only showed the book to her

husband when it was ready to be published. While Evelyn Haythorne may have been an exceptional woman, her story does suggest that while consciousness is, in part, formed from material circumstances, this does not preclude individuals from acting against the grain of the structures which shape and determine consciousness. Social forces might predispose individuals like our fictional woman or Evelyn Haythorne not to realize their ambitions, but that does not mean no one in such circumstances will ever become a writer. The possibility of some human agency, choice and self-determination remains, however constrained by social structures.

The point we are making is that social factors have an impact on our sense of identity in a variety of complex ways. Little girls, it is claimed, learn what it means to be a woman as a result of their experience in the family, at school and later in the workplace, as well as from books, magazines, newspapers, TV, films and other media. Feminist approaches to gender have argued that girls align themselves with femininity and men with masculinity as a result of the social relations experienced in childhood and adolescence. Girls are not 'naturally' feminine, nor boys 'naturally' masculine. These are learned identities. **Social constructivist** approaches to gender have been justifiably influential in breaking the link between sex and biological destiny – all women are not inherently 'maternal', for example. However, more recently writers have questioned the idea that masculinity and femininity are polarized constructs into which individuals are neatly slotted as a result of the lessons learned at school and home. Rather than there being a single form of femininity or masculinity, it has been suggested that we should think in terms of a range of femininities or masculinities that may be taken up by individuals. Moreover, rather than being socialized into one specific gender identity that remains fixed and unchanging, it is possible for individuals to change their sense of identity over time (Crowley and Himmelweit, 1992). Again, the idea that we achieve a stable gender identity at maturity is at odds with many people's experience: both women and men resist some elements of gender identity, while accepting others. Many women gain satisfaction and enjoyment from their maternal and caring roles, but react strongly against the idea that this should be their primary role, while at the same time feeling guilty if they are not 'perfect' mothers. Many men reject the idea that to be masculine they need to be dominant and aggressive, yet complain of feeling 'threatened' by assertive women. Material and social factors can explain the construction of particular identities at specific historical moments, but they do not explain why individuals invest in identity positions that are not always in their best interests, or the depth of attachment to a particular identity, to the extent that an individual is willing to die or kill to maintain that identity.

Louis Althusser developed Marx's work on ideologies in order to try to explain why particular positions are taken up by individuals. In his essay 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses', Althusser revises Marx's model in which the base – the economic mode of production of a society – is seen as determining the superstructure – social relations, ideologies, political and social institutions (Althusser, 1971). In place of the Marxist model, Althusser emphasizes the ways in which individuals are **interpellated** into subject positions by a process of identification. For example, the new mother sees herself in a variety of representations of

motherhood within her society, and is 'recruited' to the subject position 'mother' by an act of recognition: 'yes, that's me, yes, that's how it is'. For Althusser, ideology exists in everyday commonplaces, in what we call 'common sense', as well as in religious, political and philosophical systems of thought. Ideology is apparent in all that strikes us as self-evident and 'obvious', in what Althusser calls 'obviousnesses which we cannot fail to recognize and before which we have the inevitable and natural reaction of crying out (aloud or in the "still, small voice of conscience")': "That's obvious! That's right! That's true!" (Althusser, 1971, p. 161). This process of interpellation takes place at the level of the unconscious as well as consciously, and is the means by which subjects are constructed. For Althusser, the subject is not the same as the individual. Subjectivity is a constructed category produced by ideology, 'the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology in so far as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of "constituting" concrete individuals as subjects' (Althusser, 1971, p. 160).

Althusser's essay emphasizes the role of symbolic systems in the production of identities. In particular, he drew on the work of Jacques Lacan (see chapter 8) in order to link the psychoanalytic and material dimensions in explanations of why individuals take up, attach themselves to and invest in particular identity positions. In chapter 8 you will have the opportunity to explore further the ideas of Lacan and the concept of subjectivity. Now read the following account by Alison Fell, a feminist novelist and poet. This is taken from a collection of autobiographical essays by women who grew up in the 1950s.



2.4

In spite of my staunch teenage vows against marriage, during the five years at Edinburgh [Art College] I was married, divorced, and finally pregnant, so that in 1967 I found myself in Leeds as a faculty wife, mother and depressive. In 1968 I got involved in the beginnings of the Welfare State theatre group, and then, in 1969, with one of the first Women's Liberation groups, which was a revelation, and saved me from a weight of guilt about how badly I fitted into my womanly role. It also provided outlets for daring. To speak at a male-dominated meeting or occupy a pub in those scornful days required a certain reckless edge. (Still does.) In 1970 I left the Welfare State and moved to London in search of all-woman theatre. The Women's Street Theatre group did its first performance on the 1971 Women's Day march, and members of the group later went on to found Monstrous Regiment, the Women's Theatre Group, etc. Then a report I'd done on our arrest at the right-wing 'Festival of Light' led to a job on *Ink*, one of the more radical papers of the underground press. So, by accident (or was it?), I was a journalist, just as my father had wanted. For me the next few years were one long fever of feminist and libertarian politics, campaigning, militating, organising women's centres, working on *Red Rag*, the marxist feminist journal, and on the *Islington Gutter Press*. In 1974 a breakdown forced me to withdraw from activity for a year, but perhaps also gave me the inner permission I needed to write poetry again. In fact, that year marks the start of a serious commitment to writing.

Since then I've worked for four years on *Spare Rib*, and as a Writer-in-Residence in two London boroughs. In 1981 Collins published my children's novel *The Grey Dancer*, and in 1984 Virago brought out my adult novel *Every Move You Make* and my first individual poetry collection, *Kisses for Mayakovsky*. Currently I'm writing, teaching and trying to believe I'm forty. (Heron, 1985, pp. 24–5)

2.6

- Can you trace the ways in which the writer's identity has changed over time?
- What material factors appear to have been significant in forming her identity over time?
- Does Alison Fell's account of herself confirm or otherwise the idea that gender identity, in her case femininity, is learned once and for all in childhood and adolescence?
- Can you suggest any points in her life story that could be explained by Althusser's theory of interpellation?



2.7

Taking the question 'What is a woman?' or 'What is a man?', brainstorm as many possible answers as you can. We have started you off.

What is a woman?

- Someone with long hair
- Career girl
- Lesbian
-
-
-
-
-
-
-

What is a man?

- Physically strong
- New man
- Lover of football



Simone de Beauvoir famously asserted that 'one is not born but rather becomes a woman' but, if you have completed this activity, it may have surprised you to see how many different, and sometimes contradictory, versions of 'becoming a woman' are possible. Do you think this is equally true of 'becoming a man'?

Social constructivism is the term used to describe approaches that reject essentialist explanations of identity. A social constructivist perspective claims that gender identity is formed through interaction with social factors, and is not simply the result of biological differences. Such an approach does not deny biological differences, but attempts to understand and explain them in terms of social con-

text, rather than seeing individuals as limited and bounded by their biology. In order to complete your work on this section, we want to introduce you briefly to some ideas from sociobiology. Read the following short extract from an article by Richard Stevens. According to Stevens, what do sociobiologists identify as the origin of human behaviour and what function does this serve?



2.5

A useful principle is that, if you want to understand something, it is worth looking at its origins, its history. One approach to understanding human behaviour is to look at it as a species pattern. Can we gain any insights into identity by considering how human behaviour might have evolved?

The theory which argues that we can is called sociobiology. This is an approach concerned with understanding the social behaviour of animals. Humans are regarded as another animal species and as being, like them, the product of evolutionary development. Sociobiologists are interested in understanding why social behaviours evolved in the way that they did – what functions did they serve in ensuring the survival of the species and passing on genes to future generations? . . .

Their [sociobiologists'] position is that psychological and behavioural characteristics have been shaped by the process of evolution. Those behaviours which in the past have facilitated survival and reproduction are those which have been selected for. (Stevens, 1994, pp. 158, 166)

Sociobiological explanations of behaviour take as their starting point the idea that humans are a highly complex and evolved species of animal life. 'Even if we allow for major differences between ourselves and other species, given the continuity of evolution, is it not arrogant, the sociobiologist might argue, to presume that we should be *totally* exempt?' (Stevens, 1994, p. 168). If, as research has shown, genes and genetic development determine, at least in part, the behaviour and responses of animals, might they not also determine human behaviour? The sociobiological approach argues that biological imperatives, and in particular the impulse to ensure survival of the species, ensured that those behaviours which facilitated survival and reproduction of the species were the behaviours most likely to be adopted and most likely to evolve into highly complex patterns of response.

Explanations of human actions which are rooted in biology will have particular relevance for theories of gender identity because of the significance such theories place on sexual reproduction. Thus, it may be argued, as women are limited in the number of children they can bear, the characteristics and behaviours of our female ancestors might have been those most likely to ensure the survival of their (relatively few) offspring, whereas men, who are able to father as many offspring as they can find partners, might have developed those responses most likely to produce an optimal number of descendants. You may well want to reject such arguments on the grounds that they appear to justify inequalities between the sexes, and biology has often been used as an explanation for the different behaviours of men and women. For example, in the nineteenth century it was argued

that women's reproductive capacity rendered them physiologically unfit for the kind of intellectual study required in higher education except at enormous cost to their potential motherhood. Sociobiology is contentious because it does suggest that human responses are more determined than most of us like to imagine. It seems to claim that our actions are the result of deep-seated and innate natural factors over which we may have little control. However, sociobiologists do acknowledge the limitations of their claims. As Stevens goes on to say, a 'more intermediate position sees human social life as a complex interplay between social process and biological predispositions, each affecting the other in complex interaction' (Stevens, 1994, p. 168). He gives the example of crying: weeping is a spontaneous act for children, it is not something they are required to learn; what they do learn is when and where it is inappropriate to cry. 'The meanings attributed to weeping are shaped by social practice and convention rather than by biology' (ibid.). In the same way, we might want to say that the meanings attributed to masculine and feminine behaviours are shaped by social practice and cultural expectations and that these are linked in certain ways to the biological functions of the sexes, male and female.

Biological differences between people have often been used as the basis for social divisions and the injustices which can stem from these. For example, genetic arguments were used until recently to explain alleged differences between the intelligence of white and black people and, as we saw above, arguments from biology were used to hinder women's access to higher education in nineteenth-century Britain and America. Yet we cannot deny our biological selves – our bodies and their workings do shape how we feel about ourselves, what we are able to do and how we are seen by others. We may want to argue that social and cultural environment plays a greater part in how we develop as human beings (the nature/nurture debate as it is often called), but we cannot forget that we do have biologically programmed bodies, that we are not simply the sum of our thoughts and emotions. For example, the inevitability of ageing and the prospect of our own mortality may shape our consciousness and our sense of personal identity in profound ways, and many people explain their desire to have children as a way of leaving some trace of their existence for future generations. Such responses to mortality do not stem simply from either biological imperatives or cultural conventions, but include elements of both. Lynda Birke has argued that we need to think outside the conventionally accepted polarizations biology/culture, body/mind, animal/human. We end this section by asking you to read the following extract and to consider carefully your response.

2.6

[One] problem with denying our biological selves has to do with the relationship between humans and animals. We know, of course, that we have some things in common with other animals: all female mammals, including women, produce milk with which to feed their young. But we usually draw the line when it comes to behaviour; human behaviour, it is generally assumed, is not really the concern of biology. Indeed, this is why biological determinism is a problem for



feminism – we do assume that human (and specifically women's) behaviour is shaped by culture.

The behaviour of animals, by contrast, is included squarely within the domain of 'biology'. Everything about animals, that is, constitutes *their* biology, while only some things in feminist accounts (our anatomy or physiology) constitute ours. As far as behaviour is concerned, we thereby imply that we are not like other animals.

This distinction is not very satisfactory. Are we to assume that evolution has shaped our bodies, but not our minds, while shaping both bodies *and* minds for other species? This is simply another way of recasting the distinction (so prevalent in Western culture) between body and mind. Animals are basically bodies with little in the way of mind; we are minds busily denying that we have bodies.

Yet we cannot simultaneously hold two contrasting positions. If animals' behaviour is their biology, then we have to assume that the behaviour is caused directly by something inside the animal. If this was said about women, we would immediately cry foul and accuse someone of biological determinism. But if it is only animals, it is all right. Isn't it?

My short answer is no – I do not think that other mammals (at least) are mere puppets of their genes, any more than I think people are. But biologically determinist arguments always rely on drawing parallels between human and animal societies . . . So, as long as animals are wholly seen as 'biological', then the parallel will lead inevitably to seeing humans in the same way. An alternative way of drawing parallels would be to point to the extent to which individuals learn to be social – in both humans and other animals. This possibility is rarely considered, so we are left with either (a) accepting parallels based on biological determinism, or (b) denying any parallels or similarity at all. (Birke, 1992, pp. 72–3)

Recent work in sociology and cultural studies has begun to suggest alternative ways in which we can understand the relationship between the physical bodies people inhabit and the formation of identities. These perspectives reject the idea of the 'body' as simply a biological organism, and stress instead that people's experience of their physical bodies is shaped by social structures and expectations, as well as 'natural' functions. For example, we consume food in order to survive, but what we eat, when and how, as well as how far we can choose (or not) to shape our body through eating, is a result of a range of social variables. These might include which part of the globe we inhabit (the industrialized or developing world), whether we are male or female and historically specific 'ideal' body shapes. The current vogue for body-building is another example of the links between cultural practice and physical bodies. Our bodies, recent writers have argued, are an integral part of our identities, shaping and shaped by the meanings ascribed to them. They are more than a physical shell within which is contained the non-physical 'real' self, as anyone who has suffered anorexia or experienced obesity can testify (Bordo, 1993; Featherstone et al., 1991; Shilling, 1993; and chapter 8 in this book).

Hence the classifying categories that are used to distinguish between people – for example, 'race' and gender – are not immutable aspects of the natural world but social constructs. Racial difference, as the reading from Gates (above) argued, is

not a biological phenomenon but a means of categorizing people that uses certain bodily characteristics as markers of 'race'. The persecution and mass slaughter of Jews in Nazi extermination camps during the Second World War is an extreme example of the barbarous practices that can be legitimated by reference to socially constructed 'racial' differences. Differences based on social constructs, such as 'race', gender, sexual orientation, age or disability, can be construed so as to exclude, marginalize or, in extreme forms, slaughter those perceived as 'different' or 'other'. As we write, the Indian government is planning to offer financial incentives to families who produce daughters in order to halt the widespread practice of aborting female foetuses. The recognition that 'race', gender, sexual orientation and disability are socially constructed has enabled new social movements, such as black civil rights, the women's liberation movement, gay and lesbian rights and disability rights, to challenge the negative stereotyping that reinforces 'otherness' and difference. Instead, differences have been celebrated as enriching sources of energy and diversity, as in slogans such as 'Glad to be gay' and 'Black is beautiful'.

2.8

You could keep a file of images, articles, TV programmes etc. in which stereotyping is used to reinforce a particular social category, e.g. Asian, French, English, Irish, single parent, homosexual, lesbian, AIDS sufferer, feminist, secretary, drug addict. There is more on stereotyping in chapters 3 and 9. Try to identify the precise elements that create recognizable stereotypes of your chosen category.



'Identity crisis' and the modern world

Identity, however, is not only experienced at the level of the individual. Collective, ethnic and national identities are important ways in which people negotiate a sense of belonging and, often allied to this, political solidarity. Asserting national, religious or ethnic identities can lead to political conflict, as in the case of Northern Ireland, where identities based on religion have divided the province. In the former Yugoslavia, established identities fragmented under the pressures of economic and political conflict, and the re-emergence of national identities around older forms of ethnicity – Serb and Croat – has led to devastating upheaval and war. In Britain, right-wing politicians have been concerned to reaffirm a sense of national identity in the face of what they perceive as threats from European unity. In England, as in many parts of the industrialized world, international migration and a loss of certainty about what constitutes 'Englishness' has brought with it the possibility of new identities that are less firmly aligned to the older boundaries of nation-states. Since the 1950s immigration has produced Asian communities in many parts of Britain that were previously the province of white working-class groups, notably in Bradford and parts of London. Many young people whose parents or grandparents came to Britain in the 1950s or the 1970s from the Caribbean or Asia do not see themselves as either wholly British or wholly Indian or

West Indian. In his novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, Hanif Kureishi has his narrator begin with a discussion of his identity:

My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. (Kureishi, 1990, p. 3)

Karim sees himself as English but not in the way 'English' has been defined in the past. He sees himself as a 'new breed' – a hybrid produced by his Indian background and his English upbringing (his father is a first-generation Indian in Britain and his mother is white, British, working class). He reflects on the effects of this both in terms of biology (blood) and in terms of the groups he can and cannot belong to. He wonders if the consequences of this 'mixing' have produced the sense of restlessness and boredom he feels. The following reading is from a series of articles in *the Independent* between 17 and 22 November 1997, in which the findings of a large-scale survey of young people, aged 17–24, were discussed and analysed.



2.7

The extent of isolation felt by this generation is astonishing in a country that until recently called itself Christian and prided itself on local loyalties. Just one in five feels part of a community, while only one in ten identifies with a religion or race. Two per cent see themselves as belonging to a political party, while 13 per cent feel part of a social class.

'I'm very much a creature of the planet,' says Mr Reza, born in Glasgow of Mauritian parents. 'I don't belong to any particular land mass. My skin is brown but I don't feel Mauritian. I feel more British when I go abroad. I don't belong to any religion. I'm open to the existence of anything but I don't believe in God. Some of the Buddhist philosophies I find quite palatable. I don't want to be a member of a class. I'm a person. I've never followed one political party. I'm not a believer in one though if you had to label me I would probably fall somewhere between Labour and the Liberal Democrats'. (*Independent*, 22 November 1997)



2.9

- What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to an identifiable grouping such as gender, ethnic group, class, political allegiance, religion, nationality?
- The *Independent* report suggests that the loss of clear-cut cultural identities is a cause for concern. How do you respond to this?

The idea that contemporary societies are characterized by crises of identity, such as those exemplified in the former Yugoslavia or, in a different form, by Kureishi's narrator and Mr Reza, is one that has been argued by a number of social and cultural theorists in recent years. In a collection of essays on this topic, published in 1990, Kobena Mercer comments,

Just now everybody wants to talk about 'identity'. As a keyword in contemporary politics it has taken on so many different connotations that sometimes it is obvious that people are not even talking about the same thing. One thing at least is clear – identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty. (Mercer, 1990, p. 43)

Let us consider some of the features of contemporary life that have been suggested as reasons for a 'crisis of identity'. Some recent writers have argued that the search for collective and individual identities has become more intense in the face of increasing **globalization** (Giddens, 1990; Robins, 1997). The modes of economic production and consumption that have placed McDonalds, the burger chain, in almost every city in the world, made it possible to buy a can of Coca-Cola in the remotest corner of the globe and allow us to cross continents in hours rather than weeks have led, it is argued, to a fragmentation of the characteristics that once distinguished specific identities and nationalities. According to some writers, instead of identities based on groupings of community or nation, we all now share a common identity as global consumers, as a consequence of what Kevin Robins calls the 'transnationalization of economic and cultural life' (Robins, 1997, p. 12). For example, the management consultant, Kenichi Ohmae believes that national boundaries and the identities aligned to these are no longer significant in a world dominated by global corporations and organized around a global economy: 'The nation state has become an unnatural, even dysfunctional, unit for organizing human activity and managing economic endeavour in a borderless world. It represents no genuine, shared community of economic interests; it defines no meaningful flows of economic activity' (Ohmae, cited in Robins, 1997, p. 26).

In the face of these global movements people may feel detached from the older identities that defined previous generations and may, like Mr Reza, see themselves as 'creatures of the planet'. This may express a sense of alienation and detachment or it may involve resistance to the socio-cultural effects of global capitalism through the assertion of a new ethics based on a sense of global citizenship and responsibility. An example of such citizenship would be allegiance to environmental and ecological movements concerned with the future of the planet. There is further consideration of this in chapter 9, but for now the point to grasp is that increasing global trends in terms of the goods that are produced and consumed, the speed and accessibility (for some) of world travel, the development of electronic technologies that allow us to communicate immediately with Tokyo or New York and the movement of people, as a result of occupation, poverty or war, will have far-reaching consequences for the ways in which we define ourselves and

are defined by others. Before going any further, you could attempt the following activity in order to extend your understanding of what is being argued in debates about globalization.



2.10

- Use a dictionary or reference book to find out what is meant by the term 'nation-state'.
- Can you think of any examples of how the 'transnationalization of economic and cultural life' has shaped the area you live in? Who lives in your neighbourhood? Do you have a sense of belonging to a particular community that bestows identity in your neighbourhood, in the workplace or elsewhere?
- Has globalization had any impact on your work, your family, your neighbourhood?

The trend towards a global economy has led to changes in the migration of labour. Often forced by poverty, and sometimes by war as well, people have moved across the globe. Of course, migration has always occurred, but the late twentieth century has seen an acceleration of this phenomenon. Most large cities in the industrialized world have an ethnically diverse population. For example, as mentioned above, London and Bradford in Britain have large, well established Asian communities that have brought to Britain their own cultures and religious faiths. This dispersal of people across the globe produces new forms of identity, as well as tensions as a result of cross-cultural differences. For example, in the extract above from *The Buddha of Suburbia*, the narrator, Karim, describes himself as 'a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were'. For many centuries Jewish people have been dispersed across the globe. Since the Second World War Jews have struggled to create 'a home' in the Middle East. One of the consequences of this has been to displace Palestinians from what they perceived as their home. Yet for many Jewish people 'home' is the USA or France or wherever they were born and have lived for most of their lives. Thus, for some, Jewish identity is closely aligned to a specific place, a particular geographic area, a bounded land mass; for others, their sense of identity may be created from their upbringing as American (or British or Polish) as well as their Jewish culture and religion. And all Jewish people in the late twentieth century live in the shadow of the Holocaust, whether they see their roots in Israel, Europe or America.

The term **diaspora** is used to conceptualize the forced dispersal of people across the globe. Literally the term means: *dia*, through, apart, across; *spora*, from the Greek 'to scatter'; therefore to scatter apart, across, through. The Africans who were brought to the Caribbean or to North America to be sold as slaves from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries were displaced and dispersed in multiple ways, and the experience of transportation, colonization and slavery caused a profound discontinuity in terms of cultural identity. Taken from different villages, different parts of Africa, different tribes, speaking different tongues, worshipping different gods, the African people of the Caribbean and

North America nevertheless shared the experience of exile and slavery. The cultures and identities developed by black Africans in the Caribbean and North America may draw on their African 'roots', but they also draw on a shared history of slavery *and* the experience of living in the industrialized North or under European colonization. Edouard Glissant has commented on this as follows:

There is a difference between the transplanting (by exile or dispersion) of a people who continue to survive elsewhere and the transfer (by the slave trade) of a population to another place where they change into something different, into a new set of possibilities . . . I feel that what makes this difference between a people that survives elsewhere, *that maintains its original nature*, and a population that is transformed elsewhere *into another people* . . . is that the latter has not brought with it, not collectively continued, the methods of existence and survival, both material and spiritual, which it practiced before being uprooted. These methods leave only dim traces or survive in the form of spontaneous impulses. This is what distinguishes, besides the persecution of one and the enslavement of the other, the Jewish Diaspora from the African slave trade. (Glissant, 1992, p. 14)

In more recent times, the wars in Vietnam or in the former Yugoslavia, in the Middle East, South America or Africa have resulted in myriad displacements. In the contemporary world this process of dispersal and displacement has accelerated, and produces cultural identities that are shaped by different places and located in diverse parts of the world. Identities produced in these circumstances cannot be traced back to a single origin or homeland (Africa or Indochina), but are produced from a range of cultures, locations and experiences.

2.11

Think about the ways in which the following might *share* a sense of cultural identity and the ways in which their different experiences might have produced *variations* of identity:



- South African blacks in the 1990s.
- Jamaicans living in Jamaica.
- Third-generation black British whose grandparents emigrated from Jamaica in the 1950s.
- Black Americans living in the southern states of the USA.
- Black Americans living in New York.
- Tutsi refugees from Rwanda now living in Zaire (1994 conflict).

You may need to find out more about these groups from newspaper reports, reference books or the following texts (full details are in the *further reading*): Fanon (1986), Gilroy (1987), Rutherford (1990), African Rights (1994).

The third feature that can be linked to the idea of 'identity crisis' is the political disruption in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. The break-up of the USSR

and the collapse of communism in 1989 left a political void that was quickly filled by the re-emergence of earlier forms of national identity, ethnicity and religion. Without communism as a central reference point, people in the USSR and Eastern Europe found themselves fragmented and uncertain or in a position to claim identities that had been lost or suppressed under communism. The collapse of communism also had consequences for the ways in which writers and academics saw the future. The spread of capitalism across the globe and the end of the Cold War made it difficult to think and talk in terms of two structuring and opposing centres: capitalism and communism. In the 1960s and 1970s, conflict was frequently discussed and analysed in terms of a small number of 'master' ideologies, such as communism and capitalism. In the 1990s, with the collapse of communism, this is no longer tenable and there is a growing tendency to seek explanations for conflict in terms of competing identities, whether between large social groupings or at the level of the individual.

In recent years there has been a growth in social movements based on **identity politics**: feminism, the black civil rights movement, gay and lesbian movements have used a sense of collective identity as women, black people, homosexuals and lesbians to challenge subordination and oppression. Some strands of these movements base their politics and strategies on the uniqueness of a particular identity. For example, some members of the Greenham Common Peace Camp movement that actively protested against nuclear warfare and American missile bases in Britain during the 1980s based their politics on a radical feminism that held that women as women have a greater investment in peace as a consequence of, among other things, their social and biological role as mothers. Attempts on the part of white, Western feminists to advocate a universal female identity have been criticized by black feminists for failing to recognize the differences between women of different cultures, classes and ethnicities. Black feminist critiques have shown how the class and ethnic identities of some white, middle-class feminists are frequently at odds with the desire of such feminists to speak to and for a universal female identity,

Many black women had been alienated by the non-recognition of their lives, experiences and herstories in the WLM [women's liberation movement]. Black feminists have been, and are still, demanding that the existence of racism must be acknowledged as a structuring feature of our relationships with white women. Both white feminist theory and practice have to recognize that white women stand in a power relation as oppressors of black women. (Carby, 1982, p. 215)

Now read the following extract, by Jeffrey Weeks.



2.8

Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality. But it is also about your social relationships, your complex involvement with others, and in the modern world these have become ever more complex and confusing. Each of us

live with a variety of potentially contradictory identities, which battle within us for allegiance; as men or women, black or white, straight or gay, able-bodied or disabled, 'British' or 'European' . . . The list is potentially infinite, and so therefore are our possible belongings. Which of them we focus on, bring to the fore, 'identify' with, depends on a host of factors. At the centre, however, are the values we share or wish to share with others . . . Identities are not neutral. Behind the quest for identity are different and often conflicting values. By saying who we are, we are also striving to express what we are, what we believe and what we desire. The problem is that these beliefs, needs and desires are often patently in conflict, not only between different communities but within individuals themselves.

All this makes debates over values particularly fraught and delicate: they are not simply speculations about the world and our place in it; they touch on fundamental, and deeply felt, issues about who we are and what we want to be and become. They also pose major political questions: how to achieve a reconciliation between our collective needs as human beings and our specific needs as individuals and members of diverse communities, how to balance the universal and the particular. (Weeks, 1990, pp. 88–9)

2.12



- Look back at the description you wrote of yourself at the start of this chapter. Try to identify which aspects of your description are about collective identity in the sense discussed by Weeks above. Consider how significant these are for your sense of yourself, which ones 'you bring to the fore'.
- Look out for newspaper reports or news items on TV that refer to collective identities. You could collect a portfolio of such material. Figure 2.1 suggests a transnational identity around the issue of AIDS that is based on a political cause rather than global consumerism.

Representing and narrating identity

The extract from Alison Fell in reading 2.4 was from a piece of **autobiographical** writing. The word 'autobiography' is made up of three distinct parts, each with its own meaning: auto meaning 'I', bio meaning 'life' and 'graphy' meaning writing. Autobiography is therefore generally understood as the written account of an individual's life. As such, it offers a self-representation: a representation of a particular identity created by the self who is thus represented. The writer looks back (usually) on the past and narrates that past from the standpoint of the present. Of course, not all self-representations are literary or even written. People tell stories about their lives in many ways: in conversation, in oral accounts, in therapeutic case histories, in visual images, even in a CV for a job application. Personal narratives, whether produced as written autobiographies or in other forms, are an attempt to impose meaning and coherence on the often random and chaotic



Figure 2.1 World AIDS Day

experiences which constitute lives as they are lived, to order experiences by placing them within a narrative frame. Telling or writing a life story involves interpretation. The act of selecting, from the mass of lived experience, which events and people to include and emphasize is itself an act of interpretation. Alison Fell, you will recall, highlights her work with feminist organizations in the theatre and journalism. In doing so she constructs a specific identity for herself and a particular set of meanings to which her life testifies. The personal narratives we tell are never simply mirror reflections of a lived reality, but are mediated by the need to represent the self as possessing a sense of identity and control. Think about the result if you tried to tell a friend about every event, emotion or person you could recall encountering. Apart from the fact that your friend would undoubtedly quickly tire of listening, wouldn't you feel the account was incoherent, contradictory and meaningless? Autobiographical representation is one of the ways in which we shape our experiences into some form of meaning and construct particular identities for ourselves. Now read the extract below, in which Margaret Woollard, a London teenager, gives her reasons for writing autobiography.



2.9

I chose to write an autobiography basically because I just love writing about myself. I have kept a detailed diary now for four years because I want my children and my children's children to look back on it and find out what I was like as a teenager and what life was like in the 1980s. I also keep it for my own personal records as to how I have changed. But not only that; even if I never

looked back on it again I shall never forget the satisfaction it gave me to put down my deepest thoughts on paper.

It took me a while to work out what to include in my autobiography: how personal I should make it, and what aspects of my personality I should portray. My life has been fairly uneventful compared to some; apart from moving to London and my parents' separation. There are few single events that I can pinpoint as landmarks in it, so I decided to write about the periods I went through and my attitudes and opinions, rather than tell a straight narrative from the day I was born up until the present day.

I have been very frank in my autobiography. I may come across as 'weird': I don't think my life is in fact very different to the average London teenager and I have maybe exaggerated the differences to make a more interesting story. I am not afraid to portray myself as an individual and express what I really feel. I would like other young readers to enjoy reading about my life: to laugh at the funny incidents and be moved by the sad ones, and to try to accept and understand me and see me as a young person similar to themselves. (Simons and Bleiman, 1987, p. 81)

Activity 2.13

- Why does Margaret want to write about herself?
- What decisions does she make about the story she will tell?
- What 'message' or meanings is she trying to convey about herself?



As we have suggested, there may be a gap between identity as it is represented and identity as it is lived, but this does not mean that representation and reality are two mutually exclusive categories. Personal life narratives may be informed by the ways in which we think 'tales of lives should be told'; that is, they require moments of drama, interesting characters and a coherent meaning in order to communicate with a reader/listener (Stanley, 1992, p. 12). At the same time, a personal life narrative, whatever form it takes, does involve a real rather than a fictional life, it is about people who actually existed rather than imaginary characters and it does refer to events which did occur, however mediated these are by the narrator's shaping influence.

And more complex still, 'lives as they are lived' exist symbiotically with the written representation of lives: we expect our and other people's lives to have troughs and peaks, to have 'meaning', to have major and minor characters, heroes and villains, to be experienced as linear and progressive, and for chronology to provide the most important means of understanding them, all of which are characteristics of fiction. (Stanley, 1992, p. 14)

Many of the issues introduced in this section will be taken up in chapters 3 and 8. There are connections too with the discussion about history in chapter 4.

Conclusions

This chapter has introduced you to the concepts of identity and difference. You will have the opportunity to consider further some of the ideas raised here in later chapters. For now we offer you a summary of the main ideas introduced here.

- Social as well individual factors create people's sense of themselves, the ways in which they can be seen by others and the lives they may expect to live. Although social factors provide the parameters within which lives are lived and identities experienced, these may not be inevitably determining; there remains scope for individual action and agency. We are able to construct identities from a diverse and sometimes conflicting range of possibilities. However, identities are bestowed as well as chosen, and this may give rise to conflicting identities.
- At the same time, however, material factors alone cannot explain the investment that individuals have in specific identities. Althusser's theory of the subject attempts to incorporate psychoanalytic explanations into a materialist perspective.
- The formation of identities can involve essentialist claims about biology (e.g. the statement 'I have British blood'). Non-essentialist perspectives argue that identity is relational and contingent, and depends upon the symbolic marking of one group as different from another (e.g. man/woman or Asian/Euro-pean).
- Identities are formed through classification systems that define social groups in terms of similarities and differences. To be Asian is to be not-European. 'Race', gender, age, sexual orientation are socially constructed categories that are **relational** rather than biologically inherited. Such categories may, however, use biological features as symbolic markers by which to classify individuals.
- Identities and differences can shift over time, circumstances and place. For example, the assertion of national identity during wartime may attempt to transcend those gender, age, class, religious and ethnic differences that in peacetime may have engendered conflict. Thus identities are **contingent** upon time, circumstance and place.
- Social and material effects follow from the symbolic marking of one group as different from another.
- Identities may be formed collectively as well as individually, and can be used for political purposes: for example, the women's liberation movement, 'Glad to be gay', Black Power.
- Accelerated globalization, increased migration and the collapse of an alternative ideology to capitalism have led to what some writers see as 'a crisis of identity' at the end of the twentieth century.
- The perspectives we explored also raised the question of a conceptual split between body/mind, animal/human, nature/culture. Lynda Birke suggests that this conceptual polarization constrains the ways in which we are able to understand the relationship between biological imperatives and cultural identity.

- Cultural representations, in this context autobiography and personal life narratives, are one of the ways in which we can construct self-definitions and identities out of the 'raw material' at our disposal. Cultural representations offer forms within which we can choose to narrate ourselves and our lives in order to produce a sense of identity and meaning.

Later chapters take up many of the issues raised here in further detail and in relation to specific topics. For example, the next chapter has a section on gay and lesbian representations, chapter 8 extends the discussion by focusing on the concept of subjectivity and chapter 9 thinks about our identities as consumers. Indeed, issues of identity are central to the study of culture: how we define ourselves and how we are defined by others is inextricably related to the 'production and circulation of meaning' in a particular society at a particular time.