Theoretical Approaches to Identity

How we see and define ourselves is important. This is our identity.

Richard Jenkins (2008) suggests: 'Identity involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, then knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on.'

The importance of identity is based on the notion that it is through establishing our own identity and leaning about the identities of others that we begin to understand what makes us similar and different to others.

The information in this Factsheet would be relevant to exam questions on the topic of Culture and Identity. You may find it useful to read this in conjunction with previous Factsheets 10, 81, 95, 104 and 194, which will give you a broad overview on the development of identity.

Through the similarities we share with others, we form social connections and group solidarity. This works at different levels – from the level of our peer group (where music, clothes, values, etc. will play some part) to affiliation of political groups (e.g. Labour Party, Green Party, Conservative Party, etc.)For Steph Lawler (2014) identity is about the idea of marking out similarities and differences.

Activity:

1. *Make a list of the aspects/categories you believe mark out the differences between people.*

2. *You obviously have lots in common with your best friend, however, you must also have differences too. Make a list of you and your best friend's similarities and the differences. Which list is longer? What observations can you make about this?*

We do not have the same experiences in life – we all have different experiences even identical twins do not share every aspect of life. Steph Lawler (2014) states that if we did not have an identity, then we would not recognise who we and others are. How we see ourselves – our identity, has influence over the friends we have, who we have relationships with, marry, live with, and the groups we belong to. Identity can help us 'fit' into the society we live in. We are not however, free to take on any identity that we like, some factors such as our social class, gender and ethnicity will influence how others see us.

Activity: Make a list of the elements of your identity that are of a more fixed nature, like the ones mentioned above, then make a second list of the elements of your identity that are more fluid (e.g. the brands that you wear) then write a paragraph exploring how you think these two elements work together to form your own identity. Which list of elements has more influence on your identity?

It is clear when looking at the concept of identity, that it is very much a fluid and changeable concept. We are now able to indulge in multiple identities. An individual might, for example, define himself primarily as Christian in his home environment with family and church community, a solicitor at work, gay in his relationships and fitness enthusiast with his peers. It is possible therefore, to show different identities in different social situations.

Identities can also change over time, the identity of a person in their sixties is likely to be different from when they were in their twenties.

They may have been unemployed for a period during their twenties, then trained as an accountant. Identity for the next forty years came from their profession, but in their sixties with retirement, they become detached from the identity arising from their paid employment as an accountant.

For Stuart Hall (1992) society is increasingly characterised by what he terms 'fractured identities' – meaning that people no longer possess a single, unified concept of who they are. This fragmentation comes from various sources:

- **Modernity and change.** In late modern societies pace of change has increased, making it harder for people to maintain a unified identity.

- **New social movements.** Social class provided a master status in the past, but during the 1960's and 70's people started to organise themselves around issues, not necessarily class (e.g. feminism, the environment, LGBT, civil rights, etc). New social movements began to develop, and identity then becomes a political issue.

- **Globalisation.** Improvements in communications, the ability to travel easily around the world and the global marketing of styles and images can have the effect of a 'cultural supermarket' – people can therefore choose from numerous identities – adopting the values and lifestyles of any group they wish.

Exam Hint: Showing knowledge of how identities have changed over time, with examples, will show good sociological knowledge in the exam.

Structural Approaches

Under the broad umbrella of structural approaches to the concept of identity, functionalism, Marxism and feminism all adopt a macro approach (looking at society as a whole).

All three see culture and individual identities created by the social institutions that make up society.

Social institutions programme individuals, and wider social forces form and limit identities – suggesting that we have no choice or control over our own identity formation. Therefore, social forces as opposed to individual choice shape our identity. It is the agents of socialisation that form the link between the individual and society.

Functionalists, Marxists and feminists do not however, all agree on how this occurs.

Functionalists see socialisation as a process through which we learn our culture. People are bonded together by providing them with guidelines on how they should behave and importantly, what others will expect of them.

Functionalists such as Parsons and Durkheim see the socialisation process this way. Durkheim (1963) argued that a shared culture is a necessity if society is going to run smoothly. People must conform to the culture of their own society, so to avoid punishment.

Marxists on the other hand, see socialisation as a less positive thing, as a form of ideological conditioning. Though they would argue that socialisation is a necessary process, so that we can learn about our culture and learn the behaviours that help us to function in society. But they argue that in unequal societies, socialisation acts as a form of social control. They see people socialised into the beliefs and values of the dominant class. Therefore, socialisation reproduces and even legitimises the existing social inequalities and social class divisions, normalising them.

Feminists see the socialisation process as reinforcing and reproducing the dominance of men over women – patriarchy. It is through this process and within the family that girls and boys are taught and encouraged to conform to traditional gender roles, which in turn sets them up for gender inequalities found in the wider society, in all areas of work, politics and social life.

Oakley (1974) argues that defined gender roles come from culture not biology. Parents canalise their children by providing different objects/ toys and activities to girls and boys.

> **Exam Hint:** *Showing an understanding of different structural approaches and how they differ will gain credit in the exam.*

Social Action Approaches
Whereas the previous theoretical perspectives: functionalism, Marxism and feminism adopt a macro approach, social action perspectives adopt a micro approach. This means that they focus predominantly on the individual rather than wider society. From a social action perspective, more emphasis is placed on the role of individuals in defining their own identity. Individuals do not simply passively consume the norms and values handed down by the social system. Lawler (2014) believes that within the social world, people make interpretations of the things around them – identity, therefore, is produced as people interpret the meanings of the bits and pieces of their lives, they then assemble them into an identity. Lawler suggests that identity is something that we create rather have it imposed onto us.

Goffman (1956)
Goffman was a social action theorist who saw identity forming in this way too, but he looked at it differently. He saw society like a stage, with people acting out performances like actors. When we act in the social world, we put on a 'front' to project a certain image of

ourselves – this could be thought of as our social identity. We create a 'front' by manipulating the setting in which we perform (e.g. our classroom or place of work), our appearance (e.g. our clothes or hairstyle), and our manner (e.g. our emotional demeanour). In the social world, we are called upon to put on various fronts depending on the social stage that we find ourselves and the teams of actors with whom we are performing – school or college are examples of typical stages which require us to put on a front.

> **Activity:** *Give an example of what Goffman is arguing here from your own experience in school or college today. On these social stages we take on roles, in relation to other team-members and carefully manage the impressions we give off, in order to 'fit in' to society and/or achieve our own personal goals.*
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> *These may include:*
> * *The way we speak and the words we use – accent, swear words, etc.*
> * *Our style of clothes and accessories – charity shop style or designer labels, etc.*
> * *Body adornment – tattoos, piercings, etc.*
> * *Our leisure activities – types of holidays, choices of music, etc.*
> * *Our choices of consumer goods.Our choices of media and technology -websites, mobile devices, etc.*
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> *Goffman argues that that we are all engaged in this process of manipulating others and being manipulated by them.*

> **Activity:** *Can you paint a picture of your own identity by using the above list?*

Cooley (1902)
The reaction of others provides the 'looking glass self'. We begin to see ourselves through the expectations of others. We imitate others and act out a variety of roles. This imitating and acting out of a variety of role increases with age. We might want to behave like a certain person, we see their behaviour and copy it.

Becker (1963)
Some identities can take on the form of a master status. This is a dominant status/identity which can override all other elements of a person (e.g. woman). A woman may prefer to be seen as a surgeon first and foremost, however, if others see her as a woman primarily, because of her master status (based on gender), then she will struggle to assert her preferred identity.

G. H. Mead (1934)
Mead argues that as children grow up they learn to develop a sense of themselves, the qualities they have that make them different from others. As they interact with and relate to other people, they start to develop ideas about how others see them. By seeing how people respond to them, they may modify their behaviour and sense of identity and begin to see themselves as others see them. This is clearly a fluid and changeable process, as the identities of individuals change and develop constantly as they go through daily life.

> ***Exam Hint:*** *Showing an understanding of different social action approaches and how they differ will gain credit in the exam.*

A Middle Ground

Structuration

For Giddens (2006) there is a middle ground between the previous two approaches: structuralism and social action, and he calls this structuration.

On the one hand, he accepts that social structures can limit how people act and the identities they adopt, but on the other, he also sees that social structures make it possible for people to act and form identities in the first place. For him, the culture and structure of society provide us with the means of establishing our identities, also the tools we need to make sense of society. Without a common language, norms and values set up by the social structures, we would struggle to make sense of our identity. So, though we can make choices, and the opportunity to form and then change our identity, we can only make choices within the cultural framework. For Giddens then, social structure and social action are interdependent.

> ***Exam Hint:*** *The theories of identity largely fit into two broad theoretical perspectives: Structuralism vs Social Action. In an exam question that is theory based, it is always a good idea to try to see it firstly in its simplest form, which will help you make more sense of it. Once you can break it down into broad categories, it is much easier to be evaluative. You will be able to find the strengths and weaknesses (as you see them) in one broad theoretical perspective compared to the other. To achieve high marks in any exam question that is theoretically based, you will have to show good evaluation skills.*
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> *Think about how you would use the information in this Factsheet to answer these questions:*
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> *1. Analyse two ways an individual's sense of self may be affected by their sexuality.*
>
> *2. Evaluate the Marxist view of the role of the socialisation process in the development of our identity*