When recognition fails:

Mass Observation Project accounts of not belonging

Abstract

This paper examines British Mass Observation Project (MOP) accounts written by people who say that they have struggled with belonging. The main focus lies on acts of misrecognition that occur within everyday relationships, and the impact that the ensuing relational non-belonging has had on the MOP writers' sense of self. The concept of 'invisible strangers' is developed to account for experiences of misrecognition that are perceived to be the result of individualised characteristics such as personality rather than categorical membership such as ethnicity. The process does not however end with the self; being misrecognised engenders feelings about others, which play an important role in how people experience relational non-belonging. I therefore propose extending social interactionist accounts of the relational self by exploring self-*other* feelings that involve not only how a person believes s/he is viewed and judged by others, but also how that person evaluates the selves of others.

Key words: Mass Observation Project, misrecognition, not belonging, self

Vanessa May, University of Manchester

Corresponding author: Vanessa May

Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives

Sociology

University of Manchester

Arthur Lewis Building

Oxford Road

Manchester M13 9PL

UK

Email: vanessa.may@manchester.ac.uk

Introduction

This paper examines written accounts of what it is like to not belong and asks how we can make sociological sense of misrecognition that occurs not on the basis of 'categorical identity' such as ethnicity or social class, but as a result of seemingly individual characteristics such as personality. In addition, the paper investigates not only what happens to the self as a result of such misrecognition, but importantly also the impact this has on the self-other relationship. In discussing these issues, the paper engages with and contributes to current sociological literatures on the self, (non)belonging and (mis)recognition by helping to extend their conceptual focus.

The bulk of the literature on not belonging focuses on the experiences of people who are denied a sense of belonging on the basis of their membership in a structural category such as social class, ethnicity or sexuality, or whose sense of belonging is ruptured as a result of transnational migration (e.g. Weedon, 2004; Ifekwunigwe, 1999; Eade, 1994; Benson, 2010). The topic is approached somewhat differently here, through accounts written by volunteer writers taking part in the British Mass Observation Project (MOP) who explain their sense of non-belonging not in terms of category membership but as resulting from individualised qualities such as personality. I introduce the notion of 'invisible strangers' so as to enable a sociological explanation of the experiences of people who are made 'strange' on the basis of rather intangible characteristics that tend to be interpreted as individual and unique to a person. The MOP accounts show that such experiences of non-belonging have a profound impact on the self and help shed light on the role of the self-other relationship in creating non-belonging, the nuances of different types of group membership and the

subtle ways in which power operates in everyday interactions where such 'unacceptable' selves are produced.

The process of creating non-belonging is thus conceived of as a relational one that entails acts of misrecognition. Relational theories of the self – perhaps most famously those by Cooley (1902), Mead (1934) and Goffman (1959) – tell us that others play a key role in the construction of the self, as particular or generalized others who act as 'mirrors' for the self and to whom the self is presented. Theories of (mis)recognition also focus on the role that others play in shaping how we see ourselves and the resultant self-feelings we may have, such as self-esteem (Honneth, 2012; Laitinen, 2012). Both sets of theories present others as a reference point for the self and focus on the role of the other in the formation and presentation of a self. The MOP accounts, on the other hand, help extend these theories by guiding our attention to the consequences of misrecognition and non-belonging on how a person regards others. Using Cooley's well-known metaphor of the looking glass self as a starting point, the MOP accounts illuminate the two-way process whereby people not only use others as mirrors for themselves, but also turn the looking glass around such that they are mirroring their own judgements of what is 'acceptable' behaviour onto other people.

The relational self that has a need to belong

Belonging is a complex and multidimensional experience, encompassing our relationships to people, cultures and the material world (May, 2011). In the MOP accounts analysed for this paper, belonging to people trumps other forms of belonging, which is why the main focus here lies on this relational dimension. The importance given to other people is perhaps understandable, given that we are inherently relational beings: we gain a sense of self in relationships with and in relation to other people (Mead, 1934), while striving to maintain human bonds in order to belong constitutes a 'fundamental human motivation' (Baumeister and Leary, 1995: 497).

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As relational beings, we learn 'to perceive ourselves "through the eyes of others"' (Crossley, 2006: 88) and 'we know who we are because [. . .] others tell us' (Jenkins, 2000: 11). This process has perhaps most notably been described by Mead (1934), who distinguished between the inner, more spontaneous 'I' and the social aspect of the self, the 'me' that has internalized and holds itself accountable in light of the social attitudes of the group, which Mead termed the 'generalized other'. During the course of developing our sense of self, we come to recognize that we exists as an 'object in the experience of other people' (Crossley, 2006: 91), an object that others have a particular perspective on based on how they judge our behaviour, which in turn helps inform our understanding of our self. Thus what other people think of us is important for our sense of self. An apt metaphor for this relationship between self and other, and one that is still widely used, is that of the 'looking glass self', defined by Cooley (1902: 152) as comprising three dimensions: how we think *others perceive us*; how we imagine they *judge us* on the basis of this; and the *resultant self-feeling*, for example pride or mortification.

In such social interactionist accounts of the relational self, much of the focus has been on the process whereby the self is shaped by its relational context, and responds to this by forming a particular view of itself. The relational approach also entails that people are 'necessarily situated in particular webs of belonging' to the degree that 'it is impossible not to belong to social groups, relations, or culture' (Calhoun, 2003: 535, 536; cf. Crossley, 2006: 101; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). It could even be said that the self cannot exist apart from others because there is 'no sense of "I" [. . .] without its correlative sense of you, or he, or they' (Cooley, 1902: 151). Thus belonging is fundamental to a person's sense of self which is formed as she learns to identify a similarity between herself and certain other people (Miller, 2003; May, 2011). But even when we do *not* identify with others they are an integral part of our self, because we think of ourselves not only in relation to those who we resemble, but also those who we are different from (Cooley, 1902: 96-7). A sense of self is thus always formed in relation to an 'Other' because both individual and collective identities are also constructed in opposition to what they are not, that is, what they exclude (Hall, 1996: 4;

Cohen, 1982). In sum, a self is premised on *distance from* as well as *closeness to* others. In the MOP accounts of not belonging, the relational self is largely presented in terms of distance and difference rather than similarity and closeness.

Further important elements in these processes of constructing a sense of self and belonging are power and reflexivity. While the perspective of certain people matters more than that of others, and thus has more sway over how we perceive ourselves, assuming the perspective of others never results in 'total domination of the self by others' because we are able to 'answer back' (Crossley, 2006: 101). As Crossley (2006: 89) points out, 'our relations with others are dialogical' in that we do not merely passively adapt to social norms, but engage in 'poly-vocal' internal dialogues where we can for example anticipate how others would judge our behaviour, and defend ourselves against possible criticism. These internal dialogues can be held with a range of interlocutors: particular others we are currently conversing with; phantom others who are people we have conversed with in the past, whose opinion we value and who therefore have an impact on us in the present; our phantom community made up of our phantom others that constitute our 'us', the unified voice of the people in our lives who matter, and which we use as a sounding board; and a generalized other that can be understood as a 'them' that represents the more abstracted social norms of our society (as in 'They say…' or 'They think') (Athens, 1994: 525, 529). The MOP writers are especially concerned with an audience of particular others who act to exclude them from an 'us'.

Recognition and misrecognition

According to Shotter (1993: 123, 193), in order to belong, it is not enough that we 'grow up as a human being within [our] society' but we must also feel that we can take part in the 'reflexive arguments' of society, that is, arguments about what matters, why, and what should be done about it. Gaining a sense of self and of belonging is therefore never a solely individual accomplishment, but

an act of claims-making that involves other people, and, more specifically, acts of recognition by others. Simply put, recognition means positively affirming the existence of a person, respecting individual difference and acknowledging claims that a person makes with regards to their personhood, as well as showing concern for their well-being (Honneth, 2012; McNay, 2008; Laitinen, 2012). According to Honneth (1995), recognition is a precondition for the ability to exercise the capacities of personhood. It is by being recognised, that is, having our claims to personhood and membership acknowledged, that we can successfully claim belonging.

The particular focus of this paper is misrecognition, which Laitinen defines as 'inadequate responsiveness' to the features of others that can take the form of 'various kinds of disrespect, misesteem and lack of concern, care or love' (2012: 27-28). Misrecognition can have varying degrees of severity, 'from harmless minor nuisances to crushing experiences creating traumatic wounds and significant suffering', and can take different guises, such as violating human dignity, disrespecting the autonomy of a person, and stigmatising someone (Laitinen, 2012: 26, 31). If belonging hinges on receiving recognition, then it stands to reason that being misrecognised is likely to impede a person's sense of belonging. While moral theorists such as Honneth as well as Young (1997) are mainly interested in (mis)recognition and reciprocity that occur across asymmetrical structural positions, that is, between people who hold different social positions for example in relation to economic and social resources, this paper asks how we can make sociological sense of misrecognition that is not based on structural asymmetry, but is rather experienced as the result of seemingly innate individual qualities such as shyness, which are usually interpreted as belonging to the domain of psychology.

Emotional impacts

One aspect of Cooley's 'looking glass self' that remains particularly pertinent is the emotional impact of how we think others judge us. As we interact with others, we engage in internal dialogues with particular, phantom and generalized others, and it is these dialogues which result in the 'self-feelings' that Cooley talked about (Athens, 1994: 525). Being (accurately) recognised can lead to positive emotions such as self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of being accepted and loved, which in turn contribute to fellow feeling and a sense of belonging (Honneth, 2012; Cooley, 1902; Scheff, 1990; Griffiths, 1995). In contrast, misrecognition 'can lead to distorted relations-to-self, such as self-hatred, and can truncate the development of very central capabilities of persons' (Laitinen, 2012: 26). Those who are deemed to 'not fit in' tend to be treated with disrespect, disgust and contempt, leading to various forms of suffering including such self-feelings as embarrassment, shame or humiliation (Griffiths, 1995; Tyler, 2008). Consequently, a person's 'concept of self is not devoid of affect' (Crossley, 2006: 92), while belonging and not belonging, which themselves constitute a *feeling*, are fundamentally affective experiences which can have an 'explosive force' (Scheff, 1990: 76; May, 2013; Griffiths, 1995).

Although the focus of most theorists has been on self-feelings that result from (mis)recognition, the analysis below alerts us to the fact that because an act of (mis)recognition involves at least two people, in addition to self-feelings, the process also generates feelings *about the other*. Being attentive to these 'multilayered emotional responses' is important, because they speak to the social relationships and social position of a person (McNay, 2008: 186-7).

Data and methods

The data for this paper comprise accounts of non-belonging that were written in response to a Mass Observation Project (MOP) directive on belonging. The MOP originally began in 1937 'as an anthropology of ourselves' and was revived in 1981 to create an archive of accounts by 'ordinary'

people about their everyday lives in Britain (Hubble, 2006; Sheridan, 1993). To this end, MOP has enlisted a panel of volunteer writers (also called observers or correspondents), around 500 of them at any one time. Three times a year, the volunteer writers receive a directive from the MOP, detailing the topics that they are asked to write about, ranging from mundane issues such as shopping, gardening and family relationships, to current events such as royal weddings and the London bombings in 2005, and topical issues including climate change. The correspondents are not obliged to respond to a directive, so the number of accounts archived at the Special Collections at the University of Sussex varies from directive to directive, usually ranging between 200 and 300. The panel of volunteer writers is not statistically representative in that the majority are women, over the age of 40, white, middle-class, and live in the south-east of England (Black and Crann, 2002). But what it lacks in statistical representativity the MOP makes up for in its size and diversity within these categories (Bytheway, 2009: 885).

In the summer of 2010, I commissioned a directive on belonging, which instructed correspondents to write about their experiences of belonging and non-belonging across their lifetime, focusing on belonging to people, places and culture. This directive garnered responses from 185 correspondents, of whom 65% were women, over 90% broadly speaking 'middle-class' in terms of background (e.g. education) or occupation (e.g. company director, librarian, teacher), and 44% were aged over 60. It is fairly safe to assume that most if not all of the 185 writers are white given that the majority of MOP correspondents are white and that none of the writers remark on their skin colour, thus indicating that they belong to the white majority whose 'race' is unremarkable (e.g. Byrne, 2006).

This paper is based on a sub-sample of these 185 accounts. This sub-sample was analysed along two axes: holistic and categorical. First, the total sample of 185 accounts was analysed using a holistic approach which allowed me to preserve the narrative qualities that were present in most of them. For each account, I wrote a case summary, focusing on the 'belonging narrative': experiences

of belonging/non-belonging and shifts between these, sources of (non)belonging (people, places, culture), how (non)belonging was described (relational, sensory, cultural), and the main point put across by the correspondent. This analysis demonstrated that around a third of the accounts (n=55) were almost exclusively about non-belonging, many of which opened with 'I have always been an outsider' or words to that effect. A particularly interesting emergent theme was that the majority of these accounts (n=38) were about non-belonging that derived not from structural group membership such as nationality or social class (perhaps because most of the writers belonged to 'dominant' or 'majority' social groups), or a specific aspect of the writer's life such as illness, but from a perceived individual character trait, generally described as 'personality'. Experiences of non-belonging of this nature have not yet received much attention from sociologists.

The majority of these 38 accounts came from people under the age of 60 (n=27) and women (n=24). The relative youth of this sub-sample might be explained by the fact that a rather common narrative arch depicted non-belonging as becoming less significant or acute with age, partly due to increased self-confidence. The accounts varied in length from one to seven pages. Some of the accounts were handwritten, others typewritten, with different margins, line spacing and fonts or styles of handwriting, and many writers included diagrams of concentric circles depicting the people they felt they belonged with, as requested in the directive.

The second stage of analysis was categorical, focusing solely on the sub-sample of 38 accounts of non-belonging. These were coded for the following: sources of belonging that the correspondents felt excluded from, the reason(s) for non-belonging, the writers' relationship to or evaluation of belonging and non-belonging, and the nature of the self-other relationship. Once each account had been analysed in this manner, I began making comparisons across cases, attentive to thematic threads running through the data. These themes were then brought into dialogue with the relevant theoretical literatures discussed above, which allowed me to generate conceptual categories. At this stage, the analytical focus lay on seeking different facets of non-belonging rather

than attempting to categorise the writers into 'types' (Mason, 2011). The aim was to illuminate what non-belonging can consist of so as to provide a multi-dimensional account that maintains some of the complexity and contradictions inherent in how non-belonging is experienced in everyday life.

It is also important to keep in mind the particular characteristics of the MOP accounts: these are *written* presentations of self that tend to differ in tone and character from accounts offered in face-to-face interviews (cf. May, 2008). The implied, and at times explicitly named, audience for these accounts comprises the Mass Observation Project – to which some writers have been writing for decades, have formed a relationship with and a sense of ownership over – but also me, the commissioning researcher, as well as other researchers who might visit the MOP archive (Sheridan, 1993). There is thus a sense that the correspondents are writing to a familiar and known, or at least trusted, audience, leading to a degree of intimacy and candidness that is perhaps further aided by the veil of anonymity afforded the writers (cf. Bytheway, 2009). These factors can allow MOP correspondents to explore topics differently than they would in a face-to-face interview, making it for some easier to explore difficult topics (Smart et al., 2012). The accounts are also fairly introspective in tone, no doubt partly because respondents can write at their own pace over the course of a day, week or even months. This allows them space to be reflective, to edit and rewrite. Thus the MOP accounts can offer a combination of more polished yet more 'internal' accounts than interviews – perhaps akin to the internal dialogues with particular, phantom or generalized others that Mead, Athens and Crossley refer to.

Being excluded from groups

The MOP correspondents describe the experience of being excluded as the *absence of belonging*. For most of the writers, belonging means 'fitting in', being 'accepted' and 'feeling at home'. People comprise the *source of belonging* that emerges as most significant in these 38 accounts, which are

mostly about not belonging to family, friends, peers and colleagues, thus constructing non-belonging as a felt distance from other people. This does not however mean that the writers completely lack experiences of relational belonging: all bar one of them express a sense of belonging to and being recognised by one person or a few close people, usually a partner, children or other family members with whom the writers feel they can be themselves. Their experiences of non-belonging mainly concern people outside of this inner circle, and it is groups that the MOP writers have found particularly tricky, often preferring one-to-one relationships:

> I am not a joiner in, much happier in my own company than in the company of others.
> There have been exceptions to this, close friends whose company I actively sought out
> (K798, F59, housewife and writer)[1]

Twenty-nine of the MOP correspondents describe their interactions with groups as having been problematic throughout their lives. Experiences of non-belonging, even bullying, have been particularly acute in childhood for eighteen correspondents, some of whom write evocative accounts of feeling left out as other children played:

> One of my earliest memories is when I was maybe 3 or 4 years old and at a nursery school [.
> . .] everyone was outside playing on swings, chutes, in the sandpit. I remember being on my
> own, at the edge of the area, watching. A similar aged little girl came up and spoke to me,
> then danced off to play with her friends, and I remember thinking why can't I do that? Why
> can't I go off and play with people too? But I couldn't. I didn't have the confidence, even at
> that age. (W729, F53, former supply teacher)

Nine MOP writers explicitly note that as they have grown older, and their confidence has increased, their sense of being an outsider has diminished or come to matter less: 'Over the years I have felt less of a need to belong and more sure of myself' (M4463, M56, train driver). Perhaps belonging to groups has also lost some of the urgency it had in school where they were thrust into groups.

The groups that the MOP writers feel excluded from are those that we encounter in our everyday lives, based on interpersonal interaction and relationships, where all members know each other and each member must be individually accepted. Griffiths's (1995) distinction between 'structural groups' and 'invisible colleges' is instructive here. Membership in 'structural groups' is based on structural location such as gender, ethnicity or nationality, and is thus rarely a matter of choice. When the MOP writers discuss structural groups, especially ones based on country, region or locality, they do so using the diction of belonging: 'I claim British nationality for that is the land I was born, raised and inhabit' (A4127, M48, receptionist). In contrast, 'invisible colleges' come into being when a group of individuals choose to belong together because of, for example, shared interests or personality; though of course these characteristics are also shaped by structural location such that 'birds of a feather flock together' (McPherson et al., 2001). One MOP writer alludes to this distinction between different types of group:

> I can say I'm European then I suppose I'm British then I'm from Yorkshire and if I want to narrow down my nationality more I'm a South Yorkshire lass. Belonging to this is beyond my control, its what I've been born to. The belonging I can have control over is more personal. (B4563, F43, graphic designer)

It is from such 'personal' invisible colleges that the MOP writers feel excluded. Misrecognition of this sort, because it feels more personal can therefore be deeply insulting (Laitinen, 2012). An invisible college is premised on face-to-face interaction, where the parties to the interaction judge whether they share enough in common with each other to warrant a more involved relationship. It is during such interactions that we are evaluated according to seemingly individualised characteristics. As shown below, the most commonly cited reason for not belonging is the MOP writer's own personality, particularly shyness. But such seemingly innate individual characteristics have a social origin, in that the meanings attached to certain behaviours, such as being quiet or blushing, are socially derived and enacted in social interaction (Scott, 2007).

On the outside looking in

A central theme that ran through the accounts was a sense that other people share an ability socialise that the writers are lacking. One of the most commonly repeated refrains was that of being 'an outsider' or 'on the outside looking in': 'There is always a sense of being on the outside looking in, of being the person picked last for every team' (G2640, F58, librarian). Scott (2007) notes that self-defined shy people often describe themselves as standing on the edges of social interactions, looking on (cf. Riley, 2002). What these writers are observing from the side-lines is the seeming ease with which other people interact and connect with each other, thus forming groups:

> I was always on the side, looking on, trying to work out what was going on, trying to decipher the communications going on, the necessary social rituals and inter-relationships. Most people I know fall into an easy way with other people, they seem to know what is required, what is necessary to join in. [. . .] I think there's a lack in me. (M1201, F47, writer)

Such descriptions have much in common with how the participants in Scott's (2007) study accounted for their shyness. These are people who feel that their innate shyness makes them incapable of interacting with others in a 'natural' way, because they are constantly highly aware of their own performance, wary of making a faux pas that will cause others to view them negatively. They are in other words afraid of embarrassing themselves in social situations (cf. Goffman, 1959). At the same time, they view others as Competent Others who know the tacit 'rules of the game', are able to decipher what is going on in any situation and to act accordingly (cf. Bourdieu, 1977).

Shyness can make it difficult to 'join in' and form relationships with other people, even though one may 'like to feel a part of things' (R4100, F45, library assistant). According to Scott (2007), one of the things that keeps shy people from taking part in group interactions is a lack of trust that others will help them 'save face' should they falter (cf. Goffman, 1959), making it difficult

to 'join in' for fear of rejection. The MOP writers say they tend not to spend much time with others and have come to be viewed as 'introverted', 'loners', 'reclusive', 'unsocial' or 'outsiders' (characteristics named by thirteen writers). Four correspondents say they are aware of giving off the impression of being aloof, remote or stand-offish: 'I can be very thoughtless and remote at times' (E743, F59, teacher).

These MOP writers also share similarities with Simmel's (1971) 'stranger' who is of the group yet apart from it, standing at the boundary of the group. What is crucial here is that in finding reasons for their non-belonging, the MOP correspondents individualise the causes behind the distance between themselves and others. This then becomes a solitary experience that cannot easily bring about a feeling of 'groupness' (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000) or shared collective injury that could form the basis for joining together as an interest group (cf. Honneth, 1995; though see Scott, 2007 for counter-examples). Although such suffering is experienced in an individualised manner and 'negatively internalised in a habitus of resignation, frustrated rage and boredom' (McNay, 2008: 140), it can be seen as the result of something systematic, as socially produced meanings and labels are attached to seemingly personal characteristics (Smith, 1987; McNay, 2008: 9, 11-14). I now turn to examine these characteristics more closely and the consequences of being excluded from invisible colleges on the basis of them.

Under the cloak of invisibility

When someone is misrecognised they are being made 'strange' or 'othered'. The 'strangeness' of the MOP writers is not necessarily obviously apparent: they are white, British-born, 'average' people who do not 'stand out' in a crowd and can walk down the street unremarked. This is reflected in the fact that these accounts do contain depictions of experiencing a deep sense of belonging to more abstract structural groups such as nationhood:

Hearing the Welsh voices, singing the Welsh songs and enjoying the Welsh victory (much to the chagrin of the snotty English supporters behind me), I felt like I truly belonged with these people. (G3963, F38, stay-at-home mother, previously accounts manager)

These are in other words not accounts of 'proximate bodies out of place' that Ahmed (2000) talks about in her work on 'strangers': bodies marked by structural difference, for example skin colour or class-coded clothing, and immediately visually recognisable on the basis of this difference. The MOP accounts indicate that there is another, more subtle way of demarcating people as 'strange', rather than 'a stranger', based on personality, behaviour and interests. Twenty-nine writers mention their own personality – being shy, a loner or lacking in confidence – as reasons for their non-belonging. In addition, a range of other, individualised, reasons were offered, such as being 'academic', a 'bookworm' or 'not as pretty as other girls' (B4527, F29, teacher; H2639, F70, retired library assistant; D3958, F29, secretary). Furthermore, a lack of 'common ground or beliefs' or a 'gulf in interests and outlook' can also lead to a sense of 'separateness' (A4127; L4388, F24, freelance writer; E4111, M70, retired fire-fighter). The strangeness that the MOP writers describe is one that can be intangible and difficult to pin down: 'your face doesn't fit' (B4563) or feeling 'a bit "different" from other people' (B3968, M44, retired due to ill health, previously community health worker). They are in other words 'invisible strangers': excluded from invisible colleges on the basis of somewhat elusive qualities.

Unlike strangers, invisible strangers can claim belonging to and are recognised as members of structural groups akin to Anderson's (1983) 'imagined communities', the members of which feel united on the basis of some *shared* characteristic such as nationality, religion or regional accent. Though the members of such an imagined community do not all know each other personally, they can experience a sense of affinity when their paths cross: 'Casual encounters with Liverpudlians on zebra crossings can make me feel connected' (G226, F69, retired counsellor). But within this abstract structural group, a person can be rejected from particular groups on the basis of their seemingly

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unique characteristics that are not immediately or obviously discernible but nevertheless set them apart from others. A sense of belonging to an abstract group could be described as belonging from a distance, easily shattered when one has to interact with people on an individual level:

> I have been to football matches, gigs, gone [on] walks, gone on touring holidays in England, on my own, and not felt lonely, while I might if I went, for example, with a hiking group, where I might feel uncomfortable because I'm not socialising as well as the others. (D3157, M55, customer service advisor)

This form of exclusion entails more than fleeting interaction, emerging only when people get to know one another as unique persons. Employing Ahmed's (2000) distinction between 'being' (ontology) and 'being with' (belonging), we can see that invisible strangers are allowed to 'be', in that their being as a member of a structural group is not questioned, but they are not allowed to 'be with' or belong when it comes to interactions with specific people. The MOP accounts would indicate that it is not enough to just 'be'; 'being with' and being recognised in particular interactions matters just as much, thus adding to sociological understandings of the complexity and multidimensionality of belonging.

The tension between conformity and individuality

In order to belong to a group and be accepted as a member, one must conform to at least some group norms. A system of rewards and punishments, most of them informal, is in place in any society to encourage conformity (Scheff, 1990: 74). The cost of non-conformism is to be perceived as standing outside of a group, in other words, being isolated (Bourdieu, 1977). The irony of modern life – especially in today's neo-liberal world where individuality and being the master of one's own fate are so highly prized – is that it requires both individualisation and collectivism, though these are generally understood as 'diametrically opposed alternatives' (Elias, 1991: 147). In societies with high

levels of individualisation, there exists a constant tension between 'the desire to be something in one's own right' and to 'be something unique' on the one hand, and 'the wish to stand wholly within one's society' and 'the need to belong' on the other (Elias, 1991: 149-50). In Meadian accounts, this same issue emerges as the tension between social embeddedness and reflexivity: we are concerned with how particular and generalized others view us, while at the same time having the ability to challenge these views (Crossley, 2006: 90).

It is how this tension is negotiated, particularly as it plays out in group contexts, that the MOP accounts help illuminate. Indeed, as the following MOP writer notes, group belonging is necessarily based on the double act of inclusion and exclusion. We can only have a group to belong to if there exist people who are 'othered' (Cohen, 1982; Hall, 1996):

> First there is the sense of belonging to the group, then the corollary that other groups are 'different' and, eventually, that they are weaker, threatening, etc. Then comes the feeling that someone within the group is not thoroughly 'with' the group. Some group members become 'out crowd' compared to the 'in crowd' that have the feelings of belonging. So belonging, and a sense of belonging, while important, have their dark side. (D3157)

As Simmel (1950: 134, 137) observed, acting as a member of a group can afford us a sense of being anonymous and concealed because it is the group collectively rather than its members individually who are seen as responsible for its actions. We might therefore do or say things that we would not if acting on our own, yet remain with a clear conscience. The MOP accounts illustrate how being the recipient of such reduced moral responsibility can be experienced: as a deeply unfair and painful act of misrecognition. One self-feeling resulting from their outsider status as described by 12 MOP writers is a sense of being isolated or lonely, which for three has also led to depression: 'the depression and anxiety I've had [. . .] are a kind of response to not belonging' (B3968). According to Simmel (1950), isolation entails not merely the absence of social interaction, but also the awareness of a society that one is not interacting with. Thus isolation is fundamentally 'determined by

sociation, even though negatively', and can become particularly intense when we are in the presence of other people rather than when we are alone (Simmel, 1950: 119), as exemplified by the following quote:

> ...alone in the sense that I'm at a party or with a group and *feeling* alone and left out, and believing everyone is enjoying themselves more than I am, that everyone is more sociable, better at mixing than I am, and so on. (D3157)

Nine of the MOP writers 'interrogate the diction of belonging' (Riley, 2002: 2) by explicitly questioning the notion that people unequivocally want social inclusion. Although 'even occasional loneliness remains taboo, while to be without visible social ties is inexcusable', such 'solitariness may be willed and preferred by its bearer' (Riley, 2002: 8). These MOP writers wear their non-belonging as a badge of honour, mentioning with pride that they are 'individual', 'independent', 'outspoken', 'self-contained', 'self-sufficient' and 'critical' (K798; H3821, M58; G4374, M44, orchestra director). The 'us' that these correspondents are willing to ally with consists of a select few people, which is why they are unable and unwilling to conform to group norms or 'merge with others to the point of invisibility' (E4111). Non-belonging can thus be the result of a simultaneous rejection *by* others and rejection *of* others as a result of not putting 'much trust in people' and feeling 'repelled by others' repulsive behaviour' (F2949, F56; A4127). In effect, these writers exclude most other people from their 'us', instead placing them in the category of 'them'. As Athens (1994) points out, such a situation is fruitful ground for the sort of non-conformism embraced by the correspondents.

The remaining 17 MOP cases are somewhat more complex in that although the writers do have some experiences of belonging to groups, these have left them yearning for a more 'real' connection, because being accepted by the group has entailed having to 'hide' aspects of their self. Recognition by the group has ironically enough constituted an act of misrecognition, though others might have been unaware of this:

I have had many good and loving friends of whom I was very fond; it's just that they nearly always thought I was a different kind of person to that which I am. They projected themselves onto me. (D996, F83, retired Citizens Advise Bureau advisor)

Acceptance does not necessarily lead to a sense of belonging, nor is non-belonging always the result of 'othering', but can be the consequence of being identified as 'similar' or 'acceptable', as the following quote demonstrates: 'I am always conscious that I am playing the role of daughter, mother, employee' (W632, F68, retired business analyst). These cannot, however, be seen as merely 'cynical' presentations of self (Goffman, 1959: 28) for two reasons. First, rather than the fleeting encounters that Goffman describes, the MOP writers are talking about semi-permanent states of being in relation to others, whereby they have habitually hidden an aspect of their self that they believe would be unacceptable to others. Second, the accompanying feeling is not the 'gleeful spiritual aggression' observed by Goffman (1959: 29), but sadness because the social bond is simulated rather than genuinely felt. At its extreme, presenting a self that *feels* inauthentic can be experienced as being disengaged from the world and 'trapped in a kind of bubble [. . .] in my own tiny, frightened world and no longer a part of the real one' (B3968). Statements such as this bring to mind Laing's (1965) 'divided self'.

While theories of recognition tend to focus on the *self*-feelings that result from being (mis)recognised, this is not all that is going on: people also turn the metaphorical mirror towards the outside world and ask 'What do I think of other people?' Thus, the process described by Cooley can be extended to include *how people see others*; how they *judge others* in relation to themselves; and the *resultant self-other feelings* including isolation, ambivalence and contempt. I propose using the metaphor of 'the looking-glass self-other' to capture the duality of this process and the potential complexity of the attendant emotions including (mixtures of) shame, anger, loneliness and pride.

Conclusion

In exploring accounts of non-belonging by Mass Observation Project (MOP) correspondents who tell about experiences of being an 'outsider' because they have been deemed 'different' based on their personality, behaviour or interests, all seemingly individual characteristics, this paper has aimed to bring a broader range of experiences of non-belonging under a sociological lens. The concepts 'invisible strangers' and 'the looking glass self-other' have been added to the conceptual toolbox of theories of self, (non)belonging and (mis)recognition so as to enable us to make better sociological sense of the multiple forms and consequences of non-belonging that results from such exclusions in everyday interactions.

I have argued that forms of misrecognition that take place at a 'micro' level matter sociologically as well as morally, for they speak not only of individualised matters such as personality, but also of broader social issues including what types of behaviour and characteristics are deemed 'acceptable' or 'odd'. If all forms of exclusion can be understood as the result of systematic social processes, it is not merely exclusion that occurs on the basis of categorical membership such as gender or ethnicity that sociologists should aim to understand. So far, 'personalised' or 'individualised' exclusion has mainly been left to psychologists to explain. However, because such non-belonging has important effects on the self and on the relationship between self and other, sociologists must also develop conceptual tools to make sense of it. One such concept proposed in this paper is 'invisible stranger' which sheds light on how intangible 'personal' yet socially derived characteristics are used to exclude people who ostensibly belong because they are not immediately or visibly 'strangers' in their social contexts. Such 'invisible strangers' are excluded from 'invisible colleges' – founded on personal ties rather than structural location– and on the basis of subtle cues such as acting awkwardly in social situations.

In addition I have argued that we must pay attention to the social consequences of such misrecognition, not only on the self, but on the relationship between self and other. The focus of

much of the social interactionist theorising on the relational self is too narrow because it is mainly concerned with how our sense of self is informed by our interaction with others. What has so far remained under-theorised is how these interactions affect how the self views its relational context and the consequences this can have for the quality of social bonds. Utilising Cooley's metaphor of the looking glass self – still widely cited – this process could be described as a revolving looking-glass self-other, where the mirror is used to make sense of both the self and others. Others mirror us back to ourselves, but we also mirror others against our own values and expectations. The paper has also highlighted the emotional dimension of such processes. Whereas relational theories of the self and theories of recognition tend to focus on *self*-feelings, these are not sufficient to describe what is going on in the MOP accounts. Being negatively judged and excluded by others results not only in a range of self-feelings but also in feelings about others.

The MOP accounts have thus brought to light something that Mead and Cooley had little to say about, namely what happens when others become objects in the experience of the self. Some MOP writers, rather than merely accepting that they do not belong, with the attendant feelings of lack of self-worth, perform a counter-act of misrecognition, naming their own criteria against which they judge others. If others are deemed not worthy of seeking belonging with, a symbolic reversal can take place: it is no longer the group that decides where the boundary between 'us' and 'others' lies, but rather the group that is excluded from the person's 'us'.

Struggling to belong to a group can be a deeply troubling experience because belonging to groups is fundamental to the relational self (Calhoun, 2003). Thus although the MOP writers were British, arguably we would find similar mechanics and consequences of being excluded from groups in other cultural contexts: becoming to a degree isolated from social interaction and consequently experiencing a range of feelings about self and other. Furthermore, given that some conformity is required in group formation and that ideals of 'individuality' and 'authenticity' are so widespread, it is to be expected that the tension between wishing to conform so as to belong to a group on the one

hand and ignoring the group's expectations in order to present a self that feels genuine on the other would resonate with people's experiences beyond the UK.

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Author biography

Vanessa May is Senior Lecturer in Sociology and a member of the Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives at the University of Manchester. Her research interests include the self, belonging, lone motherhood and qualitative methods. She has published in a number of journals including *Sociology*, *Sociological Review*, *International Journal of Research Methods* and *Narrative Inquiry*, and has recently authored a book entitled *Connecting Self to Society: Belonging in a Changing World* (Palgrave Macmillan).

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[1] Each MOP writer is given a unique identifier, consisting of a letter and number combination. I also indicate the gender of the writer (M for male, F for female), followed by age and occupation if these are known. When an MOP writer is quoted for the second time, only their MOP number is provided.