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How to cite:

Kehily, M. J. (2009). What is identity? A sociological perspective. In: ESRC Seminar Series: The educational and social impact of new technologies on young people in Britain, 2 March 2009, London School of Economics, UK.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

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## What is Identity? A sociological perspective

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Paper presented at ESRC Seminar Series, The educational and social impact of new technologies on young people in Britain, London School of Economics, 2 March 2009

### Biographical note:

Dr Mary Jane Kehily is Senior Lecturer in Childhood and Youth Studies at the Open University, UK. She has research interests in gender and sexuality, narrative and identity and popular culture and has published widely on these themes. Books include: *Gender, Sexuality and Schooling, shifting agendas in social learning*, (Routledge 2002) and, with Anoop Nayak, *Gender, Youth and Culture, young masculinities and femininities* (Palgrave 2008).

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### Introduction: Freedom, choice and identity in late modernity

This short paper is a loosely written account of the presentation given at the ESRC seminar series on new technologies and young people in the UK. Though far from comprehensive in its approach to identity, the paper identifies and discusses some generative ways of thinking about identity in late modernity. This is further explored with reference to two empirical examples drawn from the author's own work.

Late modern social theorists have developed a particular sociological perspective on selfhood in 'new times' (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). A generally held assumption of late modernity suggests that identity matters more now because we have more choice. It could be argued that in previous generations we had identities waiting-for –us. The existence of strong class-based and regionally specific communities shaped the life trajectories of individuals. Within these locally bounded contexts individuals further developed a notion of being in the world through occupational structures and work-based cultures. By contrast late modern social worlds appear to offer fluidity, mobility and choice. Key articulations of contemporary selfhood found in phrases such as 'choice biographies' and the 'reflexive project of self' are redolent with ideas of plurality, selection and self-narration – recurrent motifs of the post industrial story of self. Bauman (1988), however, provides a different conceptualisation of identity in late modernity:

Everyone has to ask himself the question 'who am I, 'how should I live', 'who do I want to become' – and at the end of the day, be prepared to accept responsibility for the answer. In this sense freedom, is for the modern individual the fate he cannot escape, except by retreating into the fantasy world or through mental disorders. Freedom is therefore a mixed blessing. One needs it to be

oneself; yet being oneself solely on the strength of one's free choice means a life full of doubts and fears of error ... Self construction of the self is, so to speak a necessity. Self confirmation of the self is an impossibility' (Bauman 1988:62).

Bauman reminds us that identity is forged in the social sphere is located within temporal relations; a sense of the past, present and future haunts identity-work and identity practices. In asking the question, 'Who am I?' individuals are invited to set down identity markers located within the past and the present. 'Mother', 'lover', 'worker'- or whatever terms we reach for - work as both ascriptions and claims that account for the self in shorthand. 'How should I live?' points to the present, conjuring up the practices and routines that define ways of being in the world. The third question, 'Who do I want to become?' orientates us towards the future, tapping into the aspirational project of fashioning a future self. The inter-relationship between past, present and future in the on-going work of developing an identity suggests that who we are, what we do and what we become changes over the life course and furthermore, the work of identity remains fragile and unstable to the point where settlement is unachievable. Bauman powerfully suggests that developing an identity is a fate that modern individuals cannot escape; we need identity because without it we would go mad.

### **Processes of social recognition: language and belonging**

While Bauman reminds us that identity is forged in the domain of the social, other theorists focus on the up-close, everyday social practices that shape a sense of self. The Bakhtin circle of linguists working in 1930s Soviet Russia, emphasise the importance of the social in all forms of communication, producing active and generative forms of identity-work. Something as ordinary, everyday and ubiquitous as talking to others becomes central to defining oneself and one's place in the world. For Volosinov (1973) language exists as a system of signs produced within a particular historical and social milieu. Volosinov sees language as a social phenomenon with very real material indices, where the sign becomes a production within communication. His analysis of the complex forms of human utterances place great emphasis on the social act of speaking and the social context of all communication. All speech act, he argues, are addressed to another's word or another listener; even in the absence of another person, a speaker will assume the presence of an imagined listener. In this way language becomes the product of the reciprocal relationship between the speaker, the listener and their social world. In a much quoted passage, Volosinov writes:

Each and every word expresses the 'one' in relation to the 'other'. I give myself verbal shape from another's point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong. A word is a bridge thrown down between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me then the other depends on my addressee. A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee ... individualistic confidence in oneself, one's sense of personal value, is drawn not from within, not from the depths of one's personality, but from the outside world (Volosinov 1973: 86-89)

Volosinov's analysis of the social nature of language extends to areas that might otherwise be thought of as 'psychological'. He defines 'inner speech' as 'utterance still in the process of generation' (Volosinov 1973; 87) and argues that 'inner speech'

is just as social in character and focus as its articulation through utterance. For Volosinov all forms of communication and experience are socially orientated and given meaning within a social context and the broader socio-ideological structure. Within this framework Volosinov identifies two poles: the 'I-experience', which tends towards extermination as it does not receive feedback from the social milieu; and the 'we-experience' which grows with consciousness and positive social recognition. What we may interpret as an individual's self-confidence, deriving from personal and psycho-social processes, Volosinov would interpret as an ideological form of the 'we-experience', deriving from confident social relations with the outside world, not from within. For Volosinov, an individual's identity, inner thoughts and outward articulations are reliant on processes of social recognition and ultimately the product of social inter-relations. Extrapolating from Volosinov's generative linguistic analysis, it is possible to suggest that identity is confirmed through processes of social recognition and challenged through processes of misrecognition. Identity formation from this perspective remains structured through the identification of processes of 'sameness and difference', inclusion and exclusion at work in the everyday interaction of talking to others. In everyday social encounters, speaking generates forms of identity work that become imbued with affect as individuals recognise and misrecognise people-like-us and 'people-not-like-us.

A future commentary on identity can be found in the work of Stuart Hall. In a piece of work that blends different theoretical approaches to identity, Hall insightfully suggests that identity can be seen as the meeting place between the subjective processes inscribed in the way we live our lives and the discourses that position us:

I use identity to refer to the meeting point, the point of *suture*, between, on the one hand, the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate', speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes, that produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken'. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. They are the result of a successful articulation or 'chaining' of the subject into the flow of discourse (Hall 1996).

In order to explore further the idea of identity as a meeting place, I will draw upon two empirical examples from my own research. The first example is based upon an ethnographic study of gender and sexuality in a secondary school in the UK (Kehily 2002), while the second example is based upon an on-going research project investigating motherhood as a changing identity (Thomson and Kehily 2008).

### **Identity as a meeting place**

In an ethnographic study of gender and sexuality in school, conducted in the mid 1990s (Kehily 2002), I noted the striking continuities between my observations of informal student cultures and those of earlier school-based studies. Gender relations remained polarised in broadly familiar ways. Seemingly successful and secure masculine identities were premised upon being tough and not being gay. While feminine identities were largely premised on the notion of reputation as identified by Lees (date). Despite widespread changes in the national and global landscape marked by processes of de-industrialisation, globalisation and new social movements, informal student cultures could be characterised by a residual and persistent

conservatism that appeared retrogressive and peculiarly out of kilter with 'new times' Working with the day-to-day expressions of sexism, homophobia and hyper-masculinity, I asked, why do student cultures remain so conservative? My conclusions led to an evolving understanding of the school context as a powerful site for defining the limits of gender identity for 13-15 year olds. For students, gender and sexuality remain important sites for the exercise of autonomy and agency within the confined space of the school – a space that they experienced as a total institution pre-eminently concerned with their incarceration and suppression of agency. Within the disempowering environment of education imperatives and external control, student sexual cultures become imbued with significance as adult free and education free zones where students can negotiate what is acceptable and desirable on their own terms (Kehily 2002). The collective activity of young people exists in tension with the individualising culture of contemporary education practice in ways that assert the power of the collective while challenging adult notions of sexuality as a preserve of adulthood. The overly tradition and retrogressive nature of student sexual cultures can also be seen as a protest against egalitarian structures, emergent sexualities and middle class sensibilities.

In the second example the identity of young mothers is brought into focus. An identifiable theme in Skeggs' work is a concern with the negative associations surrounding working-class femininity. Femininity can be understood as a class-based property premised upon appearance – what you look like serves as shorthand for who you are, defining at a glance feminine identity, behaviour and morality. Skeggs (2004) argues that appearance operates as a condensed signifier of class in which negative value is attributed to working-class forms of embodiment and adornment. Seen from this perspective, class exists as a process that works through evaluation, moral attribution and authorization. Within the symbolic economy working-class women are commonly assumed to embody a style of feminine excess, denoting an overly abundant and unruly sexuality that places them dangerously close to the reviled figure of the prostitute. The fecundity of young working-class women, particularly, is viewed as excessive and morally reprehensible. Skeggs claims that the respectable/unrespectable binary that served to evaluate the working class in industrial times now works in different ways to construct certain vices as marketable and desirable while others retain no exchange value. Young working-class mothers provide a striking illustration of a group whose embodied vice is not recoupable for exchange. 'Even in the local context her reproductive use value is limited and limits her movements...white working-class women are yet again becoming the abject of the nation' (2004:23). In contrast to theories of individualization, Skeggs suggests that mobility exists as an unequal resource, offering different points of access to different social groups. In Skeggs' analysis mobility becomes a classed and gendered affair that confines working-class femininity to the local, offering little opportunity for movement.

Comedic excess is one of the ways in which class disgust is expressed – as in the Vicky Pollard and Kate Moss charity event. *Little Britain* excessive comic characters: the adult male who is still breastfed by his mother, the wheelchair bound male who is really able bodied, the teenage mum, Vicky Pollard embodies an aggressive caricature of working class femininity - drinking, shoplifting and fighting are strong features of her repertoire. Representations of young motherhood draw upon popular pathologies of young mothers as irresponsible, *bad* mothers, economically unproductive,

excessive – informing an affective register generating range of emotions from humour to disgust. At a time when the majority of women are delaying the birth of their first child until they are in their 30s or early 40s, women who have children in their teens appear aberrant and out-of-step. The age at which women become mothers reflects their socio-economic status as trends indicate that women who stay in fulltime education, embark upon professional careers and exercise social mobility are more likely to postpone motherhood into middle age. Our study found that *all* women were invested in motherhood as a moment of profound identity change. The social polarisation of motherhood according to age points to age as the ‘master category’ through which normative notions of mothering are constituted. Our sample of 62 first time mothers could be subdivided into three age-based categories that shaped maternal identities and the project of new motherhood. In the 14-25 age group, women at the younger end were aware of the representational field that constructed them as inappropriate mothers. They accounted for their pregnancies in ways that spoke back to popular discourses positioning them as ‘chav’ girls and ‘pram-face’ moms. The middle group of women, age 25 – 35, tended to define the pregnancy as an synchronised biographical event; timing the baby to coincide with financial security, emotional security and the ability to take a career break without disadvantaging their general career prospects or ambitions. The older age group of 35 – 48 spoke of their pregnancy as a last gasp of fertility. Often beset by complicated fertility or relationship histories, they felt pleased and lucky to be pregnant at a time when they were on the point of ‘giving up’.

### **The experience of early motherhood**

Our study points to the ways in which pregnancy constructs young mothers as simultaneously childlike and mature. Their accounts, in keeping with this contradictory positioning are replete with assertions of agency and denials of agency. Young women did not experience their pregnancy as a ‘choice’. Rather, it was something that ‘happened’ and now had to be accommodated. Commonly, young women found themselves at the centre of familial dramas, their pregnancy acting as the trigger for family disputes and heated scenarios. Many young women felt that the common culture of motherhood as expressed in pregnancy magazines and other popular sources did not speak to them. Rather they drew upon soap operas and celebrity culture to make sense of their situation and the furore surrounding it. Most of the young mothers in our study remained in the family home or close to it and maintained close and regular contact with family members. Such intergenerational proximity could be associated with downward social mobility and the pooling resources necessary to support the new mother and baby. The birth of the baby tended to be a family affair involving mothers, grandmothers, friends and partners. Acutely aware of the ways in which their youth and their bump could be read by others, young women spoke back to popularly held constructions of early motherhood. Sophie, a 17 year old woman in our study expresses an awareness of her pregnant body and the ways in which it may elicit moral disapproval:

Some people cover up their bump and some people don’t. I usually do but sometimes my tops do rise and that’s when they get quite shocked ‘cos my tummy’s hanging out... What’s the difference between having a baby now and having a baby when you’re older? There’s still the knowledge, you can’t change the fact that you’re gonna have a baby for the first time. No matter how old you

are it's the same set of issues, you know sleepless nights, breastfeeding, changing the baby and you're not gonna know any different because you're 17 or you're 30. Older people don't think like that. They judge you because you're young and having a baby ... I love being pregnant. I absolutely love it. I'd go through it again and again.

### **Concluding points:**

In returning to the idea of identity as a meeting place it is possible to see identity as relational – formed and played out in relation to those who are similar and those who are different. Gender polarities in school fashion the identities of young women and men while also providing a context for the formulation of intra gender differences. In the second example, young mothers in the 14 -19 age group can be seen as an identifiable cohort defined in relation to other, older mothers. Identity can be seen as multiple: spoken through and in dialogue with a range of social categories and positions. When focusing on young motherhood it is apparent that class is embedded within the age category and, in conjunction with the representational field, capable of mobilising economies of affect. Significantly, identity is contextually specific. In the ethnographic example, school exists as an institutional frame for gender/sexual identities. While in the second example, young motherhood is framed by the policy field, the representational and family/community values. The temporality of identity is commonly overlooked, however, it should be noted that identity is ever in-process and changes over the life course. In both examples it is possible to detect shifting emphases in relationships to past, present, future. Finally, identity is never complete and can incorporate aspirational and fantasy elements. In school contexts, same sex friendship groups become a space for trying out different versions of masculinity/femininity. The developing maternal identity of young women may become part of a biographical project of self, realising an emergent adult identity that is also part of an intergenerational story resonant with themes of social mobility, community and recuperation.

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