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key concepts in
body and society

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Kate Cregan is the author of *Sociology of the Body: Mapping the Abstraction of Embodiment* (2006) and *The Theatre of the Body: Staging Death and Embodying Life in Early Modern London* (2009). The majority of her writing and research is based around understandings of embodiment across time, space and culture – with particular reference to medical interpretations of the body, medical technologies, and the representation of the body in images. Two of her allied interests are ethics (human, social and research) and writing pedagogies, in particular how becoming a writer informs the process of becoming a researcher. She has extensive experience teaching and researching in the humanities and social sciences. Recently, she has co-ordinated the teaching of ethics to medical students across the five years of a medical degree and lectured in sociology at Monash University. Currently, she is co-ordinator and senior lecturer of the interdisciplinary Graduate Researchers in Print writing programme in the Faculty of Arts, Monash University, Melbourne.

about the author

> **Definition** Identity is the sense of 'self' or personhood that is constructed within a social complex. It may be perceived solely in terms of the individual, it may be perceived in terms of group – or other – relations, but it is inevitably caught up in the interplay of our own and others' perceptions of the self. In this, identity and the body are inextricably linked.

There are a variety of ways of understanding identity. From a psychological standpoint, identity is generally conceived as an internal intellectual process linked to stages of development and how we form knowledge about ourselves and the world (see the discussion of Freud under **Psychoanalysis**). This is, generally, explained in terms of our earliest interpersonal relationships (mother, father, siblings) which are said to affect the way we construe and relate to others and society. Psychological notions of identity are, by and large, universalizing and can imply that certain traits are immutable. Early social theories of identity such as Cooley's (1902) 'looking-glass self' were related to these psychological developmental approaches as is Mead's (1934/1962) 'me' and 'I', despite its emphasis on socialization (see also **Appearance and Beauty**). However, psychological understandings of identity tend to be highly individualizing and do not provide sufficient explanation of the individual's identity as a member of the group or a society, even if they have much to say about the individual's capacity to function within a social complex. Goffman's (1971) idea of identity as social performance or 'mask', whereby we adapt that performance for a given audience (private, public, home, work), introduced the notion that identity is not as static as is often assumed.

Across these theories we can already see the embodied nature of identity. Cooley and Mead's understanding of identity requires self-awareness, a reshaping of both behaviour and appearance in response to recognizing our own and/or others' views of our bodily cues. We become acutely aware of our bodily presentation. Similarly, Goffman's

social masks require both the monitoring and re-presentation of ourselves through the management of embodied gestures and behaviours. The conscious (or subconscious) appropriation of a given identity may be intellectual but the social projection of that is fundamentally embodied in practice.

In broad terms, identity can be said to be the result of the material and/or intellectual connections we make with others, with whom we have something in common. One of the clearest examples of such common connection is national identity. Anderson (1991) has characterized this kind of identity as our self-selecting membership of what, in post-modern societies, is an 'imagined community'. We relate emotionally and materially to an anonymous mass of people, very few of whom we may ever meet or talk to – even though we may live next door to them – but with whom we believe we have a shared understanding of what it is to be of that nation.

Identity need not be – indeed rarely is – constituted at a single level. For example, national identity can be incredibly complex. In a multicultural society, this may involve not only identification with the geographical boundaries within which one lives but also (sometimes *rather*) identifications with one or multiple lands in which one does not and may never have resided. These kinds of diasporic connections become more complex and more common as globalization intensifies and people move more readily between nations. The mutability of national identity is a clear example of how it is no longer possible to understand identity, of any kind, as fixed. Just as affiliations to nations have become more abstract, the increasing reflexivity of everyday life in developed countries leads to the further fracturing of identity into the reflexive identities of the post-modern individuals, who take on the responsibility of self-construction as a method of (self-) control in a world in which the certainties (work, family, community) of prior social formations have fractured (Giddens, 1991).

Even within a seemingly straightforward national identity there may be multiple identities that interleave within and over that national identity: ethnic, gender, sexual, disability, religious, political … identities may take precedence over any allegiance to country (see also **Difference**). Any of us has multiple identifications or identities at any one time, that inform and contribute to the self and these shape and are shaped by other people's perceptions of us. Identity is therefore also formed on the basis of rejection, on what we are *not*. For example, fundamentally, I am

not male. This can be closely followed by any number of other *nots*, as well as positive assertions of what I am.

Others perceive our identity through our self-presentation, in which our bodily presentation is implicated. Bourdieu (see **Habitus**) argued that our class identity is visible in the way we hold our bodies, what we wear, our bodily actions, our choice of sport or leisure pursuits and where we live, amongst a whole complex of embodied attributes. The same may be said of identity other than class: skin-colour, gender, sexuality, ability/disability and so on. Identity may be with a nation, it may be with an ethnic group, it may be associated with a gender or a sexual preference, it may lodge in a loose grouping on the basis of bodily habits or outward markings (**Modification/Dysmorphias**), but it is hard to think of a form of identity that does not involve some embodied aspect. Even in a multicultural society national identity hinges on physical and/or geographical location (or the '*not*' of where we are located).

All manner of what might be called difference is linked to identity (**Class/Caste, Colonialism/Post-colonialism, Difference, Disability/ Ability, Race/Ethnicity**). Post-modern constructions of identity hold that none of these is fixed, therefore identity is not fixed. Identity has been assumed to be immutable in historical, positivist understandings because bodies have been assumed to be immutable in relation to all these categories. While he did tend to assume *a* body, undifferentiated on the basis of gender or age, Foucault has nevertheless shown that the dominant understanding of the body is itself a historical construction (**Medicine and Science**) that has changed over time. All the embodied aspects of identity are therefore open to adaptation, conscious presentation and re-presentation (**Modification/Dysmorphias, Performativity**).

Identity is also important to the body in society on the basis of dominant dualistic understandings of the body as a lesser material adjunct to the controlling mind (**Dualism**). All the embodied aspects of identity mentioned above bring to the fore the embodied nature of identity formation. This rejects the abstract construction of identity as an intellectual phenomenon rather than a phenomenological and embodied quality. The political theorization of identity, at least since Hobbes, has been as a facet of the mind. And yet, as sociology and particularly the sociology of the body has shown, much of the prejudice and oppression consequent on the ascription of non-ideal identities has been on the basis of bodily traits (**Class/Caste, Gender/Sex, Nature/ Culture**, etc.).

FURTHER READING

See also the readings for **Class/Caste, Colonialism/Post-colonialism, Difference, Gender/Sex** and **Nature/Culture**.

There are many intellectual theories of identity, which have little to say about the body or bodily effects and yet have bodily ramifications, such as Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934/1962). Some of the key theorists who do attend to the embodied nature of identity are Anderson (1991), Giddens (1991) and of course Goffman (1971). Goffman, in appealing to the physical means by which we shape our behaviour, brought the body into identity and is therefore a key further reading. Crossley (2001) takes the body *as* identity, arguing that we are our bodies. Burkitt (1999) has approached the intersection of the body and identity in modernity, arguing for identity as embodied and relational, through the interplay of body and thought. I also include here Hallam et al. (1999) because, as much of my own writing testifies (Cregan, 2007a, 2007b, 2009) I believe that *the dead are part of the community*, as we prove through our treatment of and the ceremonies we perform upon their bodies as well as our remembrance of them.

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