Self-Identity and Its Discontents: Sociology in the 1990s
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Why Identity and Why Identity in the 1990s?

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the journal *Sociology*, the Editorial Board have decided to publish four e-special issues to showcase the depth of material in its archive. After some discussion the Board agreed that these should be grouped by both time period and theme: the other e-special issues are '1967-1979 Sociology and Social Class' edited by Ryan and Maxwell, 'Sociology in the 1980s – The Rise of Gender' edited by Roth and Dashper, and 'Sociology in the 21st Century – Reminiscence and Redefinition' edited by Jawad, Dolan and Silkington.Identity was chosen as the focus for the present e-special issue as the 1990s was an important period in the development of public and sociological discussions around this slippery concept. This was an era when the politics of group identities came to the fore (around sexuality and ethnicity to name but two). It was also, as we discuss below, the decade when the notion of the 'individualization' of self-identities was widely discussed in sociology and beyond.

Sociologists' interest in the topic of identity has waxed and waned over the years. Much of the work of classic social theory, including Durkheim, Marx, and Simmel, was concerned with the impact of the shift from traditional to modern society on people's sense of self and on the relationship between individual and society. Decades after, the fathers of symbolic interactionism, Mead and Cooley, explored the inherently social processes by which personal identities are formed. Later Goffman's extensive work considered how unwritten rules of interaction inform social identities and their presentation. In spite of this rich tradition, identity did not figure as a topic when David Morgan and Liz Stanley, the editors of *Sociology*, organized a collection around key debates within British sociology to celebrate the journal's 25th anniversary in 1992. The chapters, written by current or recent members of the *Sociology* editorial board, discussed social mobility; women and class; organisational structures; 'industrialism'; inequalities within the household; power; ethnomethodology; and gender (Morgan and Stanley, 1993). The term 'identity' was missing from the contents and index of this collection. Yet within a few years it was ubiquitous across the sociology curriculum and has remained so. This embrace of the term 'identity' did not come without

its problems; it could be argued that it has become so taken for granted that it is rarely analytically interrogated. The happy abandon with which sociologists have adopted 'identity' has led some critics to argue that the term is of limited analytical value to social scientists (for example Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). But the slippages it allows between discussion of personal experiences and social divisions was arguably part of its appeal to many sociologists working in the 1990s. As we have already remarked, this decade saw a great deal of discussion of social identities. The contribution of this literature was to highlight the growing political significance of identities whilst exploring their intersectional and constructed character. But just as significantly, alongside this was a discussion of the personal manifested in concerns with subjectivities, narratives, life styles, and the life course.

The 1990s is often characterised as the decade when British sociology was preoccupied by the individualization thesis, following the publication of Anthony Giddens's *Modernity and Self-Identity* in 1991 and Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society*, originally published in German in 1986 and translated into English in 1992. Broadly, this thesis rested on the assertion that in late modernity people are increasingly disembedded from tradition, come to value their individuality, and act accordingly as reflexive individuals at the centre of their own life projects. The influence of Giddens and Beck within and beyond sociology at this time is well documented. For example, a 2001 survey of UK Professors revealed that they judged Anthony Giddens to have been the sixth most important sociologist of the twentieth century (Halsey, 2004). The same study found Giddens to be the most cited author across *Sociology*, *Sociological Review* and the *British Journal of Sociology* during this era.

It has been interesting to consider the extent to which this growing concern with self-identity and individualization was or was not reflected in the content of *Sociology* during the 1990s. The themes of class and social change, and of gender divisions (key preoccupations of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s) continue to predominate in the journal alongside other longstanding topics including research methods and working lives. However, we can see a broadening out of the topics covered in the journal (whose readership and page length also grew significantly at this time - see Platt, 2003) and the emergence of new themes such as the life course and emotional relationships and a renewed interest in the interplay between personal and social experience. Early indicators of this development were special issues of

Sociology on consumption in 1990 and on biography and autobiography in 1993. More established topics, notably work and organisation, were also re-examined through the lens of individual subjectivity.

The Selection of Papers for the Special Issue

Our task as editors was to choose the articles to be included in this e-special issue. We did so in three stages. Having first agreed the viability of the identity theme, each of us individually conducted a systematic review of the contents of the journal to unearth possible candidates for inclusion. We then shared our long lists and rationales and, through a process of comparison and discussion, came up with a collective short list. This initial conversation was itself enlightening: each of us had our own distinct starting assumptions about how and why identity was significant the 1990s. These reflected our differing interests and backgrounds: for example, Skinner was already teaching Sociology in 1990 whilst May and Rollock added the hindsight of a later generation. Nevertheless, through our exchanges we could pick out emerging themes and an overarching narrative. Having agreed a collective short list we proceeded to narrow down our choice through a process of careful review and discussion. With our themes established, the final selection was made on the basis of what we judged the enduring quality of articles, balanced with the aim of achieving coverage of our chosen themes.

In making our selection we do not claim that our e-special issue is representative of the 1990s journal content overall. Rather we wish to highlight the emergence of a particular set of new concerns during that decade, and the synergies that can be identified between 1990s and contemporary discussions around identity. We were less concerned with the status of the author or the number of citations that an article has received since publication. Some of the authors were leading figures in British Sociology at the time, while other articles were written by people at the early stages of their academic careers. Although the articles do speak to the theoretical concerns at the time, thereby providing a window into 1990s British society and the developing concerns and perspectives of 1990s British sociology, they are more than period pieces and, we hope, of intrinsic interest to contemporary readers. They touch upon important changes, the effects of which remain visible in contemporary society and contemporary sociology. A range of articles included

here discuss the novelty of organizing assumptions that have since become so commonplace that it is now hard to 'make them strange': that death is a test and manifestation of the personality of the individual; that we express who we are through our consumption choices; that we can build intimate relationships by advertising ourselves and sifting others' advertisements; that work is a measure of personal worth; and so on. Underlying these developments are socio-economic shifts now often referred to using the short-hand term 'neoliberalism'. In the 1990s discussions, self, lifestyle, and life course were seen as a counter-point or contrast to older preoccupations with political economy, organizational structures, and social inequalities. From the standpoint of 2015, structural developments and these changes in outlook and expectation seem inseparable: what may have been a weakly-defined backdrop of 'late modernity' has become an all too clear experience of late capitalism.

Although we found a rich pool of articles from which to make our final selection, some topics and themes that we expected to find in the pages of *Sociology* were missing or barely represented. The politics of identity rarely features, nor is there much discussion of cultural sociology or of the implications for social relations and self-understandings of new media and information technology. Sexuality is also notable by its absence and there are only a small number of articles that touch upon ethnic or national belonging. It is worth reflecting on what these missing topics might say about British sociology in the 1990s and the journal's place in the discipline. Certainly much of the intellectual action around these themes seems to have taken place elsewhere. We cannot tell whether this was entirely by choice, but we can speculate that, in part, it is a reflection of the expanding numbers both of academics and of specialist journals and the widening of horizons of sociologists, increasingly willing and able to publish in journals based outside of the UK and/or at the changing boundaries of their subject.

We have grouped the selected papers under four headings: the first section looks at attempts to theorize self-identity in late modernity; this is followed by three papers that illustrate 1990s sociology's growing preoccupation with consumerism and lifestyle; the next section contains articles that share an interest in understanding biography and the life course. The selection finishes with two articles that show something of the debate about

the future of the discipline taking place at that time and the ways in which the preoccupation with self-identity extended to sociologists' wish to write themselves back into their work.

Theorising Self-Identity in Late Modernity

Although Giddens and Beck are often cited, it is notable how few of the selected articles simply accept and apply the individualization thesis wholesale. Many support a common challenge to this thesis that it wrongly understood individualization as a universal and politically neutral process. Feminists, for example, critiqued the individualization thesis for its gender blindness and for not recognising that the individuality and exercise of choice that were presented as the hallmarks of life in late modern society were the purview of a few, mainly white, middle-class men (see for example Skeggs, 1997; McNay, 1999). Articles in our selection highlight how self-identity and individualization are mediated by experiences of gender, ethnicity, age, class, and locality. Moreover, individualization is not a replacement for forms social differentiation, regulation, and exploitation but the means by which these things have come to operate. The articles in this e-special issue also suggest that the accomplishment of the self has become a more complex and problematic process under contemporary conditions. In making these points, our authors use a range of other theoretical tools alongside or against Giddens and Beck, including the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Mead, and Goffman. In addition, the collection reveals the growing influence of feminist epistemologies across UK sociology; this is evident both in the concern to link discussions of personal and social life and in the imperative to reflect on the role and position of the researcher.

Our selection begins with two articles that set out explicitly to engage with the individualization thesis, testing its claims by bringing together theory and empirical case studies. Lucy Bailey (1999), in 'Refracted Selves? A Study of Changes in Self-Identity in the Transition to Motherhood', shows how close examination of the ways in which people negotiate 'life transitions' challenge many of the simplifications of the individualization thesis. Analysing interviews with thirty-three women in the third trimester of their first full-term pregnancy, Bailey shows how becoming a mother is one of the most telling examples

of transitions that place people into a status that comes with many (traditional) expectations. Bailey argues that pregnancy (and perhaps other life transitions) can 'refract' a person's sense of self. In other words, the self is not necessarily fundamentally changed, but rather previously unnoticed aspects of identity come to light as a result of the transition. Thus, for some women, pregnancy and giving birth meant embracing aspects of a gendered identity (even if only temporarily) that encompassed dependence and vulnerability.

In 'Career as a Project of the Self and Labour Process Discipline', Christopher Grey (1994) draws on Foucauldian literature on surveillance in the workplace to explore the ways in which 'governmentality' increasingly operates on, in, and through 'self-governing' subjects. Grey argues that the notion of 'career', because it offers the subject a 'vehicle for the self to "become"', is a particularly powerful technology within the project of self-management and 'one of the most obvious sites for realising the project of the self' (pp. 481-482). Grey takes the example of an accounting firm to develop his analysis; he uses qualitative interviews and personnel records to track staff career trajectories. We learn that the very process of selecting trainees to work at the firm ensures that those employed will already be 'career oriented', in other words, will have begun exercising the required self-management techniques. Once in the company, trainees learn to produce appropriate forms of behaviour in a self-disciplined fashion, and to ensure this, they go through regular appraisals where the criteria include 'enthusiasm' and 'commitment' (in the face of mundane, mind-numbing, and routine job tasks). By expressing the 'right' kind of attitude to work, the trainees are demonstrating their willingness to 'discipline themselves via the operationalization of the category "career"' (p. 487). As employees advance up the organizational ladder (and the content of their job becomes more interesting and challenging), the way in which they can demonstrate such willingness changes, and they must increasingly be prepared to sublimate their whole life to the development of their career, to the point of seeing friends as 'contacts' and socialising as 'networking'.

Nick Crossley's 'Body Techniques, Agency and Intercorporeality: On Goffman's *Relations in Public'* (1995) is a good example of diverse attempts by sociologists in the 1990s to take embodiment seriously and of the varied theoretical detours they took in the process. Crossley's article is to be read as part of his intellectual project at the time, which centred on re-evaluating the work of key sociologists such as Foucault, Bourdieu, and Mead in order to

explore what they could offer a sociology of the body. In this article he presents a new reading of Erving Goffman, and his book *Relations in Public* in particular, recasting his work as a 'a radical departure from the Cartesian, dualist presuppositions of most sociology' (p. 134). For Crossley, Goffman's work can be used to develop and combine the concepts of 'body techniques' (as first used by Mauss) and 'intercorporeality' (first used by Merleau-Ponty) in order to understand the interplay of active bodies and the social worlds in which they move. This engaging article touches upon a range of topics that remain germane in contemporary sociology, including the body, everyday life, and habituation. In doing so, it articulates an account of socialised, embodied behaviour at odds with the emphasis on a reflexive consciousness to be found in the individualization literature.

Floya Anthias's 'Connecting "Race" and Ethnic Phenomena' (1992) is one of only a few examples of discussions of ethnic identity to be found in *Sociology* in the 1990s. It is, however, a landmark contribution to the literature and as such, however dated some of its reference points, merits re-reading for its discussion of the meanings of and relationships between race and ethnicity. The article is relevant to the theme of this e-special issue in its insistence on connecting discussion of group membership to questions of power, inequality, and intersectionality. Anthias makes links between ethnicity, racism, and nationalism. She warns against reducing ethnicity to 'identity' in the sense of a person's ethnicity being merely a question of identification with a collective sentiment. Ethnicity is, she argues, also a question of 'social conditions' that have very real consequences in terms of people's access to resources. The article also expresses concern about the limitations of multiculturalism (a celebration of identities) as an alternative to antiracism (a critique of structured inequalities), a point that is of wider relevance to a discussion of the affordances and weaknesses of identity-based politics.

Identity, Consumption, and Lifestyle

In different ways, the four papers discussed in the previous section reveal a concern with questions of subjectivity and social change but through their detailed empirical and theoretical engagements complicate or challenge the sweeping statements made about self-identity shaped anew in late modernity. One aspect of contemporary life often cited by

Giddens and others as an arena for the development of individualized lifestyles is consumption. In the 1990s, articles on consumption and consumers began to appear in *Sociology*, some of which put these claims to the test.

Alan Warde 'Consumption, Identity-formation and Uncertainty' (1994) takes as its starting point the ways that Beck, Giddens and also Zygmunt Bauman see consumption and lifestyle as crucial to the development of self-identities in contemporary societies. He goes on to explore the consequences of consumption for personal well-being, arguing that a market economy is potentially 'anxiety-provoking' because it requires continual choices under conditions of uncertainty and is accompanied by the risk of making the wrong decisions. These risks are partly managed by following group behaviours and expert advice. Warde audaciously adapts Durkheim's discussion of individuality and social integration in *Suicide* to show that, rather than all consumption being the realm for the reflexive development of self, it takes place under varying conditions of collective attachment and regulation. He concludes that 'we should be wary of perpetuating a politico-ideological sense of the consumption process which imputes freedom to an activity that is not in any important sense free' (p. 897).

Ruth Madigan and Moira Munro's '"House Beautiful": Style and Consumption in the Home' (1996) provides a useful counterpoint to Warde's theorizing, developing many of the same themes through a more concrete discussion of 'home-directed consumption'. Madigan and Munro use postal questionnaires and qualitative interviews (conducted in 1991) to explore the attitudes and behaviours of the residents of a Glasgow housing estate. While it would be wrong, they argue, to see these consumers merely as the dupes of aggressive marketing, it is easy to overstate the view that their consumption is a means of self-expression. 'Home' is a touchstone of identity but this is not only achieved through consumption choices. These choices are influenced by ideas about aesthetics drawn from the media and advertising and constrained by lack of material resources and classed and gendered notions of conformity and respectability.

The articles by Warde and by Madigan and Munro can each be seen as examples of sociologists seeking to engage critically with an increasingly influential political discourse

which sought to recast citizens or workers as consumers. Elizabeth Jagger's 'Marketing the Self, Buying An Other: Dating in a Post Modern, Consumer Society' (1998) is ground-breaking in the way in which it highlights the spread of a logic of consumerism into areas previously seen as operating by different norms and values. Written before the rise of internet dating, Jagger's content analysis of 1094 dating newspaper advertisements seems highly prescient. Her particular concern is with the way in which lifestyle and leisure act as a means through which we create and perform identity work. The criteria by which people advertised themselves and described their prospective partner relied on a narrow range of bodily, personality, and cultural traits that reflect normative masculinity and femininity. These are, however, deployed in ways designed to demonstrate individuality and non-conformity: qualities of self and life style choice are used to temper any suggestion that someone might be a 'traditional' man or woman or be seeking only to match with a partner of a particular social class or income level.

Identity and Life Course

One manifestation of sociology's preoccupation in the 1990s with questions of self-identity and social change was a growth of interest in people's reflexive organization and narration of their own biographies. Here there is a shift from C. Wright Mills's (1959) famous formulation of the sociological imagination as being about understanding the connections between personal biographies and social structures. Instead many sociologists were now committed to interrogating the biographical experience itself. As the Bailey article discussed above shows, this work often focused on the management of 'transitions' in the life course.

Gill Jones 's '"The Same People in the Same Places"? Socio-Spatial Identities and Migration in Youth' *(*1999) considers the transition from youth to adulthood in a study of young people from the Scottish borders. In the context of limited local opportunities, these young people face a crucial life choice: should they leave their rural home or stay? Jones uses a combination of secondary data and in-depth qualitative interviews to understand the relationship between structure and agency in the ways people make and experience this choice. The result is an article that is both a throwback to old-fashioned sociological concerns with community and the urban/rural distinction and forward thinking in its focus on belonging, mobility, and social and cultural capital. Its particular contribution is to

understand the importance of what Jones terms 'socio-spatial identities' emerging out of a complex range of biographical and family experiences to explore the varied relations to place and home exhibited by 'stayers' and 'migrants'.

Bill Bytheway's 'Ageing and biography: The Letters of Bernard and Mary Berenson' (which was published in the 1993 *Sociology* special issue on autobiography) analyses the letters and diary entries (as collected in two separate edited volumes) of Bernard and Mary Berenson, a relatively privileged couple prominent in the American art world in the first half of the 20th Century. The article is structured around two key arguments: first, that sociologists should consider 'ordinary theorizing' about age and ageing (by people themselves rather than social scientists/gerontologists) and second, that men and women experience and theorize ageing differently. Bytheway uses the letters and diaries of the Berensons, written throughout their adult lives to offer insight into how these two people narrate their own ageing processes. Both used similar categories to theorize ageing - as a process of development, as a series of stages, as decline or loss - but 'how they expressed them was gendered' (p.162). Mary seemed more concerned with ageing and generational differences from a relatively young age (30s and 40s), while Bernard's letters rarely mention ageing, until his own advancing years starts to impact on his capacity to work. Berenson does note that this difference is at least partly presentational rather than experiential, the result in part of the backgrounds and interests of the editors of the two volumes he analyses. None-the-less the potential of an approach that considers ageing as an on-going challenge to self-narration shines through.

In one of the standout works of 1990s British sociology, Ian Craib (1994) describes death as the ultimate 'disappointment' to confront the reflexive self-managing individual. In his bluntly titled article 'Heroic Death' (1992), Clive Seale considers how people under conditions of secularization and individualization address this disappointment and 'seek to imbue dying, and caring for the dying, with meaning' (p. 597). Based on open-ended answers to a national random sample survey of 250 relatives and friends of deceased adults, the article highlights changes to professional and lay conventions as to whether it is appropriate to openly acknowledge an ill person's likely death. Seale detects a shift whereby increasingly diagnosis of a fatal illness is seen as an opportunity for the sick and those who

care for them to be 'heroic', gain self-understanding, and demonstrate empathy in the full knowledge of imminent death. As Searle acknowledges, this change is not without its contradictions and complications, not least that many deaths are difficult to interpret in heroic terms, but it is an important indication of the recasting of life as well as death in biographical terms.

Sociological Selves

One less-remarked feature of the identity-turn in British sociology is the ways that sociologists came to reflect on how, in writing, research, and teaching, best to represent their personal experiences and the myriad experiences of their audiences. While some of this reflection may now seem a naïve celebration of authenticity and the capacity to be 'reflexive', it remains an intriguing side bar to wider discussions of self-identity.

In 'Facts or Fictions? Aspects of the Use of Autobiographical Writing in Undergraduate Sociology' (1993) Jane Ribbens offers a thoughtful, theoretically-informed meditation on her experimental use of autobiography with sociology undergraduates taking a course on gender inequality at Oxford Polytechnic (now Oxford Brookes University). Ribbens argues that while sociology has embraced the link between sociological issues and 'biography of the life course', it has failed to reflect this in pedagogy. She acknowledges the various criticisms of the use of autobiography in teaching (for example, a lack of objectivity and clarity of format) but also sees its potential contribution. This lies in the development of a critical self-awareness in students and the connections the use of autobiography allows between personal experience and social processes. For Ribbens, allowing students to write as 'I' is particularly significant as a means of bringing traditionally marginalized voices and experiences to the centre of sociological discussion.

Tellingly, David Morgan begins 'Sociological Imaginings and Imagining Sociology: Bodies, Auto/biographies and Mysteries' (his Presidential Address to the 1998 British Sociological Association Conference) with 'I'. His reflection on the past and future of sociology has moved some distance from the language and concerns set out in the edited collection (Morgan and Stanley, 1993) to which we refer at the start of this introduction. Morgan

considers the potential of sociology as an 'imaginative pursuit, a practice that is capable and disturbing' (p. 648). Morgan offers critically reflection on the state of the discipline, notably in his discussion of how sociologists come to select areas of examination that are often more to do with their own positionalities than genuine, broad engagement with everyday life. For Morgan the new sociology of the body, feminist scholarship, and auto/biographical methods have opened up debate about the role of the social scientist.

Final Reflections

As Morgan's article suggests, in its widening concerns and its preoccupation with questions of self and reflexivity, British Sociology went through significant shifts in the 1990s. These developments took place in critical dialogue with the prophets of individualization within and beyond academia. The various versions of the individualization thesis blended description, analysis, and prescription and rested on fragile assertions about the novelty, character, and universality of the late modern experience. In contrast, the work included in this e-special issue exhibits admirable sophistication and flexibility in the use of theory, new and old. One example of this is the discussion of embodiment that laid the ground work for more recent attempts to revisit the bio-social nexus (Renwick, 2012).

Individualization theorists often relied on common sense generalizations about contemporary life. In contrast, many of the articles in this collection show the commitment of 1990s sociologists to detailed empirical work using (and often combining) a variety of data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews, surveys, archival work, and review of media content. Looking back, it is striking that much of the analysis of these data sources focused on discourse as both a manifestation and framing of people's subjectivities. Alongside this preoccupation with narratives and the discursive mediation of experience, comes a new willingness among sociologists to ask questions about their own objectivity, social position, and influence.

Perhaps at first glance, a collection of articles from this era may not seem an enticing prospect: the 1990s are long enough ago to seem dated but too recent to seem historic. Our exploration of the *Sociology* archive suggests the contrary. There is much here that merits

re-reading and that answers Morgan's call for an 'imaginative sociology' that communicates a sense of wonder at the 'mysteries' of social life.

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