2

SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE

There are many questions to ask about identity and identification. How do we know who we are, and how do others identify us? How does our sense of ourselves as unique individuals square with the realisation that, always and everywhere, we share aspects of our identity with many others? How can we reconcile our routine sense of ourselves as consistently 'who we are' with the knowledge that we can be different things to different people and in different circumstances? To what extent is it possible to become someone, or something, other than what we now are? And is it possible to 'just be myself'?

This book offers a sociological framework[1] within which to think about these questions. Identification is a particularly seductive sociological topic because of the way in which it focuses the sociological imagination on the mundane dramas, dreams and perplexities of everyday human life. It brings together C. Wright Mills' 'public issues' and 'private troubles' and makes sense of each in terms of the other. To put this in another context, 'identity', as a meta-concept that, unusually, makes as much sense individually as collectively, is strategically significant for social theoretical debates about 'structuration' and the relationship between the individual and the collective (Parker 2000; Stones 2005)

DEFINING IDENTITY

In principle, the notion of identity applies to the entire universe of creatures, things and substances, as well as to humans. Its general, non sociological, meanings are worth considering. *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers a Latin root – *identitas*, from *idem*, 'the same' – and two basic meanings:

- the sameness of objects, as in A1 is identical to A2 but not to B1;
- the consistency or continuity over time that is the basis for establishing and grasping the definiteness and distinctiveness of something.

From either angle, the notion of identity involves two criteria of comparison between persons or things: *similarity* and *difference*.

Exploring further, the verb 'to identify' is a necessary accompaniment of identity. There is something active about identity that cannot be ignored: it isn't 'just there', it's not a 'thing', it must *always* be established. This adds two further items to our starter pack:

- to classify things or persons;
- to associate oneself with, or attach oneself to, something or someone else (such as a friend, a sports team or an ideology).

Each of these locates identity in practice: they are both things that people do. The latter also implies a degree of reflexivity.

Which brings us back to *social* identity. While this third edition retains the book's original title – marketing considerations carry some weight, after all – I prefer, wherever possible, simply to talk about 'identity' or 'identification'. This is for two reasons. First, if my argument is correct, all human identities are, by definition, *social* identities. Identifying ourselves, or others, is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction: agreement and disagreement, convention and innovation, communication and negotiation. To add the 'social' in this context is somewhat redundant (cf. Ashton *et al*. 2004: 81). Second, I have argued elsewhere that to distinguish analytically between the 'social' and the 'cultural' misrepresents the observable realities of the human world (Jenkins 2002a: 39–62). Sticking with plain 'identity' prevents me from being seen to do so.

Much writing about identity treats it as some*thing* that simply *is*. Careless reification of this kind pays insufficient attention to how identification works or is done, to process and reflexivity, to the social construction of identity in interaction and institutionally. Identity can only be understood as a process of 'being' or 'becoming'. One's identity – one's identities, indeed, for who we are is always multi-dimensional, singular *and* plural – is never a final or settled matter. Not even death freezes the picture: identity or reputation may be reassessed after death; some identities – sainthood or martyrdom, for example – can only be achieved beyond the grave; and graves and memorials – testaments of identity, in some respects – are not unchanging points in a static landscape (Hallam and Hockey

2001; Sudnow 1967). Bearing this in mind, for sociological purposes identification can be defined minimally thus:

- 'Identity' denotes the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their relations with other individuals and collectivities.
- 'Identification' is the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectivities, and between individuals and collectivities, of relationships of similarity and difference.
- Taken – as they can only be – together, similarity and difference are the dynamic principles of identification, and are at the heart of the human world.

Like most of the ideas in this book, the notion that similarity and difference play off each other is not new. In 1844 Karl Marx wrote the following, in a letter to Feuerbach:

> The unity of man with man, which is based on real differences between men . . . what is this but the concept of society!
>
> (Marx, quoted in Wheen 1999: 55)

More than seventy years later, in a similar vein, Simmel argued that

> the practical significance of men for one another . . . is determined by both similarities and differences among them. Similarity as fact or tendency is no less important than difference. In the most varied forms, both are the great principles of all internal and external development. In fact the cultural history of mankind can be conceived as the history of the struggles and conciliatory attempts between the two.
>
> (Simmel 1950: 30)

Thus, identification is a game of 'playing the *vis-à-vis*' (Boon 1982: 26). Identity is our understanding of who we are and who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us). It is a very practical matter, synthesising relationships of similarity and difference. The outcome of agreement and disagreement, and at least in principle always negotiable, identification is not fixed.

DISCOURSES OF DIFFERENCE

The approach to identity and identification that I explore in this book is at odds with an influential body of contemporary social theory that distinguishes between 'identity' and 'difference', as different *kinds* of

phenomena, and emphasises the pre-eminence of difference. Identity is, at best, confined to a supporting role, in relationships based either on similarity alone or on identification with someone or something.

This 'difference paradigm' has roots in a varied range of debates over the last three decades. One such debate was about theoretical alternatives to structuralism: inspiration was sought in Derrida's notion of *différance* and psychoanalytic models which understood identification as dissociation from ego's earliest significant other(s). Elsewhere, a celebratory emphasis on difference was part of postmodernism's abandonment of modernist grand narratives and universalism. The reconstruction of theory and strategy on the political broad left, following the collapse of European state socialism and the rightward reorientation of politics in the Western social democracies, was also significant. New political alliances were expressed in ideas such as 'identity politics', for which 'difference' provided an organising theme. In this context, the campaigns of a range of interest groups and movements – women, ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, disabled people, for example – have asserted the positivity of diversity and difference, and the ethical and political value of pluralism.

Notable theorists of difference include Seyla Benhabib (1996), Judith Butler (1990), Paul Gilroy (2006), Stuart Hall (1996), Luce Irigaray (1993), Steven Seidman (1997) and Charles Taylor (1994). If nothing else, this brief roll call suggests that theoretical discourses focusing on difference are, as one might perhaps expect, characterised by intellectual and political heterogeneity (for useful surveys, see du Gay *et al.* 2000; Taylor and Spencer 2004; Woodward 1997a). Even so, there is some agreement, and, in the context of my argument, it is important to emphasise that key elements of this broad understanding of identification are right.

Anti-essentialism is perhaps the most obvious of these. To insist that identity is not fixed, immutable or primordial, that it is utterly sociocultural in its origins, and that it is somewhat negotiable and flexible, is the right place to begin if we are to understand how identification works. However, this perspective is not new – it is certainly not post-modern – nor is it as radical as it is often presented. It has been particularly influential in social anthropology, post-Barth (1969), but it has an even longer history in interactionist sociology, stretching back through Goffman, to Hughes, Simmel and Weber. At best, this wheel has been reinvented.

A healthy distrust of political universalism – of inclusive, apparently equal, citizenship – also imbues the work of many of these authors. Gutmann, introducing Taylor's seminal essay 'The Politics of Recognition', describes universalism as 'totalitarian' (1994: 7), while Irigaray puts it thus: 'supposedly universal values . . . turn out to entail *one part of humanity*

having *a hold on the other*' (1993: 16, her emphasis). These are important and defensible views: difficult questions need to be asked about the potential tyranny of compulsory inclusion. The recent convergence in Western Europe of social integration policies with the 'war on terror' is only one case in point. Arguments that diversity is valuable – necessary even – do not conflict with the understanding of identification set out in this book.

Having acknowledged common ground, I must now disagree with two core propositions that are broadly shared by difference theorists. The first insists that knowing who's who is primarily – if not wholly – a matter of establishing and marking differences between people. Hall summarises this point of view with particular clarity:

> [identities] are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity . . . Above all, and directly contrary to the form in which they are constantly invoked, identities are constructed through, not outside, difference . . . identities can function as points of identification and attachment only because of their capacity to exclude.
>
> (Hall 1996: 4–5)

From this perspective, knowing who I am is a matter of distinguishing and distancing myself from you and you, and from that person over there. The recognition of 'us' hinges mainly upon our not being 'them'. In Benhabib's words, 'Since every search for identity includes differentiating oneself from what one is not, identity politics is always and necessarily a politics of the creation of difference' (1996: 3). Note the use of words such as 'only', 'always' and 'necessarily'. Note too that identification *with* and differentiation *from* are seen as dissimilar processes: 'differentiation from' permits 'identification with' to happen, and is thus logically prior and apparently more significant. Difference almost appears to have become the defining principle of collectivity, the fulcrum around which the human world revolves.

The second proposition shared by the difference theorists about which one should, at least, be very sceptical is their argument that difference and identity have become more marked and more significant over the last few decades: 'cultural diversity is, indeed, the fate of the modern world' (Hall 1992: 8). We are, apparently, living in a new globalised epoch of diversity and identity politics. Since I will discuss this further in Chapter 3, I will merely register my disagreement here and move on, to focus on two reasons for rejecting the notion that knowing who's who is primarily a matter of difference.

SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE

In the first place, and leaving aside the established meanings of the word 'identity' discussed earlier in this chapter – for definitions can always be contested – emphasising difference misses the utter interdependence, whether in abstract logic or messy everyday practice, of similarity and difference. Neither makes sense without the other, and identification requires both. And, indeed, some of the writers against whom I am arguing appear to recognise, to some extent, the necessary interplay of similarity and difference:

> identity is always particular, as much about difference as about shared belonging . . . identity can help us to comprehend the formation of the fateful pronoun 'we' and to reckon with the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that it cannot help but to create. This may be one of the most troubling aspects of all: the fact that the formation of every 'we' must leave out or exclude a 'they', that identities depend on the marking of difference.
>
> (Gilroy 1997: 301–302)

Gilroy appears to acknowledge the role of similarity, or 'shared belonging'. Having done so, he nonetheless privileges difference: it remains, for him, the active principle upon which knowing who's who depends.

Against this, the point is that, logically and in everyday interaction, it doesn't make sense to separate similarity and difference in this way, or to accord one greater significance. We cannot have one without the other: to identify something as an A is to assert that it has certain properties in common with all other As, and that it differs from Bs, Cs and so on. To say who I am is to say who or what I am not, but it is also to say with whom I have things in common. For example, one's personal name is one of the definitive markers of individual difference. But, to name oneself is generally also to establish one's public gender. To those with the appropriate contextual knowledge it also positions one in terms of family or kin-group membership. Further local knowledge may enable one's ethnicity or religion, or both, to be established. Thus, while a personal name signifies individual distinctiveness, it also positions its bearer in terms of collective similarities (and, of course, differences).

And there is a more serious problem. If it were possible to assert one's distinctive difference from others without simultaneously indicating those with whom one might have stuff in common, all one could actually do is communicate who or what one is not. Unless one could exhaustively deny the entire array of possible persons, or kinds of person, that one might be

– bar one, of course – it would not be sufficient to communicate who or what one is. Even if one could perform such an implausible feat, it is not clear how one would then give substance to what or who one might claim to be. Difference on its own is simply not enough to establish who's who. It doesn't work.

The conventional solution to this problem is to use the concept of 'identity' to denote relationships of similarity, and to say that 'identity' and 'difference', although utterly distinct, should be thought about together, a view that can be traced back at least as far as Locke in the late seventeenth century (see Anthias 1998; Benhabib 1996; Taylor 1998; Woodward 1997b). This might be fair enough, although it arguably underestimates the degree to which similarity and difference, in order to make any sense at all, must each imply the other. It also flies in the face of what some of the difference theorists actually say. Hall, for example, is emphatic that he is not concerned with 'identity in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness . . . without internal differentiation)' (1996: 4). His model of identification and attachment – derived from a cultural reading of psychoanalysis – depends upon the exclusion of others and the establishment of difference as the foundation of personal meaning and self-regard. Similarity is not even in the frame.

A more significant difficulty with this position is that separating identification and differentiation from each other seems, in practice, to end up privileging the notion of 'identification *with*'. In this mode, identity becomes coterminous with uniformity and conformity, if not outright conformism. Butler, for example, seems only able to understand identity as attachment and subjective conformism. In pursuit of the liberating power of difference, her argument for the subversion and transcendence of identity – or, rather, of what she sees as the illusion, or trap, of identity – is grounded in 'the presumption that identities are self-identical, persisting through time as the same, unified and internally coherent' (Butler 1990: 16). The similarity to Hall's view, quoted above, is striking. It is only Butler's understandings of identity and difference as utterly distinct from each other, and of identity as identification *with*, that allows her the luxury of even imagining the transcendence of identity. The emphasis upon 'identification with' ignores two linked realities: that identification is also a matter of classifying oneself and others, and that classification depends upon the interplay of similarity and difference. Against the utopian possibilities evoked by Butler, it is vital to recognise that absolute differentiation from others – no less than absolute absorption in others – is likely to be a very rare bird indeed (not to mention flightless and in constant danger of extinction).

To summarise the argument so far, knowing who's who involves processes of classification and signification that necessarily invoke criteria of similarity and difference. Attending to difference on its own, or even simply emphasising difference, cannot provide us with a proper account of how it is that we know who's who, or what's what, in the human world. To say this does not, of course, imply any 'objectively real' sense of similarity or difference. It is constructions or attributions of similarity and difference, made by people engaging in the identification of self and others, with which I am concerned.

The above criticisms converge in a recognition that foregrounding difference underestimates the reality and significance of human collectivity. Whatever else might be involved in knowing who's who, it is undeniably a matter of similarity and solidarity, of belonging and community, of 'us' and 'we'. In this, as in other respects, the focus on difference arguably flies in the face of the observable realities of the human world.

'Us', 'we', 'community', 'solidarity' are, however, words that should carry a health warning. They are deeply political – communitarianism and nationalism are good examples of their ideological potential – and we should at least approach them with apposite caution. Charles Taylor's or Judith Butler's discussions of the dangers inherent in 'identity as same-ness', and their arguments for, respectively, the foundational necessity to democracy of the recognition of difference, or the progressively subversive character of difference, are worth remembering. So, too, is Samuel Johnson's famous eighteenth-century characterisation of patriotism as the last refuge of the scoundrel. We should also remember that these notions are imagined. In Anthony Cohen's words (1985), they are 'symbolic constructs'. They are, however, capable of being extremely powerful imaginings, in terms of which people act. They are anything but imaginary, in that they are enormously consequential. Solidarity, once it is successfully conjured up, is a powerful force.

We should also recognise that invocations of similarity are intimately entangled with the conjuring up of difference. One of the things that people have in common in any group is precisely the recognition of other groups or categories from whom they differ. It cannot be otherwise: Hughes understood this in the late 1940s, and Barth developed the idea further (Barth 1969; Hughes 1994: 91–96). But to acknowledge this is a far cry from calling up difference alone – or even mainly – as the primary arbiter of who's who. The human world simply doesn't work like that.

THEORISING IDENTITY

My other basic objection to the difference paradigm is that concentrating on difference makes it difficult to deal with the core questions of social theory, or even, perhaps, to engage in social theory at all. In this context, I take the consistent, and connected, core concerns of social theory to be: 'How should we understand social change?' and 'How are we to understand the relationship between the individual and the collective?' (Jenkins 2002a: 15–20).

Focusing only, or even mainly, on difference is unhelpful if one wants to understand social change, in that it doesn't accord with observable realities. Put simply, collective mobilisation in the pursuit of shared objectives is a characteristic theme of history and social change. It may not be the only important process at work, but it is to be found wherever one looks, and, unavoidably, collective politics involves collective imaginings of similarity as well as of difference (witness the remarks of Marx and Simmel, quoted earlier). To make the point from a different direction, the consequences and processes of the change from agrarian to industrial lifestyles and production – as Durkheim outlined in 1893, in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1984) – can, at least in part, be understood by looking at the interplay and significance of relationships of similarity and difference.

Moving on to the relationship between individuality and collectivity, the problem is even more fundamental. I am not sure that it is possible to have any comprehension of the collective dimensions of social life – other than a merely additive, arithmetical model – if we emphasise difference. If knowing who's who is essentially, or even largely, a matter of fission and exclusion, then where does the 'more-than-the-sum-of-the-parts' that is an enduring mystery of everyday human life come from? In this context, it is noteworthy that most theorists of difference – with the exception of Butler – routinely use collective notions such as 'culture' or 'society' that are in considerable tension with their fetishisation of difference. Perhaps they simply have no choice.

There is also a more general point to be made. Theory of all kinds depends upon three linked processes: abstraction, generalisation and comparison. Social theory is no exception. A model of the human world that prioritises difference offers, at best, only very limited scope for generalisation and comparison. At least one difference theorist has acknowledged this:

> One of the dangers of focusing on difference may be a retreat into empiricism. For the very assertion of the existence of *differences* involves

taking at face value the appearance of living in a diverse and fragmented universe. There is a failure to interrogate what may lie behind or beneath these surface appearances, to find connections and commonalities.

<div align="right">(Anthias 1998: 509, her emphasis)</div>

Apropos empiricism, Anthias is right, although she may understate the case. The problem that she identifies may – and only apparently para-doxically – explain why discussions of difference are so rarely based in systematic empirical research; why there is a dependence, at best, on loose qualitative description; and why the essay is the dominant form. Perhaps this is the only way to disguise, and keep at bay, the ever-present threats of empiricism and a-theoria.

Finally, there is something other to think about than social theory, and something more important. One source of the difference paradigm was the post-1989 realignment and reorientation of left-wing politics; it is easy to sympathise with it as a political move that was appropriate to the times. One of the ethical impulses that stand behind the emphasis on difference is a plea, not just for tolerance of difference, but for its enthusiastic embrace:

If ever-growing social complexity, cultural diversity and a proliferation of identities are indeed a mark of the postmodern world, then all the appeals to our common interest as humans will be as naught unless we can at the same time learn to live with difference.

<div align="right">(Weeks 1990: 92)</div>

Leaving aside the supposed historical novelty or post-modernity of differ-ence, we have returned to Taylor's 'politics of recognition' (1994), a call to arms, whether liberal or radical, on behalf of pluralism. A call that is difficult to ignore. These are values that need to be defended, nurtured and supported, no less today than fifty or a hundred years ago.

They are not, however, enough. There are pressing public issues that are simply not addressed by proclaiming the positivities of difference, or arguing for tolerance and pluralism. They concern collective belonging, collective disadvantage and, not least, the relationship between the freedom to be different, on the one hand, and equality and collective responsibility, on the other. Thinking about these issues – none of which is either new or simple – requires a model of identification that places similarity and difference at its heart, on an equal footing with each other. Even if it is not, to echo Bauman (1999: 190), time to 'recall universalism from exile' – certainly not an unreconstructed universalism, anyway – it is, perhaps,

time for a return to a politics which recognises responses to collective ills other than the purely privatised and individualised.

WHO'S WHO (AND WHAT'S WHAT)

I have argued here, and in Chapter 1, that the human world is unimaginable without some means of knowing who others are and some sense of who we are. Since, unlike other primates, we don't rely on smell or gestures – although these aren't insignificant in face-to-face identification – one of the first things that we do on meeting a stranger is attempt to identify them, to locate them on our 'mindscapes' (Zerubavel 1997). The cues that we rely upon include embodiment, clothing, language, answers to questions, incidental or accidental disclosures of information, and information from third parties. Our efforts are not always successful, either: 'mistaken identity' is a common enough experience to be a staple of folktales and literature. Equally familiar is the theme of 'lost' or 'confused' identity: people who can't prove who they are, who appear not to know 'who they are', who are one thing one moment and something else the next, who are in the throes of 'identity crises'.

Situations such as these provide occasional cause to reflect upon identity. We try to work out who strangers are even when we are merely observing them. We work at presenting ourselves, so that others will work out who we are along the lines that we wish them to. We speculate about whether so-and-so is doing *that* because of 'her identity'. And we talk. We talk about whether people are born gay or become gay because of their upbringing. About what it means to be 'grown up'. About the differences between the English and the Scots (or the Welsh, or the Irish). About the family who have just moved in round the corner: we shake our heads, after all you can't expect anything else, they're from the wrong part of town. About 'Arabs', 'Muslims', 'rag heads' and 'terrorists'. We talk about identity all the time (although we may not always use the word itself).

Change, or its prospect, is particularly likely to provoke concerns about identity. The transformation of everyday life in the affluent West during the 1950s and 1960s, for example, occurred amid argument and conflict about gender, sexuality, generation, race, class, imperialism and patriotism; all of which speak very directly to our topic here. More recently in the United Kingdom, monetary union in Europe – and, indeed, every other aspect of the European Union, from decision-making in the Council of Ministers to the regulations governing sausage manufacture – conjures up the ghosts of centuries of strife with our continental neighbours and is interpreted as another attempt to undermine British national identity.

Public concern about identity may wax and wane, but the perpetual bottom line is that we can't live routine lives as humans without identification, without knowing – and sometimes puzzling about – who we are and who others are. This is true no matter where we are, or what our way of life or language. Without repertoires of identification we would not be able to relate to each other meaningfully or consistently. We would lack that vital sense of who's who and what's what. Without identity there could simply be no human world, as we know it. This is the most basic sense in which identity matters. Accordingly, my focus in the rest of this book is primarily on the mundane matter of how identification works, and the production and reproduction of identities during interaction. Before getting down to this in detail, however, there is one final issue to address, the relationship between modernity and identity. This is the subject of the next chapter.

11

SYMBOLISING BELONGING

Although the previous chapter focused on the role of *difference* in collective identification, it still makes sense to say that the emphasis in collective identification falls upon *similarity*. Group identification, by definition, presupposes that members will see themselves as minimally similar. Categorisation is predicated upon the proposition that those who are categorised have a criterion of identification in common. Collectivity means having something in common, whether 'real' or imagined, trivial or important, strong or weak. Without some commonality there can be no collectivity.

These issues have a long history in social theory, particularly the theme that the less stuff people have in common with each other, the more problematic collective cohesion becomes. Marx's writings on alienation, and his subsequent discussions of class conflict and mobilisation, are actually all about this. When Ferdinand Tönnies, writing in 1887, posited a historical transition from *Gemeinschaft* ('community') to *Gesellschaft* ('association') he, too, was concerned with what people had in common and how it was changing. Durkheim's distinction in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1984), first published in 1893, between the mechanical solidarity of traditional rural life, in which similarity bound people together – an image reminiscent of Marx's description, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, of the French peasantry as 'potatoes in a sack' – and the differentiated complementarity, or organic solidarity, of the newly industrialised world, evokes the same theme. So does his notion of the *conscience collective*.

Ever since Durkheim, the classic territory within which these themes have been explored has been 'the community'. Thinking about community

probably has its deepest roots in the Romantic intellectual tradition in European social thought, in response to the uncertainties and conflicts of rapid modernisation and industrialisation. 'Community' called up an imagined past in which horizons were local, the meaning of life was relatively consensual, co-operation prevailed, and everyone knew everyone else and 'knew their place'. However, in a post-1945 world characterised by affluence, mobility and consumerism, on the one hand, and conflict, the shadow of genocide, and a gradual retreat from socialism, on the other, 'community', and the approach to empirical research known as the 'community study', became increasingly contentious (Bell and Newby 1971; Stein 1960). Agreed definitions of the basic notion became ever more elusive and, facing competition from theoretical newcomers such as 'culture', 'community' slowly withdrew to the margins of the syllabus (where it would eventually be joined by 'class'). Post-modernism's cele-bration of difference, flux and decentred polyvalence looked like the final nail in the concept's coffin.

However, 'community' does not belong to intellectuals. It is a power-ful everyday notion in terms of which people organise their lives and understand the places and settlements in which they live and the quality of their relationships. It expresses a fundamental set of human needs (Doyal and Gough 1991; Ignatieff 1984). Along with the idioms of kinship, friendship, ethnicity and faith, 'community' is one way of talking about the everyday reality that the human world is, collectively, more than the sum of its individual parts (Jenkins 2002a: 63–84). As such, 'community', and its analogues in languages other than English, is among the most important sources of collective identification. Whatever we do with it, it isn't to be ignored.

It probably isn't too surprising, therefore, that the idea of 'community' has experienced a recent revival within the social sciences (Crow and Allen 1994; Delanty 2003). Whether in Bauman's cautious rediscovery of the post-postmodern virtues of collectivity (2001), in communitarianism and the critical responses to it (Etzioni 1993; Sennett 1998), in the notion of 'social capital' (Farr 2004; Portes 1998; Putnam 2000), in lively anthro-pological debates (Amit 2002; Amit and Rapport 2002), in discussions of 'communities of practice' (Barton and Tusting 2005; Wenger 1998) or in empirical studies of aspects of 'community' (Bellah *et al*. 1991, 1996; Blokland 2003; Keller 2003), the idea shows signs of returning to a centre-stage position that would have seemed unlikely twenty years ago.

SYMBOLISING COMMUNITY

Despite this renaissance, in order to understand better community and collectivity I am going to turn to a framework that is, in fact, more than twenty years old itself. Not only is it a previous generation of intellectual software, but, to make matters worse, it has since been repudiated by its author, Anthony Cohen. Drawing on his argument (1994) that selfhood, identification and consciousness are rooted in an irreducible and interior essence of stable, private meanings, Cohen has now taken to task his own work, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (1985), criticising it, and himself, for

> the attribution to identity of the characteristics of relativity and an ephemeral nature; and concomitantly, the denial to identity (communal or individual) of constancy.

> (Cohen 2002: 166)

It isn't the notion of community itself that bothers Cohen. Rather, he is resisting the notion that communal boundaries are by definition negotiable and shifting, merely a matter of who stands where, and deploring the neglect of relatively autonomous communal self-identification that he sees as resulting from the emphasis on transactions at the boundary. Both of these elements of his original argument derive, interestingly enough, from Barth.[1] Collective identification, he seems to be saying, has to be something more solid, something more authentic.

I make no apologies, however, for insisting that Cohen's original model of the 'symbolic construction' of communal and other collective identities remains useful (1982, 1985, 1986). More than useful, in fact: it's indispensable, exploring how people construct a sense of themselves and their fellows as 'belonging' *in* a particular locality or setting of relationships and interaction, and *with* – if not *to* – each other. This is what Cohen meant by 'community' in the 1980s and it seems to be pretty much what he still means (2002: 168–169). Although, the argument was developed during his work in peripheral communities within large-scale polities, his framework offers a set of general, and generalisable, propositions about communal life:

- community membership depends upon the symbolic construction and signification of a mask of similarity which all can wear, an umbrella of solidarity under which all can shelter;
- the similarity of communal membership is thus imagined;
- inasmuch as it is a potent symbolic presence in people's lives, however, it is not imaginary.

Like most worthwhile social theory, Cohen's was a creative synthesis. Drawing on the Durkheimian tradition of British social anthropology – emphasising the role of symbolism in creating solidarity – Cohen's understanding of the significance of communal boundaries, as has already been pointed out, owed much to Barth. With respect to the politics of symbolism, he acknowledged the influence of the Manchester School of social anthropologists, particularly Max Gluckman (1956), Victor Turner (1967) and Abner Cohen (1974), while his emphasis upon meaning derived from Geertz (1973, 1983) and, ultimately, Weber.

Cohen's starting point was that 'community' encompasses notions of similarity and difference, 'us' and 'them' again. This focuses attention on the boundary, which is where the sense of belonging becomes most apparent:

> The sense of difference . . . lies at the heart of people's awareness of their culture and, indeed, makes it appropriate for ethnographers to designate as 'cultures' such arenas of distinctiveness . . . people become aware of their culture when they stand at its boundaries.
>
> (Cohen 1982: 2, 3)

Recognition of a 'sense of us' and community stems from the awareness that things are done differently *there*, and the sense of threat that poses for how things are done *here*. The debt to Barth is obvious: in particular, note that collective forms – such as 'cultures' – are produced by the local sense of difference at the boundary.

However, 'community' in this model is not material or practical in the way that identity is generated interactionally for Barth. But neither is it 'structural'. It is definitively 'cultural', and as such – anticipating Cohen's later arguments about selfhood and identity – mental or cognitive:

> culture – the community as experienced by its members – does not consist in social structure or in 'the doing' of social behaviour. It inheres, rather, in 'the thinking' about it. It is in this sense that we can speak of the community as a symbolic, rather than a structural, construct.
>
> (Cohen 1985: 98)

Emphasising the symbolic construction of 'community', Cohen advanced three arguments:

- *Symbols generate a sense of shared belonging*. A sports team, for example, can excite the allegiance of, thus uniting, all or most of a community's

members, coming, in time, to symbolise the community to its members and to outsiders. Shared rituals – whether weddings and funerals, or rituals of community such as the annual fête or the works outing – can also act *for* the community as symbols *of* community.

- *'Community'*[2] *is itself a symbolic construct upon which people draw, rhetorically and strategically*. Claims to act in the best interests of the 'community' or to represent the 'community' are powerful. We're all supposed to be in favour of 'community': it's a feel-good word carrying a powerful symbolic load, hence its political uses, as in 'community care', for example (Bulmer 1987). 'Community' is ideological: it not only says how things are, it says how they *should* be. It's also 'essentially enshrined in the concept of boundary' (Cohen 1985: 14): it symbolises *exclusion* as well as *inclusion*. Hence its rhetorical potency in ethnically divided situations such as Northern Ireland.

- *Community membership means sharing with other community members a similar 'sense of things', participation in a common symbolic domain*. This does not entail either a local consensus of values or conformity in behaviour: 'community', for example, means different things to different community members. So do symbols of community. The rugby club in a south Wales valley, for example, will be experienced and understood differently by an ex-player, by a teacher who has only recently come to live locally, and by the wife of an unemployed man who spends too much money in the club bar. But each of them may see themselves as supporters of the team, particularly if it's doing well in the Cup, and to each the club may represent 'the community'. What matters is not that people see or understand things the same, or that they see and understand things differently from other communities, but that their shared symbols allow them to *believe* that they do.

Whether we are talking about 'symbols *of* community' or 'community *as* a symbol', the power of the notions and images thus mobilised depends on the capacity of symbols to encompass and condense a range of, not necessarily harmonious or congruent, meanings. By definition, symbols are abstract to a degree, imprecise to a degree, always multi-faceted and frequently implicit or taken for granted in their definition. As a consequence, people can to some degree bestow their own meanings on and in symbols; they can say and do the 'same' things without saying or doing the same things at all. This returns us to the distinction between the nominal and the virtual. The nominal – the name or description of an identification – is always symbolic. In addition to language, it may be further symbolised in heraldry, dress, ritual or other material and practical forms.

Which is precisely why the nominal can be associated with a wide range of virtualities without change or abandonment.

So the sense of homogeneity or uniformity that is apparent within local communities is just that: *apparent* and every inch a collective – and symbolic – construct:

> the members of a community may all assent to the collective wisdom that they are different from other communities in a variety of stereotypical respects. But this is not to say that they see each other, or themselves, manifesting these differences similarly.
>
> (Cohen 1986: 11)

Using an expression that recalled Barth (1981: 12, 79–81), Cohen argued that the ties or bindings of 'community' *aggregate* rather than *integrate*:

> what is actually held in common is not very substantial, being *form* rather than content. Content differs widely among members.
>
> (Cohen 1985: 20)

Differences of opinion and more – of world-view, cosmology and other fundamentals – among and between members of the same community are normal, even inevitable. They are masked by a semblance of agreement and convergence generated by shared communal symbols, and participation in a common symbolic discourse of community membership that constructs and emphasises the boundary between members and non-members. Thus members can present a consistent face to the outside world. One might also say – although Cohen didn't put it like this – that the symbolic construction of community allows people who have to get on with each other to do so without having to explore their differences in damaging detail.

Here Cohen, once again anticipating his later arguments about self-identification, introduced a distinction between the public and the private:

> The boundary thus symbolises the community to its members in two quite different ways: it is the sense they have of its perception by people on the other side – the public face, or 'typical' mode; and it is their own sense of the community as refracted through all the complexities of their lives and experience – the private face, and 'idiosyncratic' mode. It is in the latter mode that we find people thinking about and symbolising their community.
>
> (Cohen 1986: 13)

This is almost a communal 'I' and 'me'. The symbolisation of community is, once again, to be found in 'thinking' rather than in 'doing'.

Cohen rounded his argument out with the suggestion that symbolic boundaries – of hearts and minds – become more important as boundaries of place and locality become less important, with political centralisation, lifestyle standardisation and national integration. The more pressure there is on communities to change as part of this process, the more vigorously boundaries will be symbolised. Difference will be constructed and emphasised and *we*-ness asserted in opposition to *them*. A symbolically contrived sense of local similarity may be the only available defence. In some cases the hardening of an apparently 'traditional' identity may actually serve as a smokescreen, behind which substantial change can take place with less conflict and dislocation.

Various criticisms can be made of Anthony Cohen's original framework. For example, his contrast between 'thinking' and 'doing' is problematic (Jenkins 1981), as is his distinction between 'social structure' and 'culture'. In particular, the epistemological difficulties of his emphasis upon what people *think* cannot be underestimated. Discussing the private 'thinking of community' (Cohen 1986: 9) he anticipated his recent insistence on the essential privacy of meaning and individual identification (1994), discussed in Chapter 5. As suggested there, any analysis developed on these terms is opaque, relying on assertion rather than evidence.

Fortunately, in his original work on *collective* identity, Cohen's emphasis upon individual private thoughts was almost irrelevant. Advancing his argument by means of apt ethnographic case study and illustration, he presented, over and over again, accounts of people *doing* things: saying this or that, participating in rituals, mounting political protests, fishing together, or whatever. It's in and out of what people *do* that a shared sense of things and a shared symbolic universe emerge. And it's in talking together about 'community' – which is, after all, a public *doing* – that its symbolic value is produced and reproduced.

There are other problems, too. Focusing on the anthropologised margins, Cohen overemphasised the homogenising, flattening effect on communities of their integration into nation-states and wider polities. Even more important, he exaggerated the uniformity, and the monolithic tendencies, of large-scale political units. Doing what many anthropologists do – treating 'beyond the community' as the modern equivalent of 'here be dragons' on a mediaeval map – he didn't attend to the complexity, divisions and tensions of state and nation and their constituent institutions. Which is ironic. Almost every thread in his analysis of the 'symbolic construction of community' could have been woven into a model of the

'symbolic construction of the nation' (and indeed, in many respects, it already had: see, for example, Anderson 2006). The 'community' of locality and settlement is no less imagined than the 'community' of the *nation*, and no less symbolically constructed.

A related difficulty is that he didn't explore situations in which collective communal solidarity is *not* symbolically reasserted in the face of external pressure. He replaced structural-functionalism's image of consensus with a model of *imagined* consensus or homogeneity that is no more likely to fit all situations. How, one wonders, would Cohen accommodate the fractured towns and villages of Sicily and Calabria,[3] or inner-city neighbourhoods in the United States,[4] within his framework? The ethnographic evidence suggests that while the conventional understanding of 'community' doesn't fit the bill, situations such as these can't be explained away as anomic disorder either. Cohen's model *can*, however, be expanded to include them, at least in principle. There is ample evidence of collective identification – within families, networks, churches, gangs or informal associations, for example – that could quite easily be grist to his analytical mill. But the mask of *community* has slipped: that *particular* umbrella is in tatters. That Cohen neglected to take on the local fragmentation of communal identification – its symbolic *de*construction, if you like – was an opportunity missed to widen the scope of his theoretical framework.

Allowing for these criticisms, however, his original framework brings much to the sociology of identification. In the first place, he recognised that his analysis wasn't confined to localities of physical co-residence (Cohen 1985: 97–118). Although the emphasis on community as a mental construct created problems, it permitted the application of his model to a wide variety of collectivities: communities of interest, geographically extensive ethnic communities, occupational communities, religious communities, transnational communities, cyber-communities, and so on (see, for example, Howell 2002). These are all collectivities to which one can 'belong'. Cohen's arguments are relevant beyond the village or the neighbourhood. In his edited volume about 'Identity and Diversity in British Cultures' (1986), for example, households, kinship, adolescence and a farm are among the communities of identification discussed by the contributors.

Second, his original framework complements Barth's, offering a more developed model of the relationship between boundaries of identification and their 'contents' – the common sense, common knowledge and patterns of behaviour shared by the people inside the boundary – while still emphasising the possibility of flexibility and variability. Bearing in mind his emphasis upon cognition and concomitant de-emphasis of interaction,

Cohen's original understanding of boundaries was more 'definite' than Barth's (thus already implying, perhaps, his subsequent self-critique). But in taking seriously the 'cultural stuff' within the boundary, and emphasising symbolisation rather than values, Cohen offered an advance on Barth (which further suggests that his critique of his own neglect of stable collective self-identification is probably a little harsh).

Collective identities are not 'internally' homogeneous or consensual. They can and do change; they can and do vary from context to context; they can and do vary from person to person; and yet they can and do *persist*. Cohen's self-critique overlooks the fact that it is precisely the 'constancy' of collective identification that his original framework helps us to understand. Without emphasising the symbolic dimensions of identification – in addition to the transactional and interactional – the enduring more-than-the-sum-of-parts of collectivity cannot, in fact, be fully understood.

SIMILARITY AND DIFFERENCE REVISITED

Symbolisations of community are umbrellas under which diversity can flourish, masks behind which a considerable degree of heterogeneity is possible. In my terms, the mask or umbrella is a *nominal* identification. This is always symbolised: in language, but also potentially in other forms, whether visual, musical or whatever. The practice and experience of community membership, *vis-à-vis* other members and outsiders, is the *virtual* dimension of communal identification. It may, in large degree, be individually idiosyncratic. Both nominal and virtual have internal and external moments of identification; both are a dialectic of group identification and categorisation. Each feeds back upon the other (to return to Barth). The distinction between the nominal and the virtual allows an emphasis upon process and the practices of embodied individuals to be integrated into Cohen's original scheme.

Cohen was saying, most convincingly, that the similarity emphasised by collective identities is a construction, an ongoing historical contrivance, reminiscent perhaps of Bourdieu's 'cultural arbitrary'. It stems from the minimal sharing of a symbolic repertoire. But, of course, and Cohen would not, I think, disagree, in that the individuals concerned believe in it – in the sense of organising their lives with reference to it – it is not only 'socially real', it is consequential. And sometimes very powerfully consequential. A flag may only be a symbol of national unity, but there are too many historical examples of individuals perishing in its defence to take it anything but seriously. There is no such thing as *just* a symbol. Nor can

a community ever be imaginary (even though it can never be anything other than imagined).

And Cohen was saying more: if communal identification is a collective contrivance, it is contrived within a comparative framework of similarity *and* difference. It evokes our difference from them as well as our similarity to each other. But that's not all. Throughout Cohen's argument, and in his choice of examples, he emphasised that the 'belonging' of 'community' is symbolically constructed by people in response to, even as a defence against, their categorisation by outsiders, whether they be the folk from the next village, tourists upon whose cash locals might depend, the representatives of an oil company, environmental protesters, or the officers and impersonal agencies of the state. Against these foils difference is asserted and similarity symbolically constructed; it is in their face that communal identification is necessary. It is here in Cohen's original framework that we see the internal–external dialectic of collective identification at work.

To recall a point made elsewhere, words such as 'response' or 'defence' should not be misconstrued to imply necessary *sequence*. They do not mean that communal identification, the shared sense of belonging together, is absent until, one morning, along comes the outside world to conjure them up. There will always have been an 'outside world', even if only the next village. However, the outside world's salience, its power and size, and its perceived distance and difference from 'us', may all change. In the process, as part of an ongoing dialectic of collective identification, community may be more explicitly stressed and practices of communal symbolisation and differentiation increasingly called into play in the solidary affirmation of similarity and the defence of perceived collective interests. To reiterate another earlier point, collective identificatory strategies stressing symbolisations other than the strictly communal – family, friendship or whatever – may be alternatives to a communal response.

The similarities here with social psychology's 'self-categorisation theory' (Turner 1984; Turner *et al*. 1987) are sufficiently striking to deserve brief comment. That approach argues that in response to 'external' situational contingencies individuals select, from the available possibilities, and not necessarily self-consciously, collective identifications with which to identify themselves (and to identify themselves with). In the process, they contribute to the production and reproduction of the collectivities with which they are identifying, evoking and constructing intra-group similarities and inter-group differences. This theory, with something in common with both Barth and Cohen, could be described as another version

of the internal–external dialectic of identification, albeit a very individualist one.

BOUNDARIES, RELATIONSHIPS AND EMBODIMENT

The internal–external dialectic allows us to think about boundaries of identification – A/not A – without reifying them. One metaphor for boundaries might be the hyphen between the internal and the external (a hyphen, after all, meaning nothing without whatever it connects). In another image, the boundary can be seen as the dialectical synthesis of internal thesis and external antithesis: the identity *is* in important senses the boundary. These ways of thinking about the matter converge, in that each involves at least two simultaneous points of view. The internal definition of A is external from the point of view of B, and *vice versa*. Similarly, A and B can be thesis, antithesis or synthesis, depending on one's starting point (of view). Boundaries are definitively relational, simultaneously connecting and separating one side and another.

This definitively relational nature of boundaries of identification is closely connected to the symbolisation of identity. In the first place, symbols only 'make sense' in relation to other symbols. Meaning is a product of system and relation; nothing means anything on its own. Similarity, for example, cannot be established without also delineating difference. The second place, however, is more interesting. This is

> the line of argument of the French sociologists of *L'Année sociologique* . . . that the social relations of men provide the prototype for the logical relations between things.
>
> (Douglas 1973: 11)

That line of argument stretches from Durkheim and Mauss, via Lévi-Strauss, to Michel Foucault, Mary Douglas herself and Pierre Bourdieu. In the present context, it points to a reciprocal mutuality of signification between symbolisation and identification. This means that identification is not just a sub-set of the general symbolic domain that we routinely, and carelessly, reify as 'culture'. As the symbolic constitution of relationships of similarity and difference between collectivities and embodied individuals, identification provides the basic template – via analogy, metaphor, homology, etc. – for the wider constitution of the world as meaningful. Identification thus emerges as fundamental to cognition, a view which resonates with the arguments of Marx and Mead, that interaction between humans is the *a priori* of consciousness, rather than *vice versa*.

If interactional relations provide the model for symbolic relations – i.e. for *meaning* – then it is important to remember that those are relations between individuals, and that those individuals are embodied. This is recognised by, among others, Douglas (1973), Bourdieu (1977: 87–95; 1990: 66–79) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999). The collective point of view imagines a world with humanity at its centre; the individual point of view centres on the body. With respect to identity, this is perhaps most significant in that the (individual) human body provides a basic metaphor for symbolising and imagining collective identities. It's not only social scientists who 'see' the human world using organic analogies. In English, for example, we talk about 'the head of the family', 'the head of state', 'the heart of the community' or 'the backbone of the organisation'. We say that a particular group 'has guts'. Communities can be 'alive' or 'dead'. One could doubtless find many other examples. Even collective identification, it seems, draws symbolically on embodiment as a model or evocation of its consistency and integrity.

The symbolisation of identification offers a further perspective on the processes during which the embodied individual and the abstract collective converge. Individual and collective identifications are inherently symbolised, particularly in the symbolic interaction of language (remember the discussion of Mead in Chapter 5). Language allows individuals to participate in the collective domain; according to Mead, it permits reflexive selfhood, in the capacity to take on the role of the Other. In summarising what might otherwise be vast amounts of information about people, condensing it into manageable forms, the symbolisation of identification also allows us, sociologically and in everyday life, to think about and to model – in other words to imagine – collectivities and the relations between them. Symbolisation permits the necessary abstraction of individuals and collectivities, and of the relationships between them, which is the constitutional basis of the notion of 'society'.

Among the most important aspects of the symbolisation of identity in this respect is that it allows individual diversity and collective similarity to co-exist within the human world. There is no need to wonder about why people who 'are' the same don't all 'do' the same. For practical purposes and in certain contexts, we simply imagine them as more or less the same. And that imagining is 'socially real'. The symbolisation of identification works, what is more, in a similar fashion whether individually or collectively. One way of talking about selfhood, for example, is as a symbolisation of the complexities of individuals, a means of glossing them with enough consistency to allow others to decide how to act towards them. The identification of individuals with respect to their membership of

collectivities contributes in the same way to the expectations that others have of them. The point is not that this consistency is 'objectively real', but that it provides a plausible basis for a minimum of predictability during interaction and in the course of relationships between people.

The unity of selfhood is in one sense an umbrella or mask, under or behind which the diversity and contradictions of the individually embodied point of view over time and across situations can co-exist, backstage, without having to be perpetually in the front-stage public limelight (to the likely confusion of self and others). The parallel with the 'symbolic construction of community' is clear: selfhood is no less imagined than any other identity. Identification, whether individual or collective, is always symbolically constructed.

THE INESCAPABLE ABSTRACTION OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Looking at symbolisation draws our attention to the necessary abstraction of identification. Sociologically speaking, images of identity – selfhood, community or whatever – look very like what Max Weber called *ideal types* (1949: 90–106). An ideal type is an abstract model of any particular collective pattern or form, with two basic characteristics:

- An ideal type is a synthesis of/from a myriad of 'more or less present and occasionally absent' collective phenomena. Not everything that is a specified feature of an ideal type is necessarily present in any actual case.
- Phenomena are included as elements of an ideal type on the basis of the 'accentuating' point or points of view – in the sociological case, theoretical positions and interests – from which it is constructed.[5]

Among the examples of social scientific ideal types that Weber offered are the 'city-economy', 'capitalistic culture', 'feudalism', 'the state' and 'Christianity'. The construction of ideal types by social scientists is a heuristic procedure that permits comparison and hypothesis formulation in the face of the extreme diversity and density of everyday life.

Weber recognised that many ideal types are not only *analytical* models, but are also meaningful *folk* models (which harks back to the discussion of groups and categories in Chapter 9). Sociologists are not the only people who need to compare things, or frame working hypotheses. Nor do they have any monopoly on the complexity of collective life. Alfred Schutz (1967: 176–250) expanded upon Weber's conception of the ideal type to make this point more thoroughly. Schutz argued that all of our

knowledge of the world – whether commonsensical or sociological – is in the form of ideal typifications. Given the inherently symbolic nature of language this is perhaps no more than we might expect.

Schutz distinguishes our direct face-to-face knowledge of our *fellows* in the everyday human world, from our indirect experience of *contemporaries*, who we have never met and may never meet.[6] Our ideal typical models of our contemporaries are likely to be more abstract than the typifications – based in direct experience – which we draw upon to understand and render more predictable people who we 'know'. There is a continuum, from more concrete to more abstract, which Schutz expresses from an ego's point of view, as a move from *We* to *Thou* to *They*. From the direct vividness of my face-to-face interaction with known others, the human world becomes ever more 'remote and anonymous' as I look out into the world of my contemporaries. Eventually the boundary of that world is reached in artefacts which 'bear witness' to their meaning for some unknown Others, but don't identify those Others to me. Beyond that boundary my contemporaries are inaccessible. What Schutz is saying here is relevant to our understanding of similarity and difference:

> All our knowledge of our fellow men is in the last analysis based on personal experience. Ideal-typical knowledge of our contemporaries, on the other hand, is not concerned with the other person in his given concrete immediacy but in what he is, in the characteristics he has in common with others.
>
> (Schutz 1967: 193)

This resembles closely my proposition that individual identification emphasises difference, while collective identification emphasises similarity. The 'concrete immediacy' of our fellows differentiates one from another as complex individuals; our contemporaries have 'in common' their collective similarity as members of this or that particular category.

Schutz's distinction between fellows and contemporaries illuminates the nuances of the relationship between similarity and difference, as it is worked out differently with respect to individuals and collectivities. For example, despite Schutz's stress on what they have in common, it is clear that contemporaries are definitely individuals, even though they may be shadowy and anonymous. I know that the Mexican navy, for example, is made up of real sailors; I don't recognise any of their faces, however. Even in the case of contemporaries with faces, in the absence of knowledge based in direct personal experience one relies on more superficial, less individualised knowledge about them, among which their participation in

collective identifications, such as gender, ethnicity, residence, class or occupation, will be prominent. Allowing for that, however, that one of my fellows is, say, Mrs Oswald's daughter, baby Helena's mother, and the owner of a red Mazda coupé, who dropped a bag full of groceries outside my door yesterday (which I helped her to pick up at the same time as having a chat about the new couple who have just bought the house two doors away), will probably be more relevant to me than her collective identifications as female, Afro-Caribbean, middle class and a lawyer.

But this example itself demands further elaboration. I cannot, for example, *forget* that Mrs Oswald's daughter is female. Otherwise she would be Mrs Oswald's son, and could not possibly be Helena's mother. And the relevance of gender depends upon point of view, whether I am male or female, regardless of closeness of relationship and directness of knowledge (and not actually regardless: the nature of intimacy and its likelihood between individuals are both influenced by gender). Gender, the embodied intersection of one relationship of similarity and one of difference, is simultaneously and definitively a matter of individual fellowship and collective contemporaneity.

Nor can ethnicity – 'race' in this case – be disregarded. My ethnic point of view matters, depending on context. When I first encountered the woman who I now know to be Helena's mother, that she was Afro-Caribbean may have been the first and most significant thing that I noticed about her. And *is* Mrs Oswald Afro-Caribbean? And what might it tell me if she were not? Similarly, the fact that her daughter owns the red Mazda tells me something about her class, which in itself may call up knowledge about her profession. And that she is a lawyer is a significant aspect of her individual identity as one of my fellows: you never know when you might need a bit of informal legal advice. Etcetera. No less important, there is also the place of collective identifications in *her* self-image, which none of the above even begins to touch on.

Our knowledge of our fellows – their individual identity in our eyes – can never, whether in the last analysis or not, be completely 'based on personal experience' as Schutz claims. I do not, for example, have to experience Mrs Oswald's daughter practising law to know, for all practical purposes and until otherwise proven wrong, not only that she is a lawyer, but also (approximately) what being a lawyer entails. That is a matter of the things she has in common with other members of the professional collectivity – lawyers – that she claims as her own. What we know about individuals as fellows in our everyday lives, and the plausible expectations we have of them, are as much a matter of their collective identifications as our direct experience of them.

Nor are our contemporaries only known to us in terms of their collective similarities to specified others. The President of the United States – as I write it is still George W. Bush – is not one of my fellows. Even so, I would recognise him if I bumped into him in the High Street. In his case, however – unlike his predecessor's, Bill Clinton – I could neither name nor recognise his wife. The media ensures that I know a great deal about Bill and Hillary – from their marriage, to their politics, to their business dealings – although I cannot personally vouch for the accuracy of my knowledge. More to the point, do I know any less about Clinton or Bush than I know about the neighbour with whom I pass the time of day every day, discussing only the garden and the weather, and is what I know any less accurate, less verifiable or less concrete?

One resolution of these questions might suggest that all of our fellows are, in some aspects of their lives and in some circumstances, also our contemporaries. That this is so may, when it becomes apparent, be a potent source of distress in close relationships: 'To think I thought I knew her' is too common a theme to require elaboration. We simply can't have full direct experience of even our closest intimates. Each of our fellows is identified individually by us via their idiosyncratic combination of collective identifications and the synthetic, rolling account provided by our direct experience of them. And on the other hand we know about our contemporaries in vastly different degrees of detail and individuality.

The more people have to do with each other in everyday life, the more likely they will be to identify each other as *fellow* individuals, rather than primarily by reference to their collective identifications. Others, looking into the everyday human world from a distance or 'outside', will, however, be more likely to identify them first as members of a collectivity, as *contemporaries*. Whether someone is my fellow or my contemporary is always a function of my point of view. At the boundary, in encounters between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' – which is, once again, always relative, a matter of point of view – when insiders come to see themselves, in the internal–external dialectic of collective identification, as belonging, there is a constant interplay of similarity and difference. As symbolic constructions, each is imagined. In their consequences, however, neither is imaginary.