

What is identity and what does it do



s What is Identity and what does it do Whilst a great deal has been written about the national identity, group identity and individual identity, there seems to have been rather little research attempting to link individual, group and nation identity. The apparently most relevant previous work is William Bloom's study "Personal identity, national identity and international relations" published in 1990. However on examination this proves rather disappointing apart from preliminary definitions such as "" National Identity .. that paradigm condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with the national symbols - have internalised the symbols of the nation - so that they may act as one psychological group when there is a threat to, or the possibility of the enhancement of, these symbols of national identity" (Bloom, 1990: 52).

Ethnic groups (that is groups with real or apparent genetic similarity) are a central source of values and identity, significantly more so than class, so much so that the modern state has been unable to absorb them. What the modern state has done, however, is to carry through a far-reaching integration of ethnic groups, so that those living in the same state share a range of features, attitudes, values when it comes to politics. Such groups are the central mechanism for providing individuals with their identity; " rather than thinking about individuals 'sacrificing' part of their identity when they become part of a group, [we should regard] individual identity as possible only in the context of secure group attachments... The notion of individuals apart from groups... is a product of western thought, not the human experience" (Gellner, 1993: 76).

" Groupism" then as a primary human behavioural pattern is the readiness to form groups round any observed or imagined differences in bodily or mental

characteristics; almost anything will serve: proximity, language, age, sexual inclination, skin colour, eye and hair colour, shared historical or individual experience, metaphysical beliefs, shared descent - even apparently trivial interests such as Star Trek, soccer, basketball or baseball teams, real ale. Those who consider themselves similar in some respect tend to aggregate, to form a herd or flock and in so doing immediately are distinguished from (more or less strongly) those who identify themselves with other groups. Nations, societies, or states are in-groups on the largest scale, formed of multiple subsidiary in-groups and regarding other nations, societies or states as out-groups. Consideration of smaller groups can throw light on the cohesion of the largest groups. The obverse of the unity of the group is the potential for inter-group conflict. Social identity plays an important role in group-out group relations, the distribution of resources, self-categorization, and expectations for behavior. It is an automatic redefinition of "self" in terms of shared group membership.

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