



## Programme Specification

### Summary

These are interesting times for the study of identity. Identity is central to many of the most significant developments in contemporary society. It has been suggested, for instance, that social and technological changes have led to the replacement of stable identities based on familiar social class hierarchies with multiple, fragmented and more uncertain identity projects based on 'life-style' and consumer choices. It has been argued that family and work-place loyalties and traditional political and community commitments are breaking down and have been replaced by a more volatile and dynamic 'identity politics'. Many have stressed the upsurge of intense solidarities based on religious, ethnic and national identities. The negative side of this is expressed through exclusion and through hostility towards those with different identities.

Identities and Social Action is a major multi-disciplinary research programme that seeks to deepen our understanding of the processes involved in the making of selves, groups and communities. The focus is on how people are constituted in various social sites and how identity practices create social spaces and conflicted and cohesive patterns of social relations. £4m of funding has been released for the programme and the ESRC welcomes original and high quality applications from researchers across the social sciences (including researchers from psychology, sociology, cultural studies, education, sociolinguistics, social anthropology, history, economics, social policy, politics and geography).

### Programme Objectives

The focus of the programme is on the attempts of people with very different trajectories and from very different contexts to build communities and 'liveable' lives. Central to these attempts is the constant mobile process of identity formation and identity stabilisation, and practices of categorisation, grouping, self-making and 'othering'.

The objectives of the programme are as follows:

*To provide systematic empirical evidence concerning contemporary identity practices:* Much public debate and recent social theory is based on untested claims about the changing nature of identity in modern and postmodern societies. These claims concern both the changing bases of identification and social relations and claims about the ways in which people make sense of themselves as individual actors and the new forms of reflexivity, self-construction and relationships emerging as a consequence. The evidence used to support these analyses of 'changing times' is often anecdotal, however. There is an urgent need to ensure that such claims are based on empirical investigation.

*To develop an understanding of the processes of social identification:* There is little understanding of the processes involved in the mobilisation of identity. How does identification occur? How do identities become salient and motivating, linking in to social action? How are identities represented and given content and how do they come to organise people's activities and influence their choices?

*To promote cross-fertilisation between disciplines:* Identity is simultaneously created in social and political practices, embedded in institutional forms and a focus of profound emotional commitment by individuals. A co-ordinated trans-disciplinary programme should help our

understanding of the ways in which different levels of analysis and definitions of identity found across social science interconnect.

*To systematise and integrate theory and to encourage methodological innovation in the study of identity:* An enormous amount has been written about identity and related concepts such as self and subjectivity from a variety of theoretical perspectives such as social constructionism, symbolic interactionism, post-structuralism, micro-sociology and ethnomethodology, psychoanalysis and social identity theory in social psychology. The programme provides an opportunity for review, consolidation and new theoretical development. Similarly, different social science disciplines have approached the study of identity from their own preferred methodological angles ranging from quantitative survey and experimental research to qualitative ethnographic investigations and thematic and discursive analysis. The programme is an opportunity for methodological innovation and the integration of different methodological tools.

*To provide insights of practical and policy relevance to core social issues:* In line with the ESRC's mission to contribute to the "economic competitiveness of the United Kingdom, the effectiveness of public services and policy, and the quality of life", the programme will address the links between identity processes and three particular areas of practical concern: (i) social conflict and social cohesion (ii) political processes and participation and (iii) social exclusion, privilege and hierarchies.

### **Research Areas**

We anticipate that the programme will include research on a wide range of identities (and fusions, intersections and articulations thereof) including gender, ethnicity, social class, disability, sexuality, age, regional and national identities and identities based on religious affiliation. Each of these, of course, raises its own particular issues. What has happened, for example, to the ideal of a 'multi-cultural identity'? What does it mean to be a British Muslim in the context of the recent war with Iraq? What is happening to gender in a supposedly 'post-feminist' age – are we all androgynous now? How do gendered cultures operate? What are their boundaries, limits and impact? How do national and regional, rural and urban identities intersect as bases for action? How are distinctive identities around disability or sexuality being constructed these days in reaction to exclusionary practices and how do we understand the embodiment of identity? And, how do identity affiliations based on large-scale social category memberships (such as gender and ethnicity) intersect with identities based on more local affiliations and statuses (such as identifications with particular work-place or occupational roles)?

In addition to these more specific questions, the strands below pick out broader problematics which could be investigated in relation to many different identities and identity combinations. Three strands have been identified, relating respectively to 'contemporary identity practices', 'identification and social action' and 'identity and areas of practical concern'. While these distinctions are made to guide applicants and to provide some focus for the programme, it is not intended that projects will necessarily fall clearly into any one strand as opposed to the others. Indeed, we anticipate that researchers will want to draw links between the different strands.

In outlining the strands, a wide range of illustrations have been used. These are provided as possibilities in order to clarify and provoke thought. They are certainly not meant to be prescriptive, nor is it suggested that the programme should (or indeed could) cover every detailed point. Some of these topics have already been the focus of extensive research which would provide the context for any new work while other topics have been relatively neglected and require a fresh start. The central task of those involved in commissioning will be to select a set of projects which complement each other and address the overall themes of the programme in imaginative ways.

### **Strand A: Contemporary Identity Practices**

One of the central claims of recent social theory is that the formative social conditions for personhood are now substantially different in globalised and postmodern societies. Individual life histories and senses of self are increasingly shaped by the pressures for

'individualisation'. It has been suggested that 'traditional individuals' embedded in firmly defined places and sites provided by class, region, family, local community and nation state have been replaced by 'liquid individuals' – free-floating, mobile, highly reflexive and self-conscious subjects, privatised in their dealings with others, globalised in their allegiances and busy forming and valuing what Beck has called 'self culture' or the culture of 'life of one's own'. Such claims require careful historical analysis and empirical investigation of the contemporary patterning of identity affiliations.

*Are traditional identity categories no longer motivating?* Is it the case that although social inequality persists, social class has been superseded as a basis for self and other definition? What has been the fate of regional, family and local community based social identities? Identities appear to be much less bounded now by the nation state. To what extent have technological advances enabled people to negotiate and mobilise more globalised attachments and affiliations? Are some individuals identifying themselves as European, for instance, or even as 'world citizens'? What social categorisations and group memberships now engage people's commitments, configure and organise their senses of self? Are these based on life-style and consumption and the conscious staging, fashioning and performing of self? Who are the audiences for contemporary identity performances? Does corporate power, and the emergence of global life-style brands such as Nike and McDonalds, ensure that identities and aspirations are now more homogeneous than in the past? How do people customise, react to and work with identities offered in the market-place?

*What forms of relationships and groupings are emerging?* In response to the breakdown of traditional communities and kin based relationships what new modes of self/other organisation, networks and solidarities are becoming apparent? Are webs of relationships (sexual, romantic, friendship, family based) no longer so dependent on physical proximity? Are singleness, serial monogamy and internet dating, for example, symptoms of 'self culture' and what identity positions do these phenomena foster? Do new forms of urban development such as housing estates in new towns create substantially different forms of community? What are the consequences for identity, particularly children's identities, of the new 'blended' families and possibly more complex and less clear patterns of family relations? And do new technologies such as 'texting' and the mobile phone create what are perhaps better described as 'swarms' rather than 'groups' of connected people?

*Are well-being and the goals for individual identity projects now defined differently?* Identities are normative and often prescriptive. They invoke cultural values and lay ethical and political philosophies about what it means to be a particular kind of person. Identity provides a way of accounting for and evaluating actions and makes people accountable for their behaviour. Are collective and local group-based ideals for personhood changing? Is fragmentation, uncertainty and the multiplicity of identity a new problem and new experience? How do people deal with disparate identities? If identity allows us to organise our activities over time, do some identities allow for more coherence than others? It has been suggested that new modes of individualisation in society are exemplified by the burgeoning interest in popular psychology. Who are now the mentors and guides for our identity projects? How are distress and well-being registered – in what discourses, phenomenologies and practices? What interactional, status and relational failures create trouble and difficulty for identity projects and how is that trouble managed psycho-socially and psychodynamically?

## **Strand B: Identification and Action**

The need to analyse identity at several levels from the psychological to the political is often stressed. This seems particularly necessary when considering the processes involved in identification and the links between identity and social action. How do collective identities 'grab hold' of individuals? What is 'personal' and what is 'social' in this process? Of the many identities which are potentially salient in any social situation, why do people act from one rather than another? Why do individuals invest in some identities rather than others? How much choice do individuals have over their affiliations and allegiances? What differences does the ascription of identity make and where does agency sit in the process of identification? Part of the difficulty in researching and theorising these questions is the lack of a common language across the social sciences. Identity is defined differently in different disciplines and evokes contrasting perspectives and frameworks. One objective for the

programme is to aid the development of greater synthesis and integration of identity theories or at least to develop a clearer sense of the divisions and the incommensurable points. At the societal, political and institutional levels, the processes through which categories of identity are created and gain meaning need to be explored. How are versions of identity communicated and authorised? What is the relation of these to material cultures? How does the social and spatial organisation of institutions, for example, affect the identities of employees and clients? New technologies, such as new modes of surveillance alter the ways people relate to each other and the identity categories available. Similarly rituals, monuments, festivals, moments of collective remembering, the heritage industry, the fashions, habits and routines of everyday consumption all seem important in the emergence and reiteration of the 'content' for identity.

At the psychological or individual level, the theoretical issues in this strand translate into questions about identity, memory, emotion, cognition and the organisation of action over time. What kinds of social actions and social realms does human psychology make possible? What are the consequences of identification for our actions and our relations to others: how we think about them, feel about them and act towards them? What are the ways in which people actively invoke and claim identities for themselves and others? How do they use this to manage their relations with others and to claim rights and resources?

These issues apply across the life course but they also raise some core developmental questions about the ways in which children and adolescents work with identity. How do children and adolescents categorise others, recognise and represent difference and develop local practices in relation to social category based identities in nurseries, schools, colleges and in family settings? Little is known about children's identity cultures particularly as they intersect with issues of social conflict and social exclusion.

### **Strand C: Identity and Policy Matters**

#### ***Social Conflict and Social Cohesion***

Research on identity is well placed to address some of the most troubling phenomena of our times: the exclusion of and discrimination against groups on grounds such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and religion. What are the identity practices adopted by the excluded and the excluders? How do identity cultures form around these experiences and how do moments or sites of inclusion and exclusion co-exist in communities? Through voluntary and forced migration and as an outcome of globalisation, those at what were once defined as the margins are now right at the heart of European centres. The UK is composed of people from very different cultures and with very different histories, backgrounds and experiences sharing common futures. Responses to diversity vary from celebrations of hybridity, cosmopolitanism and difference in parts of the metropolis to the exclusionary politics evident in the rise of the BNP in areas such as Burnley and Sunderland, for example. Identity practices are central to social conflict, group solidarity, inter-group hostility and violence. They relate to patterns of ethnic and religious discrimination fuelled by mass migration, popular representations of asylum seekers and constructions of global conflict as 'clashes of civilisations' between different fundamentalisms. How is identity linked to the treatment of those who are placed outside the group boundary? Do we inevitably discriminate against those we define as 'other' and, if not, what determines how we act towards them? Even if such links can be made in principle, in practice can changing patterns of identification be used to explain and address specific examples of exclusion, discrimination and conflict?

#### ***Political Processes and Participation***

Politics is defined broadly in this strand to include activities at the level of nation-state government and activities found in single organisations and institutions, from 'official' policy making to local and global social movements. Forms of governance whether in a particular work-place or at state level develop modes of representation and practices delineating their domain and these also create the spaces for political actors with particular identities, capacities and aspirations. Familiar examples include, for instance, the 'entrepreneurial subject', the 'responsible citizen', 'the inclusive manager', 'the welfare recipient', 'the deserving family' and the 'lone mother' in policy making. More needs to be known about contemporary emergent identities of this kind, their normative basis, their social psychology

and the ways in which they lead to engagement, indifference or resistance to the political process.

Work on political processes and identity is particularly pertinent in light of recent claims that increasing individualisation and disengagement from more traditional forms of communal political participation has been accompanied by an upsurge in dramatic expressions of collective identity. These might be the identities associated with one issue protest movements, with leisure activities such as football, or the broader 'identity politics' of feminism, disability rights, lesbian and gay movements and religious fundamentalism. The evidence for these new patterns of participation needs to be evaluated, along with their impact and social effects. What are the subjectivities, work upon the self, and the experiences involved in what Castells has described as these emerging 'communal heavens'. More generally, what are the implications of the relationships between identity and political participation for an understanding of how political entrepreneurs are able to form and shape collectivities?

### ***Social Exclusion, Privilege and Hierarchies***

Social exclusion is the consequence of linked sets of problems – economic disadvantage, low incomes, unemployment, relationship and family breakdown, health issues and disability, deprived neighbourhoods, crime, etc. Little is known, however, about the identity dimensions. Social exclusion produces new identity positions and results from the assignment of social identities. What is the impact of exclusionary pressures on the organisation of self? What identity resources can be mobilised in support and what identity dynamics reinforce exclusion?

Similarly, what are the links between identity processes and privilege? If social class is no longer the 'master' identity category and every worker is now encouraged to hone their biographies, educational qualifications and skills to reflexively respond to volatile and rapidly changing employment markets, then how are social elites, social differentiation and privilege maintained? Who does well out of the democratisation of risk and individualisation processes identified by social theorists? How is privilege and status experienced, enacted and represented as life-style, character and personality? What identity positions constitute authority? What do high levels of cultural and social capital look like as identity formations in contemporary sites of power? How are these gendered and how do they relate to ethnicity? Equally, what defensive identity work is required to cope with lack of privilege and social inequality?

### **Contributing Disciplines and Methodological Considerations**

Given the breadth of the issues involved in the study of identity there are no social science disciplines which are excluded from the remit of the programme. If the programme is to meet its objective of understanding the different dimensions of identity processes and the ways they fit together, it is essential that projects are funded from a wide range of disciplines. This means ensuring the inclusion of disciplines (such as social history and psychology) which are traditionally under-represented in programmes of this sort.

Trans-disciplinary debate and cross-fertilisation are important in terms of developments on theoretical, methodological and practical levels. Moreover, the links go beyond the social sciences. Developments in genetics, biology and cosmology all affect the way in which we understand and choose our identities. Equally, the concept of identity is critical to much work in literature, history and philosophy. Individual projects of a trans-disciplinary character will be strongly encouraged, although this is not a requirement for funding. Links between projects will be identified and developed in the course of the programme. The programme Director held workshops over the summer of 2003 for potential applicants and these provided an opportunity also for interested groups to begin developing cross-disciplinary links.

Similarly, the programme will require the employment of a wide range of methods to meet its objectives and will require creativity and methodological innovation. Quantitative and qualitative methods are welcome including experimental and survey research and ethnographic, observational and interview based work. The programme will benefit from both extensive (large sample survey and questionnaire based work) and intensive approaches

(including case studies and 'thick' descriptions of relatively small samples). Projects might focus on sample or population based research designs or take a 'slice of life' approach focused for example on detailed comparison of two contrasting sites for identity work. One constraint is that research should be clearly situated in social life and social action and should have a high level of ecological validity so that relatively direct connections can be made between research findings and identity phenomena on the ground.

Typically projects will run for three years but applications for larger five year projects are also encouraged perhaps but not necessarily with a longitudinal element or phased research design. The majority of the projects will focus on the UK (albeit recognising the globalised character of UK based identities). But projects focused on communities and patterns of social relations internationally where there are important lessons to learn about identity practices and processes are also welcomed.

One of the challenging aspects of studying identity is that so much relevant data is already in existence collected by academics, government and market researchers in many different contexts. Projects based on 'desk scholarship' working with existing data sets rather than collecting new empirical material will be considered. All potential applicants are encouraged to think about integrating existing data sets and sources into their projects and this might be particularly relevant for projects exploring claims about historical changes in identity or considering replicating earlier work to explore social changes. ESRC Research Resources provides a wide range of such resources and information starting with, for example, the Economic and Social Data Service with its UK Data Archive (including the Qualidata Archive) and longitudinal data collections such as British Cohort Study, British Household Panel Survey, Millennium Cohort Study and National Child Development Survey. In addition there is the Centre for Applied Social Surveys and the ESRC/JISC Census of the Population Programme (see the ESRC website for further details).

### **Involvement of Users**

The programme is relevant to a wide range of policy and practice and will seek to build a dialogue between academic researchers and public users. One of the activities of the programme Director will be to map and identify relevant users for identity research in combination with the audiences identified by particular research projects. It is anticipated that a small group of users will be identified where a great deal of effort could be put into aligning the trajectory of research projects with the trajectory of the needs of user groups, then a larger circle of interested groups who might want to draw on the findings as they are disseminated in a more ad hoc fashion.

The following examples illustrate some possible applications which have been raised by users:

- Users in the NHS are interested in the relationship between social identity, the use and the experience of health services by certain groups. More generally, users in local government want to use an understanding of social identity in order to plan service provision that will both meet the needs and be used by all the community.
- Users including the government's Social Exclusion Unit, the Equal Opportunities Commission, and the Disability Rights Commission are interested in using an understanding of the links between identity and discrimination in order to develop their policies. Such work is also of relevance to the Home Office in terms of developing policies on immigration and the dispersal of Asylum seekers.
- Users such as the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) want to know how policies such as faith schools affect the development of religious identities and relationships between religious groups.
- Users such as the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission are concerned with the role of identity in inter-group conflict and the implications for protecting the human rights of different groups.
- Users such as the Consumer Association are concerned with the way that social identity processes may be related to patterns of consumption that lead people into difficulty and debt

Users will be involved in the programme through representation on the programme Advisory Committee. They should also be involved in the steering committees of individual projects especially where they relate to specific practical issues. In addition, users will be involved in the workshops and seminars to be organised in the course of the programme as well as the conferences and workshops that will be organised to disseminate findings at the end of the programme.

### **Management of the Programme**

[Professor Margie Wetherell](#) from the Faculty of Social Sciences, Open University has been appointed as the Director. Her role will be to manage the programme assisted by an Advisory Committee selected from academic and user communities. This team will be responsible for ensuring that projects achieve their individual objectives and for ensuring that, collectively, they achieve the overall objectives of the programme. To this end, co-ordination and interchange between projects will be a priority. It will be achieved through two principal mechanisms:

- Workshop series: There will be regular workshop meetings in which researchers will discuss their work, their assumptions about identity and the ways in which their work links with other levels and topics of analysis.
- Exchanges and meetings: The Director will fund exchanges between researchers on different projects and will also encourage/fund meetings between two or more projects where that would help co-ordinate their contributions.

A key objective of this Programme will also be to look across other ESRC investments and identify opportunities for potential inter-working and the cross fertilisation of thinking on issues of identity. There are a number of allied Programmes funded by the ESRC where there exists a real opportunity to promote and foster interdisciplinary debate through regular dialogue and exchange. These include, for example, the Cultures of Consumption and Devolution and Constitutional Change Programmes and the Genomics initiative.

Both during and at the end of the programme findings will be disseminated both to the academic and user communities through the following mechanisms:

- Web site: The web site will contain details of all projects, of joint initiatives and provide a site for discussion and debate.
- Yearly reports: Each project will contribute to an overall annual report.
- Open conferences: After the second and fourth year of research open conferences will be organised which will promote a dialogue with academic and user communities
- Final workshops and conferences: In the final year of the programme a series of specialist workshops will be organised around both theoretical and practical topics (social conflict, political processes and identity practices and social exclusion). Booklets will be prepared for these conferences summarising the findings of the research. These individual booklets will be collated into a document which will be available to participants at a final inclusive conference.

It is anticipated that the bulk of the money available will be allocated in one funding round with no funds held back for a second round of applications. Some money may be reserved for two year research fellowships for theoretical and empirical integrative work later in the programme.