GIDDENS, MODERNITY
AND SELF-IDENTITY

In this chapter, and the next two, we consider some theoretical approaches which provide us with ways of looking at how people form their sense of self and identity. This will be fleshed out in the discussions of actual media, and actual audiences, in the subsequent chapters. Here, we look at the work of Anthony Giddens on how people understand and shape their self-identity in modern societies, and how the media might feed into this. We begin with some background to his approach, to provide some context.

CLASSICAL AND MODERN

Anthony Giddens combines an old-school, 'classical' sociological style with a contemporary awareness of changes in society, and he is happy to mix new theories with more established sociological perspectives. He was born in 1938, but has kept up with the rolling ball of social change. He hasn't tried to marginalise the impact of feminism in his understanding of society, for instance, and considers change in gender relations to be important. Some commentators criticise him for being too eclectic and for not going into things in enough depth, but those people are normally trying to turn their own narrowness into a virtue, and therefore might not be entirely trustworthy. In interviews, Giddens seems pleasant and self-effacing, which is nice because he has been so prolific that you wouldn't expect him to have had time to develop social skills.

Giddens manages to continue the grand sociological traditions, whilst
dealing with the issues of today. The ‘founding fathers’ of sociology, Durkheim and Weber, cast shadows across his work. The other ‘founding father’ is, of course, Marx, whom Giddens finds less significant for contemporary sociology. Although Giddens had published analyses of Marx in the 1970s, his textbook, *Sociology* (several editions from 1989), shocked the world of sociology teachers by barely mentioning him — especially in contrast with other sociology textbooks, which had previously been obliged to outline a Marxist perspective on every area of sociology. This reflects a frustration with the simplistic arguments of left-wing sociology; whilst it is easy to say that capitalism has ruined everything, Giddens indicates that we need to look for more thorough and sophisticated theories about how the world works today.

**ANTHONY GIDDENS: QUICK FACTS**

- Giddens enterprisingly co-founded Polity Press in 1984, to exercise more power in academic publishing.
- Giddens was a lecturer at the University of Cambridge from 1969, but the institution rejected Giddens’s applications for promotion to a readership for ten years — ‘I think this was a record’, he says — before finally making him a Professor in 1987, after he had published 13 books.
- In 1996, Routledge published a four-volume set entitled *Anthony Giddens: Critical Assessments*, which discussed his work over some 1,800 pages.
- Giddens’s notion of a ‘Third Way’ — which sought to avoid the traditional certainties of left- and right-wing politics — was said to be an intellectual inspiration to New Labour in the UK, and he was given a life peerage in June 2004, as Baron Giddens of Southgate.
- In recent years, Giddens has correspondingly turned to writing more hands-on political books such as *Europe in the Global Age* (2006) and *Over To You, Mr Brown: How Labour Can Win Again* (2007).
- His impact on New Labour may have been patchy, however. David Blunkett’s famously self-serving diaries reveal him dismissing a Giddens speech in 1998 — when Blunkett was Secretary of State for Education and Employment — as ‘all very entertaining’, but ‘an insult’ to those who had been developing a ‘third way’ within politics for the previous 15 years (Blunkett, 2006: 93).
KEY THEMES

The main Giddens themes, of concern to us here, are:

- The fusion of individual actions and grand social forces in one theoretical approach (‘structuration’).
- The impact of ‘late modernity’ – where all activity is the subject of social reflection – on social actors, relationships and institutions.
- The consequent ‘democratisation’ of everything from big organisations to intimate relationships.

Giddens has a number of other related interests, such as globalisation, the state and the ‘third way’ in politics, but these are not so central to the present discussion.

LEFT AND RIGHT

Giddens would not deny that Marx was very important in the development of social science, and his instincts seem to be the nice-to-other-people ones which can be found at the theoretical heart of ‘the left’. But he is frustrated at the left/right divide in social analysis, and became identified as one of the architects of the ‘third way’, which Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Gerhard Schroeder were supposedly interested in – although Giddens’s idea of it seems to be more original and complex than, say, Blair’s mix of left and right traditions (see Giddens’s *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* (1998), *The Third Way and Its Critics* (2000)).

In sociology there has been a long-standing divide between those theorists who prioritise ‘macro level’ studies of social life – looking at the ‘big picture’ of society – and those who emphasise the ‘micro level’ – what everyday life means to individuals. Giddens always had an interesting relationship with this dichotomy. He seemed to admire Durkheim’s preference for broad statements about society and sociology itself (his 1976 treatise on methodology even bore the cheekily grand Durkheimian title *New Rules of Sociological Method*). But Giddens rejects Durkheim’s idea that we should be able to identify laws which will predict how societies will operate, without looking at the meanings understood by individual actors in society. Giddens is here much closer to the other ‘grandfather’ of sociology, Weber, who argued that individuals’ own accounts of social action were paramount. But Giddens recognised that both perspectives had value – and since the ‘macro’ and
‘micro’ levels of social life naturally feed into each other, you shouldn’t have to choose between them. So he came up with the theory of ‘structuration’, which bridges this divide.

**THE THEORY OF STRUCTURATION**

Giddens’s theory of structuration notes that social life is more than random individual acts, but is not merely determined by social forces. To put it another way, it’s not merely a mass of ‘micro’-level activity – but on the other hand, you can’t study it by only looking for ‘macro’-level explanations. Instead, Giddens suggests, human agency and social structure are in a relationship with each other, and it is the repetition of the acts of individual agents which reproduces the structure. This means that there is a social structure – traditions, institutions, moral codes and established ways of doing things; but it also means that these can be changed when people start to ignore them, replace them or reproduce them differently.

In the book *Conversations with Anthony Giddens* (Giddens and Pierson, 1998), we find Giddens untroubled by his critics’ efforts to find problems in the detail of how this might actually work. His ‘oh, you’re making it very complicated, but it’s perfectly simple’ attitude might frustrate some, but you can’t really argue with it, because the whole idea of structuration is perfectly straightforward, and makes sense.

**STRUCTURATION**

| Human agency (micro level activity) and social structure (macro level forces) continuously feed into each other. The social structure is reproduced through repetition of acts by individual people (and therefore can change). |

**SOCIAL ORDER AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION**

But if individuals find it difficult to act in any way that they fancy, what is the nature of those invisible social forces which provide resistance? Giddens finds an answer by drawing an analogy with language: although language only exists in those instances where we speak or write it, people react strongly against others who disregard its rules and conventions. In a similar way, the ‘rules’ of social order may only be ‘in our heads’ – they are not
usually written down, and often have no formal force to back them up — but nevertheless, people can be shocked when seemingly minor social expectations are not adhered to. Harold Garfinkel’s sociological studies in the 1960s showed that when people responded in unexpected ways to everyday questions or situations, other actors could react quite angrily to this breach of the collective understanding of ‘normal behaviour’ (see Garfinkel, 1984 [first published 1967]).

In the case of gender this form of social reproduction is particularly clear. When a boy goes to school wearing eyeliner and a dash of lipstick, the shockwaves — communicated through the conventions of punishment and teasing — can be powerful. And yet he only supplemented his appearance with materials which are used by millions of women every day. Women who choose not to shave their legs or armpits may be singled out in a similar way, treated as deviants for ignoring a social convention about feminine appearance.

People’s everyday actions, then, reinforce and reproduce a set of expectations — and it is this set of other people’s expectations which make up the ‘social forces’ and ‘social structures’ that sociologists talk about. As Giddens puts it, ‘Society only has form, and that form only has effects on people, in so far as structure is produced and reproduced in what people do’ (Giddens and Pierson, 1998: 77).

But why should we care about maintaining this shared framework of reality? Would it matter if other people were surprised by our actions? Giddens argues that people have a “faith” in the coherence of everyday life, which is developed very early in life — when we have to place absolute trust in our carers — and sustained by our ordinary interactions with others (Giddens, 1991: 38). It is because of this faith — a kind of routine trust, extended without a second thought — that some people are so shaken when others challenge the taken-for-granted consensus about how, say, women and men should behave.

This could explain, for example, why some men are disturbed — even angered — to see other men acting in an ‘effeminate’ manner: because this behaviour challenges their everyday understanding of how things should be in the world. (TV entertainers in drag, on the other hand, pose no threat as they are just ‘entertainment’ which can easily be read as a confirmation of gender stereotypes.) People have an emotional investment in their world as they expect it, and for some, certain aberrations are most unwelcome. Others, of course, don’t mind at all. Unfortunately, this account does not explain exactly why appearance or behaviour which crosses traditional gender boundaries can be so much more contentious than other unexpected things, such as unusual forms of hair colour or politeness.
The performance of gender appears here – as it does throughout this book – as something which is learned and policed, and which has to be constantly worked on and monitored.

**GIDDENS, LATE MODERNITY AND POSTMODERNISM**

We are not in a post-modern era, Giddens says. It is a period of *late modernity*. He does not necessarily disagree with the characterisations of recent social life which other theorists have labelled as postmodern – cultural self-consciousness, heightened superficiality, consumerism, scepticism towards theories which aim to explain everything (‘metanarratives’ such as science, religion or Marxism) and so on. Giddens doesn’t dispute these changes, but he says that we haven’t really gone beyond modernity. It has just developed, into late modernity.

So it’s inappropriate to call it postmodernity. Giddens is undoubtedly right that postmodernity isn’t a completely new era – although to be fair, we can note that most major theorists of postmodernity, such as Jean-François Lyotard, did not actually say that postmodernity replaced, and came after, modernity, anyway. Nevertheless, the focus on modernity is useful because the most important contrast for Giddens is between pre-modern (traditional) culture and modern (post-traditional) culture. The phenomena that some have dubbed ‘postmodern’ are, in Giddens’s terms, usually just the more extreme instances of a fully developed modernity. Furthermore, studies such as my Lego identity study (Gauntlett, 2007, discussed below and in Chapter 11) have shown that the postmodernist claim that identities are ‘fragmented’ these days does not match people’s actual experience: individuals may think of their identities as complex and multi-faceted, but they still understand their identity as all one thing, and not fragmented at all.

**POST-TRADITIONAL SOCIETY**

It is important for understanding Giddens to note his interest in the increasingly *post-traditional* nature of society. When tradition dominates, individual actions do not have to be analysed and thought about so much, because choices are already prescribed by the traditions and customs. (Of course, this does not mean that the traditions can never be thought about, or challenged.) In post-traditional times, however, we don’t really worry about the precedents set by previous generations, and options are at least as open as the law and public opinion will allow. All questions of how to behave in society then become matters which we have to consider and make
decisions about. Society becomes much more reflexive and aware of its own precariously constructed state. Giddens is fascinated by the growing amounts of reflexivity in all aspects of society, from formal government at one end of the scale to intimate sexual relationships at the other.

Modernity is post-traditional. A society can’t be fully modern if attitudes, actions or institutions are significantly influenced by traditions, because deference to tradition – doing things just because people did them in the past – is the opposite of modern reflexivity. Because of this, Giddens (1999) suggests that societies which try to ‘modernise’ in the most obvious institutional sense – by becoming something like a capitalist democracy – but which do not throw off other traditions, such as gender inequalities, are likely to fail in their attempt to be successful modern societies.

MODERNITY AND THE SELF

In modern societies – by which we mean not ‘societies today’ but ‘societies where modernity is well developed’ – self-identity becomes an inescapable issue. Even those who would say that they have never given any thought to questions or anxieties about their own identity will inevitably have been compelled to make significant choices throughout their lives, from everyday questions about clothing, appearance and leisure to high-impact decisions about relationships, beliefs and occupations. Whilst earlier societies with a social order based firmly in tradition would provide individuals with (more or less) clearly defined roles, in post-traditional societies we have to work out our roles for ourselves. As Giddens (1991: 70) puts it:
What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour.

The prominence of these questions of identity in modern society is both a consequence and a cause of changes at the institutional level. Typically, Giddens sees connections between the most ‘micro’ aspects of society – individuals’ internal sense of self and identity – and the big ‘macro’ picture of the state, multinational capitalist corporations and globalisation. These different levels, which have traditionally been treated quite separately by sociology, have influence upon each other, and cannot really be understood in isolation.

Take, for example, the changes in intimate relationships which we have seen in the last 60 years – the much greater levels of divorce and separation as people move from one relationship to another, the substantially increased openness about sexuality, and much more conspicuous sexual diversity. These changes cannot be understood by assuming they were led by social institutions and the state, not least of all because conventional thinking on both left and right has been that both capitalism and the ‘moral authorities’ of the state would prefer the population to have stable monogamous family lives.

But these changes cannot be explained by looking only at the individual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEATURES OF LATE MODERNITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The self is not something we are born with, and it is not fixed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Instead, the self is reflexively made – thoughtfully constructed by the individual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We all choose a lifestyle (even if we wouldn’t call it one).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relationships are increasingly like the ‘pure relationship’ of equals, where everything has to be negotiated and there are no external reasons for being together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We accept that all knowledge is provisional, and may be proved wrong in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We need trust in everyday life and relationships, or we’d be paralysed by thoughts of unhappy possibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We accept risks, and choose possible future actions by anticipating outcomes. The media adds to our awareness of risks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
level, either: we couldn’t just say that people spontaneously started to change their minds about how to live. A serious explanation must lie somewhere within the network of macro and micro forces. The changes in marriage, relationships and visible sexuality are associated with the decline of religion and the rise of rationality — social changes brought about by changes in how individuals view life, which in turn stem from social influences and observations. These developments are also a product of changes in the laws relating to marriage and sexuality (macro); but the demand for these changes came from the level of everyday lives (micro). These, in turn, had been affected by the social movements of women’s liberation and egalitarianism (macro); which themselves had grown out of dissipations within everyday life (micro). So change stems from a mesh of micro and macro forces.

The mass media is also likely to influence individuals’ perceptions of their relationships. Whether in serious drama, or celebrity gossip, the need for ‘good stories’ would always support an emphasis on change in relationships. Since almost nobody on TV remains happily married for a lifetime — whether we’re talking about fictional characters or real-life public figures — we inevitably receive a message that monogamous heterosexual stability is, at best, a rare ‘ideal’, which few can expect to achieve. We are encouraged to reflect on our relationships in magazines and self-help books (explicitly), and in movies, comedy and drama (implicitly). The news and factual media inform us about the findings of lifestyle research, and actual social changes in family life. This knowledge is then ‘reappropriated’ by ordinary people, often lending support to non-traditional models of living. Information and ideas from the media do not merely reflect the social world, then, but contribute to its shape, and are central to modern reflexivity.

THE REFLEXIVE PROJECT OF THE SELF

If the self is ‘made’, rather than inherited or just passively static, what form is it in? What is the thing that we make? Giddens says that in the post-traditional order, self-identity becomes a reflexive project — an endeavour that we continuously work and reflect on. We create, maintain and revise a set of biographical narratives — the story of who we are, and how we came to be where we are now.

Self-identity, then, is not a set of traits or observable characteristics. It is a person’s own reflexive understanding of their biography. Self-identity has continuity — that is, it cannot easily be completely changed at will — but that continuity is only a product of the person’s reflexive beliefs about their own biography (Giddens, 1991: 53). A stable self-identity is based on an account
of a person’s life, actions and influences which makes sense to themselves, and which can be explained to other people without much difficulty. It ‘explains’ the past, and is oriented towards an anticipated future. This narrative can always be gently revised, but an individual who tells conspicuously different versions of their biography to friends may be resented and rejected, and acute embarrassment is associated with the revelation that one has provided divergent accounts of past events.

The existential question of self-identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual ‘supplies’ about herself. A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going. The individual’s biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing ‘story’ about the self.

(Giddens, 1991: 54)

A self-identity is not an objective description of what a person is ‘like’, and we would not expect it to be. Take, for example, a middle-aged man who has recently left his wife and moved in with his new lover, a younger woman. His biography covering these events might say that he was the victim of a failed and ultimately loveless marriage, and that his rational move into this new relationship has brought the happiness which he always sought and, indeed, deserved. His wife’s biography, on the other hand, might assert that she did everything she could to make the marriage work, but her pathetic husband was enticed by younger flesh. And the younger woman’s account might view her lover as misunderstood, or exciting, or something else. None of these views is ‘correct’, of course – they are merely interpretations of a situation. Nevertheless, each person’s own view is true as far as they are concerned, and they retain pride in their self-identities.

The ability to maintain a satisfactory story, then, is paramount: to believe in oneself, and command the respect of others, we need a strong narrative which can explain everything that has happened and in which, ideally, we play a heroic role. This narrative, whilst usually built upon a set of real events, needs to be creatively and continuously maintained. Pride and self-esteem, Giddens says, are based on ‘confidence in the integrity and value of the narrative of self-identity’ (1991: 66). Shame, meanwhile, stems from anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative on which self-identity is based – a fear that one’s story isn’t really good enough.
These theories about identity have previously been rather difficult to explore empirically (in the real world). Giddens himself relies mostly on the power of his own philosophical assertions, references to other theorists, and some novels and self-help books. In the Lego identity study which I've mentioned already (Gauntlett, 2007), I sought to make identity issues more tangible — literally — by asking 79 diverse individuals to build metaphorical models of their identities in Lego (the full process is outlined in Chapter 11). The study found that the participants did indeed have a sense of personal identity as a story — a true story, as far as they were concerned, although they knew that others might see the same story differently. In particular, they went somewhat further than Giddens, as we will see later, seeing their own story in the light of the multitude of other stories which we encounter in everyday life (such as movies, soaps, news, anecdotes and adverts). Rather than the theory of the 'reflexive project of the self' being an academic abstraction, the study suggested that it was a commonly accepted part of everyday life (although, of course, everyone understood it in their own way, and would not use Giddens's terminology as such).

**ROMANTIC NARRATIVES**

The notion of constructed biographies is, again, all very modern. Giddens links the rise of the narrative of the self with the emergence of romantic love. Passion and sex have, of course, been around for a very long time, but the discourse of romantic love is said to have developed from the late eighteenth century. 'Romantic love introduced the idea of a narrative into an individual's life', Giddens says (1992: 39) — a story about two individuals with little connection to wider social processes. He connects this development with the simultaneous emergence of the novel — a relatively early form of mass media, suggesting ideal (or less than ideal) romantic life narratives. These stories did not construct love as a partnership of equals, of course — instead, women were associated with a world of femininity and motherhood which was supposedly unknowable to men. Nevertheless, the female protagonists were usually independent and spirited. The masculine world, meanwhile, was detached from the domestic sphere, both emotionally and physically, and involved a decisive sense of purpose in the outside world.

Whilst passionate affairs might come and go rather unpredictably, the more long-term and future-oriented narrative of romantic love created a 'shared history' which made sense of two lives and gave their relationship an important and recognised role. The rise of this 'mutual narrative biography' led individuals to construct accounts of their lives, so that, even if the relationship with their partner went awry, a story still had to be maintained.
And so now the biography of the self has taken on a life of its own, encouraged by a range of narratives suggested by popular media. Feature films, for example, often include the story of two people who are ‘destined’ to be together – they have found ‘the one’, and are happily united as the credits roll. Soap operas, on the other hand, almost always feature characters who move from one relationship to another, and sometimes even back again, because of the demands of the continuous serial form. Lifestyle magazines, as we will see in Chapters 8 and 9, have yet another vocabulary for relationships, which places a heavy emphasis on sexual fulfilment. These sources suggest a (potentially confusing) mix of ways of considering oneself and one’s relationships.

THE REFLEXIVE SELF AND SEXUALITY

Freud famously argued that society sought to repress sexuality. Foucault later suggested that sexuality was not repressed but was more of a social obsession – any efforts to ‘repress’ sex reflected a fascination with it, and would always create even more awareness and talk about it. (More on this in the next chapter.) But Giddens argues that neither of these views is particularly satisfactory. His own argument is that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sexual behaviour became ‘hidden away’ not because of prurience, but because it was being connected to the newly emergent sphere of intimate relationships – partnerships characterised by love and trust (which, we are told, were not common features of marriage in earlier times). ‘Sexual development and sexual satisfaction henceforth became bound to the reflexive project of the self,’ Giddens says (1991: 164). This is really a view shared with Foucault, although Giddens’ emphasis here is more on the recent development of intimate relationships discourses which are fitted into autobiographical narratives (whereas Foucault’s emphasis is more on discourses of the individual sexual body).

With sexuality and sexual identity being regarded, in modern societies, so central to self-identity, issues in this area take on a profound level of importance. The question of one’s sexual orientation, for instance, is of much more fundamental concern to us than taste in music or preference for certain kinds of foods. To have a ‘problem’ in the sexual department can lead people to declare that they no longer feel like a complete man or woman. And of course, this is heightened because sexual feelings are the subject matter of a huge number of songs, films, books, dramas and magazine articles. Other topics of everyday concern, such as food, shopping, pollution, work and illness, do not feature in anything like as many popular media products.
CONSUMERISM AND IDENTITY

Modernity does not, of course, offer up an unendingly diverse set of identities for citizens, newly freed from the chains of tradition, to step into. Many social expectations remain — although these are perhaps the remnants of the traditions which modernity is gradually shrugging off. But in addition, there is capitalism. Here, think not of the dirty factories we associate with Marx’s critique, but of fashion and glamour, must-have toys, blockbusting bands and movies, fine foods and nice houses. As Giddens puts it, ‘Modernity opens up the project of the self, but under conditions strongly influenced by the standardising effects of commodity capitalism’ (1991: 196). The stuff we can buy to ‘express’ ourselves inevitably has an impact upon the project of the self.

Advertising promotes the idea that products will help us to accent our individuality, but of course the market only offers us a certain range of goods. The project of the self is redirected, by the corporate world, into a set of shopping opportunities. Giddens sees this as a corruption of, and a threat to, the true quest for self. At the same time, he notes that people will react creatively to commodification — they will not be compelled to accept any particular product in one specific way. Nevertheless, he says that the reflexive project of the self ‘is in some part necessarily a struggle against commodified influences’ (1991: 200), since the identities which are directly ‘sold’ to us are, by their very nature, similar to the fixed identities of tradition, which the reflexive citizen will question.

LIFESTYLE

Consumerism is one of the clearest ways in which we develop and project a lifestyle. Again, this is a feature of the post-traditional era: since social roles are no longer handed to us by society, we have to make choices — although the options are not, of course, unlimited. ‘Lifestyle choices’ may sound like a luxury of the more affluent classes, but Giddens asserts that everyone in modern society has to select a lifestyle, although different groups will have different possibilities (and wealth would certainly seem to increase the range of options). ‘Lifestyle’ is not only about fancy jobs and conspicuous consumption, though; the term applies to wider choices, behaviours and (to greater or lesser degrees) attitudes and beliefs.

Lifestyles could be said to be like ready-made templates for a narrative of self. But the choice of one lifestyle does not predict any particular type of life story. So a lifestyle is more like a genre: whilst movie directors can choose to make a romance, or a western, or a horror story, we — as
‘directors’ of our own life narratives – can choose a metropolitan or a rural lifestyle, a lifestyle focused on success in work, or one centred on clubbing, sport, romance, or sexual conquests. The best-known lifestyle template must be that of the ‘yuppie’, perhaps because this model emerged in the 1980s as the first radically post-traditional professional identity, based on the individualistic desire to amass personal wealth. This lifestyle stemmed from particular occupations, but also came complete with a handy set of accessories by which would-be yuppies could identify themselves: mobile phone, braces and hair gel (for men), and a conspicuous designer wardrobe. Identifiable yuppie apartments made it easy to decide where to live, and yuppie wine bars gave them somewhere to go in the evening. (Yuppies were effectively satirised by Brett Easton Ellis in *American Psycho* (1991) – and by Mary Harron in the film of the novel (2000) – in which the protagonist finds he can get away with satisfying any desire, including killing people, because no-one will challenge his smooth designer-label identity.)

Lifestyle choices, then, can give our personal narratives an identifiable shape, linking us to communities of people who are ‘like us’ – or people who, at least, have made similar choices. The behaviour associated with our chosen lifestyle will likely have practical value in itself, but is also a visible expression of a certain narrative of self-identity.

The choices which we make in modern society may be affected by the weight of tradition on the one hand, and a sense of relative freedom on the other. Everyday choices about what to eat, what to wear, who to socialise with, are all decisions which position ourselves as one kind of person and not another. And as Giddens says, ‘The more post-traditional the settings in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, its making and remaking’ (1991: 81).

An identity fitted into a lifestyle is not entirely free-floating. A lifestyle is a rather orderly container for identity, each type coming with certain expectations, so that particular actions would be seen as ‘out of character’ with it (Giddens, 1991: 82). However, an individual might have more than one ‘lifestyle’, each one reserved for certain audiences. Giddens calls these ‘lifestyle sectors’ – aspects of lifestyle that go with work, or home, or other relationships.

The importance of the media in propagating many modern lifestyles should be obvious. Whilst some ways of life – rural farming lifestyles, for instance – are not reflected too often on television, and will mostly be passed on by more direct means, ideas about other less traditional ways of life will be disseminated by the media – alongside everyday experience, of course. For example:

- A young person interested in dance music and clubbing might ‘learn’ about this scene first of all from the glossy dance music magazines; then
real-life experience might lead this view to be adapted or replaced – but
the magazines would still exert an influence over associations of the
lifestyle with glamour, or drugs, or whatever.

- A young schoolteacher’s idea of what it means to be a teacher will
mostly be based on their real-life training, experience and observation –
not on something they’ve seen in some TV drama about teachers.
Nevertheless, a meaningful part of their ideal notion of what a teacher
could or should be like may be based on ‘inspirational’ films or dramas
about teachers such as Dead Poets Society (1989), Wonder Boys (2000)
or Freedom Writers (2007).

- People who have moved into a social group which they were previously
unfamiliar with – such as a working-class woman who suddenly lands a
job on Wall Street – may (initially, at least) try to acquire some of the
personal styles, and possessions, which the media typically associates
with them.

The range of lifestyles – or lifestyle ideals – offered by the media may be
limited, but at the same time it is usually broader than those we would
expect to just ‘bump into’ in everyday life. So the media in modernity offers
possibilities and celebrates diversity, but also offers narrow interpretations of
certain roles or lifestyles – depending where you look.

THE BODY, AGENCY AND IDENTITY

Just as the self has become malleable in late modernity, so too has the body.
No longer do we feel that the body is a more or less disappointing ‘given’ –
instead, the body is the outer expression of our self, to be improved and
worked upon; the body has, in the words of Giddens, become ‘reflexively
mobilized’ – thrown into the expanding sphere of personal attributes which
we are required to think about and control.

In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Erving Goffman (1959)
wrote about ‘impression management’ as the means by which a person may
adjust their facial expressions, posture or clothing to suit a particular situ-
ation. In every interaction with another person or group, each of us rou-
tinely fosters more or less of an illusion (which may or may not reflect how
we ‘really’ feel) designed to give the ‘right impression’ to our ‘audience’.
Goffman’s argument should apply to human interactions at any point in
history – even cavemen must have adjusted their faces and apparel to
encourage feelings of affection, admiration or fear, in those they met.

So in what way is the ‘reflexive mobilization’ of the body a new feature
of late modernity? Giddens would suggest that it is to do with the ways in
which all aspects of the body are now 'up for grabs' to a previously unheard-of extent. At the grandest of extremes, operations can now make people taller, slimmer and bustier. Even sex can be changed. On a more commonplace level, we assume that anyone these days can adopt a regime which will make them look more slim, or athletic, or muscular. Whilst we have to admit that different regimes of the body have existed for thousands of years, in different forms, the diversity of the different bodily manipulations available today – and in particular the amount of thought we put into these regimes – may be unique. Certainly the level of media coverage of these possibilities, in magazines and guidebooks, must be unprecedented. As we will see in Chapters 8 and 9, almost all lifestyle magazines for both women and men contain advice on how readers can change their appearance so that they can 'feel good' personally, and be more attractive to others.

Curiously, Giddens is unhappy with Foucault's account of the body and how we present ourselves in society. Foucault 'cannot analyse the relation between body and agency' – the relationship between our outer display and our inner consciousness – 'since to all intents and purposes he equates the two' (Giddens, 1991: 57). In other words, since Foucault sees people as all 'surface' – with no true 'inner self' (that's nothing but discourse, Foucault suggests, all that talk about your inner self) – he is unable to conceive of an inner consciousness driving the external presentations of self. For Foucault, Giddens complains, 'the body plus power equals agency. But this idea will not do, and appears unsophisticated when placed alongside the standpoint developed prior to Foucault by Merleau-Ponty, and contemporaneously by Goffman' (ibid.).

It's funny that Giddens suggests that Goffman is more sophisticated than Foucault, because everybody normally thinks of Foucault as being at the height of sophistication and complexity, whereas Goffman's theatrical metaphor for everyday life – 'all the world's a stage', basically, with everybody presenting a performance for their various audiences – is simple and almost obvious (which doesn't mean it's actually wrong, of course). Foucault's argument is relatively difficult to pin down, whereas Goffman presents his case clearly and in detail, with lots of well-observed examples. Giddens is unimpressed by the challenging vagueness of Foucault and (refreshingly, perhaps?) plumps for the down-to-earth sociological reportage of Goffman.

The problem with The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, though, is that it is very difficult to see what might lie behind all of the displays of self. Apart from the idea of the inner self being basically a cynical actor who wants to get on comfortably with everyone, in any given situation, Goffman
doesn’t give us much to go on. One is reminded, again, of Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), where the narrator of the title, Patrick Bateman, says:

> There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable: *I simply am not there.... I am a noncontingent human being....* But even after admitting this – and I have, countless times, in just about every act I’ve committed – and coming face-to-face with these truths, there is no catharsis. I gain no deeper knowledge about myself, no new understanding can be extracted from my telling.

*(1991: 376–377)*

Bateman is troubled by the apparent lack of a coherent ‘self’ at his core – ‘Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do?’ he wonders (ibid.) – and, like the reader of Goffman, is aware of his own successful performances, but doesn’t know where any of them come from. Since Giddens sees people, in a rather ‘common sense’ way, as thoughtful actors making choices, he is able to skip past this problem.

**THE TRANSFORMATION OF INTIMACY**

In the post-traditional society, as mentioned above, relationships are entered into for the mutual satisfaction of emotional needs – unlike in the marriages of traditional cultures, which (we are told) were primarily for economic and symbolic convenience. Even if love was an element of such a marriage, the partnership would not be disbanded just because one or both parties felt that it was not bringing them complete fulfilment. By contrast, post-traditional relationships are consciously constructed, analysed, or broken up, according to how the participants are feeling. This is what Giddens calls *the transformation of intimacy*, in which an intimate, democratic partnership of two equal ‘soulmates’ becomes important for members of modern society. The traditional idea of ‘marriage for life’ is here replaced with the ‘pure relationship’, in which communication between equal partners (of whatever sex) ensures the couple are always oriented towards mutual satisfaction. The pure relationship is typical of reflexive modernity, where people’s actions are oriented towards the achievement of personal satisfaction. Lest this seem extreme, Giddens admits (1998: 124) that the
pure relationship is an ‘ideal type’, and that in real life today there is still a strong pull of tradition, as well as a consideration for the feelings of others.

Giddens is interested in sexuality and intimacy within – importantly – the contexts of modern everyday life. He criticises Foucault, for example, for putting too much emphasis on sexuality, while failing to come up with adequate accounts of gender, romantic love and the family (Giddens, 1992: 24), all of which are linked with sexuality in different ways. He also suggests that Foucault isn’t that great on sexuality either. The Frenchman’s account doesn’t really explain the explosion in sexual awareness within the past century, for example: how did we get from the dry texts written and studied by a small number of male doctors at the start of the twentieth century, to the mass appeal of sizzling sex specials in popular magazines at the start of the twenty-first? Giddens, in typically sensible and sociological mode, points to the arrival of effective contraception as an important turning-point: once sex was separated from reproduction, sexual pleasure and variety could come to the fore. Reliable birth control paved the way for the ‘sexual revolution’, women’s liberation and the emergence of ‘plastic sexuality’ – sexuality you can play with.

Whilst contraception (in the days before AIDS) had a direct impact on heterosexual sex, it had a knock-on effect on homosexual lives and sexuality generally, as the idea of sexual pleasure in society became more open and less riddled with anxiety. Furthermore, although in traditional societies the important function of reproduction was necessarily focused on heterosexual couples, in more modern times, once reproduction had come under human control, heterosexuality lost its primacy. This, Giddens suggests, is part of the long march of modernity; more and more areas of life come under social control, and so choice and diversity may prosper. (This may be optimistic, and Giddens admits that a point of blithe sexual diversity has not yet been reached – lesbians and gay men still face prejudice, abuse and violence, generally from those people we rightly call ‘unreconstructed’.)

The media has continually reflected – and may have partly led – the changing status of different sexual activities, attitudes and sexualities, spreading awareness of different expectations, and the existence of diversity. The private world of sex, however hidden or visible it had been at different points in the past, has certainly been thrown into the popular public domain in the past two or three decades, by the mass media, in a way which is quite unprecedented. Formal studies of the changing face of sexuality, alongside the representations of sexuality in films, magazines, news reports, pop videos, websites, soap operas and so on, all form part of what Giddens calls the *institutional reflexivity* regarding sex – society talking to itself about sexuality. This greater openness about sex has meant that there is a greater
awareness of sexual skills, techniques and possibilities; and as examples of 'good sex' and 'bad sex' become more conspicuous, so sexual performance becomes more central to relationships overall, and a factor in whether they thrive or fail. Consequently, magazines, books and TV shows contain more sex advice than ever before. Even magazines for men, which were previously happy to admire women’s bodies and assume that the male readers would know how to show the women a good time, are now full of advice for men on how they can impress women in and out of the bedroom (see Chapter 8).

**SELF-HELP, POPULAR CULTURE AND THE IDEAL SELF**

Self-help books are another source of lifestyle information in the modern world. These populist guides would usually be sneered at by academics, but Giddens has studied them to gain some insight into the more popular ways in which modern living is discussed. (I will be discussing self-help books, too, in Chapter 10.) In one such book, *Self-Therapy* by Janette Rainwater (1989), Giddens finds support for his idea that therapy is basically about helping individuals to sort out a strong self-identity based on a coherent and fully understood narrative of the self: a thoroughly modern and reflexive ‘methodology of life-planning’ (Giddens, 1991: 180). But the language of self-help offers new elements, too, such as ‘being true to oneself’, which means that the reader has to construct an ideal self which they can then try to be ‘true’ to. Self-help books are typically about self-actualisation (fulfilling personal potential), and so the self, and the narrative of the self, then has to be directed towards particular goals which, of course, have to be selected. So, from self-help books we acquire a picture of the self as based on a quest for particular achievements, seeking happiness, and trying to put together a narrative in which obstacles are overcome and fulfilment is ultimately reached.

Self-help books, of course, are only the most explicit purveyors of life advice. Many other forms of popular media offer images of what good relationships look like, what constitutes attractiveness, and what makes life worth living. Characters in films usually have clear goals, which we are expected to identify with. Magazines offer specific advice on how to impress and succeed. Game shows, as well as some dramas, equate wealth with happiness (although the dramatic cliché that money brings misery is also popular). If we all have an ‘ideal self’ which is the aspirational heart of self-identity, and which informs our construction of narratives of self-identity, then the mass media must surely play a part in its development in modern
societies. Therefore we will consider actual media examples and their relationship with the construction of self-identity in Chapters 8, 9 and 10.

STORY STRUCTURES

Another influence of the media might be found not in the content of stories, but in the promotion of coherent stories themselves. We come to expect strong, clear narratives, where the motivations of different characters can be identified. For example, Giddens says of soap operas: ‘The form is what matters rather than the content; in these stories one gains a sense of reflexive control over life circumstances, a feeling of a coherent narrative which is a reassuring balance to difficulties in sustaining the narrative of the self in actual social situations’ (Giddens, 1991: 199).

In his book Story, Robert McKee (1999) sets out a template for the structure of a satisfying mainstream movie. Maybe this will show us the archetypal story which people connect with, and which they would want to live their own lives by? The point of the book is not to tell screenwriters what their movies should be about, but describes the general way in which a well-told story should unfold. The model can be applied to any story, from a domestic period drama to a sci-fi action thriller. Whilst McKee welcomes all kinds of variations, he suggests that the ‘classic’ kind of story involves an initially reluctant protagonist who is drawn into a world of challenges, faces various crises, gets to a point where all seems lost, but ultimately arrives at a climax (beginning 20 minutes before the end, please) where the hero and/or the situation is changed forever. We can see that this is the basic structure of many popular movies, old and new, from The Battleship Potemkin (1925) and The Wizard of Oz (1939) to Music and Lyrics (2007) and Hot Fuzz (2007). Whether you have loan Gruffudd as bendy-limbed Mr Fantastic in Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer (2007) or Ioan Gruffudd as anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce in Amazing Grace (2007), this story structure remains present and correct.

In a book from the same screenwriting shelf, The Writer’s Journey, Hollywood ‘story consultant’ Christopher Vogler (1999) draws on ancient and supposedly ‘universal’ myths and archetypes to suggest a rather more precise sequence of elements which should make a successful film – one which is able to touch hearts around the world. The ‘Hero’s Journey’ described by Vogler, drawing upon the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell, comes in 12 stages. A hero is introduced in their everyday environment (the ‘ordinary world’), where they receive a ‘call to adventure’, which is refused. Encouraged by a mentor, however, they enter the ‘special world’ of the story, and encounter tests, allies and enemies. The hero approaches the
heart of the story, and has to survive a traumatic (ideally, life-threatening) ordeal. They get a reward, but are pursued on ‘the road back’ to the ordinary world. Finally the hero experiences a transformative ‘resurrection’, and returns with a prize which will benefit the ordinary world.

Although this may look like a very prescriptive formula, Vogler insists that there is no fixed order for these elements, and that they can be applied to any kind of story. Vogler is not providing a new recipe for shaping stories, but rather feels that he is distilling the story elements which have been present in many super-popular stories in the past, from ancient myths and fairy tales to the Star Wars saga (1977–2005) and almost every other blockbuster.

But what do these Hollywood story tips have to do with our discussion? Both Robert McKee and Christopher Vogler consider the connections between popular stories and everyday life to be strong. McKee suggests that ‘our appetite for story is a reflection of the profound human need to grasp the patterns of living, not merely as an intellectual exercise, but within a very personal, emotional experience’ (1999: 12). He quotes Kenneth Burke’s assertion that stories are ‘equipment for living’. Vogler goes even further:

I came looking for the design principles of storytelling, but on the road I found something more; a set of principles for living. I came to believe that the Hero’s Journey is nothing less than a handbook for life, a complete instruction manual in the art of being human.

(1999: ix)

The key story elements described by the two authors do not appear as a result of coincidence or chance. Indeed, George Lucas has acknowledged the influence of Joseph Campbell’s studies of mythology upon the Star Wars plots, and director James Cameron accounted for the phenomenal international success of his Titanic (1997) by noting that it ‘intentionally incorporates universals of human experience that are timeless ... By dealing in archetypes, the film touches people in all cultures and of all ages’ (quoted in Vogler, 1999: 243).

Whether truly ‘universal’ or not, these ‘classic’ story structures and character types do certainly seem to be appealing and meaningful to many people around the world. They are stories which we can relate to, and which we enjoy. The international success of certain stories seems to confirm this – for instance, the examples we discussed in Chapter 4, Ugly Betty (2006–) and the Spider-Man movie series (2001, 2004, 2007), have been incredibly successful in diverse countries around the world, presumably because they tell of a good ‘everyman’/‘everywoman’ kind of character...
who struggles with extraordinarily testing situations but is eventually victorious. It seems likely, then – to return to the Giddens terminology – that we would borrow from these stories when shaping our narratives of the self.

As mentioned above (p. 109), the Lego identity study (Gauntlett, 2007) found that individuals do indeed use story frames in their understanding of their own lives. The analysis of the Lego identity models drew upon the work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who argued that narratives provide their audiences with the opportunity to consider ethical questions. Ricoeur suggests that literature – which we can take to mean all kinds of fictional narrative – is ‘a vast laboratory for thought experiments in which the resources of variation encompassed by narrative identity are put to the test of narration’ (1992: 148). In other words, all possible ways of living life are played out in the stories that are told in a culture, and we learn from stories of greed, lust, hate, love, kindness and heroism, and develop our own narrative of self in relation to these templates. Popular media obviously provides us with many such narratives every day, including television drama and soaps, movies, comics, video games, and even the ‘true’ narratives about celebrities and reality TV stars which appear across a range of media. Such narratives give people the chance to think about what constitutes a ‘good life’ or a desirable identity. The Lego study found that individuals sought to construct a story of identity – often building on the common narrative frame of a journey – which was unified and drew in other elements of the story-frames suggested by popular media (Gauntlett, 2007: 194–195; and see Chapter 11).

THE ANTI-GIDDENS: STJEPAN MEŠTROVIĆ

Much of the appeal of Giddens’s work rests on his belief in people’s own capacities – he sees people as rational agents, in control of their lives, who have the ability to evaluate received ideas and creatively bring shape to their own lives. I should perhaps note, or admit, that – although I happened not to have studied Giddens properly until preparing the first edition of this book – my own work has also always favoured this approach. For example, in previous books – based on empirical research – I have emphasised the ability of people to resist media messages (Gauntlett, 1995, 1997, 2005, Gauntlett and Hill, 1999), the ability of young people to make their own creative media texts (1997), the ability of audiences to make television programmes relevant to their own lives (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999) and the ability of ordinary people to make expressive websites (Gauntlett, 2000; Gauntlett and Horsley, 2004). It seems preferable to assume that people are thoughtful and creative beings, in control of their own lives – not least of all
because that is how most people surely see themselves. A sociology which disagrees with this view of people, and claims to 'know better', would seem to be almost inhumane.

Here, then, it is instructive to look at Stjepan Meštrović’s critical polemic, *Anthony Giddens: The Last Modernist* (1998). The author implies that it is Giddens who is inhumane because his model of social life is far too rational, and excludes emotions and sentiment. The continuing popularity of nationalism, leading to violence and genocide, in many parts of the world, shows that people do not act on a purely rational basis. Nationalism, Meštrović suggests, is just one of many unruly and irrational emotions which people harbour – and which have deadly consequences – and which Giddens’s model of the sophisticated, thoughtful, rational actor is unable to explain.

[Giddens’s] glib optimism, popular sociology rhetoric, and shallow treatment of theory resonate with the current climate of feel-good-optimistic ideology in sociology ... Giddens and many other mainstream sociologists have been singing a merry tune of global democratisation even as genocide raged in Bosnia, Russians expressed a nostalgia for Communism, the European Community began unravelling almost as soon as it was formed, and ‘ethnic cleansing’ became a metaphor for our times.

(Meštrović, 1998: 4-5)

Meštrović suggests that Giddens offers an account of social life which is appealing to comfortable, middle-class Western sociologists, but which is weak when faced with the plight of the poor and the dispossessed. Giddens’s more recent, more directly ‘political’ books (e.g. 1999, 2000, 2006, 2007) show awareness of, and discomfort about, ethnic conflicts and social problems, but Meštrović would no doubt say that his solutions are simplistic, optimistic and unconvincing.

A judgement about whether Giddens or Meštrović are right or wrong about this may ultimately rest on whether one agrees with Giddens’s hope for optimism or Meštrović’s inclination towards pessimism. Meštrović makes the surprising mistake of confusing his own interpretation of modernity with Giddens’s use of the term. Meštrović understands modernity in the usual sociological way, as the time following the Enlightenment, which means we have been living under modernity for a couple of centuries at least. But Giddens, as we have seen, uses the term rather differently as part of his opposition between tradition and modernity, where tradition still plays a (decreasing) role in contemporary society. So Meštrović thinks that
Giddens's account of modernity is flawed because it cannot account for irrational nationalist feelings, but actually Giddens is fine on this point because he wouldn’t count those nationalist sentiments as part of modernity anyway – they are remnants of tradition which have not yet been discarded. (We could also note that nationalists no doubt feel themselves to be rational, and will have rational-sounding arguments to support their views.) So Giddens does have grounds for optimism, on his own terms, because we can see that tradition is in decline and that modernity is a more tolerant way of living. The kinds of oppression that concern Meštrović, whether they stem from tradition, and/or irrational thought, should cease to occur as rational modernity gets an even firmer grip.

Meštrović has no sympathy for this rational model, however. ‘Giddens’s agent is all mind and no heart’, he says (1998: 78). ‘Giddens’s knowledgeable human agent is ultimately a rationalist, a modernist caricature of what it means to be human’ (ibid.: 80). The discussion of how people can creatively engage with their emotional lives through contemporary resources such as self-help books and other media, in The Transformation of Intimacy (Giddens, 1992), had seemed to me to be a liberating analysis of modern living. But for Meštrović it is quite the opposite:

Previously, modernists got as far as Fordism and the assembly line in applying the machine model to social life. Giddens goes a step further: in The Transformation of Intimacy and other works, he advocates the self-diagnosis of emotional problems and the remedy to such problems in much the same manner that one would fix a faulty carburettor.

(Meštrović, 1998: 7)

Whilst the machine analogy seems to be an effective put-down, it isn’t really clear what is wrong with the idea that people can try to heal their own affairs of the heart. Meštrović clearly reads Giddens as unemotional and ‘heartless’, but I find Giddens to be refreshingly willing to consider emotions and feelings within his sociology. The ‘pure relationship’, for example, could cynically be seen as a selfish and rational approach to partnerships, where a person stays attached to another only when it is rewarding to do so. But on the other hand, it is a model concerned with people following their feelings, staying together if they are in love, or seeking an alternative if they are not – an honest, emotional approach.

Meštrović rejects Giddens’s belief that people typically know what they are doing, and can account for their actions, asserting instead that people ‘most of the time function as if they were on auto-pilot’ (ibid.: 34). Both
scholars could, no doubt, point to bits of empirical evidence which appear to back up their claims; so it becomes a question of taste. Personally, I prefer Giddens’s model of the thoughtful, self-aware modern individual, to Meštrović’s idea of the unreflexive conformist. Nevertheless, readers who feel seduced by Giddens’s upbeat sociology – dismissed as ‘a processed “happy meal” of social theory’ by Meštrović (ibid.: 212) – should find it useful to at least consider the latter’s arguments.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we saw that with the decline of traditions, identities in general – including gender and sexual identities – have become more diverse and malleable. Although sometimes limited by vestiges of tradition, modern lives are less predictable and fixed than they were for previous generations, and identities today are more ‘up for grabs’ than ever before. Everyone has to choose a way of living – although some people feel more enabled to make more unusual choices than others. The mass media suggests lifestyles, forms of self-presentation and ways to find happiness (which may or may not be illusory). To interpret the choices we have made, individuals construct a narrative of the self, which gives some order to our complex lives. This narrative will also be influenced by perspectives which we have adopted from the media. Our relationship with our bodies, our sexual partners and our own emotional needs, will all also be influenced by media representations, but (of course) in complex ways which will be swayed and modified by our social experiences and interactions.

FURTHER READING

*Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity* (Giddens and Pierson, 1998) is a very readable introduction to Giddens’s ideas on self-identity and modernity, as well as other matters. The most important book on these issues is *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Giddens, 1991), which offers an excellent detailed discussion, whilst *The Transformation of Intimacy* (Giddens, 1992) further develops some of those ideas. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim have pursued related interests in their book *Individualization* (2002).

There are two good and readable introductions to Giddens: *Anthony Giddens and Modern Social Theory* by Kenneth Tucker (1998) and *Anthony Giddens: An Introduction to a Social Theorist* by Lars Bo Kaspersen (2000). See also *Theorising Modernity: Reflexivity,*