Study unit 4: THE NOTION OF IDENTITY

Take note
Before proceeding with this study unit, it is important that you 'pre-flect'. What does this mean? It means really think about the broad theme/topic of the unit. At the top of the table fill in the unit topic, and in the left-hand column, write notes on what you believe you know about the theme/topic. At the same time, think about what you’d like to know about the unit topic. In the middle column, write clearly understandable notes that explain what you hope to learn from this unit. The third column of this KWL strategy should be filled in upon completion of the unit outcomes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNIT Theme/Topic:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What I know (K)</td>
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Study Unit 4: The Notion of Identity

The general outcome of this module is that learners will be able to (i) demonstrate a theoretical and empirical understanding of relationships as they emerge in kinship and non-kinship-based socio-political groupings; (ii) develop insight, by means of cross-cultural comparison, into power relations, social stratification and gender entrenched in socio-political groupings; and (iii) recognise and assess the cultural practices that maintain or threaten the societal order, given different contexts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module Outcomes</th>
<th>Study Unit Outcomes</th>
<th>Possible Assessment Question</th>
<th>Study Unit Activity</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With regard to the module outcomes, learners will display the capability to:</td>
<td>4.1 Formulate a well-conceptualised interpretation of ‘identity’.</td>
<td>Write a short essay (no longer than 2 pages) which describes the autonomous structures and procedures of governance in Buysdorp. Using the case study of Buysdorp, elucidate how place, identity, and ethnicity were and continue to be articulated and negotiated. In no more than two pages, formulate a well-conceptualised interpretation of ‘identity’.</td>
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<td>♦ Critically analyse contemporary concepts and issues as they relate to socio-political groupings.</td>
<td>4.2 Explain ‘ethnicity’ as a pre- and post colonial construct.</td>
<td>Explain de Jongh’s (2006:78-79) approach to ethnicity as a postcolonial construct.</td>
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<td>Activity:</td>
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<td>4.3 Re-conceptualise ‘gender’.</td>
<td>4.4 Discuss the shifting conceptual framework of ‘citizenship’, as well as xenophobia as an extreme example of non-citizenship.</td>
<td>Re-conceptualise ‘gender’ in Africa (Kolawole 2005:258-262) Referring to Von Lieres &amp; Robins (2008:48-52), discuss the shifting conceptual framework of citizenship in South Africa, i.e. where the different meanings of ‘citizenship’ as encountered in post-apartheid South Africa are set out. Xenophobia may be understood as an extreme example of non-citizenship. Prepare critical arguments substantiating this statement.</td>
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<td>Literature:</td>
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At the beginning of the previous study unit, the idea of social stratification was introduced. In that context, it shows that a number of different political systems exist and that society is divided along a number of lines. Having said this, you will have noted that the previous unit was devoted to expounding the different forms of political organisations typically distinguished by (earlier) anthropologists [as discrete groupings; “national communities of common ‘blood and culture’” (Sharp 1988:4)]. In so doing, attention was given to the formation, composition, and functioning of, for example, tribes, chiefdoms, and states. Social control and dispute resolution also enjoyed attention. We see this unit as an extension of the previous unit. In this study unit, however, we problematise a number of issues related to socio-political groupings and how they are stratified.

Our understanding of socio-political groupings is no longer restricted to territory or required to be kinship based. Socio-political groupings, what might have been referred to as secondary social groupings – including voluntary associations, for example – are increasingly becoming important in the lives of individuals. We have in fact long ago entered the realm of ‘tertiary’ socio-groupings, those we might refer to as ‘imagined’ groupings. Sharp (1988:1), for example, explains that “different races and ethnic groups, unique cultures and traditions, do not exist in any ultimate sense… and are real only to the extent that they are the product of a particular world-view”.

The title of the study unit, *The notion of identity*, also hints at answering a fundamental question: if we accept that tribes and chiefdoms do not or no longer exist, particularly in South Africa, and that kinship and descent groupings no longer provide the glue that holds socio-political groupings together, how do we define ourselves? In exploring this, particular attention will be paid to identity. The notion of identity is very broad and underscored by an ever increasing body of literature. The purpose with introducing ‘identity’ in this study unit is, firstly, to sensitise the learner about the complexities of identity. Secondly, it aims to pique the interest of students concerning the relevance of identity and related topics – thus engage learners to question/analyse/make ‘scientific’ sense of their own lived experience. A selection of topics related to this includes the following: gender, ethnicity, citizenship and community, and space and place.

### 4.1 Identity

The ‘conventional model’\(^1\) of identity simplistically proposes that we have one basic identity. However, increasingly in South Africa and elsewhere, people do not see themselves as belonging to only one grouping determined by, for example, race and culture. Instead, race and culture as criterion for determining group membership is understood to be an “external imposition rather than... a basic statement of their own identity” (Sharp 1988:1). Identity, or self-definition, is thus understood to be “situational, and that they can be different things in different contexts” (Sharp 1988:2). “Individual and collective identities can no longer be understood as produced within defined locations... The identity of any one person or group or nation is produced simultaneously in several locals or contexts, and connected to many that are not physically present, and to others that have never been directly experienced or engaged with” (Moore 2007:449). Identity is a “function of a complex process among all the sites in which the identity of someone or a group anywhere is defined in simultaneity” (Moore 2007:449). Distiller and Steyn (2008:4-5), for example, talk about the self constantly being invented and reinvented. Underscoring this notion is that there are “different interpretations of ‘reality’... diverse representations of South African society” (Sharp 1988:2). What is more, each of these ‘representations’ is a “political statement which includes the assumptions and intentions of the people who make it” (Sharp 1988:2).\(^2\) This strongly links the notion of identity with our previous unit and a significant focus of this module, namely that of political practices.

Distiller and Steyn (2008:6) remind us that what they call “any stand of identity”, for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity, should not be understood in isolation if meaningful sense is to be made of it. Borrowing from Distiller and Steyn (2008:6-7), I would like to suggest that, since all of these topics related to identity are socio-cultural constructions or social categories, they can perpetually be “constructed, deconstructed, resisted, subverted, and its artificial boundaries and divides challenged”.\(^3\)

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1. This conventional view also happens to be widely held, particularly by those in positions of power.
2. It is acknowledged however, that not all interpretations/representation are equally valid/legitimate.
3. Consider for example, Sharp’s (1988:7) idea of socio-political identity and the changing political environment in South Africa, with the emergence of COPE (Congress of the People) leading up to the April 2009 Elections.
4.2 Ethnicity


“[B]eginning in the 1950s, the concepts ‘race’ and ‘tribe’ were supplemented by a new vision of ‘ethnic group’ and ‘nation’ as the basic building blocks of South Africa” (Sharp 1988:7). “The vision of a fundamentally divided African population, comprising discrete ‘ethnic groups’ and proto-‘nations’, was functionally necessary to the policy of apartheid, since it provided a rationale for allocating people to their respective ‘homelands’” (Sharp 1988:8). According to Sharp (1988:79), the apartheid vision of ethnic group alleged that objective cultural differences were what distinguished ethnic groups from one another. He continues by saying: “The members of an ethnic group spoke one language, held to a distinctive set of practices, and shared a common system of beliefs” (1988:79).

Of significance to our earlier discussion on ‘nation’ is Sharp’s (1988: 79) almost sarcastic comment that an ethnic group might, at a particular point in its development or existence, seek political autonomy. When this happens, it indicates that the ethnic group has reached a level of maturity befitting advancement to the succeeding level, namely that of nation (cf. Barth 1969).

About *ethnicity*, Sharp (1988:80) explains: It “is a political process by which people seek to form groups, and to differentiate one set of people from another, by appealing to the idea of ineluctable cultural difference”. He continues, “[E]thnicity is the pursuit of political goals – the acquisition or maintenance of power, the mobilisation of the following – through the idiom of cultural commonness and difference” (1988:80). De Jongh (2006:78-79) expresses his understanding of ethnicity as “the dynamic which may stem from groups (entities by virtue of self-perception and/or as perceived by others ...) of people in contact or juxtaposition and/or interacting (although the nature of ethnicity is dialectic, such interpretations or relations often revolve around power) with each other in a shared environment or socio-political context and that such ‘groups’ or entities are historical communities with sociocultural similarities and with shared interests, intentions, a sense of belonging and an awareness of common symbols or legends of descent”. Further, ethnicity is “an expression of the historically evolved particular memories by which members interpret and give meaning to their world” (de Jongh 2006:79). Along similar lines to the above explanations, Lavenda and Schultz (2008:439) define ethnicity as “[a] principal of social classification used to create groups based on selected cultural features such as language, religion, or dress. Ethnicity
emerges from historical processes that incorporate distinct social groups into a single political structure under conditions of inequality”. Coertze (2007:13), however, calls for the refinement of the concept and a departure from the colloquial use.

4.3 Gender

Haviland (2008:392;397); Moffett (2008:104-115)

Sharp (1988:12) warns of the “impression that the only politically inspired representations which have serious social consequences in South Africa are those dealing with ‘race relations’”, a sentiment shared by Ramphele and Boonzaier (1988:153) and Wasserman and Jacobs (2003:17). For this reason, a module such as this would not be complete if gender were not at least minimally unpacked, again emphasising how the seemingly objective categories of woman and man are socially and culturally constructed (cf. Sharp 1988:12).

As so many of the other concepts discussed in this module, gender too, is culturally constructed. The term sex is used to indicate the physical characteristics of males and females, while gender is the “cultural construction of beliefs and behaviors considered appropriate for each sex” (Lavenda and Schultz 2008:386). Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003:7) define gender as “the cultural interpretation of perceived physical, anatomical, or developmental differences between males and females”. Along similar lines, Nanda and Warms (2007:260) define gender as the “cultural and social classification of masculine and feminine”. The sex of a person does not per se dictate the gender role – the cultural expectations of men and women in a particular society – and the identity that the person may assume. Ramphele and Boonzaier (1988:154) add to this that “gender roles and relationships are socially learned, reinforced and modified by the economic, political and cultural environment in which we live”. Socialisation plays an important role in the development of appropriate gender-role behaviour. A woman might be of the female sex, but have a male gender-role identity – she may dress and otherwise present herself as a man and she might even perform ‘traditionally’ masculine types of work. As may a boy be male, but have a female gender-role identity, taking on explicitly female-associated mannerisms, and so on. Complicating the issue of gender for social scientists in general, and anthropologists specifically, are the recognition of the phenomenon of hermaphroditism or transexualism (ambiguous and the presence of both male and female external genitalia), supernumerary (more than the standard two sexes in a culture), and alternative gender roles (e.g. the xanith, the two-spirit role, hijra, etc) (Lavenda & Schultz 2008:386; Nanda & Warms 2007:260-262). To this, one can also add vastly different ideas about hetero-, homo-, bi-, trans-, and a-sexuality.
The relevance of gender for our larger discussion entails the way in which society is stratified along
gender lines, together with the disproportionate access to power, prestige, and wealth. Read carefully, the
previous sentence reflects a very Western-centred conception of gender and the unequal access to
resources, also unwittingly wielding the banner of male domination over women and their subordination in
all spheres of life. As we know from cross-cultural comparison, cultures think about, distinguish, and
to centralise gender; stating that “gender is central to social relations of power, individual and group
identities, the formation of kinship and other groups, and meaning and value”. The term gender
hierarchy best explains “the ways in which gendered activities and attributes are differentially valued and
related to the distribution of resources, prestige, and power in a society” (cf. Nanda and Warms 2007:273).

Of particular significance for this module is to situate gender as a stratifier of South African society.
Ramphele and Boonzaier (1988:153) argue that the domination of men over women is in fact
underpinned by racial domination, together with economic deprivation and the manipulation of tradition.
Making a case that patriarchy is in fact the domination of men over women, Ramphele and Boonzaier
(1988:154) hold that it is the common denominator between black men and white men in South Africa. In
attempting to unpack the politics of gender, we come to realise that many African women (both black and
white) are victim to the widely held ideology of male domination (Ramphele & Boonzaier 1988:156). The
contention is that “women pass through the control of different men throughout their lives. It is a system of
control that stretched from the cradle to the grave” (Ramphele & Boonzaier 1988:156). The example of
lobola or bohadi may be used to demonstrate this dominance and control over women. Ramphele and
Boonzaier (1988: 156) do warn not to fall into the trap of thinking that all women passively accept their lot
as dictated by so-called tradition⁴; they are thus neither all powerless, nor submissive.

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Re-conceptualising African gender

Like the other concepts introduced and discussed in this module, and particularly in this study
unit, ‘gender’ too needs to be re-conceptualised. Mary Kolawole’s (2005:251-266) article entitled
Re-conceptualizing African gender theory: feminism, womanism and the erere metaphor offers
interesting insights into this new understanding and use of ‘gender’.

a) Explain the erere metaphor.
b) Re-conceptualise gender in Africa (Kolawole’s 2005:258-262).

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⁴ Ramphele and Boonzaier (1988:165) define tradition as “a reconstruction of the past that is unchallengeable”.
Sexuality

Read Pumla Dineo Gqola’s (2004:139-148) *When a good black woman is your weekend special: Brenda Fassie, sexuality and performance*. As part of your critical reflections, consider how a South African music icon such as Ms Fassie was able to, in the face of a largely patriarchal society, retain and maintain a fan-base as she did. Also, consider what this account says about the identity of the South African community.

4.4 Community and citizenship

In conventional usage, community is easily used with the implication that all understand exactly who is included, and by implication, excluded from the grouping. In addition, probably its greatest flaw is the assumption that all included within the circle of the category, think alike, following the same ideologies and rules to govern and make sense of their life (Sharp 1988:10). Although true in some cases and across some circumstances, such a supposition should not be generalised. This conventional usage of the concept ‘community’ also conjures up the idea of static social entities, each distinct from the other (Thornton and Ramphele 1988:29). Thornton and Ramphele (1988:30) help us understand this common understanding of community by saying: “In South Africa, as elsewhere, the term ‘community’ is used to denote aggregations of people who have something in common, such as common residence, geographic region, and shared beliefs, or who claim membership of a common lineage structure, or who are distinguished by similarities of economic activities or class position”. The lay understanding of community typically unleashes images of unity, cooperation and interaction, together with “social boundaries defining them and giving them identity” (Thornton and Ramphele 1988:38). These borders are naturally not ‘real’ but exist only in the ways people uphold them, for example, by means of ritual. Thornton and Ramphele (1988:38-39) state that community is the product of history, the product of people, and the “result of complex political processes”. They warn, however, that community and society are not the same thing; society is much larger (1988:39).

Part of the problem with the concept community is government’s continued use of the concept ‘community’ as a synonym for race, ethnic group, nation, or peoples (Thornton and Ramphele 1988:30). I draw your attention back to the idea of stratification, introduced in the previous study unit. You will remember that a number of divisions may occur in society. These divisions either promote or hinder access to resources such as wealth, power, and prestige. It should be borne in mind that these divisions – or said differently, groupings – are not natural, bounded groupings.
The shifting conceptual framework of citizenship in South Africa

Consult Von Lieres & Robins (2008:48-52) and write a short essay (no longer than two typed A4 pages) in which the different meanings of ‘citizenship’ as encountered in post-apartheid South Africa is set out.

In this light, a term closely associated with the community is citizenship, and this term is also explored in this unit. Citizenship can be understood as linked to control and the regulation of access to rights and resources (West 1988:100). In general terms, non-citizenship thus precludes one from participating in the political process. The South African situation is interesting in that, during the 1970s, a large portion of the population actually had dual citizenship: of South Africa and of the homeland (West 1988:100, 108). They were stripped of the former when certain homelands, national states, e.g. Bophuthatswana, Venda, Transkei, and Ciskei received independence from South Africa. Together with other classifications, such as being allocated to certain population groups, the system actually forced people into structured inequality (West 1988:101).

Within the ambit of post-colonial or post-apartheid scholarship, we must also revisit the traditional understanding of citizenship and consider the new discourses and practices falling within its realm. They have come to the fore in response to efforts to delineate our new society and state (Von Lieres & Robins 2008:47). Consider, for example, the notion of ‘health citizenship’ which has developed in the last number of years as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and others have actively sought redress for those stigmatised and marginalised by the AIDS pandemic and their plight to receive quality of life by improving antiretroviral treatment (ART) (cf. Von Lieres & Robins 2008:52-57).

The case of xenophobia

Xenophobia may be understood as an extreme example of non-citizenship. Use the chapter with the same title, written by Owen Sichone (2008:255-263) to complete this activity.

a) Define xenophobia.
b) Briefly present the events of May 2008 which are hailed as of the most serious public acts of xenophobia on the continent.
c) By way of concluding remarks, explain how xenophobia can be understood to be an expression of non-citizenship.
4.5 Space and Place

Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003:2) state that our interest in space and place is not per chance but rather very necessary to understand the world we are creating. Unlike the other concepts introduced in this unit, ‘space’ and ‘place’ seem self-evident. We might anticipate that studies of ‘space’ and ‘place’ include house form and sacred space, to name but two. However, fields of interest as diverse as border issues and migration, multi-sited and global phenomena, tourism, and travel fall within the ambit of anthropological studies of space and place. In fact, the spatial dimensions of cultural beliefs and practices in the form of “descriptions of the natural landscape and material conditions of everyday life” have very often been of interest (Low & Lawrence- Zúñiga 2003:1). It has only been more recently, since the 1990s, that anthropology has begun rethinking and reconceptualising culture in spatialised ways. As such, a number of thematic categories of ‘space’ and ‘place’ exist. Examples include: embodied spaces, gendered spaces, inscribed spaces, contested spaces, transnational spaces, and spatial tactics.

Since the scope of the module does not allow an all-encompassing investigation into the themes listed above, the issues of gendered space and contested space will briefly be presented. The former is chosen since gender and space intersect, and gender has already been included in this unit as a way we self-identify as well as in which society is stratified. To clarify, gendered spaces are “locales that cultures invest with gendered meanings, sites in which sex-differentiated practices occur, or settings that are used strategically to inform identity and produce and reproduce asymmetrical gender relations of power and authority” (Low and Lawrence- Zúñiga 2003:7). Within the discipline, studies of gender look at “how behavior patterns and symbolic representations distinguish the sexes, and ... how differences in power, authority, and value are attributed to these sexual symmetries” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003:7). Our ethnographic repository abounds with examples of gendered spaces.
An example of gendered space

Explain the notion of gendered space, by using at least one classic South African ethnography. Your group presentation should critically reflect on how behavioural patterns and/or symbolic representations differentiate between the sexes, as well as how differences in power, authority, and value are attributed to the cultural understanding of being male or female, in the contemporary as well as historical sense.

Take note

Before proceeding to the next study unit, it is important that you ‘re-flect’. What does this mean? It means really think about the broad theme/topic of the unit. In the right-hand column, summarise what you learned in this unit. By reflecting on what you learned in this module, you are completing the learning cycle. As a co-constructor of ‘new’ knowledge, you very often reformulate, redefine and reposition your stance on matters you had some lay knowledge about, and now have a more informed, scientifically rooted understanding of issues dealt with in the module.

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<tr>
<th>UNIT Theme/Topic:</th>
<th>What I know (K)</th>
<th>What I want to know (W)</th>
<th>What I learned (L)</th>
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