

Clarifying Social Identity through Group Interaction

Within the first month of my mornings at the corner store, I noticed that the people spending time in the place observed invisible social boundaries. If the volume had somehow been turned off in the room, these divisions still would have been apparent. Their coffee etiquette, in which they served coffee to themselves but not to the other regulars across the room, is one example. There were the Old Timers, the retired men who sat at the large tables, and then there were the other folks (African Americans, younger people, a few women) who sat at the small tables along the window.

These behaviors matter because they are part of the processes that link social locations with the perspectives people use to interpret their world. Rather than being static traits, social identities are psychological connections achieved through the active processes of linking oneself to other people, partly through interpersonal interaction. In a group context, the act of relating to one another as group members structures the content of conversations.

When we conceptualize identity on the level of group interaction, we bridge the individual-level psychological nature of identities and the social processes that create them. Brewer (2001) points out that the concept of social identity has been used in a range of disciplines in a variety of formulations “whenever there is a need for a conceptual bridge between individual and group levels of analysis” (114). Although many of these usages are based in psychology, it is sociological approaches that go beyond conceptualizing social identity as static tools of information processing to regard them as understandings that are continually given meaning through action (Billig 1995; Melucci 1995; Calhoun 1991). As Alberto Melucci states, “Collective identity is an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level) and concerned with the

orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place. . . . [It is] a definition that must be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated through a repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals (or groups)” (1995, 44). As people act together in social movements, or in individual political actions such as in a protest or strike (Beckwith 1998), they develop collective identities. These understandings of who they are and who they are against guide future collective action (Gamson 1992).

It does not take participation in a social movement, or even extended political participation, to develop social identities with political relevance. Just as activists within social movements collectively construct their identity, people doing less dramatic political behaviors, such as informal talk, can also collectively define what it means to be people like themselves in the world. This chapter uses observation and national sample survey data to examine and theorize the processes by which groups of people create contexts of understanding and the conditions under which the clarification of collective identity is more or less likely. The following chapter analyzes specifically how these perspectives influence the categories and considerations brought to bear in the act of collective interpretations of public affairs.

Building Collective Identity on the Basis of Shared Acquaintances and Experience

For a moment, put yourself in the place of an Old Timer. It is a frigid January morning. The vinyl of your car seat crackles as you get in and is still crackling as you climb out after you park in a lot near the corner store. The sidewalks are crusted with white from salt and ice. The windows of the place are steamy from the cold. You grumble under your breath, “Why do I wake up at the crack of dawn to come down here?” Then you open the door and the answer floats out—coffee, cigarette smoke, and, more importantly, the laughter and hellos.

The shouts of things like “Hey, where’ve you been?” that embrace you as you enter the corner store announce a group belonging that has some history. If you were an Old Timer, chances are you would have a story to tell about most other members of the group. Even to outsiders, there is an obvious sense of group membership among the Old Timers. Over repeated visits with them, it becomes clear that this sense of group membership has developed over time on the basis of shared acquaintances and experiences and many visits that have collectively reinforced and clarified this identity.

Most of the people who sit as Old Timers at the large tables joined the group on the basis of prior acquaintance. One man started coming to the store after he retired “because I know all the guys down here. I decided I would come three or four times a week and visit, have a doughnut on Tuesdays and Thursdays.” Most of the Old Timers have long, shared histories together, as relatives and as lifetime residents of Ann Arbor. In addition, almost all of them lived through World War II, and many of them fought in that war. These common experiences have likely had a lasting impact on at least a small set of their views (Jennings 1987) and identities (Stewart and Healy 1989).

This large reserve of overlapping acquaintances and experiences has enabled the development of a small-group identity. They think of themselves as a group, evidenced by the fact that they refer to themselves by the initials of the place (“the X.X. group”) or as “Old Timers.” In addition, they made membership cards for themselves about fifteen years ago. The cards proclaim: “Bulls of the Corner Store.”¹ Below this is a line with “member” written beneath it. Below this are the words “Meeting Daily” and “Exclusive Membership,” and in the bottom right corner are the letters “B.S.” This stands for “you know, our product,” as one of the members blithely informed me.

People outside the group also refer to them as an entity. Around Ann Arbor, when the place is mentioned, it is not uncommon for someone to say, “Oh sure, I know that place. Ever see those guys who hang out in there?”²

Part of the work of maintaining their group boundaries is done through their coffee etiquette. Sometimes the race and class relations in the place are put into words. One morning, one Old Timer noted that I had recently spent more time at the large tables than on the other side of the room.

Pete: We're glad you're sitting over here on this side of the room. You learn a lot more over here than over there in the Dunbar Center.

Kathy: Dunbar Center?

Pete: Yeah, you know, the *colored* section.

Kathy: Why the Dunbar Center?

Pete: Oh, because that was the name for the old black community center over on North Main [Street].

And on a different morning, pointing to the small tables,

Charlie: That's the Dunbar Center, you know.

Kathy: So I've heard.

Dave: What's that?

Charlie: The Dunbar Center—used to be that the black part of town was the Dunbar section.

Dave: Oh. Hmmm hmm. [Explaining to me]: There's a black community center called the Dunbar Center, over on North Main.

Kathy: It's still there?

Dave: Hmmm mm. It was the social center.

Charlie: Ann Street . . .

Dave: Ann Street, between Division and Main, was the social center. Used to be a lot of Greeks, too.

Charlie: Right. I remember the first day I was in [this city]: October 5, 1945. There was a guy riding his motorcycle around the block [motions with his hand] on the sidewalk, with a cop chasing him, trying to catch him . . .

Kathy: No kidding!

Dave: Yep, that was the social center.

Charlie: [Motions to the small tables]: We call that the 'DuMMMbar Center': D-U-M-B.

Kathy: Why's that, Charlie?

Charlie: All the dumb folks, the outcasts, sit over there.

At the same time that the Old Timers are constituting themselves as the in-group, the "Outcasts" are giving meaning to their own place in the relationships there. One man, asked by an Old Timer why he sat at the small tables, answered simply, "Aw, come on. I can't sit with you heavy hitters." A small-table regular (a white, retired maintenance worker) differentiates himself from the Old Timers by making frequent comments about their wealth: "Shhhhhucks! They have more money than they know what to do with. They got so much money over there. . . . Rich—could light fires with it."

Although the small-table regulars see the large-table regulars as a group, they rarely have discussions in which they see *themselves* as a distinct social group. Several factors likely explain this difference. First, the ratio of regulars at the small tables to the full range of people who sit there is relatively small compared to that at the large tables. Only four people appeared almost every day. In addition to these folks, a variety of other people would regularly drop in, including two brothers, a few women, and several middle-aged white men. Several other people were daily regulars, but would sit there much earlier in the day or later in the morning. Thus the people who sat at the small tables at the same time as the Old Timers constitute a small friendship group more than a collectivity that they might perceive as a group or association. Second, few of the patrons who sit at the small tables are lifetime residents of the

area, and the retired men who spend time together on that side of the room appear to have met while “passing time” there. Although among both the Old Timers and the small-table regulars there is an obvious sense of positive affect or camaraderie, the small-table regulars have a smaller base of shared experience from which they can talk about collective perspectives or build a collective identity.

When the topic of group membership arises, it is typically about the “groupness” of the Old Timers. For example, early on in my observations, one of the brothers who occasionally sat at the small tables told me a story about one of the large-table regular’s fighting with one of the counter staff. “He actually threw his coffee at him and said, ‘You can’t treat me like that. I’m a regular!’” Like the small-table regular above who commented on the Old Timers’ wealth, any sense of group membership among the people who sit along the window pales in comparison to that displayed by the people at the large tables.

Contrasting Identities among Members of the Guild: The Necessity of Mechanisms of Connection

After spending a little more than one month with the Old Timers, I had concluded that much of the basis for their relations to one another could be attributed to their shared experience as people who had worked in the Ann Arbor area, played sports together, and served in the military. To test this conclusion, I began observing the craft guild, a group similar to the Old Timers in age, class, residence, and race but who, as a function of their gender, did not share these other experiences. The group had approximately thirty members, five or six of whom met once a week. They gathered in a church basement to make crafts to raise money for the church and have lunch together. Observing this group revealed that overlapping experiences and acquaintances can foster collective identity, but in order for this to work, some kind of mechanisms for recognizing these common traits must be in place.

Psychological research shows that communication along the lines of “we” rather than “I” is more likely when the people talking perceive that the differences across groups in the environment are greater than the differences within their own group (Turner et al. 1994). This suggests that having a large base of shared experiences and acquaintances is conducive to talk about collective identity, but it is not sufficient—people need to recognize their intragroup similarities.

What makes these similarities salient? One prominent mechanism in the psychological literature is the presence of out-groups. Tajfel and Turner

(1979) argue that interaction in a group of people is likely to focus on inter-group comparison rather than individual differences when three conditions are met: (1) the participants have internalized their group identity, (2) the situation allows for comparison with other social groups, and (3) members of other social groups are readily available as a relevant base of comparison (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 41; 1986). With respect to a specific context, Brewer and Miller (1984) conclude that when a large group contains several distinct parts, the differences across them will be salient. But if the group is relatively small, then these differences will be less apparent. Also, when there is a clear minority group, the category that designates this minority status will be salient.³ Brewer and Brown (1998) note that several other conditions affect the salience of social categories: the physical proximity of group members in a setting (p. 556, citing Gaertner et al. 1989), and recent events (p. 557, citing Higgins, Rholes, and Jones 1977). Research on *political* identities, specifically, has supported the claim that contextual information, such as the relative density of members of one's social group within the surrounding census tract (Lau 1989),⁴ and textual and visual information provided in a news article (Huddy 1998) can influence whether or not a person identifies with a certain social category. Taken together, these results suggest that a collective identity is more likely to be salient when members of an out-group are present physically or are represented symbolically through such things as newspapers or photographs.

Another key mechanism in fostering the clarification of shared identity is the process of selection to the group. The store of personal experiences is constrained by *perceptions* of shared experiences that people use to self-select into settings and groups. There is widespread evidence of social homophily, or the act of people interacting and associating with others they perceive to be like themselves. For example, perceptions about shared racial background affect individuals' residential selection (Farley, Steeh, Krysan, Jackson, and Reeves 1994). Ideas of how women should behave cumulate to influence the kinds of groups women join (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1986) and the spaces, such as coffee shops in Greek culture, that they enter (e.g., Cowan 1991).

Selection into voluntary groups is likewise performed on the basis of perceived likeness. If the group is a nonvoluntary collective, ability to self-select is limited. This is the case in the workplace (Mutz and Mondak 1998; Sigelman, Bledsoe, Welch, and Combs 1996). But among voluntary groups, people control whether they enter and whether they exit. If the group gathers primarily for social interaction (as is the case with the groups at the corner store), not for an instrumental purpose, people likely enter on the basis of

perceived likeness. If a group forms around a stated function, that is, has an instrumental purpose (as is the case with the guild), people enter on the basis of that hobby, political concern, or professional need, not necessarily on the basis of overlapping acquaintances and experiences.

Therefore, even though the members of the guild do have a base of shared experiences, it is not sufficient to foster a collective identity among them. The vast majority of the members are of the same Protestant faith, members of the particular church in which they meet, have lifestyles that give each of them time to meet in the middle of the day, and like to work on sewing and related crafts. Thus the group is homogenous with respect to religious beliefs, socioeconomic background, age/generation, race, gender, and hobbies. Yet the group is diverse in many respects, especially with respect to gender roles. Two of the women never married or had children, and some of the women worked full time for much of their lives, while others never worked for pay. Among those who did enter the workforce, there is a diversity of occupational backgrounds. There is a former scientist, a retired public school teacher, and several former administrative assistants. In addition, they do not have uniform ties to Ann Arbor. Many of them moved to the area in retirement, after living elsewhere for much of their lives.

On top of relatively few shared experiences, their group and group setting lack mechanisms that might emphasize their similarities more than their differences. First, the group meets only once a week. Although individual members run into each other occasionally at Sunday services, the familiarity this frequency grants is much less than that of the Old Timers, who meet daily. Second, the setting, the church basement, does not provide sources of contrast to out-groups. No other groups or people are there when they gather. Thus, rather than notice how they as a group are distinct from non-group members, they focus on differences among themselves. Unlike the Old Timers, they cannot develop and define their identity by placing themselves (verbally and physically) in contrast to other people in the place.

Why not gender? Why did the women in the guild not talk with one another through the perspective of their experiences as women? Simply put, shared demographics do not equal shared perspectives. Homogeneity with respect to sex—or any other social category—is not sufficient to foster shared identity. As stated above, their experiences as women are *not* identical. They have not all been married, nor have they all raised children. Within a group of people perceived to share a demographic trait (e.g., “women”) there are a myriad of individual experiences that have the potential to contribute to a common identity. Without a stimulating mechanism, however, sharing this demographic trait may form the basis for differentiation instead.

Psychological research suggests why gender in particular might not serve as a source of collective identity for a small group. Brewer and Miller explain that across a society as a whole, salient social categories are likely to be those with “convergent boundaries” or differentiation from other groups along a variety of dimensions such as the economic, political, and physical (1984, citing Brewer and Campbell 1976). Arguably, racial categories fit this bill better than gender categories. The identities that people seem to rely on in a given situation are those that fill two opposing needs—the need for affiliation and the need to differentiate oneself from others.⁵ Focusing on one’s identity as a woman may not provide the optimal balance for many people between belonging to an in-group and separating oneself from out-groups. Since many women live in intimate contact with members of the out-group (men), seeing the world through the lens of a strong attachment to women may not comfortably satisfy the need for affiliation.

Research on consciousness-raising groups underscores that identity with women does not automatically exist—it takes work. What it means to be a woman, and how this relates to politics, is not universal among women (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). Small group discussions in the women’s movement of the latter half of the twentieth century enabled women to recognize the connection between their private lives and political solutions (Freeman 1975, 118). Jo Freeman argues that a key factor in the ability of discussion groups to raise gender consciousness (identity with women that includes political content)⁶ was the fact that the groups included only women. However, it was this homogeneity *combined* with selection processes and the explicit goal of talking about shared interests that suggested a common language (124). These combined factors created contexts in which the participants were likely to recognize the similarities across the experiences of others in the group.

Group purpose has also been shown to affect identity processes among people of similar sexual orientations. Lichterman (1999) found that in a lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered rights group, in which the relevant out-group was not well defined, the members focused on their differences. They “reflected critically” on their identities as queer people. However, when talking within a different group in which the purpose was to build coalitions across various leftist groups, the same people focused on collective identities. In this context, the relevant out-group *was* well defined: the right or Christian right. (Lichterman gave the group the pseudonym “the Network Against the Right’s Agenda.”) In this context, the people spoke as if their identity as queers was a given and focused instead on their differentiation from out-groups.

Table 4.1 Factors Affecting Development of Group Identity, Compared across Old Timers and Guild

	Old Timers (Strong group identity)	Craft Guild (Weak group identity)
Shared experiences and acquaintances	Many	Few
Frequency of meetings	Daily	Weekly
Purpose of group (affects selection, and also likelihood of identity talk)	Social	Instrumental
Salience of outgroups	Presence of outgroup members, other reminders (wall decorations, newspapers)	No one else present; some postings pertain to church programs, religious decorations

Without the mechanisms of a group purpose intended to recognize similarities, selection processes predisposing the recognition of likenesses with respect to social categories, or characteristics stimulating the salience of out-groups, the guild women were not in a situation conducive to communicating through and thus developing the lens of a group identity. Unlike the Old Timers, they did not clarify their identities with large-scale social groups like “the middle class” by identifying with each other as “middle people.” Instead, they contrasted themselves to one another.

Table 4.1 provides a summary of those group characteristics that are likely to increase the extent to which a group develops a collective identity. Briefly, shared experience and acquaintances lay the basis for recognizing similarity, and the frequency of meetings increases the chances that these similarities will be recognized. The purpose of the group influences the selection processes that result in more or fewer shared experiences and acquaintances and also whether or not the talk in the group will focus on shared social locations. Finally, the physical presence of or physical reminders of the existence of out-groups serve as mechanisms that stimulate talk along the lines of “us” and “them.”

Although the members of the guild do not identify with one another, their talk and behavior suggested that social identities were not irrelevant to their interaction. But rather than the setting serving as an opportunity to interpret the world through the lens of “how we are alike,” it provided a chance to work out “how should I think about various topics given the kind of person that I am?” Thus their interaction may have helped each individual

member clarify her own social identity, although to a lesser extent than in group contexts in which group members reinforce these identities in one another.

I was best able to see the guild members clarifying their social identities with respect to gender. Over the course of my nineteen visits with the guild, the members talked about a variety of topics directly related to behavior they deem appropriate to women. The most common topics dealt with sexuality. For example, one day they were talking about spanking, and then the conversation turned to sexual child abuse. I asked Elnor, a former schoolteacher, "Did you see that a lot when you were a teacher—child abuse?"

Elnor: No, I didn't see it, and I don't think it took place.

Eloise: Like that one teacher [recently in the news], having an affair with her student . . .

Elnor: That's on the western side of the state. [Explaining to the rest of the group] There's a teacher who's been with a student, second child on the way. She's in jail now.

Kathy: You mean she's pregnant with the kid's kid?

Elnor: Yes!

Kathy: Oh my goodness. How old is the kid?

Elnor: Fourteen.

Ginnie: Something is not right with that woman.

Elnor: You know there was a 13-year-old boy on the news who looked like an adult, had the actions of an adult . . . maybe that was the case here.

Eloise: Still is no excuse.

Doris: Takes two to tango, you know . . . They have the father in there [in court] now?

Ginnie: Sickening.

This conversation enabled the women to hear one another's ideas about appropriate female sexual behavior. Other conversations did the same work. In one, they talked about their feelings about nudity and rape. We had been talking about recent student riots at Michigan State University and attempts by police to identify perpetrators with the use of pictures posted on the Internet.

Eloise: Like that Naked Mile business here [referring to an informal run done in the nude by University of Michigan students on the last day of classes. In recent years, people had taken pictures of the runners and posted them on the Internet.]

Ginnie: What a strange thing. Imagine, having that picture on your record the rest of your life. How embarrassing!

Kathy: That is pretty embarrassing.

Ginnie: It's like these girls, crying rape . . . they go to a guy's house . . .

Doris: . . . after having a couple of drinks with him . . .

Ginnie: Right, and then they say he raped them. As far as I'm concerned the police ought to throw the book at them, not the guy. They should know better.

Elnor: We never went out at night alone . . .

In this conversation, a consensus emerges; they seem to agree that many of the reports of rape on campus are unfounded or unjustified. But this agreement is temporary and does not carry over to subsequent meetings. When discussing the Lewinsky scandal one day, disagreement about women's sexuality reemerged. Doris said, "Oh goodness, well, we've all sown a few wild oats [like Clinton]. . . We all have, haven't we?" When she looked around the table, they all nodded in affirmation, but tentatively, as if they were not exactly sure what she meant. And on another day, they were talking about the case of a five-day-old boy found abandoned shortly after birth.

Ginnie: You wonder where the parents are when kids act up like that.

Doris: Someone should have spanked that girl! [laughs]

Eloise: I think some of these kids don't know the facts of life—at the age of fourteen . . .

Hazel: I sure didn't.

Ginnie: I was a late bloomer. I was really green.

Eloise: Mom gave us a real good book.

Doris: I didn't know anything . . . I didn't know. My parents didn't talk about it.

Ginnie: Oh, mine either. I thought if you kissed someone you were pregnant. The first time I did that I almost died. I thought I was going to die!

Doris: But you had fun though, didn't you?!

Ginnie: Not the first time [shakes as if shivering]. When my parents talked about it they said, "Oh, that's the family way."

Kathy: The "family way"? That's how they referred to sex?

Ginnie: That's right.

Doris talks openly about sex and claims a right to do so in this conversation and in others. But when she does, several others usually attempted to

change the topic and react to her statements in ways that indicate they think the topic is unsuitable for their luncheon meetings. And yet others think not only should sexual behavior be addressed but it ought to be controlled. Instead of identifying with one another's experiences they are giving testimony about their individual perspectives (Sanders 1997). In this particular social context, they are not developing a group identity but are voicing their own individual definitions of womanhood. By sharing their different views of the way women ought to act, they are clarifying their individual identities.

Beyond Closeness Measures: Observing Collective Identity Processes at Work

The context of a group—including the physical space, the characteristics of the membership, and its purpose—matters because it affects the range of resources people have for connecting to one another. Although the nature of the context in which the guild meets encourages the members to focus on internal differences rather than to relate to one another through the perspective of a common identity, the context of the Old Timers' meetings encourages the development of a group identity.

The presence of out-groups in the corner store at times fosters the eruption of in-group/out-group distinctions. One morning, an African-American man sitting at a small table overheard a white man at the large tables say "nigger." The man from the small tables approached the speaker, as if wanting to start a fight, but the other Old Timers restrained him.

This is an extreme example. The relations among the people who use the corner store are typically neighborly. The people who gather at the large tables are not preoccupied with intentionally denigrating people who are not members of their group of friends. Likewise, the people at the small tables do not show overt resentment toward the Old Timers. However, among the Old Timers, part of communicating with one another and showing an appreciation for their membership in the group is the act of reinforcing their place through talk and behavior that sometimes blatantly discriminates against nonmembers.

This differentiation is often done along racial lines, but the Old Timers clarify boundaries with respect to gender as well. Only women who are accompanied by a male or are direct relatives of one of the Old Timers sit at the tables. Those that do not have these claims to guest status are policed. A member of the church guild reported to me—without realizing I was observing the Old Timers at the corner store—that she once took a seat at the large tables in the store. She was on an errand to buy dry ice there during

the Old Timers' gathering time and sat down to wait. The Old Timers went about their conversation for a few minutes, and then one turned to her and said, half-jokingly, "Gee, you must be an aggressive female!" She recalled that the encounter was friendly, but that it sent clear signals about the group's bounds: "They let me know gently that this was a man's group."

"Let[ting] me know gently" is a telling observation with implications for the way public opinion scholars typically study identity. The Old Timers rarely refer to themselves verbally as a group of men. Behaviors such as subtle comments suggesting women do not typically sit at certain tables are aspects of identity processes that are not easily revealed through standard survey-based measures. Typically, social identity is measured with "closeness" measures (Lau 1989; Wong 1998). The measures conceptualize identities as explicit (spoken or directly referred to) labels people give to themselves, and thus they are limited in their utility. They do not capture unspoken conceptions of where people place themselves in the social world.

We can see the discrepancies between the Old Timers' behavior and their responses to closeness measures by looking at their responses to questionnaires that I administered. The closeness measures read: "I am interested in finding out what kinds of people you think are most like you, in their ideas and interests and feelings about things. Please read over the following list and mark the groups you feel particularly close to." The list included poor people, liberals, the elderly, Ann Arborites, blacks, labor unions, feminists, business-people, young people, conservatives, residents of Michigan, Hispanic Americans, women, working-class people, whites, environmentalists, middle-class people, men, Christian fundamentalists, Americans in general, people at your place of worship, and people in your neighborhood. Table 4.2 displays the Old Timers' responses as well as their responses to a similar question asking whether they "felt particularly *not* close to" any of the groups, which I asked in the self-administered questionnaire.

These reported identities convey a group composed of middle- and working-class elderly, conservative, white men who live in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and are somewhat attached to Americans in general. In addition, the group contains few, if any, liberals, union members, Christian fundamentalists, feminists, or people of other races. This is an accurate aggregate picture of the group. However, notice that only 35 percent say that they feel close to "men," while their conversations are often about the proper role of women and men in society.

Although "social identity" is the label social scientists give to psychological attachments with people in similar social circumstances, survey respondents may not as readily label these connections or report that they use

Table 4.2 Identities and Anti-Identities of the Old Timers

Group	Percentage feeling “close to”	Percentage feeling “not close to”
Middle-class people	69	0
Elderly	50	8
Conservatives	50	4
Businesspeople	42	8
Working-class people	42	0
Ann Arborites	39	8
Whites	39	0
Americans	39	4
People in neighborhood	39	12
Residents of Michigan	35	0
Men	35	0
People at place of worship	31	4
Young people	23	12
Women	15	8
Environmentalists	15	35
Poor people	8	27
Labor unions	8	50
Hispanic Americans	8	27
Christian fundamentalists	8	62
Liberals	4	65
Blacks	4	31
Feminists	0	62

Source: Self-administered questionnaire.

them to think about the world through the terms of “feeling close to” a given group.⁷ People may identify with groups and put these attachments to use on a more subtle, less conscious, level. This is especially the case among members of dominant social groups (e.g., whites, males, members of the upper middle class). Members of minority groups are more likely to claim “closeness” to social groups of which they are objective members given the relative distinctiveness of their group in the social environment (Lau 1989).⁸ For example, in the 1996 American National Election Studies (ANES), 47 percent of men reported feeling close to men, while 65 percent of women felt close to women. In the same manner, while only 44 percent of whites felt close to whites, 79 percent of blacks felt close to blacks.⁹ Thus current survey measures of identity are better at capturing group attachments among members of politically marginalized groups than among dominant group members.

Closeness measures are also limited because they tend to portray identity as an either/or proposition with a battery of groups.¹⁰ This is problematic

because identities are more akin to a mutable web of interrelated attachments than affiliations that are independent of one another. A case in point is the way in which the perspectives through which women of color view the world are not the sum of their experience as women and experience as people of color but are a function of occupying a qualitatively unique social position (Crenshaw 1989).

Another potential problem with closeness measures suggested by the results of the self-administered questionnaire is that although many of the Old Timers identify as “middle class,” their former occupations and their current wealth indicate that the socioeconomic positions they occupy are not good predictors of their affiliation with that label. Of the twenty-six Old Timers who responded to the questionnaire, twenty-one placed themselves in a social class. Nineteen of those people placed themselves as “middle class” (selected from “working class,” “middle class,” and “upper middle class”). But their wealth, signified through responses to an income question in the self-administered questionnaire, their reports of what they did on their vacations, and the cars (and helicopters, planes, fire engines, and boats) that they own, suggest that many if not most of them have annual incomes well above the actual national “middle” income. In 1998, the middle before-tax household income in the United States was \$38,885 (Bureau of the Census 1999). In comparison, self-reports of twenty-one of the Old Timers give an average after-tax income of at least \$50,000 per year, even though they are in retirement. Moreover, of the five Old Timers who declined to reveal their income, two are still working full time as small-business owners. To complicate the picture even more, nine of the twenty-six respondents identify with both the middle class and the working class. Closeness measures can tell us that people identify as middle class, but they do not help us see what this identity *means*.¹¹

Because class identity is a perception of one's socioeconomic status relative to other people (Jackman and Jackman 1983; Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker, forthcoming), its content is something people continually update. The Old Timers do part of this work through talking about their youth. Most of them grew up in a modest part of town, and several grew up in what they call “Lower Town,” or a lower-income neighborhood. To negotiate their class standing, they refer to the “elite” or “cultured” part of town, which consisted of large houses that were home to “professors’ kids” when they were growing up.

The public beach, which no longer exists, is a place they describe as a setting in which they noticed class distinctions.

Pete: That public beach was one of the best things. It was a sad day when they got rid of it. [Turns to Kathy] See, it used to be half blacks and

half whites, because that was in the part of town where the blacks lived back then. Funny, because we had the beach and the golf course—us poor kids—and those rich kids on the east side of town didn't have anything. Their parents wouldn't let them go over to that beach, no way.

Bill: All professors' kids . . .

Dave: Right, learning how to go to school—we were learning how to get a job.

Pete: Yeah . . .

Bill: They went on to be academic types, we became tradesmen and people who worked with our hands.

In this kind of conversation, the Old Timers are drawing the boundaries of their conception of the middle class with respect to occupation.

Their survey responses reveal other ways in which their objective circumstances do not sufficiently describe the perspectives they use to make sense of the world. In designing the questionnaire, I borrowed many of the attitudinal items from the American National Election Studies to enable a comparison of their political attitudes and behaviors to the nation as a whole. In addition, I can compare them to a subsample of which they are a part: white men over fifty with a high school diploma or equivalent, since all of the Old Timers reported graduating from high school.¹² (See appendix 2 for graphs and descriptive analyses detailing these comparisons.) The Old Timers are more conservative and Republican than the nation as a whole, as well as the subsample. They favor limited government and traditional family ties. Despite their conservatism, their reported tolerance for moral standards resembles that of the nation as a whole and is slightly higher than the demographic group of which they are a part.

From the outside (compared to the other members of the political communities that they occupy—Ann Arbor, Michigan, the United States), the group is conservative, elderly, and isolated from the students, younger families, lower-income residents, and people of color that live in the same city. But from the inside, they are middle America. This comes through in the way they describe themselves. They are “common people”—middle class, white, Midwestern men. To them, “common people” are neither liberal nor extremely conservative; they are hard working, yet focused on their families. They perceive themselves as prototypical Ann Arborites, average Americans. At times they recognize that their perspectives are not representative of the larger population of Ann Arbor or the United States, but they do so grudgingly, contrasting themselves with younger generations, or liberals,

and so forth, whom they consider to be “taking over.” In a telling demonstration, when I asked them in the survey what comes to mind when they think of “an American” or “an Ann Arborite” they answered by describing themselves, or by noting how other objective occupants of the same political community deviate from this type. The following sample of responses is illustrative:

“I am sure the city is comprised of all phases of people. I view it from the clients I see. Most of them are conservative, hard-working-class people. The student, in general, falsely liberalizes Ann Arbor.”

“A person who believes Ann Arbor is a great place to live, and wants to live in Ann Arbor. One who has attended the local schools, one who has a work history in Ann Arbor and found it good.”

“Old timers.”

“Not liberal crazies now on the city council, planning commission, school board.”

And then there are responses taking note of groups that have “taken over”: “liberals”; “academia”; “environmentalists”; Academics, mostly liberal, a little flaky, very little in common with those at the [corner store] who are Ann Arborites, but not in the majority.” Their definitions of the real community are subtle: they do not say explicitly that “real” Ann Arborites are “white, middle-class, retired men with conservative values.” Instead, a real Ann Arborite is “one of us.”¹³ They present themselves as the middle and deserving of the title of the common person.

The behavior and the conversations of the Old Timers reveal information that closeness measures cannot. When the Old Timers pour coffee for group members but not others, or tell women, “gently,” that they are out of place, they are restricting their membership and setting themselves apart from others. In so doing, they are delimiting who constitutes their community and whom they consider fellow residents of the place.

Their ability to view the world from the standpoint of “middle people like us” is very much a function of their shared history. The following conversation is an example of the way shared experiences and acquaintances, not just shared demographic traits, form the basis of these identity processes. The following exchange took place among a group of Old Timers joined by several women (relatives of the Old Timers) later one morning. This group was diverse with respect to sex but had a vast resource of shared history from which they could draw on to negotiate and reinforce their ideas of the good life.

Skip: Boy, Ann Arbor has really changed. We have lost a lot of good things.

Rose and Alice [together]: Oh yeah, yeah.

Skip: It has really changed.

Alice: People used to say “hello” to you; you used to know people when you walked around town.

Rose: Hmmm mmm . . .

Skip: Used to play kick ball with a tin can between Thompson and Division Streets—the street lights would come on, someone would whistle or holler and we’d all say “good night” and go in and go to bed. You’d say “hello” to people. If somebody got sick, people would be helping out.

Rose: People are just too busy these days.

Skip: Yeah, we’ve lost a lot of good things. Don’t you think so?

Rose and Alice [together]: Oh yeah, yep.

Rose: Now both of them [both parents] are working. I can understand why both parents need to work, but now nobody’s home, both parents are working. The kids are boarded out—never used to be like that. In the neighborhood, all the women would be home, we’d gather at somebody’s house for coffee in the morning. You’d start having kids and you’d bring your kids along. It’s not like that anymore. It’s not right.

Skip: When you came home after school, what was the first word out of your mouth?

Skip and Rose [together]: “Mom!! Mom, where are you??”

Bob: Oh yeah [referring to Skip]. Well, he’d say, “Hey, what’s to eat?” [And then, offhandedly], “Oh, Hi Mom!” [Laughs.]

Skip: That’s right, you’d call out for Mom. These days, we have more latchkey kids than the other kinds. No wonder kids are getting into trouble. And we just had another school shooting the other day . . . [. . .] . . . ¹⁴ The thing is that there’s a loss of respect. Young people these days don’t have respect for their country, for their parents, for their teachers—

Alice: . . . and they don’t respect old people either.

Skip: That’s right. When the national anthem came on when I was young, I stood up and saluted. No one made me do it. I just had respect. I’ll stop my sermon here, but it’s just so different.

In talking about the way people ought to behave toward others, these people are doing a kind of triangulation, in essence saying, “*You* and *I* are

like *this*." Group interaction enables these kinds of linkages, because the act of communicating *with* people requires that individuals relate to one another. Most of the people at the corner store and in the guild follow the conventions of good conversation and try to talk with one another, speaking in such a way that their audience can understand, rather than simply talking for the sake of talking (Grice 1975). To produce satisfactory, sustained interaction that people return for day after day and week after week, people need to either refer to or forge some kind of common language. Even when talking about politics, people tend to convey what they have to say in a package to which their recipients can relate (Polanyi 1989, 46). This can take the form of mutually understood phrases, colloquialisms, or "shared cultural truths" (Polanyi 1989). It can also take the form of mutual acquaintances or common backgrounds. Asking such questions as "Where are you from?" or "What line of work are you in?" is an attempt to establish such common ground by figuring out what a person is like. Are we both Midwesterners? Do we both work in the public schools? The answers tell people whether they belong to similar social groups and suggest topics for further conversation.

Recognition of similarity can then act as a basis for a small-group identity. Although previous work on the role of social identities in political thinking has focused on large-scale social groups, the relevant group that structures thinking is not always a societywide one (Brewer and Gardner 1996). People are situated within structural locations that are more personal than their status as "blacks" or "men" or "women." Group interaction, by fostering identity with small-scale social groups or associations, can mediate the distance between individuals and larger social groupings.

Over repeated interactions, the Old Timers carve up the world into "us" and "them" and connect themselves to the group as a whole. This act of negotiating ideas of who constitutes "us" perpetuates the interaction as it helps develop modes of appropriate behavior, or norms, that work to make the interaction easier (Festinger, Schachter, and Back 1950; Macy 1990, 1991, 1993). Their group interaction therefore allows them to develop the perspectives of people occupying a shared location in the social world and helps them identify with one another.

Significantly, their perspectives as particular types of people are clarified by emphasizing the ways in which they resemble one another and by pointing out the kind of behavior they do not consider appropriate for a true community member. Although psychological evidence is inconclusive about whether an "other" is necessary for an in-group identity (Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989; Gurin, Peng, Lopez, and Nagda 2001; Brewer and Brown

1998), the Old Timers often place themselves by pointing out who they are not, including blacks, liberals, and academics. LeMasters, in a study of the lifestyle of a group of “blue-collar elites” who spent time at a Midwestern bar, concluded that the people he observed formed their political opinions more often around what they were *against*, rather than what they were *for* (1975). The same is often true of the Old Timers, who, although slightly more affluent, mirror LeMasters’s subjects in generation, region, and ethnic background. Although it may not always be necessary to have an out-group with which to contrast themselves, it is hard to imagine how the Old Timers could claim “we are all just middle people” without considering other people as above and below them in status.

This dynamic is clearly apparent with respect to race. Although they rarely refer to themselves as “whites,” they often emphasize that they are not black. African Americans are clearly the most common racial group to which they refer, although they did occasionally speak of Latinos, Asian Americans, Arab Americans, and other ethnic and racial groups. They give meaning to this racial identity by talking about current race relations and by recollecting shared experiences from their youth.

Dave: Remember how you used to be able to fish for walleye right out of the backwater of Barton Dam? Ahh, walleye . . .

Pete: And a lot of suckers and carp too. But sure, walleye . . . [. . .]
 . . . There was one time we were fishing off of the public beach in the morning and I caught a huge sucker. Big thing. And there was a black woman down there, and I gave it to her, and she thought she had died and gone to heaven. . . . [. . .] . . .

Dave: Yeah, I was fishing once on the Huron—mostly for walleye—and I caught a carp. There were some blacks fishing over there, so I went up to a woman and offered it to her. I didn’t want it. But she was with a gentleman, if you could call him that, and he let me have it. He accused me of being con-deeee-SCEND-ing, because I was offering her a carp.

Pete: But that’s what they were fishing for!

Dave: We almost got into a fight [shakes his head].

By relating a specific event, and signifying the different social group memberships while doing so, they define their social identities. More than just calling themselves “white” or calling others “black,” they are conveying pictures of what members of these categories are like.

Exceptions to the Process of Clarifying Collective Identity

The process of creating a context of collective identification is far from deterministic. Even in a context of strong group identity these ideas of appropriate behavior are not universally accepted. Even the Old Timers' interactions reveal that they occasionally focus on their differences more than their likenesses. Most of the group grew up in the neighborhood surrounding the store, but some grew up in Lower Town. Sometimes the Old Timers will emphasize this distinction by yelling out "Hey, what do *you* know? You're from Lower Town" to establish the credibility of their "Old Timer" status. At the same time, one or two of the Old Timers will occasionally talk about their ties to Lower Town as a way of giving authenticity to the perspectives they use to discuss public affairs.

For example, on one occasion, Pete was talking about a liberal bias in higher education. To justify his individualist argument, he mentioned that he had grown up in Lower Town. "I quizzed my kids when they came home from school," he said. "They are taught in school these liberal attitudes. Taught in high school and college." He was bewildered by such points of view. "How can you think and be a liberal?" he asked. He said that liberalism simply ignored the fact that people need to take care of themselves. "I grew up on the poor side of town . . . and I didn't have anything, but you make your life for yourself."

Pete is not the only member of the group who at times differentiates himself to prove a point. During a large strike by General Motors workers, which affected many jobs in Michigan as well as at GM plants throughout the United States, the Old Timers often talked about labor unions. In these conversations, Dave tended to emphasize his distinctiveness from the others. Although many of them had worked in the auto industry, most of the men had held managerial positions or owned their own businesses. Thus, only a few belonged to labor unions, and only Dave, a former lineman, is vocal about his union affiliation. "Well, I think it's time for me to get going, not much for me to stir up today," Dave said one day as he got up to leave. "You see, there's a bit of a division here. Quite a few of these guys, they're antiunion. Some of these guys, like that guy over there, they say that they're union, but they aren't really. To me, you have to have put in an apprenticeship for four to five years. Those guys, they're just assembly-line people . . . but anyway, sometimes I mix things up a little. I haven't had the opportunity today." His comments display that even within a group with a strong sense of membership, such as the Old Timers, communication within it is not always done along the lines of shared identities.

Evidence beyond the Old Timers and the Guild

The foregoing comparison of the Old Timers and the craft guild suggests that people are more likely to clarify a collective identity through association interaction under two conditions: (1) when the members have a large store of overlapping acquaintances and experiences, and (2) when out-groups are present in the setting. Is there evidence beyond these groups that such conditions foster the clarification of identity?

To investigate, I turn to national sample survey data. Several available studies include data on social identity as well as information about participation in associations. However, such studies have not asked whether respondents share overlapping acquaintances and experiences with others in their voluntary associations. Fortunately, one study, the 1990 Citizen Participation Study (Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1990), provides a proxy for such a condition—perceptions of group racial and gender homogeneity.¹⁵ I use this as an admittedly noisy indicator of overlapping acquaintances and experiences on the assumption that the more homogenous the group with respect to major social categorizations, the more similar their life experiences.

Conditions of homogeneity matter for social identity processes in the following ways: It is in conditions in which people perceive that others share their race or gender that we should expect them to encounter credible information on “how someone like myself” ought to think, feel, and act. Second, in such conditions, people are more likely to encounter information that resonates with their prior identities. Third, a perception of likeness yields a greater likelihood that an interpretation privately held by any individual member will be perceived as valid for the group as a whole. Therefore, the interpretation is more likely expressed and thus more likely to foster communication about identity. In other words, conditions of heterogeneity can help people articulate their sense of identity, as was evident among members of the guild. However, when people are unsure whether their interpretation resonates with anyone else in the group, they are less likely to express it, hindering the clarification of social identity.¹⁶

Before examining the effect of group homogeneity, notice the extent of homogeneity across various association types. The 1990 CPS data indicate that most associations are homogeneous, but this homogeneity varies across group type. The CPS collected respondents’ perceptions of the racial and gender homogeneity of the group most important to them, if that group was also the one in which they were most active—as opposed to the group to which they donated the most money (see appendix 3 for wording). To indicate the average homogeneity by group type, I averaged these responses across

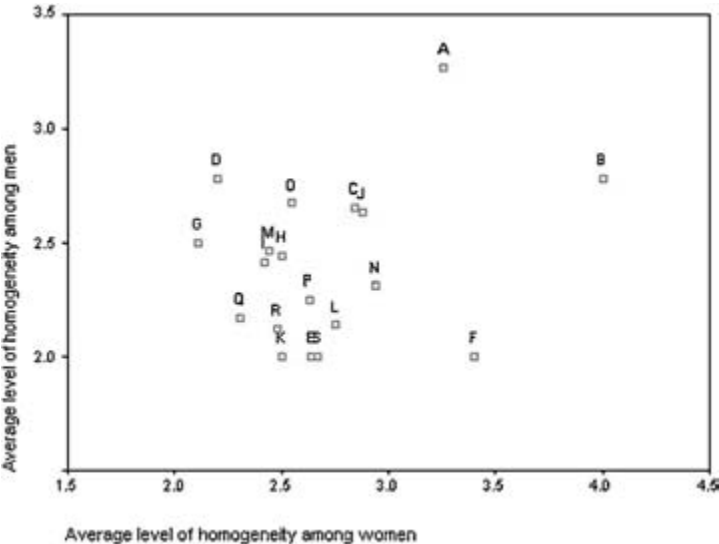


Figure 4.1 Group Gender Homogeneity. (Source: 1990 CPS)
Key: A = Service, fraternal organization; B = Veterans group; C = Religious group; D = Racial/ethnic group; E = Senior citizens' group; F = Women's group; G = Labor union; H = Business/professional group; I = Political issue group; J = Civic group; K = Liberal/conservative group; L = Elections group; M = Youth group; N = Literary group; O = Hobby club, sports or country club; P = Neighborhood group; Q = Health service group; R = Education group; S = Cultural organization

all respondents providing reports about a given group type. Figure 4.1 displays the average gender homogeneity of each group type as reported by men and women, where higher numbers denote higher sex homogeneity (range = 1–4).¹⁷ The chart shows that, like the gender makeup of the Old Timers and the church craft guild, most voluntary associations are segregated by sex.¹⁸ Notice that most group types are characterized by a membership that is on the homogenous half of the scale. The average level of homogeneity reported is at least 2 (gender-mixed) for every group across both men and women. Groups in the upper-right portion of the graph are the most sex segregated. Both women and men who participate in voluntary associations report that they do so primarily with people of the same sex.

Closer inspection of the data suggests that women's groups tend to be more homogenous than men's. In fourteen of the nineteen groups, women reported a higher average degree of sex homogeneity than did men. This is consistent with previous research showing that the associations women belong to tend to be more highly segregated by sex (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1986). These data also support McPherson and Smith-Lovin's (1986) argument that instrumental groups, such as business or professional groups

and public interest or policy groups, tend to be more heterogeneous than expressive groups such as veterans groups, lodges, or hobby groups (67). This homogeneity is partly the result of gender specialization across group types. Jennings (1990) found that among national political party convention delegates, women were more likely to belong to school-related groups, abortion-related groups, women's groups, teachers groups, and public-interest groups than men. Men, however, were more likely to belong to fraternal groups, veterans groups, labor unions, occupational groups, and service groups. His results are displayed in the first column of Table 4.3. Identical analyses among U.S. residents in general are displayed in columns two and three, computed from the 1990 CPS and the 1996 American National Election Study (Rosenstone et al. 1996). Among political party delegates, as well as the nation as a whole, voluntary association participants display considerable sex specialization.

Voluntary associations are also segregated by race. Figure 4.2 plots the average levels of racial homogeneity reported by whites and blacks in their most active groups. Higher scores reflect higher degrees of homogeneity. The plot suggests a high degree of racial segregation across group types for both races.

Further analyses reveal that racial homogeneity is more common than gender homogeneity. Women select into racially homogenous groups even more often than they select into groups homogenous with respect to sex. In the 1990 CPS, among women who reported that their most important group is also their most active group (women for whom measures of group homogeneity are available), 61 percent reported that their group was racially homogenous, while 41 percent said that it was homogenous with respect to sex.¹⁹

As the guild meetings suggested, however, homogeneity in terms of shared demographics is not enough to produce communication through the lens of collective identity. Some type of mechanism for recognizing likenesses is necessary, such as the presence of out-groups or the purpose of the group. One situation in which the membership is relatively homogenous and the identity is salient is within associations in which the purpose is related to a social category (e.g., "women's groups"). If this is indeed conducive to the development of perspectives rooted in social identity, people who participate in associations whose purpose is explicitly related to a social group of which they are objective members should exhibit higher rates of identity with that group than people who do not participate in groups with that social group purpose. National sample survey data allow us to test for this. To control for the possibility that people who participate in associations are more likely to have strong social identities for spurious reasons, I ran this test only among people who reported participating in associations. I examined this hypothesis

Table 4.3 Sex Specialization in Voluntary Associations

Type of group	1984 Convention Delegate Study		1990 Citizen Participation Study		1996 National Election Study	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Religious group	48	47	5	< 9	6	< 11
Education group	31	< 39	9	< 15	9	< 14
Women's group	14	< 60	4	2	0	1
Member of a local church, parish or synagogue					40	< 44
Health/service group			5	7	3	< 8
Abortion-related	14	< 40				
Teachers	15	< 25				
Public interest	37	< 55				
Civic group			1	2	1	< 9
Labor union	28	> 23	9	> 3	9	> 4
Service	30	> 18				
Hobby club, sports club, country club			14	> 8	15	> 12
Service/fraternal organization	32	> 12	11	7	6	4
Racial/ethnic group	32	> 30	2	2	3	2
Business/professional group	53	> 43	19	> 12	14	> 7
Veterans group	21	> 4	4	> 1	5	> 2
Elections group			2	2	5	> 1
Youth group			6	8	12	14
Cultural organization			1	2	3	3
Senior citizens group			2	4	3	4
Literary group			3	5	2	3
Neighborhood group			8	7	3	3
Political issue group			3	2	2	2
Lib/con group			2	1	0	0
Self-help group	1	2				
Environmental group	31	30				

Note: Entries are percentage of men or women respondents who report participating in each group type. The first column is taken from Jennings (1990). Several group labels differed slightly. In the Convention Delegate Study labels were “fraternal,” “occupational,” “school-related,” and “church” for those listed here as “service/fraternal,” “business professional,” “educational,” and “religious,” respectively. Please see appendix 3 for question wordings in the NES and CPS. Discrepancies are identified in the NES wordings. Following the convention used in Jennings 1990 (p. 232), percentage differences greater than or equal to 5% for the Convention Delegate Study, and greater than or equal to 3% for the other two studies are indicated with < and > signs. Weights were used to compute figures for the 1990 CPS and the 1996 NES. Ns for the CPS ranged from 1,168 to 1,179 for men and from 1,298 to 1,310 for women. In the NES, Ns were 838 for women and 696 for men.

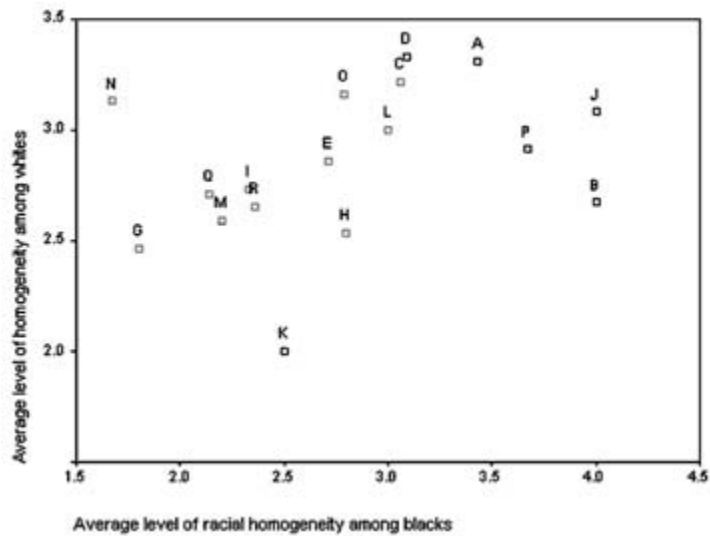


Figure 4.2 Group Racial Homogeneity. (Source: 1990 CPS)
Key: A = Service, fraternal organization; B = Veterans group; C = Religious group; D = Racial/ethnic group; E = Senior citizens' group; F = Women's group; G = Labor union; H = Business/professional group; I = Political issue group; J = Civic group; K = Liberal/conservative group; L = Elections group; M = Youth group; N = Literary group; O = Hobby club, sports or country club; P = Neighborhood group; Q = Health service group; R = Education group; S = Cultural organization

with 1996 National Election Studies data (Rosenstone et al. 1996) as well as the 1990 CPS data.²⁰ The results are displayed in table 4.4.

The results suggest that taking part in a group whose purpose invokes social group membership is more clearly related to the clarification of social identity among members of some social groups than others. Women who take part in “organizations mainly interested in issues promoting the rights or the welfare of women” and union members who take part in “labor unions” appear more likely to identify with women and unions, respectively, than people who do not participate in such groups. However, blacks and whites who take part in “groups representing your own particular nationality, or ethnic, or racial group,” and elderly people who take part in “organizations for the elderly or senior citizens” are not more likely to identify with their respective social categories than members of those categories who take part in different types of groups.²¹

The small number of cases in the salient group conditions limits the conclusions that can be drawn from this table. However, these results underscore an important factor in the process of identity clarification: the salience of social group categories *in society*. Regardless of the salience of the category in the immediate physical context, voluntary association participation has a

Table 4.4 Relationship between Social Identification and Attending Association Meetings of a Group in which Social Group Is Salient

		Mean identification		T-test
Data source		Attend meetings in which identity is salient	Attend meetings, but not in which identity is salient	
Women	1990 CPS	.58 (n = 26)	.47 (n = 578)	t = 1.869 p = .037
	1996 NES	.90 (n = 9)	.67 (n = 544)	t = 2.130 p = .031
Blacks	1990 CPS	.49 (n = 48)	.50 (n = 161)	t = .194 p = .423
	1996 NES	.89 (n = 14)	.80 (n = 107)	t = .967 p = .173
Union Members	1996 NES	.46 (n = 83)	.22 (n = 100)	t = 3.428 p = .000
Elderly	1996 NES	.70 (n = 34)	.65 (n = 143)	t = .594 p = .278
Whites	1996 NES	.28 (n = 21)	.50 (n = 848)	t = -1.583 p = .074

more obvious effect on identity development with respect to some categories than others. Whether or not African Americans participate in associations, they claim closeness with “blacks” at high rates, as noted earlier in this chapter. Thus, participation in associations has little added effect on whether or not they proclaim an identity with blacks. The high levels of identity with “the elderly” among participants in groups in which that identity is not salient suggests the same dynamic. In contrast, “closeness” to whites once more is an uncommon sentiment, even among whites who profess activity in groups related to their nationality, race, or ethnicity.

In slightly different terms, race is perhaps the most salient social category in political judgment and understanding in American culture, because patterns of social, economic, and political segregation in American society announce and reinforce that African Americans comprise a distinct group (Massey and Denton 1993) at the same time that American elite discourse underscores racial divides (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Mendelberg 2001).

Gender divisions are arguably less prominent than racial divisions in American culture (Gurin 1985). Although women are highly segregated from men in settings such as the workforce (Reskin 1993) and voluntary associations (Jennings 1990; McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1986), they are frequently linked to this out-group (i.e., men) in intimate ways (Jackman 1994;

Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). Because of this complex social position, many women may not recognize the political relevance of their membership in this social group (Sigel 1996).

Thinking about political issues consciously in terms of one's social class is even less likely than in terms of one's gender or race. This is not to say that social class identity does not matter in American politics. How Americans identify in terms of class is, for example, related to the way they orient themselves to government (Walsh, Jennings, and Stoker, forthcoming). However, overt class conflict is rare among Americans (Jackman 1994, 24–33). The nonsalience of class in American politics is especially apparent when viewed in a comparative perspective (Gerteis and Savage 1998). In addition, other social identities often overwhelm the relevance of class identification to politics. For example, African Americans' racial identities are often more powerful predictors of their policy preferences than are class divisions (Dawson 1994, 192–99). Because the linkage between class location and politics is relatively obscured in American political culture, it makes sense that we see the strongest effect of extra opportunities for interaction—participation in voluntary associations—on an identity related to class, closeness to unions.

Taken together, these results suggest that although the particular contexts of association interaction may matter for whether or not people communicate about collective identity, the broader social and political culture in which they interact has a bearing on these processes as well.

* * *

The characteristics of the broader political environment matter for how people connect themselves to politics, as these results suggest, and as previous research on public opinion, especially framing effects, has shown. However, the observations analyzed in the earlier portion of this chapter underscore that social identities are not entirely the product of elite-driven effects. It takes some work for a group of retired white men living in an idyllic community that has ample resources to perceive the world from the standpoint of people living the “typical” American experience.

Observation of the Old Timers suggests that participation in voluntary associations provides an opportunity for people to clarify their attachments to social groups. When contrasted with the craft guild meetings and tested against survey data evidence, two key factors emerge that influence whether or not people will clarify social identity through their informal interaction. First, overlapping acquaintances and experiences make the clarification of collective identities more likely. And second, for such clarification to occur, some mechanism must operate to give salience to these similarities. When

group members do communicate about shared identities, they are giving meaning to tools of understanding. These resulting identities form the basis of perspectives through which they collectively communicate about the world.

Taking part in the conversation is a different act than if the participants were merely listening to the comments of others on a tape recorder. The process of giving meaning to, of constituting, politically relevant identities is an act that is performed in a specific social context through the act of relating to one another. Because they use feedback from one another to clarify and reinforce where they each individually stand, it is the social nature of the act that enables the development of these social attachments.

When people clarify their social identities through informal talk, they are developing basic building blocks of political understanding. This act of “relating ‘I’ to ‘We’” is perhaps the fundamental move of citizenship (Pitkin 1981, 345). When people discuss public issues, they relate their personal and private selves to a collectivity or community (Norton 1988, chap. 1). The struggle over who is in an in-group and who is in an out-group, over who is superior, and how these groups relate are all questions of power, or “cultural politics” (Habell-Pallán 1997, 257). These are questions about how people are connected to others and how they should relate to one another, which are both political and ethical questions (Stoker 1992). And these are questions whose answers do not specify policy preferences but delineate ways of looking at the world—that is, perspectives.