

# Identity

What does identity mean in the context of A-level geography, and why is it important to your studies?

At first glance, 'identity' might strike you as an odd word to see listed as a specialised concept in your geography specification. In comparison with other important A-level ideas — such as sustainability, globalisation and mitigation — identity may seem a rather humble and 'everyday' word. This column explores why the idea of identity is in fact a vital conceptual cornerstone for the study of geography at A-level and beyond.

## Identity in the curriculum

The concept of identity is widely used throughout the school and university curriculum and it is worth reflecting on any past learning you may have had on this topic in other subjects. Identity matters greatly in citizenship, for example, where it is typically defined as: 'A reflection of how people see themselves which can affect how they think about issues'.

Important markers of personal identity include gender, age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and family relationships, in addition to people's local and national identity as members of their community and citizens of a nation-state. Diversity is a closely associated concept. A diverse community is one where the ethnic identity of citizens is more varied.

## Geography, culture and identity

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the so-called 'cultural turn' in university geography occurred. Contemporary philosophical ideas about cultural identity and diversity helped inform — and were, in turn, refined by — work carried out by human geographers. Two especially important research themes were studying how:

- People's sense of identity, both as individuals and as members of a society, emerges when they perceive a difference between themselves and other individuals or societies. Identity is therefore a 'relational' concept. Expressed simply, this means that we may become more aware of our own identity when we encounter individuals and societies who are different or 'other' from ourselves. This important insight has helped geographers

explore the way in which nationalism has resurged alongside growing globalisation.

- Identity is not fixed. It is fluid and changing (identity could even be regarded as a process). Changes in personal or group identity occur continually, for example in response to new technologies and the changing economic and physical world. These ongoing structural changes affect where and how people live (and thus their sense of self).

As an interesting exercise, think about the ways your own personal identity differs from that of your grandparents or other older people. 'Big picture' social and cultural changes over time (such as the growth of social media) will explain some differences. Equally, progressive political changes, such as greater equality for women, have impacted on how people view themselves and their roles in society. Migration into the UK has meant that increasing numbers of people have a multiple identity (mixed heritage).

## Identity in geography A-level

The concept of identity informs the study of A-level geography in several ways. Figure 1 shows three important applications which this column now examines in turn.

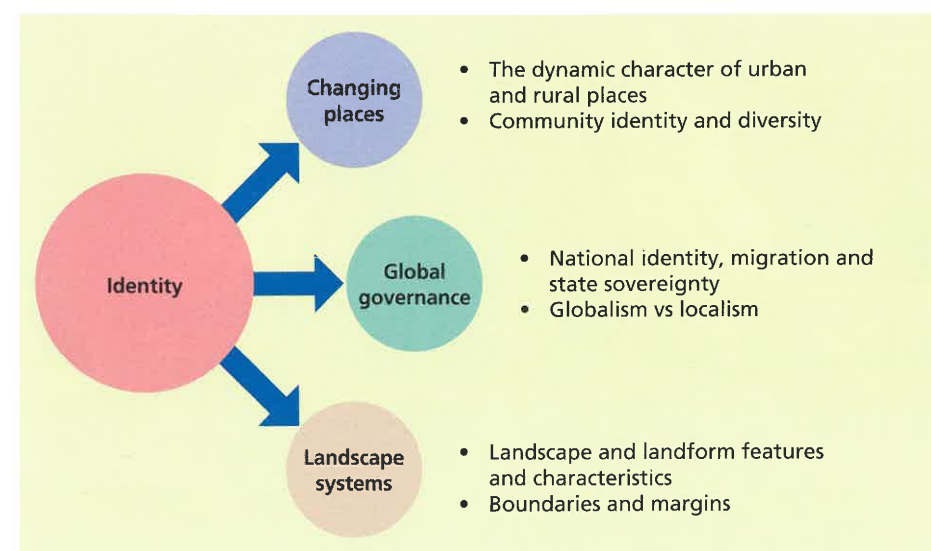


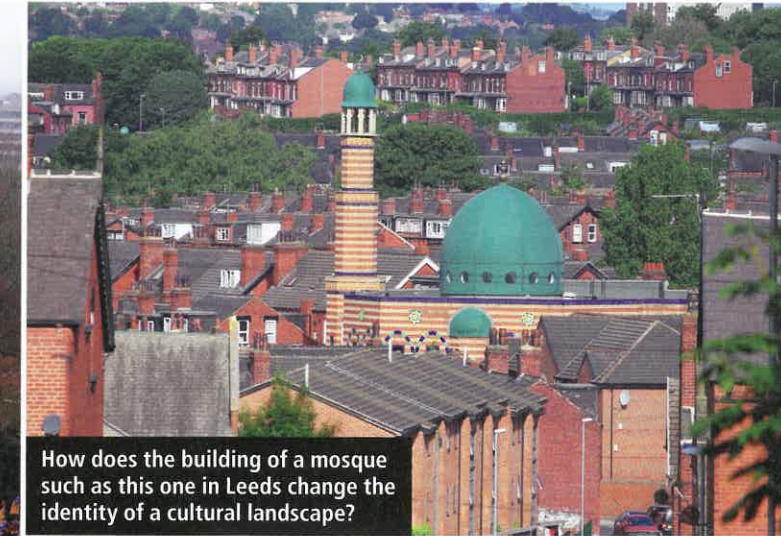
Figure 1 Identity and the geography A-level curriculum

## Identity and places

The A-level geography course examines:

- ways in which the identities of places (both real and perceived) are constructed

Catalans marching in Brussels, 2017, in support of independence from Spain. National identity can be complex



How does the building of a mosque such as this one in Leeds change the identity of a cultural landscape?

- In turn, place identity shapes community identity (the character of a city's community may reflect the industries which its physical geography gave rise to, such as steel-making, mining or docking).
- The communities, economies and physical landscapes of places are continually reshaped over time by external forces, ranging from global migration to climate change and extreme weather. As a result, the relationship between community and place identity is in a constant state of flux.

## Identity, states and sovereignty

The differing identities of states, countries and nations features in the study of **global systems and global governance**. A good starting point for studying identity in this context is Ben Anderson's classic account of how every nation is an 'imagined community'. This is widely regarded as essential reading in human geography, more so than ever given current tensions in the UK over Brexit and Scottish independence. Anderson argued that national cultures are constructed selectively around particular stories, myths and experiences. Sometimes the narrative is based also in the idea of indigenous people, but not necessarily (as shown by the fact that so many Americans view their own national identity as being entirely distinct from Native American culture).

It is well worth finding out more about Anderson's ideas and arguments if you are interested in understanding why:

- there is often cultural resistance to international migration
- nationalism has become a strong political and cultural force once again in the UK, USA and elsewhere
- some people feel that their state's sovereignty is threatened by globalisation and are acting accordingly

- how the geographies of different places play a role in the construction of *social identities*

There is particular emphasis on the importance of **place meanings and representations** for different groups of people. So, for example, a town centre might be viewed negatively as a busy and congested workplace by an older person working in an office there, whereas a younger person who enjoys going out to restaurants and bars might see the same town centre in a far more positive light. Like beauty, a place's identity is very much 'in the eye of the beholder'. This important aspect of studying places was explored in Geographical Ideas in GEOGRAPHY REVIEW Vol. 30, No. 4.

There are 'real' facts to study about place identity too. They include information about a place's physical site (its relief, drainage and geology) and human characteristics such as population density, age structure and economic functions. This aspect of place identity was explored in Geographical Ideas in GEOGRAPHY REVIEW Vol. 30, No. 2.

It is important to remember that the interrelationship between place identity

and community identity operates in both directions, and sometimes in complex ways (Figure 2).

- Place identity may directly reflect community identity (for example when a church or mosque is added to the cultural landscape by a Christian or Muslim community).

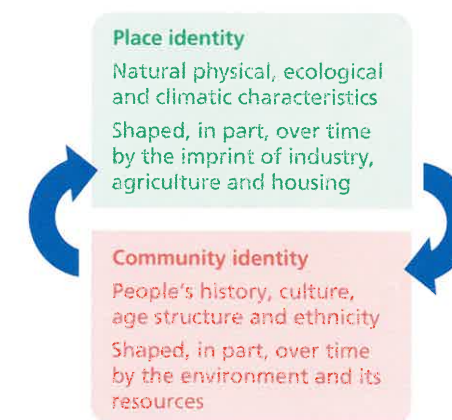


Figure 2 Interrelations between place identity and community identity



Physical landscapes may be harder to label than the textbook examples

### Critical thinking about identity in physical geography

Finally, the concept of 'identity' is also useful in A-level physical geography. In common with the physical sciences, physical geography relies heavily on taxonomies (classification schemes). At GCSE, geography students learn to recognise the 'main features' of particular things, such as a river meander, tropical plant community or desert climate. Study is usually focused on perfect 'textbook' renditions which are sometimes hard to find in reality.

At A-level, it is important to think critically about the complexity of real environments and landscapes whose identity may be very different from theoretical examples:

- In particular, physical geography fieldwork findings are sometimes harder than expected to interpret. Real-world 'messy geography' consists of landscape features and patterns whose identity and origin may well be unclear and contested. It can also be unclear where particular landscapes or environments begin and end: textbook climate and biome maps show clear-cut boundaries between regions, but these margins may be less easily visible at ground level in the real world.
- When writing about physical environments in your A-level examination, it is always a good idea to stress that the characteristics of landscapes and landforms can be far more varied and complex than models suggest.

### Activities

- 1 What are the defining features of your personal identity and the identity of (a) the settlement where you live, (b) your home region (e.g. the Midlands) or country (e.g. Wales) and (c) the UK or other state you belong to?
- 2 Like other specialised concepts — such as risk and feedback — identity is used by human and physical geographers alike. What geographic themes and topics could feature when answering the synoptic essay question: 'To what extent can the identities of societies and environments be protected from change?'

### Further reading

- Anderson, B. (2006) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso.
- Oakes, S. (2016) 'Geographical ideas: The concept of place: characteristics, change and connections', *GEOGRAPHY REVIEW* Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 34–36.
- Oakes, S. (2017) 'Geographical ideas: The concept of place: meaning, representation and conflict', *GEOGRAPHY REVIEW* Vol. 30, No. 4, pp. 14–16.



The 'red carpet blackout' at the 2018 Golden Globe awards was a statement of solidarity against sexual harassment in the entertainment industry — an example of the impact of changing social politics

Dr Simon Oakes is a geography, humanities and assessment consultant, and a senior examiner in geography, citizenship and law. He can be contacted at [geography@btinternet.com](mailto:geography@btinternet.com)