

# Modernity and Self-Identity

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Self and Society in the Late Modern Age

Anthony Giddens

Chapter 3

Stanford University Press  
Stanford, California

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© 1991 Anthony Giddens  
Originating publisher: Polity Press, Cambridge,  
in association with Blackwell Publishers, Oxford  
First published in the U.S.A. by  
Stanford University Press, 1991  
Printed in Great Britain  
Cloth ISBN 0-8047-1943-8  
Paper ISBN 0-8047-1944-6

Original printing 1991  
Last figure below indicates year of this printing:  
06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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## 3

## The Trajectory of the Self

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In this chapter, elaborating upon the theme of the self, I shall follow the same course as in chapter 1, making use of analysis and advice which not only portray a 'subject-matter', but help constitute the fields of action they concern.

*Self-Therapy*, a work by Janette Rainwater, is a book directly oriented to practice. Like the study by Wallerstein and Blakeslee, it is only one among an indefinite variety of books on its subject, and it figures in this analysis for symptomatic reasons rather than on its own account. Subtitled *A Guide to Becoming Your Own Therapist*, it is intended as a programme of self-realisation that anyone can use:

Possibly you're feeling restless. Or you may feel overwhelmed by the demands of wife, husband, children, or job. You may feel unappreciated by those people closest to you. Perhaps you feel angry that life is passing you by and you haven't accomplished all those great things you had hoped to do. Something feels missing from your life. You were attracted by the title of this book and wish that you really were in charge. What to do?<sup>1</sup>

What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour. They are existential questions, although, as we shall see later, their relation to the existential issues discussed in the preceding chapter is problematic.

A key idea of Rainwater's perspective is set out very early in

her book. Therapy with another person – psychiatrist or counsellor – she accepts, is an important, indeed frequently a crucial, part of a process of self-realisation. But, says Rainwater, therapy can only be successful when it involves the individual's own reflexivity: 'when the clients also start learning to do self-therapy.'<sup>2</sup> For therapy is not something which is 'done' to a person, or 'happens' to them; it is an experience which involves the individual in systematic reflection about the course of her or his life's development. The therapist is at most a catalyst who can accelerate what has to be a process of self-therapy. This proposition applies also, Rainwater notes, to her book, which can inform someone about possible modes and directions of self-change, but which must be interpretatively organised by the person concerned in relation to his or her life's problems.

Self-therapy is grounded first and foremost in continuous self-observation. Each moment of life, Rainwater emphasises, is a 'new moment', at which the individual can ask, 'what do I want for myself?' Living every moment reflectively is a matter of heightened awareness of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. Awareness creates potential change, and may actually induce change in and through itself. For instance, the question, 'Are you aware of your breathing right now?', at least when it is first posed, usually produces an instantaneous change. The raising of such an issue may make the person 'aware that she is inhibiting a normal full breathing cycle and allows her body to say "Whew!" in relief, take a deep breath, and then exhale it.' 'And', Rainwater adds parenthetically to the reader, 'how is your breathing right now, after having read this paragraph?'<sup>3</sup> – a question that I could echo to whosoever might be reading this particular text . . .

Present-awareness, or what Rainwater calls the 'routine art of self-observation', does not lead to a chronic immersion in current experience. On the contrary, it is the very condition of effectively planning ahead. Self-therapy means seeking to live each moment to the full, but it emphatically does not mean succumbing to the allure of the present. The question 'What do I want for myself right now?' is not the same as taking one day at a time. The 'art of being in the now' generates the self-understanding necessary to plan ahead and to construct a life trajectory which accords with the individual's inner wishes. Therapy is a process of growth, and one which has to encompass the major transitions through which



a person's life is likely to pass. Keeping a journal, and developing a notional or actual autobiography, are recommended as means of thinking ahead. The journal, Rainwater suggests, should be written completely for oneself, never with the thought of showing it to anyone else. It is a place where the individual can be completely honest and where, by learning from previously noted experiences and mistakes, she can chart a continuing process of growth. Whether or not the journal itself has the explicit form of an autobiography, 'autobiographical thinking' is a central element of self-therapy. For developing a coherent sense of one's life history is a prime means of escaping the thrall of the past and opening oneself out to the future. The author of the autobiography is enjoined both to go back as far as possible into early childhood and to set up lines of potential development to encompass the future.

The autobiography is a corrective intervention into the past, not merely a chronicle of elapsed events. One of its aspects, for example, is 'nourishing the child-that-you-were'. Thinking back to a difficult or traumatic phase of childhood, the individual talks to the child-that-was, comforting and supporting it and offering advice. In this way, Rainwater argues, feelings of 'if only' can be got over and done with. 'The basic purpose of writing autobiographical material is to help you be done with the past...'<sup>4</sup> Another aspect is the 'corrective emotional experience exercise'. The person writes down an event from the past in the form of a short story written in the present, recalling what happened and the feelings involved as accurately as he or she can. Then the story is rewritten in the way the individual would have liked it to happen, with new dialogue, feelings and resolution of the episode.

Reconstruction of the past goes along with anticipation of the likely life trajectory of the future. Self-therapy presumes what Rainwater calls a 'dialogue with time' – a process of self-questioning about how the individual handles the time of her lifespan. Thinking about time in a positive way – as allowing for life to be lived, rather than consisting of a finite quantity that is running out – allows one to avoid a 'helpless-hopeless' attitude. Time which 'carries us along' implies a conception of fate like that found in many traditional cultures, where people are the prisoners of events and preconstructed settings rather than able to

subject their lives to the sway of their own self-understanding. Holding a dialogue with time means identifying stressful events (actual events in the past and possible ones to be faced in the future) and coming to terms with their implications. Rainwater offers a 'rating scale' of stressful happenings, based on research literature in the area (pointing out also that such happenings can be causally linked to the onset of physical disease). Examples include death of a spouse, divorce or marital separation, losing one's job, being in financial difficulties, plus many other events or situations.

'Taking charge of one's life' involves risk, because it means confronting a diversity of open possibilities. The individual must be prepared to make a more or less complete break with the past, if necessary, and to contemplate novel courses of action that cannot simply be guided by established habits. Security attained through sticking with established patterns is brittle, and at some point will crack. It betokens a fear of the future rather than providing the means of mastering it:

People who fear the future attempt to 'secure' themselves – with money, property, health insurance, personal relationships, marriage contracts. Parents attempt to bind their children to them. Some fearful children are reluctant to leave the home nest. Husbands and wives try to guarantee the continuance of the other's life and services. The harsh psychological truth is that there is no permanence in human relationships, any more than there is in the stock market, the weather, 'national security', and so on . . . this clutching at security can be very discouraging to interpersonal relationships, and will impede your own self-growth. The more each of us can learn to be truly in the present with our others, making no rules and erecting no fences for the future, the stronger we will be in ourselves and the closer and happier in our relationships.

Finally . . . death: 'and the possibility that you're in charge here, too!'<sup>5</sup> Asking people to think about death, Rainwater says, typically provokes one of two attitudes. Either death is associated with fear, as in the case where individuals spend much of their present time worrying about their own death or that of loved ones; or death is regarded as unknowable, and therefore a subject



to be avoided as far as possible. Both attitudes – fear of death and denial of death – can be countered by a programme of self-help that draws on the same techniques described elsewhere in Rainwater's book. Thinking back to the past, to the first experience of the death of another person, allows one to begin to ferret out hidden feelings about death. Looking ahead in this case involves contemplating the years of life which the person believes remain, and imagining the setting of one's own future death. An imaginary confrontation with death allows the question to be posed all over again: 'What to do?'

Imagine that you have been told that you have just three years left to live. You will be in good health for these years. . . . What was your immediate response? . . . To start planning how you would spend your time? Or to be angry at how short the time is? Rather than 'raging against the dying of the light' or getting bogged down in the mechanics of how you die in this fantasy, decide how you want to spend your time, *how you want to live these last three years*.

Where do you want to live?

With whom do you want to live?

Do you want to work?

To study?

Are there any ingredients from your fantasy life that you would like to incorporate into your current life?<sup>6</sup>

### Self-identity, history, modernity

How distinctive in historical terms are the concerns and orientations expressed in Rainwater's 'self-help manual'? We might, of course, simply say that the search for self-identity is a modern problem, perhaps having its origins in Western individualism. Baumeister claims that in pre-modern times our current emphasis on individuality was absent.<sup>7</sup> The idea that each person has a unique character and special potentialities that may or may not be fulfilled is alien to pre-modern culture. In medieval Europe, lineage, gender, social status and other attributes relevant to identity were all relatively fixed. Transitions had to be made through the various stages of life, but these were governed by

institutionalised processes and the individual's role in them was relatively passive. Baumeister's analysis recalls that of Durkheim: the 'individual', in a certain sense, did not exist in traditional cultures, and individuality was not prized. Only with the emergence of modern societies and, more particularly, with the differentiation of the division of labour, did the separate individual become a focus of attention.<sup>8</sup>

No doubt there is something in these views. But I do not think it is the existence of the 'individual' that is at stake, as a distinctive feature of modernity, and even less so the self. 'Individuality' has surely been valued – within varying limits – in all cultures and so, in one sense or another, has been the cultivation of individual potentialities. Rather than talking in general terms of 'individual', 'self' or even 'self-identity' as distinctive of modernity, we should try to break things down into finer detail. We can begin to do so by charting some of the specific points in, or implications of, Rainwater's portrayal of what therapy is and what it does. The following elements can be drawn out of her text:

1 The self is seen as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible (this theme figured in chapter 1 above). We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves. It would not be true to say that the self is regarded as entirely empty of content, for there are psychological processes of self-formation, and psychological needs, which provide the parameters for the reorganisation of the self. Otherwise, however, what the individual becomes is dependent on the reconstructive endeavours in which she or he engages. These are far more than just 'getting to know oneself' better: self-understanding is subordinated to the more inclusive and fundamental aim of building/rebuilding a coherent and rewarding sense of identity. The involvement of such reflexivity with social and psychological research is striking, and a pervasive feature of the therapeutic outlook advocated.

2 The self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future. The individual appropriates his past by sifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an (organised) future. The trajectory of the self has a coherence that derives from a cognitive awareness of the various phases of the lifespan. The lifespan, rather than events in the outside world,



becomes the dominant 'foreground figure' in the *Gestalt* sense. It is not quite the case that all outside events or institutions are a 'blur', against which only the lifespan has form and is picked out in clear relief; yet such events only intrude in so far as they provide supports for self-development, throw up barriers to be overcome or are a source of uncertainties to be faced.

3 The reflexivity of the self is continuous, as well as all-pervasive. At each moment, or at least at regular intervals, the individual is asked to conduct a self-interrogation in terms of what is happening. Beginning as a series of consciously asked questions, the individual becomes accustomed to asking, 'how can I use this moment to change?' Reflexivity in this sense belongs to the reflexive historicity of modernity, as distinct from the more generic reflexive monitoring of action. As Rainwater stresses, it is a practised art of self-observation:

What is happening right now?  
 What am I thinking?  
 What am I doing?  
 What am I feeling?  
 How am I breathing?<sup>9</sup>

4 It is made clear that self-identity, as a coherent phenomenon, presumes a narrative: the narrative of the self is made explicit. Keeping a journal, and working through an autobiography, are central recommendations for sustaining an integrated sense of self. It is generally accepted among historians that the writing of autobiographies (as well as biographies) only developed during the modern period.<sup>10</sup> Most published autobiographies, of course, are celebrations of the lives or achievements of distinguished individuals: they are a way of singling out the special experiences of such persons from those of the mass of the population. Seen in this way, autobiography seems a rather peripheral feature of individual distinctiveness as a whole. Yet autobiography – particularly in the broad sense of an interpretative self-history produced by the individual concerned, whether written down or not – is actually at the core of self-identity in modern social life. Like any other formalised narrative, it is something that has to be worked at, and calls for creative input as a matter of course.

5 Self-actualisation implies the control of time – essentially, the establishing of zones of personal time which have only remote connections with external temporal orders (the routinised world of time-space governed by the clock and by universalised standards of measurement). The insistence on the primacy of personal time (the *durée* of day-to-day social life) is everywhere in Rainwater's book – although, as we have seen, it is not offered as a philosophy of the 'absolute present', but as a mode of controlling the available time of the lifespan. 'Holding a dialogue with time' is the very basis of self-realisation, because it is the essential condition of achieving satisfaction at any given moment – of living life to the full. The future is thought of as resonant with possibilities, yet not left open to the full play of contingency. So far as possible, the future is to be ordered by exactly those active processes of temporal control and active interaction on which the integration of the self's narrative depends.

6 The reflexivity of the self extends to the body, where the body (as suggested in the previous chapter) is part of an action system rather than merely a passive object. Observation of bodily processes – 'How am I breathing?' – is intrinsic to the continuous reflexive attention which the agent is called on to pay to her behaviour. Awareness of the body is basic to 'grasping the fullness of the moment', and entails the conscious monitoring of sensory input from the environment, as well as the major bodily organs and body dispositions as a whole. Body awareness also includes awareness of requirements of exercise and diet. Rainwater points out that people speak of 'going on a diet' – but we are all on a diet! Our diet is what we eat; at many junctures of the day we take decisions about whether or not to eat and drink, and exactly what to eat and drink. 'If you don't like the diet you are on, there is a new minute and a new choice-point coming up, and you can change your diet. You're in charge!'<sup>11</sup>

Body awareness sounds similar to the regimes practised in some traditional religions, particularly religions of the East. And indeed Rainwater, like many others writing about self-actualisation or therapy today, draws on some such regimes in the programme she offers. Yet the differences are pronounced. For body awareness is presented by her as a means of constructing a differentiated self, not as one of the dissolution of the ego.



Experiencing the body is a way of cohering the self as an integrated whole, whereby the individual says 'this is where I live.'

7 Self-actualisation is understood in terms of a *balance between opportunity and risk*. Letting go of the past, through the various techniques of becoming free from oppressive emotional habits, generates a multiplicity of opportunities for self-development. The world becomes full of potential ways of being and acting, in terms of experimental involvements which the individual is now able to initiate. It would not be true to say that the psychologically liberated person faces risks while the more traditional self does not; rather, what is at stake is the *secular consciousness of risk*, as inherent in calculative strategies to be adopted in relation to the future.

The individual has to confront novel hazards as a necessary part of breaking away from established patterns of behaviour – including the risk that things could possibly get worse than they were before. Another book on self-therapy describes things in the following way:

If your life is ever going to change for the better, you'll have to take chances. You'll have to get out of your rut, meet new people, explore new ideas and move along unfamiliar pathways. In a way the risks of self-growth involve going into the unknown, into an unfamiliar land where the language is different and customs are different and you have to learn your way around . . . the paradox is that until we give up all that feels secure, we can never really trust the friend, mate, or job that offers us something. True personal security does not come from without, it comes from within. When we are really secure, we must place our total trust in ourself.

If we reject deliberate risk-taking for self growth, we will inevitably remain trapped in our situation. Or we end up taking a risk unprepared. Either way, we have placed limits on our personal growth, have cut ourselves off from action in the service of high self-worth.<sup>12</sup>

8 The moral thread of self-actualisation is one of *authenticity* (although not in Heidegger's sense), based on 'being true to oneself'. Personal growth depends on conquering emotional blocks and tensions that prevent us from understanding ourselves

as we really are. To be able to act authentically is more than just acting in terms of a self-knowledge that is as valid and full as possible; it means also disentangling – in Laing's terms – the true from the false self. As individuals we are not able to 'make history' but if we ignore our inner experience, we are condemned to repeat it, prisoners of traits which are inauthentic because they emanate from feelings and past situations imposed on us by others (especially in early childhood). The watchword in self-therapy is 'recover or repeat.'

The morality of authenticity skirts any universal moral criteria, and includes references to other people only within the sphere of intimate relationships – although this sphere is accepted as highly important to the self. To be true to oneself means finding oneself, but since this is an active process of self-construction it has to be informed by overall goals – those of becoming free from dependencies and achieving fulfilment. Fulfilment is in some part a moral phenomenon, because it means fostering a sense that one is 'good', a 'worthy person': 'I know that as I raise my own self-worth, I will feel more integrity, honesty, compassion, energy and love'.<sup>13</sup>

9 The life course is seen as a series of 'passages'. The individual is likely, or has to go through them, but they are not institutionalised, or accompanied by formalised rites. All such transitions involve loss (as well as, usually, potential gain) and such losses – as in the case of marital separation – have to be mourned if self-actualisation is to proceed on course. Life passages give particular cogency to the interaction of risk and opportunity spoken of earlier – especially, although by no means exclusively, when they are in substantial degree initiated by the individual whom they affect. Negotiating a significant transition in life, leaving home, getting a new job, facing up to unemployment, forming a new relationship, moving between different areas or routines, confronting illness, beginning therapy – all mean running consciously entertained risks in order to grasp the new opportunities which personal crises open up. It is not only in terms of the absence of rites that life passages differ from comparable processes in traditional contexts. More important is that such transitions are drawn into, and surmounted by means of, the reflexively mobilised trajectory of self-actualisation.

10 The line of development of the self is *internally referential*: the only significant connecting thread is the life trajectory as such. Personal integrity, as the achievement of an authentic self, comes from integrating life experiences within the narrative of self-development: the creation of a personal belief system by means of which the individual acknowledges that 'his first loyalty is to himself.' The key reference points are set 'from the inside', in terms of how the individual constructs/reconstructs his life history.

Of all this, of course, there are questions one could ask. How valid are these conceptions? Are they in some sense ideological? Are they more to do with therapy than with any changes which might have affected the self in modern social conditions? For the moment I want to bracket these issues. It seems to me justified to assert that, partial, inadequate and idiosyncratic as the ideas just outlined may be, they signal something real about self and self-identity in the contemporary world – the world of late modernity. How that may be we can begin to see by connecting them up to the institutional transformations characteristic of that world.

### Lifestyles and life plans

The backdrop here is the existential terrain of late modern life. In a post-traditional social universe, reflexively organised, permeated by abstract systems, and in which the reordering of time and space realigns the local with the global, the self undergoes massive change. Therapy, including self-therapy, both expresses that change and provides programmes of realising it in the form of self-actualisation. On the level of the self, a fundamental component of day-to-day activity is simply that of *choice*. Obviously, no culture eliminates choice altogether in day-to-day affairs, and all traditions are effectively choices among an indefinite range of possible behaviour patterns. Yet, by definition, tradition or established habit orders life within relatively set channels. Modernity confronts the individual with a complex diversity of choices and, because it is non-foundational, at the same time offers little help as to which options should be selected. Various consequences tend to follow.

One concerns the primacy of *lifestyle* – and its inevitability for the individual agent. The notion of lifestyle sounds somewhat trivial because it is so often thought of solely in terms of a superficial consumerism: lifestyles as suggested by glossy magazines and advertising images.\* But there is something much more fundamental going on than such a conception suggests: in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose. A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity.

Lifestyle is not a term which has much applicability to traditional cultures, because it implies choice within a plurality of possible options, and is 'adopted' rather than 'handed down'. Lifestyles are routinised practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favoured milieux for encountering others; but the routines followed are reflexively open to change in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity. Each of the small decisions a person makes every day – what to wear, what to eat, how to conduct himself at work, whom to meet with later in the evening – contributes to such routines. All such choices (as well as larger and more consequential ones) are decisions not only about how to act but who to be. The more post-traditional the settings in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity, its making and remaking.

The notion of lifestyle is often thought to apply specifically to the area of consumption. It is true that the sphere of work is dominated by economic compulsion and that styles of behaviour in the workplace are less subject to the control of the individual than in non-work contexts. But although these contrasts clearly exist, it would be wrong to suppose that lifestyle only relates to

\* The term 'lifestyle' is an interesting example of reflexivity. The *New York Times* columnist, William Safire, suggested that it derives from the writings of Alfred Adler, and from thence was taken up by radicals in the 1960s and, at about the same time, by advertising copywriters. According to Dennis Wrong, however, the main influence was actually Max Weber: 'style of life', as associated with *Stände* in Weberian usage, eventually became 'lifestyle' in everyday language.<sup>14</sup>



activities outside of work. Work strongly conditions *life chances*, in Weber's sense, and life chances in turn is a concept which has to be understood in terms of the availability of potential lifestyles. But work is by no means completely separate from the arena of plural choices, and choice of work and work milieu forms a basic element of lifestyle orientations in the extremely complex modern division of labour.

To speak of a multiplicity of choices is not to suppose that all choices are open to everyone, or that people take all decisions about options in full realisation of the range of feasible alternatives. In work, as in the area of consumption, for all groups which have become freed from the hold of traditional contexts of activity, a plurality of lifestyle choices exist. Naturally, as Bourdieu has emphasised, lifestyle variations between groups are also elementary structuring features of stratification, not just the 'results' of class differences in the realm of production.<sup>15</sup>

Overall lifestyle patterns, of course, are less diverse than the plurality of choices available in day-to-day and even in longer-term strategic decisions. A lifestyle involves a cluster of habits and orientations, and hence has a certain unity – important to a continuing sense of ontological security – that connects options in a more or less ordered pattern. Someone who is committed to a given lifestyle would necessarily see various options as 'out of character' with it, as would others with whom she was in interaction. Moreover, the selection or creation of lifestyles is influenced by group pressures and the visibility of role models, as well as by socioeconomic circumstances.

The plurality of choices which confronts individuals in situations of high modernity derives from several influences. First, there is the fact of living in a post-traditional order. To act in, to engage with, a world of plural choices is to opt for alternatives, given that the signposts established by tradition now are blank. Thus someone might decide, for example, to ignore the research findings which appear to show that a diet high in fruit and fibre, and low in sugar, fat and alcohol, is physically beneficial and reduces the risk of contracting some types of illnesses. She might resolutely stick to the same diet of dense, fatty and sugary foods that people in the previous generation consumed. Yet, given the available options in matters of diet and the fact that the individual

has at least some awareness of them, such conduct still forms part of a distinctive lifestyle.

Second, there is what Berger calls the 'pluralisation of life-worlds'.<sup>16</sup> As he points out, throughout most of human history, people lived in social settings that were fairly closely connected with each other. Whether in situations of work, leisure or the family, an individual usually lived within a set of milieux of a comparable type – a phenomenon strongly reinforced by the dominance of the local community in most pre-modern cultures. The settings of modern social life are much more diverse and segmented. Segmentation includes particularly the differentiation between the public and private domains – but each of these is also subject internally to pluralisation. Lifestyles are characteristically attached to, and expressive of, specific milieux of action. Lifestyle options are thus often decisions to become immersed in those milieux, at the expense of the possible alternatives. Since individuals typically move between different milieux or locales in the course of their everyday life, they may feel uncomfortable in those settings that in some way place their own lifestyle in question.

Partly because of the existence of multiple milieux of action, lifestyle choices and activities very often tend to be segmental for the individual: modes of action followed in one context may be more or less substantially at variance with those adopted in others. I shall call these segments *lifestyle sectors*. A lifestyle sector concerns a time-space 'slice' of an individual's overall activities, within which a reasonably consistent and ordered set of practices is adopted and enacted. Lifestyle sectors are aspects of the regionalisation of activities.<sup>17</sup> A lifestyle sector can include, for instance, what one does on certain evenings of the week, or at weekends, as contrasted to other parts of the week; a friendship, or a marriage, can also be a lifestyle sector in so far as it is made internally cohesive by distinctive forms of elected behaviour across time-space.

A third factor conditioning plurality of choice is the existential impact of the contextual nature of warranted beliefs under conditions of modernity. As noted in the opening chapter, the Enlightenment project of replacing arbitrary tradition and speculative claims to knowledge with the certainty of reason proved to be

essentially flawed. The reflexivity of modernity operates, not in a situation of greater and greater certainty, but in one of methodological doubt. Even the most reliable authorities can be trusted only 'until further notice'; and the abstract systems that penetrate so much of day-to-day life normally offer multiple possibilities rather than fixed guidelines or recipes for action. Experts can always be turned to, but experts themselves frequently disagree over both theories and practical diagnoses. Consider therapy itself. Someone contemplating therapy faces a bewildering variety of schools of thought and types of programme, and must also reckon with the fact that some psychologists discount the effectiveness of most forms of therapy entirely. The same applies in the hardest areas of hard science, particularly since the overall claims of science may be subject to doubt. Thus a person with a particular kind of medical problem may be faced with deciding not just between alternative forms of high-tech treatment, but also between the rival claims of scientific and holistic medicine (of which there may also be an indefinite variety preferring their particular solutions).

Fourth, the prevalence of mediated experience undoubtedly also influences pluralism of choice, in obvious and also in more subtle ways. With the increasing globalisation of media, a multifarious number of milieux are, in principle, rendered visible to anyone who cares to glean the relevant information. The collage effect of television and newspapers gives specific form to the juxtaposition of settings and potential lifestyle choices. On the other hand, the influence of the mass media plainly is not all in the direction of diversification and fragmentation. The media offer access to settings with which the individual may never personally come into contact; but at the same time some boundaries between settings that were previously separate are overcome. As Meyrowitz points out, the media, especially the electronic media, alter the 'situational geography' of social life: 'More and more, media make us "direct" audiences to performances that happen in other places and give us access to audiences that are not "physically present"'.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the traditional connection between 'physical setting' and 'social situation' has become undermined; mediated social situations construct new communalities – and differences – between preconstituted forms of social experience. Although criticisms can be made against

Meyrowitz's particular interpretations, the overall thrust of this view is surely correct.

In a world of alternative lifestyle options, strategic *life-planning* becomes of special importance. Like lifestyle patterns, life plans of one kind or another are something of an inevitable concomitant of post-traditional social forms.<sup>19</sup> Life plans are the substantial content of the reflexively organised trajectory of the self. Life-planning is a means of preparing a course of future actions mobilised in terms of the self's biography. We may also speak here of the existence of personal calendars or *life-plan calendars*, in relation to which the personal time of the lifespan is handled. Personal calendars are timing devices for significant events within the life of the individual, inserting such events within a personalised chronology. Like life plans, personal calendars are typically revised and reconstructed in terms of alterations in an individual's circumstances or frame of mind. 'When I got married,' as a basic date within a life-plan calendar, as the discussion in *Second Chances* indicates, may be largely ousted by 'when the marriage broke up' as a more significant psychological marker. Personal calendars very often incorporate elements of mediated experience – as when, for instance, a couple will remember that they got married 'two weeks after President Kennedy was assassinated'.<sup>20</sup>

Life-planning presupposes a specific mode of organising time because the reflexive construction of self-identity depends as much on preparing for the future as on interpreting the past, although the 'reworking' of past events is certainly always important in this process. Life-planning, of course, does not necessarily involve preparing strategically for future life as a whole, although Rainwater's book makes clear that thinking as far ahead as the imagined end of one's life, and about each of the major phases likely to intervene in the interim, is fundamental to self-actualisation.<sup>21</sup>

Lifestyle choices and life planning are not just 'in', or constituent of, the day-to-day life of social agents, but form institutional settings which help to shape their actions. This is one reason why, in circumstances of high modernity, their influence is more or less universal, no matter how objectively limiting the social situations of particular individuals or groups may be. Consider the position of a black woman, the head of a single-parent family of several children, living in conditions of poverty in the inner



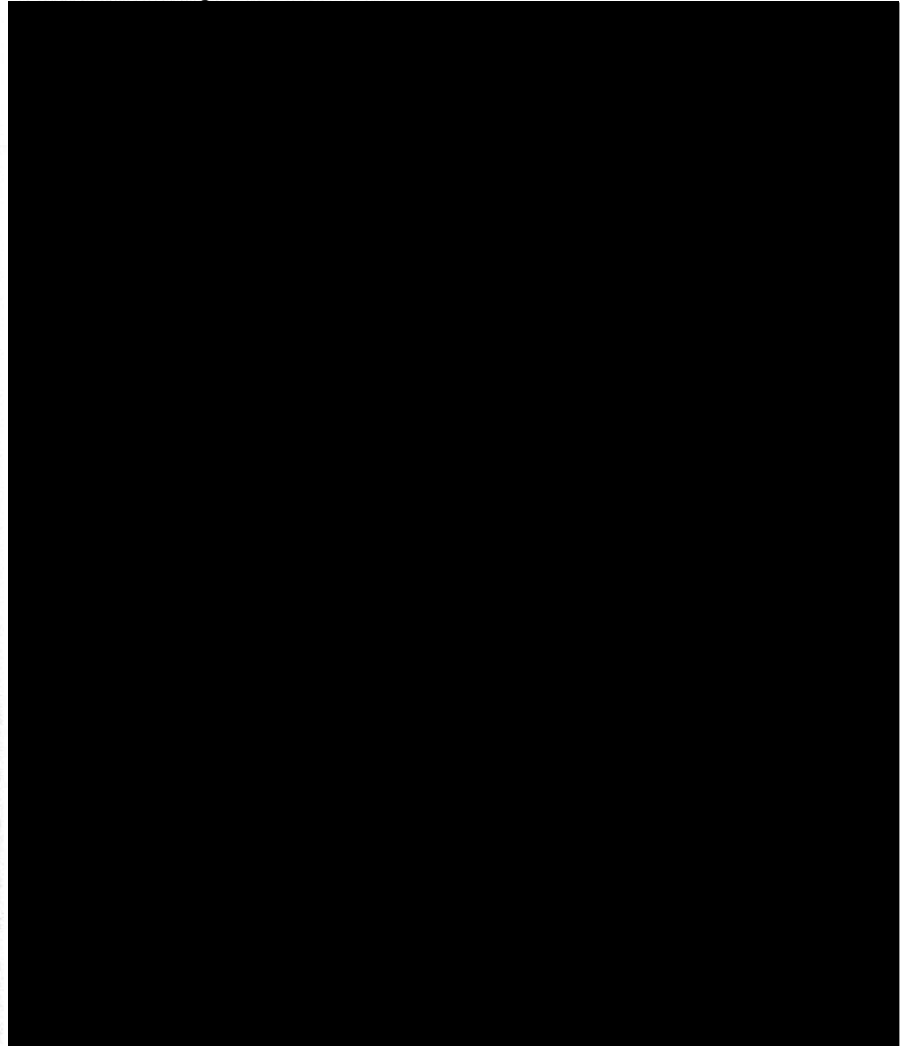
city. It might be assumed that such a person could only look on with bitter envy at the options available to the more privileged. For her there is only the drudgery of a daily round of activities carried on within strictly defined limits: she has no opportunities to follow a different lifestyle, and she could hardly plan her life, since it is dominated by external constraints.

Of course, for all individuals and groups, life chances condition lifestyle choices (and we should remember the point that lifestyle choices are often actively used to reinforce the distribution of life chances). Emancipation from situations of oppression is the necessary means of expanding the scope of some sorts of lifestyle option (see chapter 7 below on 'The Emergence of Life Politics'). Yet even the most underprivileged today live in situations permeated by institutional components of modernity. Possibilities denied by economic deprivation are different, and experienced differently – that is, *as* possibilities – from those excluded by the frameworks of tradition. Moreover, in some circumstances of poverty, the hold of tradition has perhaps become even more thoroughly disintegrated than elsewhere. Consequently, the creative construction of lifestyle may become a particularly characteristic feature of such situations. Lifestyle habits are constructed through the resistances of ghetto life as well as through the direct elaboration of distinctive cultural styles and modes of activity.

In such situations, the reflexive constitution of self-identity may be every bit as important as among more affluent strata, and as strongly affected by globalising influences. A black woman heading a single-parent household, however constricted and arduous her life, will nevertheless know about factors altering the position of women in general, and her own activities will almost certainly be modified by that knowledge. Given the inchoate nature of her social circumstances, she is virtually obliged to explore novel modes of activity, with regard to her children, sexual relations and friendships. Such an exploration, although it might not be discursively articulated as such, implies a reflexive shaping of self-identity. The deprivations to which she is subject, however, might make these tasks become an almost insupportable burden, a source of despair rather than self-enrichment.

Life planning is a specific example of a more general phenomenon that I shall discuss in some detail in a subsequent chapter as the 'colonisation of the future'. Rainwater's 'dialogue with time'

is certainly carried on in very different ways in varying social contexts and within different social strata. The orientation towards the control of time which she describes (and advocates) generates refusals and temporal dislocations as well as the attempt reflexively to drag the future into the present. A teenager who 'drifts around', who refuses to think about a possible future career, and 'gives no thought to the future', rejects this orientation, but does so specifically in opposition to an increasingly dominant temporal outlook.



## The body and self-actualisation

'The body' sounds a simple notion, particularly as compared to concepts like 'self' or 'self-identity'. The body is an object in which we are all privileged, or doomed, to dwell, the source of feelings of well-being and pleasure, but also the site of illnesses and strains. However, as has been emphasised, the body is not just a physical entity which we 'possess', it is an action-system, a mode of praxis, and its practical immersion in the interactions of day-to-day life is an essential part of the sustaining of a coherent sense of self-identity.

Several aspects of the body having special relevance to self and self-identity can be distinguished. Bodily *appearance* concerns all those features of the surface of the body, including modes of dress and adornment, which are visible to the individual and to other agents, and which are ordinarily used as clues to interpret actions. *Demeanour* determines how appearance is used by the individual within generic settings of day-to-day activities: it is how the body is mobilised in relation to constitutive conventions of daily life. The *sensuality* of the body refers to the dispositional handling of pleasure and pain. Finally we have the *regimes* to which bodies are subject.

Certain types of bodily appearance and demeanour plainly become particularly important with the advent of modernity. In many settings of pre-modern cultures, appearance was largely standardised in terms of traditional criteria. Modes of facial adornment or dress, for example, have always been to some degree a means of individualisation; yet the extent to which this was either possible or desired was usually quite limited. Appearance primarily designated social identity rather than personal identity. Dress and social identity have certainly not become entirely dissociated today, and dress remains a signalling device of gender, class position and occupational status. Modes of dress are influenced by group pressures, advertising, socioeconomic resources and other factors that often promote standardisation rather than individual difference. But the fact that we have a special word, the 'uniform', to refer to styles of dress that are standardised in relation to given social positions indicates that in other settings choice of dress is relatively open. Appearance, to



put the matter bluntly and in terms of the ideas discussed so far, becomes a central element of the reflexive project of the self.

Demeanour is strongly influenced by the pluralisation of milieux. Not only must an individual be prepared to interact with others in public places, where demeanour is expected to meet certain generalised criteria of everyday competence, but he or she must be able to maintain appropriate behaviour in a variety of settings or locales. Naturally, individuals adjust both appearance and demeanour somewhat according to the perceived demands of the particular setting. That this is so has led some authors to suppose that the self essentially becomes broken up – that individuals tend to develop multiple selves in which there is no inner core of self-identity. Yet surely, as an abundance of studies of self-identity show, this is plainly not the case. The maintaining of constants of demeanour across varying settings of interaction is one of the prime means whereby coherence of self-identity is ordinarily preserved. The potential for the unravelling of self-identity is kept in check because demeanour sustains a link between ‘feeling at home in one’s body’ and the personalised narrative. Demeanour effectively has to be integrated into that narrative for a person both to be able to sustain ‘normal appearances’ and at the same time be convinced of personal continuity across time and space; in most circumstances this is accomplished without great difficulty (although at any point it may come under strain).

In the post-traditional environments of high modernity, neither appearance nor demeanour can be organised as given; the body participates in a very direct way in the principle that the self has to be constructed. Bodily regimes, which also bear directly on patterns of sensuality, are the prime means whereby the institutional reflexivity of modern social life is focused on the cultivation – almost, one might say, the creation – of the body.

Let us once again look to a particular guide as a means of investigating these matters. *Bodysense*, by Vernon Coleman, is one among a massive number of self-help works which aim to provide a way of steering between reliance on pre-established bodily habits and the barrage of new information developed within abstract systems (emanating from doctors – of which Coleman is one – holistic health practitioners, dieticians, and so forth).<sup>37</sup> Again, we look at it symptomatically.

The book offers a ‘comprehensive screening programme’, by means of which one can monitor many aspects of one’s health and susceptibility to different ailments or disabilities. This is life-planning in a very concrete sense: a checklist is included, for example, which allows the calculation of a person’s life expectancy. Each section of the book (referred to as a ‘clinic’) contains a health area questionnaire, a ‘truth file’ (which summarises the current state of medical fact about the subject or subjects concerned) and an ‘action plan’ (what the individual might do to improve his health in the relevant respects). The concept of risk is pivotal to the work as a whole. The questionnaires allow the individual to collect points designed to give an estimate of his risk of contracting particular diseases – in particular, cancer, heart and circulatory problems, respiratory disease, digestive problems and muscle or joint difficulties.

Two of the most prominent sections are to do with eating habits and health care. Each provides an object lesson in the difficulties even professionals have in sifting through the diversity of claims and counterclaims characteristic of expert systems. As Coleman puts it:

If you believed everything you read about foodstuffs these days, you’d probably never eat again. Turn on the TV or the radio, open a magazine or newspaper and you’ll see horrifying stories about the dreadful things your grocer is doing to you. That in itself would be bad enough. It’s not much fun sitting down to a good-looking meal if you’re worried that it might be your last. But the whole business has been made even more worrying by the fact that the information being offered now frequently conflicts with last week’s data . . . so what is the truth about the food we eat? . . . What is good for you and what is bad for you? What should you avoid and what can you eat with impunity?<sup>38</sup>

Coleman tries to provide authoritative answers, although he has to recognise that many of the things he says might be disputed by other experts; and in many instances risks cannot be calculated because existing knowledge is too incomplete.

According to Coleman’s programme, cholesterol intake is to be reduced; the eating of animal fats, salt and sugar, and the drinking of alcohol, is to be brought down to a minimum: these

recommendations are made quite confidently. By contrast, coffee – which, for example, Rainwater recommends cutting out entirely on health grounds – is held not to have deserved its bad press, for ‘there really is no solid evidence to support the theory that coffee is bad for you.’<sup>39</sup> Fibre, bran and roughage are advocated as important for a healthy digestive system, while additives are treated more ambivalently by the author. Pointing out that a massive range of additives is now regularly used in the manufacture of processed foods, and pesticides sprayed on crops, Coleman emphasises that many of these chemicals have been only inadequately tested in terms of their effects on health – indeed, that testing for their long-term effects is almost impossible. It is suggested that, while it would be very difficult to eradicate all artificial additives from the diet, as much as possible can be bought from local market gardeners, local farmers and shops selling fresh or organically grown food.

‘Bodysense’ entails ‘body care’, and that is something, Coleman says, which cannot be provided by experts. Although professionals should be consulted where appropriate, resisting illness has to be primarily a matter of developing the body’s ‘own skills’. Body care means constantly ‘listening to the body’, both in order to experience fully the benefits of good health and to pick up signs that something might be going wrong. Body care delivers ‘body-power’, the increased capability to avoid serious illness and the capacity to deal with minor symptoms without drugs. Bodypower can help a person retain, and even improve on, her or his appearance: understanding how the body functions and closely monitoring this functioning in an alert fashion keeps a person’s skin fresh and body slim.

What does it mean to say that the body has become part of the reflexivity of modernity? Body regimes and the organisation of sensuality in high modernity become open to continuous reflexive attention, against the backdrop of plurality of choice. Both life-planning and the adoption of lifestyle options become (in principle) integrated with bodily regimes. It would be quite short-sighted to see this phenomenon only in terms of changing ideals of bodily appearance (such as slimness or youthfulness), or as solely brought about by the commodifying influence of advertising. We become responsible for the design of our own bodies, and in a certain sense noted above are forced to do so the more post-traditional the social contexts in which we move.

The study of anorexia nervosa, apparently purely an obsession with bodily appearance and slimness, provides a means of placing this point in stark relief.

### **Anorexia nervosa and the reflexivity of the body**

The following is a personal description of an episode of anorexic compulsion, written by a woman who eventually managed to fight free from its yoke:

I started to wear odd clothes; from jumble sales and of my own making. And make-up – strange make-up – white or black lips; dark, violent-coloured eyelids. I plucked my eyebrows away and back-combed my hair. My mother was outraged and she shouted at me. She wouldn’t let me out looking like that, so I removed it all and put it on again on the bus. And it was all a façade: underneath I was scared and lonely but I desperately wanted to be myself, to define who I was, to express my very nature. I couldn’t find the words so I used my face. I looked at photographs in magazines: there the girls were beautiful and thin. They seemed to express something that I felt. Yet I wasn’t thin and I wanted to be. I stopped eating, not dramatically, but little by little. I became a vegetarian and my mother fussed. I lost weight. My mother took me to the doctor who tried to persuade me to eat fish, at least, so I did. . . .

Later she was taken into hospital to have her appendix out:

Two months after the operation I went to a party. There I met an old acquaintance. He remarked on my weight loss and said that it suited me; in fact, he said, I looked much more attractive. I reduced my intake of food, considerably, from that moment on. I stopped eating potatoes and bread; then butter and cheese. I started to ‘eat up’ all the information I could get about calories; I read diet books with consuming interest. My food was weighed; measured according to calorific value. . . . My diet was unvaried. Every day had to be the same. I panicked if the shop did not have exactly the brand of crispbread I wanted; I panicked if I could not eat, ritually, at the same time . . .



Eventually she found a sympathetic and knowledgeable doctor, who helped her to begin to eat more substantial foods again

I trusted her. I needed her; this person who listened so carefully to what I said, who didn't judge me, who didn't tell me what to do, who let me be. I tried, with her help, to unravel the tangle of my confusing and conflicting emotions.

But in the end it was up to me. It was so hard to accept. She would help me but she couldn't tell me how to live. It was my life, after all. It belonged to me. I could cultivate it; I could nourish it or I could starve it. I could choose. It was such a burden, that choice, that sometimes I thought I could not bear it on my own. . . . It is a risky business, being a woman. I have found different strategies to cope; ones that are under my control. The struggle to be myself, autonomous and free, goes on.<sup>40</sup>

Fasting, and the self-denial of various kinds of foodstuffs, have obviously long been part of religious practices, and are found in many different cultural frameworks. It was relatively common in medieval Europe for individuals seeking salvation to undergo prolonged fasts. Female holiness achieved through food deprivation was particularly important. A variety of chronicles from medieval times recount stories of female saints whose regular fastings helped them achieve spiritual grace – physicians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries labelled the practice *anorexia mirabilis*, miraculously inspired loss of appetite.<sup>41</sup> However, it is generally agreed that *anorexia mirabilis* is quite distinct from *anorexia nervosa*, which belongs to modern times, and is particularly characteristic of the contemporary period – the phase of late modernity. *Anorexia mirabilis* was not especially pronounced among teenage or young adult women, as is often the case today; and was not bound up with the cultivation of bodily appearance, but was rather concerned with overcoming sensual appetites in the pursuit of higher values. *Anorexia nervosa* begins with the phenomenon of 'fasting girls', noted in the late nineteenth century, although this is still largely a transitional syndrome, as it were, 'a provocative relic, in a secularising age, of an older female religious culture.'<sup>42</sup> The condition proper has only become widespread since the rise of 'dieting', in the restricted sense of that term, from about the 1920s through to the present day.

The fact that anorexia is so closely linked to a gender divide is undoubtedly to do with the association between dieting and changing values about bodily appearance. The pre-established connection between a corpulent figure and prosperity had virtually disappeared by the end of the first two or three decades of the twentieth century. Women began to become concerned about weight in ways that, for the most part, men did not. Yet it is important to recognise that the 1920s was also a period at which 'diet' in the broader sense for the first time became associated with the control of weight and the self-regulation of health; and this was also the period at which the manufacture of foods began to accelerate, leading to a much wider diversity of foodstuffs becoming available. 'Being on a diet' in the narrow meaning of the phrase is only a particular version of a much more general phenomenon – the cultivation of bodily regimes as a means of reflexively influencing the project of the self.

From this point of view, anorexia, and its apparent opposite, compulsive overeating, should be understood as casualties of the need – and responsibility – of the individual to create and maintain a distinctive self-identity.<sup>43</sup> They are extreme versions of the control of bodily regimes which has now become generic to the circumstances of day-to-day life.

Anorexia is a complex phenomenon, about which there is now a voluminous literature, and it would scarcely be possible in this context to offer a properly detailed analysis of it. I want to concentrate only on those features directly relevant to the overall theses of this book. Anorexia can be understood as a pathology of reflexive self-control, operating around an axis of self-identity and bodily appearance, in which shame anxiety plays a preponderant role. All of the important elements to do with anorexia appear in the experience of the individual described at some length above. Her concern to become thin emerged, not as a sudden antipathy towards food, but as a controlled and progressive phenomenon, which happened 'little by little'; she devoted a great deal of care and concern to her diet, a deliberate asceticism in bodily regime amid the plural choices of food available; there was a marked reflexive component, as signalled by her determination to 'eat up' all the information about calories she could obtain; awareness of the need to forge a distinctive lifestyle, in relation to her self-identity, emerges very clearly; and a polarity

of shame and pride comes out plainly in the 'façade' she sought to construct as contrasted to her eventual conviction that she could 'nourish' her self-esteem rather than 'starve' it.

Why should anorexia nervosa be primarily characteristic of women, especially relatively younger women? One reason is no doubt the greater premium placed on physical attractiveness for women as opposed to men (although this imbalance is changing), coupled to the fact that early adulthood is a crisis phase in identity formation. A common view of anorexia is that it represents a 'refusal to become an adult' – in effect, a denial of puberty, the wish to remain a girl rather than become a woman. But this interpretation is not convincing and, as one observer remarks, treats anorexia misleadingly as a specific pathology rather than as 'an extremely complicated response to a confusing self-identity'.<sup>44</sup> Anorexia should rather be understood in terms of the plurality of options which late modernity makes available – against the backdrop of the continuing exclusion of women from full participation in the universe of social activity which generates those options. Women today have the nominal opportunity to follow a whole variety of possibilities and chances: yet, in a masculinist culture, many of these avenues remain effectively foreclosed. Moreover, to embrace those which do exist, women have to abandon their older, 'fixed' identities in a more thoroughgoing way than do men. In other words, they experience the openness of late modernity in a fuller, yet more contradictory, way.

Anorexia, as Orbach puts it, is a form of protest: one characterised not by withdrawal, but by a sustained engagement with the reflexivity of bodily development.<sup>45</sup> In previous times, when women's social positions were in general tightly defined, women expressed rebellion in the body in the form of hysterical symptoms. Today, their protest is intertwined with the reflexive control which a post-traditional order implies: 'The anorectic woman encompasses in her symptom a way of being entirely at odds with the phlegmatic response of her nineteenth-century hysterical sister. Not for her the fainting, falling, or flailing fists; her protest is marked by the achievement of a serious and successful transformation of her body . . .'<sup>46</sup> When the options open to a woman were few and narrowly focused, her unconscious resistance

through the body was diffuse; in a situation of an apparent multiplicity of possibilities, her reaction is confined and exhibits tight control. As Orbach points out, the anorectic individual is not the passive victim of the dietician: on the contrary, anorexia involves body regimes that are highly active and coordinated.

In anorectic lifestyles, then, we see a specific version of Rainwater's admonition: 'You're in charge,' save that the attempt at mastery becomes compulsive. The body regimes of anorectic individuals are often extreme. A person may, for example, run for several miles, take part in a punishing and lengthy exercise class and then go on to work out for a period on exercise machines. Such activities bring about a sense of achievement, rather than simply despair, and one can clearly see in them important aspects of empowerment. There is 'an urgency and strength' in the asceticism of anorexia, which is thus more to do with the self-denial *per se* rather than with a body image of slimness. 'Starving to death in a sea of objects,' as John Sours puts it, is a denial which paradoxically asserts with great force the reflexive making of self-identity and body.<sup>47</sup>

Compulsive mastery is quite different from authentic reflexive monitoring, however, and it is hardly surprising that the anorectic person frequently feels herself 'taken over' by the very regime to which she submits her body. In the terms of Winnicott and Laing, the body becomes part of a false-self system, detached from, yet rigorously governed by, the individual's inner aspirations. Feelings of destructiveness, deriving from unconscious shame, become focused on body regimes. The extraordinary intensity which anorectic asceticism can assume carries the hallmark of a ruthless inner dedication, of whose sources in the project of self-identity the individual is only partly aware. The 'alienness' of the body – in which the self cannot feel at home – helps explain why anorectic regimes may sometimes be pursued even to the level of an actual 'fasting unto death'. The individual only feels 'worthy' on the basis of a regime of self-regulation so complete that the slightest lapse is threatening.

Anorexia represents a striving for security in a world of plural, but ambiguous, options. The tightly controlled body is an emblem of a safe existence in an open social environment. As we read earlier in the personal account: 'It's a risky business, being a



woman.' The making of a self-identity and body occurs in the framework of a risk culture, which it will be the business of the next chapter to look at more directly.