6 | *Trauma, Groups and Political Action*

... why I can't go out without changing my clothes my shoes
my body posture my gender identity my age
my status as a woman alone in the evening
... I am the wrong
sex the wrong age the wrong skin
...
I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name
...
and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this
but I can tell you that from now on my resistance
my simple and daily and nightly self-determination
may very well cost you your life.

—June Jordan, 'Poem about My Rights'

6.1 Chapter Outline

Because people have many identities, or multiple identities as we have called them previously, social context and cues are important in determining when a social identity or group membership drives behaviour. Traumatic reminders, or triggers, can make group memberships salient. These reminders can take the form of discrete events or even wider events where political or historical context is seen to be relevant. Trauma has the capacity to reveal differences between us, or between us and 'them'. A long tradition of research in social psychology documents the role of a sense of ingroup and outgroup, 'us' and 'them', to understanding tensions and hostilities between groups. In contexts where the situation is already oppositional or polarised, these tensions can quickly give rise to anger and even open hostilities. This can lead to a downward spiral of events where the anger and distress associated with traumatic circumstances give rise to social and political action.

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6.2 A Personal and Political COVID-19 Experience

In March 2020, Ireland, like most of Europe, faced into the first harsh reality of the coronavirus pandemic. The early days of the pandemic brought strict lockdowns across Europe, and this was very much the case in Ireland too. Our lockdown announcement coincided with St Patrick's Day, and certainly once the usual annual festivities were cancelled people understood how serious the emerging pandemic was. My father, who was an avid listener of the radio news and recently widowed, began to take it seriously when the religious obligation to attend mass was suspended. He had never seen this in his eighty years of life. At that stage, as a family we all had started to pay attention. These early days of COVID-19 were, for me and many others, fraught with worry for those in our families who were more vulnerable. I worried about my father. My mother had died the previous summer. I was keen to help my father get over her death and to find a way to enjoy some more years with him. My father's health had been checkered during my mother's illness and not good since her death. As a psychologist, I was very aware of the risk of widowhood to his health. The effect of spousal bereavement on all causes of mortality is well documented (Elwert & Christakis, 2008). Excess mortality among bereaved men is about 21 per cent (Martikainen & Valkonen, 1996), another example of the health costs associated with stress and identity loss (see Section 5.4.2).

In the days before the lockdown, we did as much as we could. We filled his prescriptions for months to come. We filled the house with supplies of all sorts. We got him access to newspapers online in preparation for the time when trips to the newsagents were no longer advisable. Despite our preparations we were not prepared for what actually ensued. He got sick. Then he got sicker. Then he needed to go to hospital. My father hated hospital. He had spent Christmas of the previous year, his first as a widower, in hospital. He told me after that stay that he would sooner die than return to hospital again. But there was no reprieve for him. Shortly after Ireland declared its first lockdown, my father was admitted to hospital. But this was an admission like none he had experienced previously. He had a temperature, so he was put in isolation. He was initially suspected as having COVID-19. He was admitted alone. He could not be accompanied. He was cared for by front-line workers he could barely see, hidden as they were in

full protective gear. Lockdown and COVID-19 restrictions made it a profoundly isolating and upsetting hospital experience for him and also for us his family.

He didn't have COVID-19. It took a while to figure out what his health problem was, but after about ten days or so in hospital it became apparent his problems were much bigger than a temperature. He had terminal cancer. He heard this news alone, from a doctor he hardly knew, without any of his family present to offer comfort or support. Later that day he rang, to break the news to me. It must have been a difficult call for him to make. He tried to break the news of his own death gently to me. That he felt the need to do that in this most vulnerable time for him still upsets me deeply. As soon as he knew his fate, he wanted to go home. He wanted to sort out his affairs, as they say, and die in the comfort of his own home. He had been told he had about four to six weeks of life left. As we had already missed precious time with him whilst he was in hospital and out of our reach, as a family we were in complete agreement.

We set about getting him home. It took considerable effort. He was by now increasingly unwell. Between me and my siblings who were living in Ireland, we thought we could manage his care. We had been through a similar situation recently enough with our mother, so we thought we had a sense of the process. We didn't. There were two key differences. First, my father had been a late diagnosis. His illness was very different. His time was short. As his health declined rapidly, we could not access the palliative care he so desperately needed. This was the second clear difference. COVID-19 had seriously impacted palliative care services. It was so early in the pandemic that people were trepidatious about home visits. Unlike our experience of looking after our mother, we had no professional support caring for my father.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has been hard on many people. And there has been fallout from restrictions. In April 2020, the month my father died, there were 3,750 deaths in Ireland. Many families lost the chance to comfort their loved ones in the last days of their lives. Many lost the last of their precious time together. Others didn't get the care or treatment they needed. My siblings living abroad didn't get to come home to say their goodbyes. We never got to have his funeral as we would have wanted, a rite that would have allowed us to honour him and also gain comfort from the presence of wider family and friends. Now almost three years since his death, I remain unhappy

about how these issues were managed in Ireland. It is very difficult to watch someone you love die in pain, and indeed it is not something that should happen in a modern society. But the public health response repeatedly failed to take account of the terrible costs imposed by lockdowns on the most vulnerable people: the old, the dying, carers, babies, those affected by domestic violence. On more than one occasion, using what influence I had, I raised concerns (e.g. Muldoon, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c) regarding the effects of Irish lockdowns on more marginal and vulnerable groups. I never was confident that my concerns were heard, much less acted upon. And that has left me feeling annoyed and even betrayed by policy makers, tasked with taking care of 'us all' during the worst of times.

Self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987) helps to explain *when* group memberships are likely to be the basis for people's interpretation of events and *which* social identities shape trauma responses. When people are *treated* as members of a particular group and this treatment is in line with their stereotypical expectations of intergroup relations, self-categorisation is particularly likely to ensue (Klandermans, 2002). So, for example, my experience at the time of my father's death fit with a stereotypical expectation that 'women' and 'carers' often have their concerns ignored. As a consequence, I interpreted this experience in group terms. I saw a distinction between those who decided policy and those who had to live with these decisions, as well as a distinction between those who typically assume caring responsibilities and those who don't. I didn't have to see the treatment of my father as acceptable or know for sure the motivations of those who made the decisions that affected him. My sense that his treatment was in accordance with stereotypical patterns is enough for an interpretation that those who had power were not thinking about 'people like us' – carers, the old, women and children – when they made their decisions.

This perception has given rise to my strong sense that political change is needed in Ireland. There was a thoughtlessness to much of the Irish COVID-19 response. Vulnerable groups were forgotten. I am haunted by the fact that my father's end was so difficult for him. I am upset he never had a proper funeral. But most of all I am indignant with leaders who continued to respond to the crisis with performative politics rather than care and concern at the time when so many people like me struggled with grief. It suggested to me that some political

leaders had lost a grip on the real-life horrors of the pandemic and associated restrictions. My sense now is that there is a need for the voices of women, ethnic minorities, the young and the old to be part of the decision-making processes. Political change is needed. The COVID-19 context amplified divisions globally, nationally and locally. And these divisions and associated indignation are likely to have political and social implications for some time to come. Achieving unity and solidarity in highly diverse or fractured societies during times of stress or trauma is of course challenging. Context matters.

6.3 In It Together? Different Boats in the Same Storm

Belonging to social groups provides individuals with a definition of their group (i.e., a social identity) and also what is involved in being a group member. Norms are a broad concept with diverse meanings; however, we know that they are important for understanding behaviours. Descriptive norms are based on what 'we' usually do. Injunctive norms examine the perception of what 'we' think is as appropriate and emerge through everyday connections. So, a strong sense of 'daughter' meant that I regularly visited my parents and spent time in their company, and caring for them as they aged was appropriate. This norm is gender-based; it is daughters more so than sons, mothers more so than fathers who take on caring responsibilities. It is also based on collective understandings of the role of family. So, norms are very much tied to social identities. Who 'we' are, what 'we' do and approve of is central to all sorts of social and political behaviour.

Colleagues here in the University of Limerick published a paper that is very instructive in this regard (Quinn and Vaughan, 2019). In this paper they analysed the newspaper coverage of two tragedies that resulted in terrible loss of young life in Ireland in 2015. The first was an incident known as the Berkeley balcony collapse. Six young people lost their lives in the incident. Five Irish University students on J-1 summer visas to the United States together with one Irish American student died and seven others were injured. They were attending a birthday party in a friend's apartment when the balcony collapsed. The second incident was equally tragic. A fire at a halting site in Carrickmines, in Dublin, claimed the lives of four adults and six children. This time the casualties were members of an ethnic minority known as the Irish Travelling community.

The Travelling community are an ethnocultural group of Irish origin with protected legal status because of a long history of systematic marginalisation in health, social care and education. Travellers continue to experience the type of structural inequalities and stigmatisation associated with membership of less powerful groups within a broader society to this day (McKey et al., 2022). Using a linguistic analysis, Quinn and Vaughan (2019) analysed newspaper coverage to probe similarities and differences in public discourse about these tragedies. The language used to report on the Traveller tragedy reflected this subtle othering and tended to distance and depersonalise the Traveller tragedy. The discourse of the Berkeley balcony collapse was different. Coverage communicated the casualties belonged to 'us'. In this way the reporting of the newspapers not only legitimised the power relations in society but also communicated the norms about who 'we' are and who 'we' ought to care about. Even in times of tremendous trauma and grief, social norms can implicitly dictate who is deserving of our support and solidarity.

We can see similar processes at work in many countries across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, the people managing national responses were disproportionately white, middle-aged, middle-class, educated men living in large urban centres: senior politicians, medics and policy makers. Within the EU, for example, this group represents between 2 and 5 per cent of the population; they are an even smaller proportion of the global population. During the initial stages of the pandemic, these decision makers enacted many far-reaching public health guidelines. Many of these public health guidelines were quickly seen to contribute to poor health, for example, weight gain, alcohol consumption, unemployment and mental health problems. However, they also contributed to people's risk and experience of trauma, separating families and increasing child abuse and domestic violence. In the example offered from my own experience, it led to a very distressing and traumatic death for my father. Those most adversely affected by blanket restrictions were the old and the very young, women, minorities, the poor. They were not represented at the table when these decisions were made.

Tasked with managing large and diverse national communities' responses, decision makers were informed by a restricted set of norms tied to their own largely privileged male, middle-class and middle-aged identities. In a systematic review of eighteen studies (Piquero et al.,

2021) yielding a total of thirty-seven estimates, an overwhelming increase in reports of domestic violence was evident over the first year of the pandemic. Specifically, twenty-nine of these thirty-seven studies showed a significant increase in domestic violence. In short, the evidence based on several studies from different cities, states, and several countries around the world is that incidents of domestic violence increased in response to stay-at-home and lockdown orders. Yet concerns about domestic violence were so overlooked during the pandemic that the WHO and UNICEF had to repeatedly highlight the issue to policy makers (Muldoon, 2021a; Muldoon, Liu & McHugh, 2021). Lockdown orders, devised and implemented by men, failed to see the normative reality for many women and children. In abusive contexts, staying home does not mean staying safe. Indeed, fewer social interactions and minimising social contact leads to less accountability for perpetrators and few opportunities for intervention to protect vulnerable women and children.

In those early days and weeks of the pandemic, there was a heightened sense of threat. The scenes of overwhelmed health care systems, health professionals in hazmat suits, rising case numbers, and the unprecedented situation all worked to amplify people's fears. As I struggled, in vain, to secure palliative intervention for my father during his last days of his life, I interacted with health professionals whose reluctance to help was driven by this fear. These feelings of fear and threat, which we and others have referred to as 'pandemic threat' (Maher et al., 2022), inadvertently gave rise to support for more restrictions and regulations. In two studies in Ireland and the United Kingdom, we have shown how pandemic threat increased national identification, which in turn drove more authoritarian attitudes. These types of attitudes were evident across many countries, where pandemic threat was seen to increase desire for heavy-handed policing, particularly when the pandemic first emerged, and people were at their most frightened.

National identity was something frequently thought of as a vehicle for coordinating responses to the pandemic. However, the reliance on national identification to support the public health response comes at a cost. Over the course of the pandemic, Chan et al. (2021) found national identification was generally associated with an increase in disease-preventive behaviours in two countries. However, in the United States, those with the highest national identification tended to

have the greater trust in Trump's administration and therefore were slower to adopt preventive behaviours. Worldwide, it has also been clear that the least effective responses to COVID-19 were found where national sentiment was stoked in support of populism (Montiel et al., 2021), not least because this divisive rhetoric is often targeted against 'others'. This populist orientation presents a problem for improving co-ordinated compliance because actions in support of 'others' become problematised (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

Identities, then, not only are important to our support for political decisions, but also play a role in determining the likelihood of whom we help (Levine et al., 2002). Levine et al. (2002) assessed people's willingness to help a stranger after they witnessed them sprain their ankle. Participants, who were all students, had already indicated their football team allegiance and were ostensibly showing up to a research study in a psychology department when the accident happened. Levine et al. (2002) demonstrated that when the accident-prone stranger in need was perceived, by virtue of the football shirt, as sharing the same identity as the prospective helper, help was more likely to be offered. On the other hand, people were not as quick to help those with whom they did not share a football identity.

Social identities can be thought of as an important basis for social support (Haslam et al., 2005). Giving and receiving social support between group members can be useful, energising and seamless. However, if we see those who need help as 'different', 'not like us', there are two barriers. First, we may not be able to see their needs. Over the course of the pandemic there have been very many times when decisions have been made that do not appear to recognise the challenges faced by the young, the old, the sick and the elderly – sins of omission, as it were. This type of omission resulted in increased trauma experienced by women and children in the domestic arena. In other cases, vulnerable groups appeared to have been wilfully ignored. Decisions were made with the full knowledge that more marginal or vulnerable groups could be devastated. These are more like sins of commission. These purposeful acts, for example banning family members from being with their dying relatives, have also resulted in traumatic experiences.

At the collective levels these types of experiences can leave those people with a sense that when they were at their most vulnerable, they were forgotten. These experiences change us. It has changed me and made me more sensitive to the relevance of representation in politics

and decision making. Decision making always needs a diverse set of voices, including people who understand social and relational concerns. So, because I see groups and in particular the failure of middle-class men to attend to the needs of people like me – women, mothers, daughters and carers – this will affect how I vote in the future. And so it is this type of distressing experience, when it is interpreted in terms of group memberships, that is likely to impact on wider political views and political actions.

6.4 When Do We Care? Identity Salience, Stress and Trauma

We have already considered how social identities may act as a comfort in times of stress and adversity and the ways in which social identities can connect (Chapter 5). This is because social identities can be the basis for solidarity and support for those affected by traumas. But groups can also be the basis of divisions and drive prejudice and intergroup hostilities. As people have many and various group memberships and identities (see Section 5.4), a social identity has to become relevant for it to affect our behaviour and feelings. This relevance is generally referred to as social identity salience.

Identity salience is crucial to the enactment of identity-based thinking or behaviour. Identity-based actions towards others play out when a context or environmental cues makes an identity salient. The higher the identity salience (Stryker & Burke, 2000), the greater the probability that the choices and actions that a person makes will be identity-driven. This is because when an identity is salient, the group provides people with not only a definition of their group (a social identity) but also the relevant group norms for enactment. This has implications for how we think and feel about ourselves as well as other relevant outgroups.

The activation of identity in this way can be seen to arise from threat, like a pandemic threat, or indeed as a result of stress and trauma. Though the conceptualisation of salience in the social identity tradition is often thought of as something that is invoked experimentally, traumatic experiences can make social identities salient. Indeed, some of the symptoms we associate with psychological trauma share much with the concept of social identity salience. For example, triggers can include sounds, sights, smells or thoughts that act as a reminder of a traumatic event. Some triggers are obvious, such as seeing a news report of an assault or a war-time attack. Others are less so and might

include the smell of a particular dish that was being cooked when an attack took place. Triggers cause intrusive and uncontrollable reminders of the traumatic event. Even for people who have experienced a single acute stress or trauma, this is an important pathway to making an associated identity salient.

Experimental work offers evidence in support of this idea. Salient social identities are relevant to how people manage stress. For example, Levine and Reicher (1996) showed that risk of facial scarring was seen as more problematic amongst physical education students when their gender identity rather than their student identity was made salient. When thinking of themselves in terms of their gender, women students had greater concerns about appearance, and so the perceived stress of scarring was heightened. However, when thinking of themselves as physical education students, the participants in the experiment were less stressed by the possibility of a scar. Similarly, Skilton et al. (in press) found that when they made running identity salient rather than their gender identity, women's safety concerns about exercising outdoors were reduced. Haslam et al. (2005) provide another illustration of how identity salience effects stress responses. They asked two groups of participants, bar workers and bomb disposal officers, to rate the levels of stress in their own and the other occupational group. Both groups rated their own occupations as less stressful than the other group's occupation. Despite the likelihood of the bomb disposal officers experiencing an objectively more extreme or traumatic event, the officers' discussion of their own and others' stress illustrates the way that occupational identity was relevant to their appraisals: 'You expect what you see, so it's not so stressful. Disposing with bombs is something you do, not something out of the ordinary' (Haslam et al., 2005, p. 365).

Experiments like this show that the salience of social identities is important to how people process stress and trauma. Group memberships and salient social identities alter the interpretation of the stress and may also impact people's ability to deal with the situation. In this way the same event experienced can be seen very differently depending on whether or not people feel it has identity-relevant implications. If we consider the COVID-19 context, we can see clear identity and group dimensions. However, the COVID-19 context is one in which tensions arose quickly between groups. Initially, we could see tensions between nations, with China blamed for the onset of pandemic. We have also

seen real tensions emerge between leaders and followers and the old and the young in many countries, including Ireland.

In the United States and the United Kingdom, the COVID-19 response quickly became a partisan issue with new identity labels such as maskers and anti-maskers and vaxxers and anti-vaxxers emerging. COVID-19 effectively exposed the fault lines that already existed in our societies. It made social and political group divisions salient and revealed inequitable relations. Evidencing this, Syropoulos et al.'s (2021) study using publicly available data in 155 countries showed how equitable distribution of resources, acceptance of human rights, better government functioning and low levels of corruption, together referred to as 'positive peace', reduced the severity of the impact of COVID-19. Syropoulos et al. also note a similar effect in a within-country analysis of more than 4,000 counties in the United States. Social identities and group memberships matter to the sense of distress people associate with their pandemic experiences. In the same way as pre-existing illnesses are a risk on contracting COVID-19, pre-existing social and political fault lines have been disrupted by this pandemic.

6.4.1 Identity Salience and Social and Political Attitudes

There is wide-ranging evidence, then, from surveys and in real-world settings that highlight division making identity salient can influence people's support for political positions. In the United States, an important literature has developed showing that messages used to win the support of white voters, by casting non-whites as others (Brown, 2016), can prime support for particular political candidates. These divisive appeals do not mention race explicitly. Explicit reference to race can undermine beliefs in equality, which is integral to American national identity, and so the relevance of race must be made more covertly. An early prototype of such an appeal was used in the 1988 presidential campaign by George W. Bush, which became known as the Willie Horton ad. The ad oriented to the problem of violent crime in the United States. Though race was never mentioned, a picture of William Horton, an African American guilty of murder and imprisoned for life, was presented during the ad, which emphasised Republicans' strong approach to crime, and Democrats' overly liberal one. Similarly, divisive messaging was used during the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom. Advertisements depicting lax immigration control, overseen by the EU, depicted vast

queues of non-whites at UK borders. In this way, those campaigning for Britain's departure from the EU made racial identities salient in the minds of voters even though EU membership allowed its disproportionately white population free movement between member states.

Evidence shows that divisive appeals of this sort influence political behaviour (Mendelberg, 2008; Tesler, 2012). The effect of the Bush's Horton ad is well documented. It increased support for Bush amongst white conservatives (Mendelberg, 2008). In later research, commercials framing a Black person counting money, while a narrator stated that "Democrats want to spend your tax dollars on wasteful government programs" (p. 79), were also found to increase support for Bush (Valentino et al., 2002). Equally, making race relevant by using incidental pictures of non-whites in stories that emphasised the costs rather than the benefits of immigration was associated with increased opposition to migration. This effect was stronger amongst respondents of European rather than Latinx descent, further emphasising the role of identity salience. This framing mattered for political reasons too. Forty-five per cent of the respondents who viewed the anti-immigrant story were willing to send a message to Congress asking for reductions in immigration. Similarly, a recently published analysis predicting support for presidential candidates using the American National Election studies explored the effect of white identity salience on 859 white Americans during the 2016 presidential election. This analysis indicated that white identity salience was associated with greater support for Donald Trump (Levchak & Levchak, 2020).

These effects have also been observed outside the United States. In an experimental study, Fischer et al. (2010) experimentally manipulated the identity salience. In one condition, participants' gender identity was made salient, and in the other British identity was. Participants were then presented with photographs and statements relating to the 7 July 2005 London bombings (a threat to national identity) or with photographs and statements about the Taliban's treatment of women in Afghanistan (a threat to gender identity). For some participants, then, there was a fit between identity salience and identity threat (Britishness and the London bombing, for example) and for others there was not (Britishness and treatment of women in Afghanistan). Fischer et al. (2010) found that the impact of threat depends on the interplay between social identity salience and the social identity–related significance of the threat. Concretely, they found that where

identity was salient and higher levels of threat were experienced, support for military retaliation and aggression was highest.

Another study in a North American sample considered the effects of making religious identities salient. In this study that comprised Muslim, Christian and Jewish respondents, tolerance of other religious groups was examined. Comparison was made between those whose religious identity was salient versus those in a control condition where their religious identity was not made salient during the study protocol. All participants were presented with a threat to their respective religious identity through a newspaper clipping that described an ideologically motivated and physical attack on members of their respective religions. In the high salience condition, a more aggressive response was apparent. This hostile response to other religious groups was evident across all three groups (Wright & Young, 2017). Even though all of the religious identities are routinely aligned with positive and caring characteristics by believers, these findings support the notion that when confronting a threat, religious identity salience drives both anger and hostility to other religious groups.

In another study, Ginges et al. (2009) assessed the effect of religious identity salience on Israeli Jews' support for suicide attacks against Palestinian Muslims. In one group, participants were primed by asking them about their prayer frequency. A second group was primed by asking them about their synagogue attendance. These results were compared against a no-prime group. Those in the synagogue-prime group reported greater support for suicide attacks. These researchers interpreted their findings as a social identity salience effect (Ginges et al., 2010). In Northern Ireland, we conducted a similar study and presented images of the British and Irish flags (Muldoon et al., 2020). Flags remain actively contested in Northern Ireland and are symbolic of the issue at the heart of the political violence. They make the political differences between Irish nationalist and British unionist identities salient. In this study, we found that when people's ingroup flags were presented, there was a clear pattern of positive emotions apparent. However, when outgroup flags were presented, people showed high levels of uneasiness and annoyance. And it was those who were most highly identified who showed the most negative emotions when their nationality was made salient in this way.

Taken together, these studies highlight how cues and contexts are centrally relevant to how we feel about outgroups because of their role in making social identities salient. Making an identity salient is a

relatively simple task. Social identities can be very easily primed implicitly and unknowingly with visual cues such as pictures, symbols, and flags. They can also be made relevant intentionally and explicitly. So, it can be inadvertent, but it can also be purposeful. Because of this, situational and environmental, and social and political cues frame people's responses to trauma and, in particular, can drive hostile and angry reactions to others perceived as responsible or even complicit. In the next section we consider social and political contexts where identities can become chronically salient, and therefore are often if not always relevant to understanding how traumatic experience plays out.

6.5 Social Identities Writ Large

Some years ago, at a conference I presented a paper about the changing nature of identities in Northern Ireland. At the time the emergence of Northern Irish as a 'new' national identity in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement was apparent (Lowe & Muldoon, 2014). A Dutch colleague commented on how unique it was to have such a rich identity context to study. And it is true. There are some circumstances in which social identities are writ large. In such circumstances, social identities may be chronically salient. As we have seen in previous chapters, this can be a blessing and can offer solidarity with similar others during times of trauma (see Section 5.4.1). However, it is not always the case. And there can be other responses too. June Jordan refers in her poem quoted at the start of this chapter to a response that 'may very well cost you your life'. In the poem, Jordan makes it clear that her anger is a response to larger trauma and small stresses she feels she lives with daily. Indeed, the expression of negative attitudes and hostilities towards others is likely to be apparent where the situation is actively stressful and there are negative and oppositional interdependencies. This section reviews the risks of oppositional groups and identities and how they are likely to ferment anger and feelings of injustice amongst minorities and young people, with consequent impacts on social and political attitudes.

6.5.1 Polar Opposites? Oppositional and Interdependent Identity Contexts

The quotation at the start of this chapter is only a short excerpt from June Jordan's poem 'About My Rights'. The poem speaks to the anger

she feels because of the constraints she regularly places on her own behaviour to minimise her risk of rape and assault as a Black woman: she wants a simple pleasure: to go out 'alone in the evening'. In the full poem she represents this as not being able to do what she wants with her own body, which she links directly to her risk of rape as a young Black woman. It is the experience of having to manage this risk and being labelled as 'the wrong sex the wrong age the wrong skin' that brings her to the realisation and indeed a position where she rejects that idea that she is 'wrong'. In rejecting the idea that her experience of violence and risk of future violence can be attributed to being alone, 'alone not being the point', her anger becomes apparent. The last line of the poem reads as though she is calling herself to arms. Those who impede her right to self-determination will pay a price that 'may very well cost you your life'. Her intention is resistance.

Implicit in Jordan's analysis is that there are architects of this system who confine and restrict her. These people are not named; indeed, she cannot 'tell you who the hell set things up like this'. If she is the 'wrong' sex, skin and age, it is safe to assume there are others for whom it is safe to be out alone. So, though she is not explicit in naming any specific demographic as the architects of the system that constrains young Black women, as readers we are prompted to think about 'who the hell' these people might be. Because linguistically, we can make this assumption that if she is the 'wrong' sex, others are the 'right' sex. Indeed, there is an implicit suggestion that these architects of the system must be the right sex, the right age, the right skin. Jordan then offers us a bifurcation: she creates binary groups, polar opposites, right and wrong.

We know from available research on oppositional and negatively interdependent thinking that when someone is right and another is wrong, when their win is our loss, that anger and political action as is evident in Jordan's poem often ensues. Binary assumptions about group memberships are often made even if they are equally as often false. Race and ethnicity, for example, are such crude categorisations that researchers are not entirely clear what they refer to (Harawa & Ford, 2009; Helms et al., 2005). Race has little basis in biology, is not fixed, and in reality people frequently self-identify with multiple racial or ethnic categories (Schwartz, 2001). The vast majority of studies that use race do so in simplistic ways (e.g., as white versus Black or ethnic minorities). Indeed, the simplistic ways that race and ethnicity are

inserted into analyses and designs can reify racial categories and reproduce difference and prejudice (Proctor et al., 2011). You can see similar factors at play when you look at how ethnoreligious categories are dealt with in Northern Ireland. Identities that underlie conflict are perceived as polarised and oppositional (e.g., Catholic and Protestant; Muldoon et al., 2007), though they are only one dimension of any conflict. Other identities and categories co-exist even where there are highly pervasive social divisions. Practically, academics and commentators alike have been criticised for their emphasis on singular category differences, particularly where such emphases serve to reify and embed these group distinctions.

In recent years we can see the same debate has emerged in public consciousness around sex and gender. Indeed, non-binary gender identification can be seen as a reaction to this ever-increasing polarisation of sex and gender categorisations. And many of the major political cleavages and debates of our time are marked by these types of binaries. The construction of gender, political, racial or any group difference as binary amplifies already tense situations. This type of identity construction gives rise to divisions that are consistent, substantive and increasing. Although systematic cross-country evidence is rare, one analysis has classified 233 politicised groups in 93 countries according to political, economic, and ecological differences (Gurr, 1993). This analysis found that group-based inequalities often lead those who are adversely affected by the situation to direct political action.

Traumatic experience is also relevant. Sharp inequalities in economic, social and political dimensions or status between culturally defined groups are always relevant to the development of conflict (Stewart, 2008). Clear binary status differentials, as well as offering a relevant context to understand people's risk of traumatic experience, further divide people into meaningful and distinct cultural groups on the basis of distinctive experiences. When these distinctions are linked to binary categories such as gender, inequalities in access to socio-political and economic resources not only make it difficult for minorities to deal with their trauma but also mean that the majority group can be insensitive to the challenges the minority face (Cederman et al., 2013). So, for instance, men may be oblivious to the challenges women face within the justice system as they negotiate gender-based violence (Naughton et al., 2015), compounding distress. These polarising differences or inequalities do not have to be large. They just have to be

clear (Kelman, 1999). Over time, this social division, together with people's direct experiences and response to trauma, exacerbates group-based division and amplifies social polarisation further.

Social identity theory can help us understand why this is the case. When we categorise ourselves on one side of a boundary, this influences how we see ourselves as well as how we see 'others' on the far side of that line. Those we share an identity with, our ingroup, are thought about differently to those we see as being in a different category: the outgroup. There is wide-ranging evidence that even in the most banal of circumstances we tend to be kinder, more accepting and generous towards similar others because of our sense of identification with our ingroup. This bias can give rise to the type of solidarity that helps people to cope with trauma (see Chapter 5) and is referred to in social identity parlance as ingroup favouritism. So, people for the most part tend not to be wilfully hostile towards others; it is just that they are kinder to those they see as similar to themselves (see Section 6.3). However, polarised contexts with their associated strong patterns of division offer an exception. In these contexts, zero-sum thinking can arise. In these situations, ingroup members can come to view their relationship with the outgroup as oppositional and negatively interdependent (Muldoon et al., 2008). This zero-sum mentality is reflected in beliefs that if 'they' are winning, 'we' must be losing. Not only that, but in these contexts, because the rising fortunes of the outgroup are tied to the falling stocks of the ingroup, looking after 'them' is presumed to damage 'us'.

This thinking can arise in both majority/dominant group members as well as minoritised/subordinate group members. For majority group members, when a traumatic experience is attributed to minority action, zero-sum thinking can result in group protectionism and suspicion of minorities. Because the majority have both power and privilege, this can reinforce the protections afforded within the system to those who are already advantaged. For minoritised group members, traumatic experiences that are attributed to actions of the dominant or majority group action are likely to result in calls for social change. June Jordan articulates this response to her minoritisation arising from this perceived negative interdependence: her 'resistance / [her] simple and daily and nightly self-determination / may very well cost you your life'. Her resistance, then, her right to act against the system, will undermine your privileged way of life.

Hostile intergroup dynamics arise, then, when the fortunes of one group are tied to the sorrows of another. So, if my right to 'to take a walk and clear my head' is perceived to interfere with men's rights, this is likely to make progress on women's nighttime safety problematic. Recently, in Ireland and the United Kingdom, in the wake of the murder of two white women, the ensuing outcry led to calls for a curfew on men at night. It is hard to know whether the calls were meant as meaningful; however, they are a useful illustration of how an action to protect women can quickly be seen as both hostile and antagonistic by men. This call for curfews clearly threatens some, though not all, men's gender-based identity as protective and respectful men, husbands or fathers. This framing of violence against women as a product of men's behaviour, along with the feelings of identity threat, results in negatively interdependent interpretations of gender relations.

There are many examples here where sociopolitical contexts have given rise to growing intergroup divisions. It is apparent with regard to Brexit where political differences in the United Kingdom have amplified considerably since the 2016 referendum. What was previously a voting choice is now clearly transformed into polarised social identities of 'Leavers' and 'Remainers'. In the United States we can also see increasing polarisation between Democrats and Republicans. Again, forced political choices and the ongoing tensions between these two polarised opinion groups have led to increasingly harsh partisan politics and positions in that country (Mason, 2018). Whilst these tensions are often linked to battles over power and resources, in tandem there tends to be symbolic identity struggles that are just as important to understanding the hostilities (Kelman, 1999). Identification gives rise to in group favouritism first and foremost, because we are more likely to look after 'our own' than 'others' (see Section 6.2 above). Additionally, where identity groups are constructed as oppositional – for example, a win for Republicans is a loss for Democrats – the preference for our own can quickly become a basis for antagonistic relations. Overall, then, where people identify strongly, and groups are locked in oppositional relations, hostility and aggression towards the other group is more easily endorsed (Halperin et al., 2009). Protecting 'us' becomes the basis for justifying aggressive action towards 'them'. And when this happens it really matters who wields power. It is to this issue we now turn.

6.5.2 Social Identity Salience, Minoritised Identities and Political Action

June Jordan's (2005) poem reflects the intersection of her multiply minoritised position. She isn't just the wrong sex, she is also 'the wrong skin'. This intersection, or multiple minoritisation, is central to her story and indeed likely to be linked to her declared anger. As well as the two highly publicised deaths of white women in Britain and Ireland, there were two other, less publicised murders in both countries at the same time. These two murders of women of colour garnered far less attention in the news media. Like the deaths of the Irish Traveller families mentioned earlier (see Section 6.3), they got far fewer column inches. This reflects the relative privilege and protection white women have that is often not available to women of colour, which Jordan alludes to in her poem. Not only are the deaths of women of colour less remarkable (MacDorman et al., 2021), but women and girls of colour are more likely to be trafficked for sex work, raped and sexually assaulted than their white counterparts (Keys, 2021). Constructions of women of colour as sexually compliant are frequently used to dismiss women of colour when they come forward. And the likelihood that their complaints of assault are taken seriously, or acted upon by the police and judicial system, are greatly reduced.

Identity salience is increased when a group is repeatedly affected by major and minor aggressions (see Section 3.4). Because of this even in multicultural and relatively equal societies, a minority or subordinate identity can be chronically salient (Palomares, 2004; Schaffner, 2011; Wang & Dovidio, 2017). A wealth of research demonstrates that adversity as a consequence of minority and subordinate group membership, including race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, is common (Branscombe et al., 1999). Certainly, being 'the wrong skin' is central to how June Jordan defines herself in this poem and her experience of life. In this vein, Branscombe and colleagues' wide-ranging programme of research has articulated a path through which social identities are made salient and are consolidated because of the poor treatment people receive on the basis of their group characteristics. They have labelled this process the rejection identification hypothesis (Branscombe et al., 1999; Jetten et al., 2001). The core argument of the rejection identification model is that being treated differently by others based on a group characteristic heightens feelings of

identification with the group. Extending this idea further, we found that in those who have lived through the political violence in Northern Ireland, feelings of threat amplified participants' identification with their national group. We labelled this process the threat identification hypothesis (Schimd & Muldoon, 2015). Amongst minority group members, in particular, both feelings of threat and direct experience of violence, then, can result in chronically relevant identities.

Experimental studies have mimicked these findings. In an experimental study, Jetten et al. (2001) presented some evidence of discrimination against those with body piercings to those who had piercings. Participants identified more strongly with those who had piercings where evidence of discrimination was available (Jetten et al., 2001). When the researchers made clear that this discrimination was meted out by the (unpierced) majority population, these feelings of identification were even more pronounced. So, this experiment shows that it is being treated differently because of a group attribute as well as group status that increases people's sense of belonging and identification.

As a result of this increased identification, an individual's personal fate becomes psychologically tied to that of other ingroup members (Drury, 2012). Majority and minority group members are more likely to encode their own group information more fully. So, highly identified minority group members are more aware of their own increased risk of adversity and trauma and are more sensitive to news of traumas visited upon fellow ingroup members. These events are experienced as identity-relevant; they may make the identity salient; they may also be perceived as triggering.

For minority groups, then, new events can give rise to feelings of political déjà vu. This is a phenomenon that appears to be memory-based. It is derived from the detection of the familiar. A new traumatic event can feel familiar, the latest in a long sequence of similar events. As such, Chayinska and McGarty (2021) argue that political déjà vu, where an analogy between past and present traumatic events is perceived, is an identity-based phenomenon. In a field study in Argentina, they show that connecting two events from different time periods had important implications for people's identification, including support for political leaders. Not only that, but making the connection between the disappearance of an activist in the present to the mass disappearance in Argentina's history had important implications for people's political attitudes and political engagement.

Similarly, in a study of Aboriginal people in Canada whose parents had survived institutional abuse, Bombay et al. (2014) found that social identities were an important driver of intergroup attitudes across time. More specifically, adult children of survivors of the Indian Residential Schools system who saw their ethnocidal identity as central to who they were were more likely to interpret subsequent negative intergroup scenarios as arising from discrimination. The authors interpreted their findings as evidence for mutually reinforcing relationships between identity and adversity and discrimination. Appraisals of discrimination that were linked to distress of intergenerational trauma can in this way be seen to damage interactions between victims of race-based trauma and wider mainstream society.

Group members use strong and salient minority identities to make sense of adversity and trauma they experience. We have seen how this helps minority group members adjust to traumatic experience and allows trauma to be viewed as something to be endured (see Chapter 5) because it reflects and embodies a higher commitment to a political cause (Acharya et al., 2020). A strong identity impacts on the stereotypical expectations of intergroup dynamics (Başoğlu et al., 1997), and so minority group members are alive to the idea that majority group members and culture are oppressive. This not only reduces trust in majority group members (Acharya & Muldoon, 2017), but also can give rise to a sense of injustice. This combination of perceived injustice, social identification and the sense that the group has the power to act (known as collective efficacy) has been shown to drive political protest and collective action. So identities, as well as offering a sense of meaning to interpret traumatic experiences, also drive minority group members and supporters to action (Acharya et al., 2020). In this way, trauma experiences of some with whom we share a sense of identity can have a ripple effect on the wider group (Muldoon & Lowe, 2012).

6.5.3 'A Bad Age': Trauma and the Salience of Trauma and Divisions for Young People

In Ireland, there is an expression, mostly used by adults, where a young person is referred to as being at 'a bad age'. It is used to cover both challenging behaviour and challenging circumstances. It is interesting, too, amongst her other 'wrongs', that June Jordan says she is the

'wrong age'. There is no question that age or, as psychologists prefer, developmental stage is centrally important to both experience of trauma and the development of social identities. It is to this issue we now turn.

During childhood and adolescence, traumatic experiences, adversity and disadvantages offer a set of circumstances that can give rise to strong patterns of identity and also particular identity meanings. Betancourt and Khan (2008), in their wide-ranging review of the studies of children affected by war and political violence, point to the importance of meaning making for children and young people growing up in chronically traumatic contexts. Available empirical studies speak to this issue. We know from a large meta-analytic review (Schmitt et al., 2014) that a key factor that amplifies the impact of negative discriminatory experiences at the hands of others is the age at which they occur. Daniel Bar-Tal, in a range of studies, has examined the emergence of identity-based ideology in young people (Bar-Tal, 2002, 2007; Oren & Bar-Tal, 2007). This research in Israel suggests that identity-based views are often passed through the education system, facilitating the interpretation of conflict-related experiences and embedding identity positions (Bar-Tal, 2002). Subsequent narrative and ethnographic work with youth in Israel, Palestine, Bosnia and Croatia also points to appraisal and interpretation of traumatic experience as a basis for development of strong patterns of identification relevant to the ongoing conflict (Barber, 2009; Daiute & Turniski, 2005; Hammack, 2010). Youth turn to their relevant identities to make meaning of the adversity and trauma that they encounter as a consequence of the unforgiving context of their lives.

The invocation of identity in this way is not without its problems (Kelman, 1999), though the consequences are inherently related to the sociopolitical context (Urdal, 2005). In a survey of adolescents in Northern Ireland, violence against outgroups was perceived as more acceptable and justifiable by those who identified highly with their own group and its cause (Muldoon & Wilson, 2001). Muldoon and Wilson (2001) demonstrated that youth in Northern Ireland with the strongest ideological commitment who were thought to be the most psychologically resilient were also the group that viewed violence as most acceptable. Similarly, in a later study, Muldoon et al. (2008) found that young people in Northern Ireland presented social identification with one's own group as an explanation for paramilitary violence. Young

people made sense of their own side's aggressive action in identity terms. This is no doubt embedded in the oppositional and negatively interdependent nature of the context in which they lived. Ultimately, however, the use of identities in this way as meaning-making vehicles can contribute to the cycles of violence.

This use of identities to make sense of traumatic experiences and in particular violence also has implications for young people's understanding of justice and morality. In developmental terms, it is clear that concerns about morality and justice are key concerns for young people. Both concepts, however, are highly malleable, and our definitions of both are linked to social identities and group life (Clayton & Opotow, 2003). Social identities and, more specifically, who we perceive as being deserving of our care, or indeed our hostility, limits the scope of our morality. In June Jordan's poem quoted at the start of this chapter, her anger is clear. She is angry enough to threaten violence: 'it may very well cost you your life'. It is unclear if she sees a threat to others' mortality or cultural life; however, she invokes an identity-based logic about who is deserving and entitled to her concern. It is certainly not 'who the hell set things up like this'. The boundaries of her concern and entitlement to rights does not include this group who created the system (Opotow, 1996). Indeed, the perceived injustice of her own experience is used to justify her lack of concern and potentially immoral treatment towards the group who set up the system. This poem, then, can be seen to reflect exposure to trauma and violence, particularly in those who are 'the wrong age'. This seems to alter the normative acceptability of violence, contributing to identity-based validation of aggression we see in empirical studies in violent contexts (Muldoon & Wilson, 2001; Punamäki, 2009).

It is important too to remember that young people are often not in the mind's eye of those who 'set things up'. Returning to where we started this chapter, this was patently self-evident during the pandemic. In many societies the front-line work that kept societies going was undertaken by young people who staffed medical, educational, retail and service industries. In addition, young people often have more precarious housing, are more likely to share housing and be reliant on public transport than adults aged over twenty-five. All of these factors, together with the fact that COVID-19 was perceived and in reality was often less threatening for young people, meant that the rates in this age group were higher. In Ireland, this often gave rise to a

perception of young people as a problem in the spread of the virus (Breslin et al., 2023). In my own university, senior management took to patrolling areas where university accommodation predominated to minimise the lockdown breaches, which were seen as having a negative effect on both the university and young people's reputations. In India, Arabaghatta et al. (2021) found that the attribution of responsibility for the spread of the virus was more strongly polarising than the government response to outbreaks. Highlighting and apportioning blame for the spread of the virus inadvertently amplified existing political divisions. This treatment of young people has had its own social and political cost across Europe, reducing political trust in institutions in societies where treatment was less equitable (Bottasso et al., 2022).

Ignoring the diversity of who we are, and how we ought to keep us all safe, resulted in more difficult experiences during COVID-19 for some. At one end of life, there was the pain caused by the inability to secure care for my family in their last days. Added to this, families like mine could not mourn our loss in the usual and culturally appropriate way, amplifying the pain of loss and the stress of the pandemic. People like my father-in-law admitted to hospital were not allowed companionship to support them when confused, ill and dying. Even those receiving end-of-life hospice care, like my much-loved aunt, endured heavily restricted visiting in her final days. All of this prevents those around the sick from enacting important familial, national and religious identities.

At the other end of life, the young also faced serious and often unnecessary challenging pandemic experiences. In Ireland, parents could not buy shoes for young children for almost nine months. Children, my lovely nephew included, who needed first shoes were literally barefoot. Amongst young people the spread of COVID-19 was often attributed to their failure to adhere to public health guidelines in their social and sporting lives. It routinely ignored the fact that many young people were working in front-line roles (Breslin et al., 2023; Kinsella et al., 2022). The mental health costs of lockdowns for young people for whom the establishment of peer networks is a central developmental task was not considered (Crawford, 2021). Nor was the social cost of the disproportionate fining of young people for lockdown breaches (Moloney 2021). And whilst the policing and the disproportionately negative experiences of young people in comparison to older

adults (Muldoon, 2013) during times of crisis and adversity is not something that is restricted to COVID-19 times, the unfairness of a system, set up by older adults, can be seen as part of the process that foments feelings of injustice, anger and intergenerational tensions.

6.6 Conclusion

Social identities and group memberships have always been seen as relevant to tensions between groups. For group memberships to drive hostilies, however, a number of factors matter. First, social identities need to be seen as relevant to the situation. In social identity parlance this is referred to as identity salience. As well as the context being relevant, some groups are particularly likely because of their minority or subordinate status to have their concerns ignored or misunderstood by mainstream groups. Here we have looked at the role of age, gender and race, though these effects also apply to those minoritised by a disability or their sexual orientation or religion, for example. Minoritised groups are more likely to see their identity as relevant to both their own trauma experience and the experience of other minoritised group members in both the past and the present. In situations where identities are relevant, and the social context is divisive or oppositional, identities, rather than resulting in bias towards the ingroup, can result in political action and even hostility against the outgroup. In minoritised groups, where identities and justice concerns collide, traumatic experiences that give rise to anger are likely to fuel political action.