

# Identity

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**An extract**

**Original title** Identiteit  
**Publisher** De Bezige Bij, 2012

**Translation** Dutch into English  
**Translator** Liz Waters

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## Introduction

A middle-aged man is bound to a wooden pallet with sticky tape by four others. One of his tormenters writes two zeros on his forehead with a marker pen, a second presses his genitals into the man's face, a third sits on it, his buttocks bare, while another takes photographs and they all have a great deal of fun. The scene is filmed and the victim is even given a copy 'to watch at home'.

The location: an ordinary workplace in a village in Wallonia. The man with the camera is a union representative. Quite a few people took part. No one intervened. It later turned out that the bullying had been going on for years. In the days after the pictures were shown on the television news, several more victims came forward with similar stories. Within a week Flanders had a case of its own. A crane driver at a steelworks fairly regularly had his trousers pulled down by his team leader and foreman, whereupon filthy expressions were written on his buttocks and he was tied up and driven around on a jeep. The pictures were posted on YouTube by the perpetrators. For a month there was no getting away from the subject in the press. Various sources provide surprisingly high figures: ten to fifteen per cent of employees are the victims of bullying. This needs explaining, and it seems explanations are not in short supply.

The first is conservative in origin. Bullying is yet another consequence of our society's lack of norms and values. Aggression towards bus or tram drivers, the increasing number of battered babies, burned-out teachers sick of being bullied by pupils, criminal asylum seekers – virtually all our social problems can be explained in this way. Everything was better in the old days.

A second explanation draws instead on psychiatry. Perpetrators of violence are 'disturbed individuals'. A mother who abuses her baby must surely be sick – a reassuring thought. Expert witnesses in courtrooms talk of 'antisocial personality disorder' (a recognized psychiatric illness) and point to its signs in early childhood, or 'oppositional defiant disorder' (ODD to the initiated). Both diagnoses have increased massively over the past few decades, which is rather less reassuring.

A third explanation takes the medical argument even further, claiming it's human nature, the beast that lurks in us all. The Nazi tyrants were simply human and socio-psychological research shows that just about anyone can become a sadist under certain circumstances. Homo homini lupus est: man is a wolf to his fellow man<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The best known is the study by Stanley Milgram in 1963, in which normal people, after a little urging, inflicted dangerous electric shocks on test subjects in what was presented to them as a 'learning experiment'. Some ten years later, Philip Zimbardo at Stanford conducted his prison experiment, in which normal students took on their roles as prison guards with such enthusiasm that the result was an Abu Ghraib avant la lettre.

Oddly, another explanation takes precisely the opposite point of view. Human beings are good by nature; it's postmodern society that makes us bad. Take away all those violent games and aggression will markedly decrease.

Evil – let's not hesitate to use the word – is in any case not unfamiliar to us. The most distressing description comes from Hannah Arendt. In her report on the trial of SS Obersturmbannführer Eichmann she spoke of 'the banality of evil'. The notion that evil is lodged within us fits with the Christian doctrine of original sin, while a more contemporary version talks of 'our selfish genes'.

Both types of explanation suggest that an immutable human nature exists, lying in wait to reveal itself – a strange idea in the light of the quest for identity, and for 'real' norms and values, currently evident everywhere in the West. It seems we no longer know ourselves and so we rush to all sorts of experts, from psychologists to brain specialists and other kinds of clairvoyant, hoping they can tell us who we really are.

This book starts out from a different idea. We have no fundamental identity. Who we are depends very largely on our environment. If many people today have lost their bearings, then that says something about the environment. It seems to have changed fundamentally. And so have we, as a consequence. It's becoming increasingly clear that we're not at all happy about this.

Why would a psychoanalyst write about such issues? This book is rooted in my clinical practice. Like many of my colleagues, I'm convinced that the problems – I deliberately avoid the term 'disorders' – for which people seek help today not only occur more frequently than in the past but are essentially different.

In an earlier book I wrote about the end of psychotherapy and examined the connection between psychiatric disorders and social change. I have since become convinced that the impact of those changes goes far further than I initially thought. The neoliberal organization of our society determines our relationship with our bodies, our partners, our colleagues, our children – our identity, in other words. It does so in a way that is downright disturbed. In that sense I agree with the views expressed by Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Like Freud, I will not shrink from taking a clear ethical stance.