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Residual Categories and Disciplinary Knowledge: Personal Identity in Sociological and Forensic Investigations

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A central feature of the development of sociological knowledge is the formulation and use of “descriptive frames of reference” within which theoretical and empirical work may be critically assessed. This article considers the way in which one such frame of reference—that developed by Erving Goffman to represent the variety of human science understandings of the nature of identity in social interaction—distinguished between “personal,” “social,” and “self” identity. The relative neglect of the first of these three categorizations is noted. Following Garfinkel’s suggestions for the “respecification” of social analysis, this article suggests the usefulness of an approach to the neglected issue of personal identity that suspends theoretical stipulation about an abstract noun in favor of an ethnographic study of a particular occupational group—forensic investigators—for whom an orientation to personal identities is a recurrent accountable practical concern.

In his ambitious study of social theory Parsons (1949) argued that the successful development of disciplinary knowledge is based not simply on the collection of “facts” capable of testing the validity of specific propositions but also on the essential selectivity of the theoretical systems and conceptual schemes necessary to shape, direct, and limit the range of empirical inquiry. This selectivity distinguishes between what is and what is not relevant to the system in question and provides encouragement to further conceptual development within whatever boundaries practitioners draw and police. This selectivity is visible in the repertoire of categories that gives substance to the system in question, and the way that categories are represented within it marks their level of relevance to its intended disciplinary objectives:

Every system, both including its theoretical propositions and its main relevant empirical insights, may be visualized as an illuminated spot enveloped by darkness. . . . The point is, what lies outside the spot is not really “seen” until the

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searchlight moves, and then only what lies within the area into which its beam is newly cast. The logical name for the darkness is, in general, "residual categories." (Parsons 1949:16–17)

Parsons is deliberately vague in his usage of the terms "theoretical systems" and "conceptual schemes," and even when he promises a more detailed treatment, he only offers what he describes as a "preliminary, tentative" typology of such schemes. However, he makes some useful remarks about the most fundamental of these, which he calls "descriptive frames of reference." He describes such descriptive frames of reference as "modes of general relations of the facts implicit in the descriptive terms employed" (Parsons 1949:28). For him, they constitute necessary schema for selective provision and ordering of empirical facts. They also make possible identifications and definitions of the phenomenon to be explained, and guide the evaluation of the significance of any subsequent statements of "explanatory value."

Parsons argues that although such frames of reference vary in their explicitness and scope, disciplined inquiry is impossible without using them. The history of sociological theory and research includes many such schemes. Since Parsons sought to build an exceptionally powerful and explicit frame of reference as his contribution to the development of sociological theory (the "schema of action"), he only provides examples of those with long-lasting heuristic value, such as the "spatiotemporal framework" of classical physics and orthodox "supply and demand" theory in economics. In fact, the history of sociological analysis is largely a record of the introduction, development, and application of a bewildering variety of such schemes at a number of theoretical levels, most of which have not been sustained over such long periods or had such powerful effects as those of Parsons.

But whatever their longevity, the necessary commitment to the development of such theoretical schemes requires the willingness of their proponents to accumulate conceptual and empirical work guided by the "positive categories" within them. Moreover, this commitment also serves to exclude from interest whatever categories proponents have assigned to the inevitable residuum that the selectivity of the schemes imply. Insofar as residual categories constitute the "deliberately unexamined" in the construction and use of theoretical frames of reference, it (almost) goes without saying that a decision to illuminate such twilight areas of scholarly disciplines itself promises heuristic advancement, even while threatening disciplinary closure: "The process of carving out positive concepts from residual categories is also a process by which the reconstruction of theoretical systems is accomplished as a result of which they may eventually be altered beyond all recognition" (Parsons 1949:19).

In this article, I illustrate the way theoretical or empirical studies may facilitate the examination of the content and status of such residual categories and, further, suggest that such instances provide interesting possibilities for the development of sociological knowledge.

IDENTITY: A FRAME OF REFERENCE AND ITS RESIDUUM

Parsons developed his schema as a descriptive frame of reference for all adequate analysis of the structure of social action. However, Goffman constructed an ambitious, but less explicitly articulated, framework for the analysis of the structure of social interaction, which he first awkwardly described as “conversational interaction” as a “species of social order” (Goffman 1953) and, more elegantly, thirty years later, “the interaction order” (Goffman 1983). Although no single place in Goffman’s corpus of work definitively displays this highly abstract frame of reference, Manning (1992) has provided an excellent reconstruction of what he identified as the “SIAC schema.” The use of this schema allows Goffman to develop conceptual and empirical inquiries attentive to a number of central principles which, he argues, constitute the interaction order: “situational propriety,” “involvement,” “accessibility,” and “civil inattention.”

However, Goffman’s work also contains a large number of other, less encompassing conceptual schemata and frames of reference. Some commentators argue that the accumulation and variability of such schema comprise conceptual profligacy on his part, yet two central concepts consistently articulated within this framework are “self” and “identity.” These closely related terms demarcate a terrain of interest and suggest ways of more closely examining its contours.¹

In the course of his study of “spoiled identity,” Goffman (1968) offered a descriptive frame of reference representing the underlying conceptual orderliness arguably present across a very large range of human sciences studies that claimed to focus on “identity.” The timing of this effort may not be accidental. Gleason (1983) has pointed out that during the period in which Goffman was writing this book—the early 1960s—a remarkable intensification and reorientation of a long-standing intellectual interest in the “problem of identity” occurred. Since their origins in the rapidly industrializing societies of western Europe in the nineteenth century, a variety of sociological understandings of identity matters have been derived from and sought to supplement or supplant several prior accounts of the metaphysics of identity. The common rationale for these disciplinary developments and innovations argued for the recognition of the essential and ineradicably social character of the phenomenon of identity. The details of exactly what scholars meant by reference to such an essential and ineradicable social character varied. Some found it sufficient to note the significance of the changing social contexts in which generic psychodynamic processes of identity formation were activated and conditioned. Others emphasized that social structures provided a series of templates or positions with pre-specified roles, values, and identities, thus locating within the collectivity what had previously been treated as the product of the self-interrogation of individuals in the construction of their own identities. Still others asserted that the essentially social character of identity derived from its origins in linguistic convention, dialogue, or the dynamics of interaction.

Goffman (1968) comments on this range of conventional meanings and uses of

the term “identity” while developing his own conceptual framework. He gives structure to this by adjectival qualifications of the generic term and thus produces a trichotomous classification comprising “personal identity,” “social identity,” and “ego (or self) identity.” The following paragraphs outline this framework.

The term “personal identity” refers to that “which distinguishes an individual from all others” (Goffman 1968:74). Goffman notes that in contemporary society, this sense of identity normally corresponds to legal identity. In his discussion of personal identity, he focuses on the variety of ways that each individual may be said to have a set of unique characteristics. This set of characteristics constitutes such an identity for them. According to Goffman, two ideas come together in how we think about this. He describes the first as the “positive mark” or “identity peg” of an individual—the image or trace of this particular person in photographic or other material or mental records and representations. The second is the unique place that an individual occupies in a network and history of relationships. In either case, the notion that the representation or place in some network uniquely identifies only one person defines this view of personal identity. For Goffman (1968:74–75), reference to such personal identity rests on “the assumption that the individual can be differentiated from all others and that around this means of differentiation a single continuous record of social facts can be attached, entangled like candy floss, becoming then the sticky substance to which still other biographical facts can be attached.”

A second usage, “social identity,” reflects the availability of “the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories” (Goffman 1968:11). He points out that the attributes that compose any category of social identities will likely be complex and varied, because they include a wide range of cognitive, attitudinal, personal, and social features. Given his interactionist focus, these social identities are largely of interest to the extent that they provide ordinary actors with templates for the organization and understanding of one another’s conduct in specific social settings. They are both anticipations and “righteously presented demands” deployed when people interact with others. In addition, however, this sense of identity has relevance for wider social circumstances: the content of such social identity categories guide what is assumed to be true of members of the relevant category as well as what may be expected of them in a variety of social and discursive contexts. People frequently speak and write of a “common identity,” of a kind of sameness between some “kinds” of people. Although references to this commonality may seem to contradict the notion that identity needs to carry some sense of uniqueness or fundamental difference from others, such a seeming contradiction does not appear to invalidate either or both of these standard uses. Certainly, an interest in the continuity of identity across persons rather than across time and place for one person has led to recent concerns with the “politics of identity.” Ever since Marx’s discussion of “classes-for-themselves,” serious problems have arisen about assertions concerning the significance of “collective actors,” whether the collectivity is defined in a single identity category (e.g., African Americans, women, English) or in an ever more complex

combination of such categories. Yet however much the notion of such collective actors might have been seen as problematic in the human sciences, contemporary political rhetoric often explicitly or implicitly draws on the rhetorical capacity of such an idea to mobilize and shape the affiliations of individuals and groups.

We may think of personal identity as referring to what differentiates each individual person from all others and social identity as referring to those—particularly cultural—attributes that individuals share by virtue of common membership in a social category. We can distinguish both of these from a third sense of identity that Goffman argues may be found in lay and professional accounts of individuals and their conduct. He calls this third usage “ego identity” or “self-identity” (and sometimes “felt” identity), and he defines it as “the subjective sense of his own situation and his continuity and character that an individual comes to obtain as a result of his various social experiences” (Goffman 1968:129). We can distinguish the meaning of such ego or self-identity from that of personal identity (which is also concerned with unique singularity) by its character as a subjective accomplishment. In Burns’s (1992) phrase, self-identity is “felt” rather than ascribed or ascribable. Self-identity, then, refers to what most of us think about when we think of the deepest and most enduring features of our unique selves as what we “really are.” No necessary difference arises between the content of the avowed and ascribed attributes drawn on in the constitution of self-identities, on the one hand, and personal and social identities, on the other. The difference, Goffman (1968:130) argues, is that with self-identity, the individual “exercises important liberties in regard to what he fashions.” Most important here seems to be the capacity of individuals to choose among a set of available attributes and a concern with the coherence and consistency discernible within the variety of characterizations accepted to be true of oneself independent of time and location.

This trichotomous classification seems to capture the wide—and rapidly expanding—range of existing studies of identity with reasonable exactitude. It marks both commonalities and differences between and within structuralist and interactionist approaches to this topic. This fact, however, makes more remarkable the speed with which scholars reduced the trichotomy to a dichotomy, first in Goffman’s work and later in almost all borrowings and commentaries. They reduced it either by collapsing two of the terms into one or by simply neglecting one of the three. Goffman effected the first kind of reduction when he bracketed social and personal identity together and then contrasted them to ego or self-identity:

Social and personal identity are part, first of all, of other persons’ concerns and definitions regarding the individual whose identity is in question. . . . On the other hand, ego identity is first of all a subjective, reflexive matter that necessarily must be felt by the individual whose identity is at issue. (1968:129–30)

The resulting dichotomy, and tension, between socially ascribed identities and personally avowed and “felt” identity always reappears in Goffman’s later work and has provided the focus of subsequent critical commentary. Moreover, we can

see his preference for this diminished array of concepts as merely one typical instance of how “identity” increasingly came to be used in a wide variety of sociological theories as a place holder in the obvious gap that existed between accounts of social collectivities and accounts of social actions throughout the history of sociology. Since this gap had always been problematic for the explanatory claims of the discipline, attentiveness to it would result in the comparative neglect of the conception of personal identity as represented by a set of marks that “distinguishes the person so marked from all other individuals” (Goffman 1968:75). While the social significance of such a conception may be indisputable, its sociological significance was minimized. In this way, then, and despite a plethora of sociological studies of identity, the field of study of the significance of “personal” identity and the related processes of personal identification has become poorly cultivated. The category itself has become hard to make out since it has appeared only in the shadow-light typically available for the illumination of such residual categories in sociological analysis.

Below I suggest that the flexible application of Garfinkel’s generic “respecification program” to these treatments of identity issues in conventional sociological investigations provides the opportunity to rescue the category “personal identity” from this comparative neglect. A recent empirical study of the work of forensic investigators in one particular English police force illustrates this suggestion.

FROM RESIDUAL CATEGORY TO RESEARCH FOCUS

Garfinkel’s (1967) “ethnomethodology” seeks to study the ways in which human subjects acting in concert with one another produce their own and recognize one another’s “sensible” and “accountable” embodied actions and utterances. It aims to provide empirical descriptive studies of what Garfinkel (1967:11) calls “naturally organized ordinary activity.” The production, recognition, and organization of such ordinary activity constitutes the foundation of social order—what he refers to as the “locally produced, naturally organized, reflexively accountable phenomena of order.”

Scholars routinely describe Garfinkel’s program as a “respecification” of the human sciences (Garfinkel 1991, 1996; Garfinkel and Wieder 1992; Lynch 1993; Lynch and Bogen 1996). Such a respecification treats the classical themes and standard vocabulary of the human sciences as “unexplicated terms” for those locally and naturally occurring social phenomena that are objects of disciplinary attention. Adopting this program changes how we understand such objects of study in the human sciences. In addition, Lynch and Bogen (1996:273) have described such respecification as a procedure in which any human science concept or problem or method is reexamined as a “matter of routine local relevance for a particular kind of practical inquiry.” During these reexaminations, we can expect to see how social actors deploy any such concept, problem, or method in the course of their everyday activity. Under the banner of “respecification,” we are to examine phenomena described as (for example) the “rules, signs, production, causes, inquiry, evidence, proof,

knowledge, consciousness, reason, practical action, comparability, uniformity, reliability, validity, objectivity, observability, detail and structure” (Garfinkel and Wieder 1992:177). However, we are not to examine these phenomena as philosophical or theoretical problems requiring professional analytic solution but as “mundanely and routinely avowed, ascribed and observably presupposed” features of ordinary social actions. The preferred strategy for such inquiries has been the study of situated activities in their natural settings in order to observe (and sometimes to gain) the resources routinely deployed as constitutive of competent membership in such settings (e.g., Garfinkel 1986; Garfinkel, Lynch, and Livingston 1981; Livingston 1986; Travers 1977; Travers and Manzo 1997).

Thus the notion of respecification encourages a focus on identity matters as an amalgamation of a range of local, revisable occasioned relevances of social actors. It promotes the investigation of identity matters as they arise and are dealt with in the socially organized practices of everyday life. Such investigations, overall, aim to explicate what is involved in identity matters as they are made available by and to situated actors in the course of their co-construction of the orderliness of specific social contexts—identity not as an attribute of a person but as a “course of treatment” shaped and deployed by specific actors in determinate social and organizational contexts. A number of recent studies of social identity and self-identity—two of Goffman’s three characterizations of identity—have contributed to the realization of such an aim (e.g., Eglin and Hester 1992; Hester and Eglin 1997; Watson 1998), although even here, personal identity seems ignored. Let us turn to a consideration of one group of such actors and the way in which an accountable orientation to the topic of identity—especially personal identity—constitutes a central preoccupation of their working lives.

FORENSIC INVESTIGATION AND PERSONAL IDENTITY

All police forces in the United Kingdom employ staff with specific responsibility for the forensic investigation of crime scenes. Depending on the force in question, these staff have a variety of titles (including scenes of crime officers, scientific support officers, forensic investigators, and crime scene examiners). I refer to them here as crime scene examiners² (CSEs) since this term best captures their primary functions—to search for physical evidence at crime scenes, to determine the potential value of such evidence, and to secure and store evidence for subsequent analysis. CSEs also interpret the relevance of the evidence to police intelligence and criminal case construction and in all of these ways contribute to the wider crime investigation and detection process.

During much of 2000, I conducted an ethnographic study of the work of a group of five CSEs stationed in one division of an English Constabulary. I combined participant observation of the examination of a large number of domestic burglary scenes with extensive informal interviewing of CSEs and other police officers involved in crime investigation, collection of a range of documentary information

relating to scene examinations, and attendance at divisional meetings concerned with crime detection in the area.

Consistent focus on the nature of personal identity and personal identification was a matter of overwhelming occupational priority for this staff group. This orientation is not a matter for theoretical speculation but one of mundane competence and organizational accountability. The group continually displayed this orientation in their practical activities at crime scenes, in the paperwork accounting for these activities, in their talk to victims during the course of scene examinations, in the work narratives exchanged among themselves, in the processing of the results of their crime scene examinations, and in the performance measurements used to assess the effectiveness of their contributions to organizational objectives. Despite several studies of the process of criminal investigations (e.g., Ericson 1993; Hobbs 1988; Manning 1977; Morgan 1990; Sanders 1977) and a developing corpus of studies on the representation of forensic evidence and expertise in judicial settings (e.g., Jasanoff 1995; Lynch 1998; Lynch and Jasanoff 1998), the practice of crime scene examination has not previously been the subject of detailed sociological inquiry.

CSEs structure the overall process of scene examinations by trying to create a cognitive reconstruction of the sequence of events that occurred during each burglary under investigation. They achieved this cognitive reconstruction by interpreting a variety of material signs of movement and activity at the scenes as well as an accumulated knowledge of a repertoire of typified and standardized burglary *modus operandii* as part of their accumulated background knowledge of burglaries. An orientation to such a reconstructive process has long been referred to in texts on criminal investigation (e.g. Kind 1987; Nickell and Fischer 1999; White 1999), since Edmund Locard wrote of “re-creating” the criminal from traces left. However, the seemingly intuitive and fugitive nature of the process has meant that it has usually been a resource for instruction rather the topic of empirical research.

CSEs themselves formulated it only in the most general way: as a matter of accumulated professional expertise. They recognized the likely imprecision of their reconstruction while arguing for its usefulness in shaping and focusing each examination by reducing what would otherwise be its almost indefinite scope. This reductive use is especially important since CSEs have constantly to make fateful judgments about the efforts made to search particular scenes in light of their knowledge of scarce resources, the range of alternative demands on their time, and their concern with the measurement of their work effort by the use of a restricted range of performance indicators. These judgments are informed by both prior understandings of “normal” or “typical” burglary scenes and the constant comparison of such a priori expectations with the emerging details of the particular scene in question. These CSEs were sensitive to the need for both the deployment of some such preliminary framework for the organization of their approach to the scene and the willingness to suspend, enhance, or modify its use by the close observation and registration of the specific details of each unique scene visited. CSEs sought in their own work and valued in others’ work an ability to deploy an intelligent and methodical process

that avoided the dogged application of a preconceived expectation of the nature of the scene and facilitated the flexible use of their unique professional skills.

The CSEs' orientation to an essentially reconstructive impulse remains preserved in both their photographic records and in the notes they make in the course of the scene examination. CSEs use professional judgment to determine the extensiveness and intensiveness of a photographic record, along with a projected assessment of its value—largely for evidential or expository purposes. It can of course be argued that all those involved in the process of investigating crime are informed by a similar combination of retrospective gaze and projective orientation. However, the CSEs' contribution is distinguished by how these considerations are continuously reformulated and redirected through the discovery, contextual interpretation and collection of physical evidence in and through the course of a technologically enhanced examination of the crime scene. For CSEs, then, emergent reconstructive accounts are measured against, developed alongside, and revised through the detailed collection and documentation of physical evidence.

In the case of the burglary examinations, a limited number of such types of physical evidence regularly appeared. These included footwear marks and impressions, fibers from clothing found at points of entry to the burglary, tool marks left on doors or windows that had been forced open, broken glass, and paint fragments where the suspect had damaged paintwork on entry, fingermarks, body fluids, and tissue suitable for DNA profiling.

These forms of physical evidence vary in the strength of their contribution to crime detection and prosecution. The usefulness of many of them depended on features of their precise location as well as their relationship to other forms of information available in the wider police investigatory context in which they could be interpreted. However, CSEs always treated fingerprints and body fluids and tissue as especially valuable to the investigation of crime, because they were the only forms of evidence recognized as capable of capturing the personal identity of suspects. For this reason, CSEs devoted the greatest attention in the course of their examinations of burglary scenes to the discovery and recovery of these evidential traces of personal identity. However, the practical activities involved in the discovery and collection of these two forms of forensic evidence drew on different technologies and followed different trajectories.

CSEs usually made the initial identification of fingerprints relevant for and capable of further examination at burglary scenes by using available light or by deploying oblique lighting. Examiners had specialist light sources available, but their use raised health and safety issues. Thus examiners did not normally use them, except when searching scenes where more serious crimes had been committed. Following the initial observations of potentially valuable fingerprints, CSEs typically began more detailed work by brushing powder very lightly over particular areas of (or objects in) the scene to establish the quality of any potentially recoverable marks. Once such marks became visible, CSEs identified their contours so that they could brush along the contours of the ridges without filling in or erasing them. This technique

results in powder becoming fixed to the oily ridge deposits, with the success of the technique depending on the condition of the original mark, the right choice of fingerprint powder, and the skilled application of that powder by the examiner.

Throughout this process, the examiners prospectively oriented to what they knew fingerprint analysts would require for matching a fragmentary mark at the scene to a fingerprint record of a suspect in the relevant database. The CSE should not send prints to the bureau that turn out to be unsuitable for matching since that would signal his or her incompetence. As the print is being developed in situ—or at the stage where it is photographed or lifted via an adhesive acetated sheet—the examiner hopes to see ridge detail, or, more precisely in the vocabulary of the fingerprint world, “second level” ridge detail. “First level” ridge detail refers to the overall patterns repeated across all fingerprints, and while such detail is relevant for the cataloging of fingerprints (and some patterns are more rare than others) they do not have individualizing value.

Second-level detail is made visible by attending to specific points in the paths taken by the friction ridges of the fingerprint. CSEs sometimes refer to such points as Galton details, following the work of Francis Galton, and fingerprint examiners have developed a vocabulary of terms to designate different kinds of such points, for example, “ridge endings,” “bifurcations,” “lakes,” “dots,” “overlapping ridges.” Second-level detail is required for individuation, and CSEs search for this detail as they develop a mark and decide whether it is worth keeping and submitting to specialist examiners.³

DNA collection is a less complex process. It requires limited skills and can be easily converted into a simple protocol. What matters most in collecting DNA evidence are the methods of releasing the biological sample from the object on which it is found and of avoiding contamination of the suspect crime scene DNA source by other DNA deriving from a different human subject. To collect a potential DNA crime scene stain—for example, a possible bloodstain on the sharp edge of a drawer that a burglar seems to have pulled from a chest of drawers and left on the floor—CSEs carry out a few simple actions. The method consists of using three swabs moistened with sterile water: the first is used to lift the biological material from the relevant surface, the second is used to sample material at some nominal distance from the biological material, and the third is simply moistened and then retained otherwise unused. The second and third swabs serve as controls by collecting any relevant contaminants; the examiners hope that the first swab contains the necessary DNA to profile a suspect stain.

The contingencies that surround the collection of DNA evidence differ from those that apply to fingerprint collection. CSEs must identify the potential stain in the first place. A CSE needs to be reasonably sure that the stain is of human origin and potentially relevant to the crime. Depending on the surface on which the stain is found, CSEs may have to cut away the material and send it directly to the laboratory instead of swabbing it. Moreover, all of these possibilities have to be determined in the course of a once-and-only examination, since the bulk of this kind of

crime scene examination can only take place in a relatively short time before the presence and actions of others contaminate the scene.

The practical mastery of these—and other—trace evidence collection techniques comprises a dominant element in the routine work of crime scene examiners. In the case of fingerprint collection, unlike DNA collection, crime scene examiners deal with the construction of a complex artifact that demands constant visual attention and manual dexterity throughout the course of its construction. Moreover, CSEs inform their visual attention by knowledge of what is required to establish an eventual match between the scene artifact and an available—or potential—fingerprint record. Scene examination requires constant decision making about what work is worth doing with a variety of contact trace materials discovered at a variety of crime scenes. The amount of work involved here can vary significantly but usually involves the creation of artifacts that others will later treat as the equivalent of—or as stand-ins for—the real-world objects from which these artifacts (the scanned fingerprint lift or the DNA electropherogram, for example) were constructed.

The individualizing logic of criminalistic practice underpins decisions to pursue these and many more kinds of work, and the currently available repertoire of collection techniques and individual examiners' skills locally conditions them. These decisions are also accountably oriented to a number of other cognitive presuppositions concerning the organizational routines and practical contingencies typical of the conduct of criminal investigations and prosecutions. In this overall context, understandings of the nature of personal identity and identification are activated in crime scene examinations and are also displayed, contested, and negotiated in subsequent stages in the criminal justice process.

One of the most interesting features of the long history of criminalistic practice is the intensity of its pragmatic concern with the parameters of what I have referred to throughout this article as the residual category of personal identity. Other commentators (e.g., Sekula 1986; Valier 1998) have observed that exactly this feature of criminalistics marks its departure from the seemingly related discipline of criminology, whose focus has been more generic than individualizing, more theoretical than technical. A range of accounts describe the emergence and application of forensic identification technologies in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth (e.g., Caplan and Torpey 2001; Ginzburg 1980, 1990; Joseph and Winter 1996; Torpey 1998). Conventionally, these studies suggest that the identification of recidivist criminals (especially in quickly growing urban centers) became a cause for state concern from the mid-nineteenth century. Criminalists generally agree that the recognition of previously convicted criminals would serve to reduce their dangerousness, and they supported a number of technological initiatives, including the police use of photography, anthropometric measurement, and fingerprinting.

The development of such individuating criminalistic technologies has been subject to a series of uncertainties. In particular, the question arises, how many similarities between an object and its impression or traces are necessary to establish confidence

in its individualization? The history of both fingerprint and DNA identifications reveals a series of changes in the answers given to this question (see, e.g., Balding 1999; Balding and Donnelly 1995; Evett and Weir 1998; Evett and Williams 1995; Weir 1998). In addition, criminalists make important differences in their assumptions about the use of these two technologies for the collection and analysis of the material correlates of personal identity. Although they may understand fingerprints to signify the surface uniqueness of personal identity, they think DNA represents the body's interior uniqueness. Whereas the former implies no more than adventitious superficial dissimilarity between individuals, the latter is often portrayed as constituting the fundamental basis of both physiological and psychological properties of personal identity.⁴ Cole (2001) points out that the development of individualizing forensic identification has always involved assumptions about the behavioral diagnostics potentially available through examining such features. Often, these assumptions have turned out to be unfounded. Interestingly, however, the CSEs treated these assumptions as irrelevant speculations. The longevity and stability of these individualizing features and their traces, along with the probability of their discovery at particular crime scene, mattered more to them. In this respect, they treated both fingerprints and DNA traces as "empty signifiers," in Cole's phrase.

CONCLUSION

The long history and extensive variety of philosophical speculations and human sciences studies of identity matters bears witness to the theoretical significance attributed to the idea of identity. However, its representation in these specialist discourses does not capture its generic significance or how it is embedded in the ordinary activities and practical ways in which people accomplish joint actions. The work of Garfinkel and others challenges attempts to provide general and speculative theories that assert what identity is or is not and allow a casual treatment of the relationship of such theories to the understandings, actions, and events they claim to describe, illuminate, or explain. I encourage adopting an alternative proposal—that we should look at identity matters as they arise and are addressed in the course of ordinary actions. Identity may well be an inescapable feature of human existence, but we can understand why and how this is so much more successfully through examining local knowledge and practical action than we can by seeking to specify, modify, or correct schematic theories of its essential features.

In this article I have taken particular interest in how one summary of sociological thinking about identity both reflected and contributed to the residualization of one of the three elements included in this descriptive framework. I have suggested that this residuum can be illuminated by reference to an orientation to personal identity easily observable in the organized practices and local contexts of the work of crime scene examiners as they search for contact trace material at the sites of domestic burglaries. Knowledge of the material correlates and traces of personal identity along with the mastery of current technologies for their capture, classification, and

storage provide essential resources for the work of these examiners. The application of this knowledge and these technologies together serve to constitute personal identity as the object of forensic investigation. This not only reflects wider understandings of the material correlates of identity but also contributes to the changing constellation of such understandings. For this reason, it seems likely that anyone seeking a contemporary illustration of Goffman's "marks of identity" is more likely to choose the DNA profile than his own earlier choice of the fingerprint.

Writing about a different but related issue, Smith (1996:194) commented that we should replace those sociological approaches "which give primacy to theory and whose phenomenal universe is constituted by abstractions" with one that "aims at knowing the social as people actually bring it into being. Its objects would not be meanings but the actual ongoing ways in which peoples activities are co-ordinated." I believe this is true. If we cannot establish the connection between human science abstraction and the mundane world, which such abstractions seek to interpret, then the function of such abstraction remains questionable. If we see any proposed human science understanding of identity as responsive to what matters to individuals at all (and I cannot conceive of any useful human science understanding that could ignore this requirement), then we must describe how identity matters to them in the local contexts of their everyday lives.

NOTES

1. There is not space here to document the history of commentary on this work. Studies by Manning (esp. 1992, 2000) and Burns (1992) make major contributions of their own as well as provide guides to the work of others.
2. In the United States, such individuals are more often referred to as crime scene investigators.
3. More detail of the exigencies of fingerprint matching and the use of such evidence can be found in Cole's (2001) excellent study of the history of this technology.
4. A recent report of the U.K. Human Genetics Commission (2002) included a section on the forensic uses of DNA. The commission argued that DNA is a more reliable informant than fingerprints since it is durable, can be amplified from minute amounts, and is recoverable from almost every human cell or tissue, unlike fingerprints, genetic information is shared with biological relatives, and that DNA is more "information rich" than fingerprints.

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