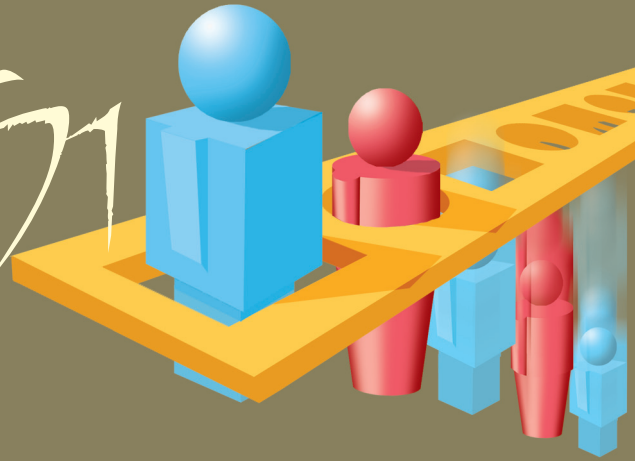


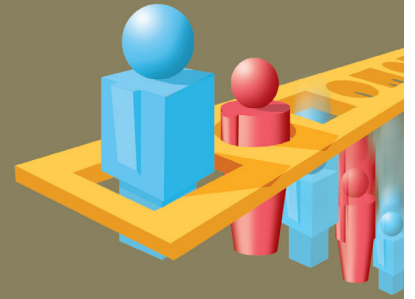
Unit G671



Exploring
socialisation, culture
and identity

Chapter 1

The formation of culture



By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

- define key concepts (norms, values, status, culture and roles) in the formation of culture
- identify and define different types (high, popular, subculture, consumer and global) and aspects (diversity, multiculturalism) of culture

Sociology is the study of human relationships and behaviour or, as Ritzer (1979) puts it, 'the study of *individuals in a social setting*'. Like many others (such as psychologists and journalists), sociologists are interested in explaining the behaviour of individuals. However, unlike other social commentators, their focus is not 'the individual', but rather 'the social setting' — an idea that concerns how our membership of social groups (such as families, schools or the workplace) shapes our individual behaviours (the particular ways we relate to other individuals).

What interests sociologists, therefore, is not so much people *as* individuals (their particular psychologies, hopes, fears and so forth) but how we *acquire* these things (why, for example, we take for granted forms of science and technology that, to people 2,000 years ago, would have seemed magical) and how we *explain* them in terms of our relationships with others (our membership, in other words, of social groups).

Culture

Although we're all unique individuals — no two people, not even genetically identical twins, ever behave in exactly the same way — we live in social groups. We choose to live our individual lives in the presence of others — and to live among and fit in with others, to be 'part of the group', we have to give up some aspect of our individuality. We have, in other words, to stop thinking as an individual ('what's best for me') and start thinking as part of a group ('what's best for us') — and in this idea we can see how to resolve the tension between 'the individual' on the one hand and 'the society' on the other.

We need to live with others to obtain the means to exist as individuals — initially basic things like food and shelter but, in time, the more sophisticated things (like cars,

computers and mobile phones) that make our lives easier and more pleasurable. In this way we all 'strike a bargain with each other': by becoming part of a social group (or society) we give up some of our individuality in exchange for the safety and security that allows us to express our individual hopes, fears, ideas and beliefs.

This is where the concept of **culture** — something we can initially, if crudely, define as a 'way of life' characteristic of a particular society — comes into the picture. Culture represents the way social groups are organised around a set of broadly agreed shared beliefs and values.

Defining culture

Taking a more sophisticated view, Nieto and Bode (2010) define culture as consisting of 'the values, traditions, worldview and social and political relationships created, shared and transformed by a group of people bound together by a common history, geographic location, language, social class, religion or other shared identity'. While this sounds rather complex, we can think about it in the following way:

- People see themselves as having things in common (such as where they live or religious beliefs). These things help to bind them as a group.
- Groups develop certain relationships (such as being family members, employees or teachers).
- These relationships express the things people value, their beliefs about the world (worldview) and the like.

Initially we can identify two *dimensions* to culture:

- **Non-material** (or **symbolic**) culture consists of the knowledge, beliefs and values that influence people's behaviour. In our culture, for example, behaviour may be influenced by religious beliefs (such as those of Christianity, Islam or Buddhism) and/or scientific beliefs — your view of human development, for example, has probably been influenced by Darwin's theories of evolution.
- **Material** culture consists of the physical things ('artefacts') produced by a society, such as cars, mobile phones and books. These reflect levels of cultural knowledge, aptitudes, skills, interests and preoccupations.

These dimensions are, of course, closely related. First, material culture is created by and from non-material culture (the mobile phone had to be invented and this required a range of cultural knowledge). Second, physical artefacts have cultural *meanings* for the people who produce and use them. They have, in short, **symbolic significance**: it may not be enough just to have a mobile phone; it may be necessary to have the latest, most up-to-date mobile on the market. This leads us towards the idea that our culture provides us with something more than just things to use: it gives us a range of attributes that shape both how we think about and behave in society.

Being born and raised in a particular culture doesn't just give us a certain standard of life; it also equips us with **cultural ideas and attributes**:

The formation of culture

- **community** — the idea that we have things in common with others ('people like us')
- **history** — both social (how our society has developed over time) and personal (such as being part of a particular family group)
- **identity** — how we define ourselves as individuals and as members of a particular society (our cultural identity)
- **language**

These ideas lead us to three further aspects of culture:

- **Transmission:** Culture is passed from one generation to the next.
- **Change:** Cultures are constantly developing through exposure to new and different influences and experiences.
- **Variation:** There are also cultural differences between societies based on **time** (the same society considered at different points in its historical development) and **space**.



Identify and briefly explain one cultural difference between the UK and France.

The cultural framework

All cultures develop from the same basic building blocks — which is not to say that all cultures are the same. Rather, culture itself is always based on four fundamental ideas that give us a framework for cultural development: social roles, social status, values and norms. These are discussed in the sections below.

Social roles

This refers to people 'playing a part' in society: just as an actor performs a role in a play, people take on and perform various roles (such as student, sister, brother, friend and employee) in their day-to-day life. Roles are a basic building block of any culture for two main reasons.

The first reason concerns **sociality**. Roles are always played in relation to other roles. For someone to play the role of teacher, for example, others must play the role of student. This demonstrates how roles contribute to the creation of culture; they demand both social interactions — people have to relate to each other in order to successfully perform certain tasks — and an awareness of others. A teacher, for example, must understand how and why they are performing that role in relation to the needs and requirements of students (such as helping them pass exams).

Normally when we play a role we find ourselves at the centre of a range of related roles (something that further extends the idea of cultural relationships because we become locked into a range of expected behaviours). This is called a **role-set**. A sociology student, for example, plays this role (slightly differently in each case perhaps) in relation to a range of roles of other people:

- other sociology students
- students studying other subjects
- sociology teachers

- other teachers
- caretaking staff
- administration staff
- parents or guardians

The second reason that roles are central to culture concerns **expectations**. Every role is identified by a name (or **label** — such as ‘sociology student’) and carries with it a sense of expected behaviour in any given social situation: a teacher, for example, is expected to behave in certain ways towards their students (and vice versa). These common expectations give a feeling of order and predictability to our relationships because role play is governed by certain behavioural rules (a **prescribed aspect** of a role — general beliefs about how you should behave when playing a role). As we’ll see later, these rules involve **values** and **norms**.

In this way — through the roles we play, the range of people we play them with and the social expectations about behaviour that they involve — we become woven into a cultural web of relationships that bring a sense of predictability and order to our lives.

We can distinguish two **types of role**:

- **Achieved roles** are those we choose or are allowed to play — but we need to have done something to earn the right to play them. Someone might, for example, only be allowed to play the role of an ‘A-level student’ if they have the required GCSE qualifications, whereas playing the role of ‘friend’ will involve a quite different set of ‘qualifications’.
- **Ascribed roles** are those we’re given or forced to play by other (usually more powerful) people. An example might be the role of a son or daughter since it is a role ‘chosen for us’ by our parents.

As suggested above, role play is a source of order and predictability in our *cultural* relationships; through role play we establish some basic ground rules for people’s behaviour (for example, I expect the checkout operator at my local supermarket to make me pay for the things I buy). Without them the social world would be a very confusing place — imagine a situation where you could not remember what your relationship to everyone around you was supposed to be.

One benefit of role play, therefore, is that once we’ve learnt what’s expected of us in particular situations, we can use this knowledge whenever we play that role. Teaching and learning, for example, are made easier if both teacher and student behave towards each other in ways appropriate to their roles (it would be difficult to learn if the teacher was unable to stop students misbehaving).

Although roles are hugely useful to both the individual and society, we play so many of them simultaneously that there are occasions when they create problems. **Role conflict** occurs when the demands of one role prevent us from behaving in accordance with the demands of another role. Consider, for example, these two roles:

- a student role demanding you to be in class at 3 p.m. on a Friday

- an employee role demanding you to start work at 2 p.m. on a Friday

Role conflict occurs here because it's impossible to successfully combine these roles. If you obey the demands of the student role you cannot conform to the demands of the employee role (and vice versa).

Social status

Social status refers to the 'level of respect' we're expected to give someone when playing a particular role. Different roles have different statuses, and different levels of status apply to different people within a **role-set** (the status of a student, for example, may be similar to that of other students in a class, but different from that of the class teacher).

As with the concept of role, there are two basic **types of status**:

- **Achieved statuses** involve doing something to earn a particular position and level of respect. A teacher's status is initially earned, for example, because they have the required qualifications and training to play this role. Students will afford their teacher an initial level of respect based on this knowledge (although this may be modified through subsequent social interaction).
- **Ascribed statuses** are those given to you by others (whether you want them or not), such as a teacher's judgement about whether you are a 'good' or 'bad' student. Since the teacher is the sole judge here, the best you can do is try to influence their decision by your behaviour.



Identify and explain one achieved and one ascribed status you currently hold.

Although status can be achieved in many ways in our society (from being rich and powerful to doing work that's useful and admired), it doesn't have a physical existence: we recognise it when we see it, but it's not something we can buy in the shops. We can, however, *demonstrate* its existence by using things that do have physical substance as **indicators**. For example, people use a range of indicators called **status symbols** (some of which can be bought in shops). These are objects that symbolise (or represent) social status. For example, a mobile phone functions partly to tell other people something about you (which may or may not be what you intended, depending on how fashionable or otherwise your choice of mobile).

Values

Values have two important characteristics:

- They are beliefs about how something *should* be. For example, the belief that someone is 'innocent until proven guilty' is the expression of a value, as is the idea that 'a woman's place is in the home' (because it argues women *should not* go out to work). Values, therefore, reflect beliefs about matters like right and wrong or good and bad. In this respect, the strongest beliefs in any culture are **morals** —

fundamental beliefs that are generally reserved for behaviours of which we strongly approve or disapprove.

- They are **general behavioural guides** because they reflect ideas about how people performing a particular role or living in a particular culture should behave. In an educational context, a teacher should teach their students, mark their work and so forth, while students should attentively listen, hand in work for marking and the like.

Values can be **cultural** (widely shared by the people of a specific culture) or **personal** (particular to an individual), an idea we can illustrate with the example of capital punishment:

- A widely held **cultural** value in our society is that people who commit murder *should not* be put to death by the state. This is reflected in the legal system, where capital punishment was abolished in 1965. In other societies (such as some US states and China where capital punishment is still carried out) the reverse is true.
- On the **personal** level, many people in our society believe capital punishment for murder is right.

Personal and cultural values frequently coincide because the latter can influence the development of the former. For example, 'queuing in the supermarket' is a cultural value in our society (people should form an orderly queue when paying for things) and we're generally taught (or learn through experience) that it is expected behaviour when we play the role of customer.

Values, by definition, always involve *judgements* about behaviour (both our own and that of others); whenever we express our values we're choosing to believe one thing rather than another.

Norms

Norms are specific guides to our behaviour in that they indicate *expected* forms of behaviour in a given situation. Norms are closely related to both values and roles. While values tell us how something should be (people should form orderly queues when waiting to pay), norms tell us exactly how to express the value — people must stand in a line, one behind the other, and wait patiently to be served. If they don't (if they break or **deviate** from the norm by trying to push into the queue), they can expect to be punished (or 'negatively sanctioned'). Norms, therefore, are basic behavioural rules we use to perform roles predictably and acceptably. When playing the role of customer, for example, it is a norm in our society to queue to pay.

Norms, as Goffman (1959) suggests, are much more open to **negotiation** than either roles or values and this makes them more flexible behavioural guides that can adapt to changes in the social environment. People playing related roles (such as teacher and students) may be able to discuss the norms that will apply to their respective roles. For example, a teacher may allow students in their class to leave early if they have completed a set amount of work.

A further dimension to normative negotiation is that it's possible to play the same role (such as a student) differently in different situations, depending on how a teacher, for example, interprets the norms associated with this role. The teacher of one class may interpret the student role narrowly, enforcing all kinds of rules and restrictions (such as working in silence). The teacher of another class may interpret the role more broadly, allowing their students to behave in ways unacceptable to the first teacher.

We can further note that norms operate on two levels:

- **Informal** norms are used to guide individual behaviour when playing a particular role.
- **Formal** norms are usually expressed as laws — the strongest type of norm in any society.



Identify and explain two norms associated with the role of 'student'.

Types of culture

So far we've looked at culture in terms of a society having certain beliefs, values and norms that apply to the majority, if not all, of its members. While this is initially useful as a way of understanding the concept, we can develop these ideas by thinking about different **types of culture**, starting with the idea that groups within a society may develop quite distinctive roles, values and norms *not* shared by the majority.

Subcultures

Subcultures are groups that exist within a large culture or society and have two main characteristics:

- **Distinctiveness**: Members share a distinctive set of roles, values and norms that are different in some way from those shared by the cultural majority. In our society, for example, we can identify a wide range of different subcultural groups such as football supporters, train-spotters and A-level students. The members of a subculture are not always wholly separated from wider cultural membership; rather, they tend to share features of the wider culture and can claim membership of both. It's unusual for subcultural groups to be wholly opposed to the norms and values of a wider culture, although they may distance themselves from these norms and values (as with some religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses).
- **Identity**: Members have a sense of their own subcultural identity; that is, individual members partly define themselves in terms of their group membership ('I am an A-level student', for example) while also defining themselves in terms of wider cultural connections (such as family membership).

Sociologically, subcultural groups generally conform to one of two types: **reactive** (or **oppositional**) and **independent**.

Reactive subcultures

A particular group of people come together as a reactive subculture when they develop norms and values that are both a response to and opposition against the prevailing norms and values of a wider culture. In other words, this kind of subculture develops when a group reacts to the actions of some other cultural group.

This type of development is common in schools, for example, where pupils form a subcultural group because of the way they are treated by teachers. Hargreaves (1967) found the boys in his study were labelled as failures on the basis of their poor academic performance; this gave them both a feeling of having things in common and something against which to react (being written off and disrespected by teachers).

Willis (1977) found a similar process at work among a small group of working-class boys who were similarly seen as failures by their teachers. The boys developed subcultural behaviours that gave them a sense of the status they were generally denied by the wider school culture. Their **reaction** turned to **opposition** through the development of a shared set of norms and values that stressed the importance of 'having a laff' and 'mucking about', and brought them into conflict with the school.

Laddishness

More recently Jackson's research into 'laddish' behaviour has extended the above ideas. Jackson (2006) argues laddish behaviour is a defensive mechanism — adopted, initially, by some young males and, more recently, by some young females — that guards against the 'fear of failure'. Laddishness, in other words, is a **reaction** to what some pupils see as the overbearing demands of the education system.

Laddishness has, Jackson (2002) argues, three dimensions:

- overt rejection of academic work
- messing around in class
- prioritising social over academic pursuits

The rejection of academic work is a crucial component of laddishness because it allows 'lads' to behave 'in ways currently consistent with hegemonic forms of masculinity in their schools'. In other words, it's a valid way of behaving that has some resonance with both masculine peer group norms (that 'real men' don't have much time or need for academic work) and teacher perceptions (the idea that 'boys' education' needs to appeal more to masculine ideals).

Such behaviour does, however, 'provide an excuse for failure and augments success'. If boys fail academically they can claim it was because they 'couldn't be bothered'; if they succeed their achievement is heightened because of the appearance of 'never having done any work'.

Jackson (2002) also argues these specific 'protection strategies' developed for both psychological and sociological reasons:

- as protection of the lads' social worth (their standing in the eyes of their peers, for example)

The formation of culture

- through fear of academic failure
- through fear of the 'feminine' (where educational success has come to be seen as a feminine quality, to succeed educationally becomes associated with a loss of male identity)

As Jackson (2003) argues,

Fears of academic failure are relatively common in contemporary secondary schooling; the high value attached to academic ability combined with the current, regular, high-stakes ability testing programmes in schools is a potent recipe for fostering fears of academic failure. These fears may then prompt a range of defensive strategies that act to protect a student's self-worth by providing 'explanations' for academic 'failure' that deflect attention away from a lack of academic ability onto other, less damaging, reasons. For example, students can explain 'failure' in terms of lack of effort rather than lack of ability.

Independent subcultures

An independent subcultural group forms around a particular set of **shared interests** (classic examples are hobby or leisure groups, such as train-spotters, joggers or dog owners). Group norms and values reflect the focus of the group's interest and will necessarily be different from those of the wider culture. However, the crucial difference from reactive subcultures is that such groups don't develop in reaction or opposition to other social groups or cultures (although their behaviour may, at times, bring them into conflict with the wider culture — as when a dog owner fails to pick up their dog's excrement). Usually, they simply reflect the interests and preoccupations of a distinctive group within a wider culture.



Using an example to illustrate your answer, describe how reactive and independent subcultures differ.

Cultural diversity

'Diversity' means difference, and the existence of subcultural groups within a wider culture is one example of cultural diversity. However, we can expand this idea to think more widely about cultural differences within and between societies.

Intercultural diversity

Intercultural diversity involves differences *between* societies. There are broad cultural differences between Britain and France, for example, in language, social history, and political organisation and representation (Britain has an unelected monarch as head of state, while France is a republic with an elected president). There are, of course, many further differences, ranging from the things we eat, through the cultural products (such

as films, books and magazines) we create and consume, to the side of the road on which we drive.

Another example of intercultural diversity concerns **personal space**. In our society we like to maintain a circle of space that extends roughly 60 cm all around — and we feel uncomfortable if people enter this space uninvited. Although many other cultures have concepts of personal space, they differ from society to society. In Hungary personal space extends around 40 cm while in Argentina it can be so small as to be almost non-existent.

Another example concerns acceptable forms of touching. In Saudi Arabia it is a sign of mutual respect for a man to hold another man's hand in public. In Britain it would be assumed that the two men were (sexual) partners. In Uganda they would be arrested and imprisoned (homosexuality is a criminal offence).



In the United Arab Emirates, holding hands is a sign of mutual respect

Intracultural diversity

Intracultural diversity involves differences *within* the same culture. Differences are found across a range of social categories (to be further considered when we examine the concept of **identity**): gender, region, age, class, ethnicity and sexuality.

Gender

Males and females display wide differences in their cultural behaviours and tastes. McRobbie and Garber (1976) argue female cultures are less socially visible than male cultures, mainly because of different **cultural attitudes**. Young female lifestyles, for example, are more likely to conform to the 'culture of the bedroom — experiments with make-up, listening to records [music], sizing up boyfriends', whereas young male lifestyles are traditionally played out in public (in the street, sometimes literally).

The development of home entertainment (through personal computers and consoles such as PlayStation and Xbox) has arguably diminished some of these differences — young male behaviour is arguably more home-centred now. However, gender differences exist in the use of these systems: boys generally prefer fast-paced action and fantasy gaming, while girls tend to be more involved in social networking and social gaming (Facebook games like Farmville). Alderman (2011) notes:

Games companies are increasingly creating products aimed at older women, a demographic that tends to be more interested in simple 'casual' games, which can be played in short bursts and don't require too much attention...games are being sold as a way to relax, to indulge in 'me-time' and, above all, to connect with others. Farmville, with its extremely simple gameplay and emphasis on social connection, has tapped into this market.

The formation of culture

Region

Within Britain we can identify specific **national** cultures (English, Scottish and Welsh) based around a range of different traditions and customs. Although each nationality celebrates New Year's Eve, for example, the Scottish tradition of Hogmanay is a more involved celebration focused around friendship ('Auld Lang Syne') and good luck (the custom of 'first footing' involves being the first person after midnight on New Year's Eve to cross the threshold of a friend or neighbour's house carrying a symbolic gift, such as whisky or fruitcake).

Similarly, a range of **regional** cultures (such as Cornish) exist in Britain, and Wood et al. (2006) note that:

London is now more diverse than any city that has ever existed. Altogether, more than 300 languages are spoken and the city has at least 50 non-indigenous [non-British-born] communities with populations of 10,000 or more. Virtually every nation, culture and religion in the world can claim at least a handful of Londoners.

And London is not alone; they note that there are:

- 25,000 Indians in Leicester
- 600 Portuguese in Bournemouth and Poole
- 650 Greeks in Colchester
- 370 Iranians in Newcastle
- 4,000 Poles in Blackburn, Lancashire

Each of these cultural groupings contributes to the overall sense of diversity in Britain through the expression of their own particular traditions, beliefs, practices and lifestyles.

Age

Youth lifestyles are more likely to be played out in public (pubs and clubs), whereas those of the elderly are generally played out in private (the home and family). There are a wide range of cultural differences among these groups based around **taste** — in music, clothing, activities and language, for example.



Suggest two ways in which the cultural tastes of young and elderly males differ.

Class

We can identify distinctive class groupings in our society (working, middle and upper classes, for example), each of which has particular cultural attributes and differences in areas like work, education and lifestyle:

- **Work:** Manual occupations (plumber, road sweeper) are largely working-class, while professional (non-manual) occupations (dentist, accountant) are middle-class.

- **Education:** Different classes have different levels of educational achievement. Middle-class children, for example, are much more likely to have a private education and attend university than their working-class peers.
- **Lifestyle:** Middle-class cultural lifestyles are more likely to include things like opera, theatre and fine dining; working-class cultural pursuits are more likely to include gambling (such as betting on horses), cinema and eating at McDonald's. While lifestyles are related to income derived from higher levels of education and work (we can note clear status differences here, with the middle classes in middle and senior managerial positions), they are also based on the idea of **taste** ('**taste cultures**' are explored in more detail later).

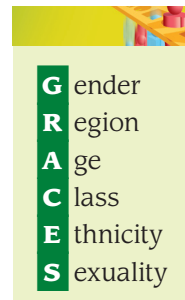
Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to cultural differences between social groups in areas like religion, family structures, beliefs, values and norms. As Winston (2005) suggests, ethnicity involves people 'seeing themselves as being distinctive in some way from others' on the basis of a shared cultural background and history. Song (2003) develops this idea to argue that an **ethnic group** is a group within a larger society that has a 'common ancestry' and 'memories of a shared past'; it has a sense of shared identity based around a variety of 'symbolic elements...such as family and kinship, religion, language, territory, nationality or physical appearance'.

When we think about cultural diversity we tend to think in terms of different ethnic groups (such as English, Asian, Black African or Caribbean). This is certainly an important source of cultural diversity though not, as we've seen, the only source. We can further explore this form of diversity in terms of multicultural societies.

Sexuality

We can identify different cultural groupings based on gay and lesbian identities and lifestyles. This could be further extended into areas like transvestism (wearing clothes traditionally associated with the opposite sex) and different types of sexual behaviour, both heterosexual and homosexual (such as sadomasochism).



Multicultural societies

A multicultural society involves two or more different cultures. England, for example, contains a variety of distinctive cultural groupings — from English, Scots, Welsh and Irish, through Afro-Caribbean, Asian (e.g. Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi), East European (e.g. Polish, Romanian), West European (e.g. French) to Australian, Canadian and American. 'English society' can therefore be broadly characterised as 'multicultural' in the sense of containing a number of different and distinctive ethnic groups.

Multiculturalism is a related but slightly different concept that reflects a set of beliefs about the *relationship* between different ethnic groups within a society. A multicultural society can display a range of different relationships between ethnic groups, from:

- **domination** of one group over all others (in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, for example, the Kurdish minority was subjected to a variety of assaults, including a poison gas attack in 1988)
- **toleration** of some minority customs and traditions, but not others (France, for example, introduced a ban on women wearing niqab or burqa veils in public in 2011)
- **equality**, respect and tolerance between different groups ('**multiculturalism**')

Multiculturalism refers, therefore, to the idea that separate and distinctive cultures can coexist in the same society, such that each cultural grouping broadly retains those features — values, customs, traditions and so forth — that are a unique and distinctive part of their cultural background and heritage, while also being part of a much wider cultural grouping (or society).

Multiculturalism is a perspective (or **ideology**) that argues ethnic groups should be able to maintain their distinctive cultural attributes within a host society, with the different groups interacting with one another respectfully and peaceably (such as a predominantly Christian culture respecting the different religious traditions and behaviours of Muslim or Jewish cultures).

Multiculturalism in Britain has focused on what Favell (1998) suggests are a number of key political and legal features:

- **Managing** the relationship between majority and minority populations.
- **Encouraging** minority languages, religious and cultural practices.
- **Discrimination** on the basis of race being outlawed. In 1965, for example, the first Race Relations Act (there have been further Acts and Revisions) made racial discrimination on 'grounds of colour, race, or ethnic or national origins' unlawful 'in public places' (although shops, for some reason, were excluded at this time).
- **Integrating** various minority rights and freedoms into law (in areas like citizenship and freedoms relating to religious practice, political association and protest).
- **Allowing** and encouraging ethnic cultures and practices (such as religious festivals).



Managing
Encouraging
Discrimination
Integrating
Allowing

Manning (2011) summarises these ideas thus:

The essence of multiculturalism is the idea that, if one makes immigrants feel welcome by allowing them to retain their culture and by seeking to address discrimination against them, they will reciprocate by embracing a British identity and the values needed for a harmonious society.



Outline and discuss three key political and legal features of multiculturalism in British society.

Global culture

While we've largely concentrated on cultural diversity and multiculturalism in the context of *British* society, in the contemporary world we don't live in total isolation from other societies — and this has led to the idea that we increasingly experience and embrace a global culture.

The idea of **cultural globalisation** relates to the free and rapid movement around the globe of different cultural ideas, styles and products that can be picked up, discarded and, most importantly, *adapted* to fit the needs of different cultural groups. The variety of available cultural products (both material and non-material) is vast and people are no longer restricted to local or national cultural choices.

Cultural products are **malleable** (open to manipulation and change). In situations where people are exposed to a huge range of cultural influences and choices it is possible to develop a '**pick and mix**' approach to culture — choosing elements of one cultural tradition and mixing them with elements of one or more other cultures to create something new and different — a process called **cultural hybridisation**. In Britain, examples might include new forms of music, film, food and individuals:

- **Music:** Bhangra is Asian (Punjabi) music transformed into dance music that combines traditional rhythms and beats with Western electric guitars and keyboards.
- **Film:** Bollywood films combine traditional Asian stories and themes with the Western (Hollywood) musical tradition.
- **Food:** Britain's favourite dish — chicken tikka masala — is not authentically Indian in origin, but rather a hybrid of Indian and British cuisine.
- **Individuals:** Burke (2009) suggests children of parents from different cultures are culturally hybrid individuals.

Although global influences on local and national cultural behaviour aren't new (different cultural practices and products have influenced 'British culture' for many hundreds of years), the *scope and speed* of cultural diversity and change have indisputably increased over the past 25 years — a process hastened by technological developments such as cheap air travel, the telephone and the internet. What is more disputable, however, is the *direction* of change. There are three general views about the nature and extent of global culture, which can be labelled 'different and mixed', 'similar *and* different', and 'disappearing'.



Chris Fredriksson/Alamy

Poster in Mumbai, India of a Bollywood film

'Different and mixed'

This view suggests that the ebb and flow of different cultural ideas and influences creates **hybrid cultural forms** that represent 'new forms of difference'; culture is not simply something given to people but rather something actively constructed and reconstructed. **Globalised culture**, therefore, refers to the way local or national cultural developments can spread across the globe, being picked up, shaped and changed to suit the needs of different groups within and across different societies — and to how developments like the internet have changed the nature of cultural movements.

A good example is **social networking**. Internet sites such as Facebook (facebook.com), YouTube (youtube.com) and Flickr (flickr.com) are **social spaces** actively constructed and reconstructed by the people who use them — to share videos and pictures, play social games (e.g. Farmville, Mafia Wars) or connect with family and friends. An interesting aspect of this development is how the idea of **culture as a commodity** fits with the idea of freeing individuals to both produce and consume cultural ideas and products. While global commercial enterprises provide the tools through which cultural ideas and products can be exchanged, it's the millions of individuals around the world *using* these tools who provide the content that makes such virtual spaces vibrant and attractive, to both users and advertisers. (Facebook, for example, registered its 500 millionth user in 2011.)

'Similar and different'

The second view argues for:

- **Convergence and similarity** *within* global cultural groups: At the global level cultures are increasingly becoming much the same: sharing the same language (such as English), doing similar things (watching American films, visiting similar websites and using the same small number of networking sites) and consuming similar products (Big Macs, Pepsi or Coke).
- **Diversity** *between* such groups: Groups of like-minded individuals share certain cultural similarities across national boundaries, but these groups are potentially many and varied. Cultures come to resemble 'strands of influence'; some young people in Britain, Japan and India, for example, may develop **common cultural bonds** around sport, music or computer games, whereas others may develop cultural bonds based around Pokémon cards or manga comics.

Sklair (1999) suggests that to understand global cultures we need to think about two processes:

- **Localised globalism**: the idea that some forms of globalised culture are adapted and changed by particular (local) cultural behaviours. Regev (2003) argues that 'rock music' — a global product of American origin — is now consumed and filtered through many different cultural influences to produce new and different 'local varieties of rock'.

- **Globalised localism:** some features of local cultures (such as their uniqueness and individuality) become part of globalised cultures. Rather than seeing the globalisation of culture as making everything the same we should see it in reverse — globalisation involves the spread of different cultural ideas in ways that create new and diverse cultural forms.

An illustration here is the idea of **Disneyisation** — what Bryman (2004) calls ‘the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world’. This involves the following closely related features:

- **Themes:** Different ‘consumption experiences’ are created. A burger in the Hard Rock Cafe probably tastes much the same as a burger from Planet Hollywood — what differs are the themed surroundings.
- **De-differentiation** (the removal of differences): Consumers are offered related products which provide a seamless ‘lifestyle experience’ (a particular perfume, for example, is associated with a particular style of clothing and footwear).
- **Merchandising:** By consuming cultural products people take ‘themed lifestyles’ into their homes and social groups.

While Disneyisation celebrates ‘diversity’ (in consumption, lifestyle, notions of ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’), it invariably presents standardised, almost homogeneous, versions of these things (just as Disney World itself presents a rather sanitised version of ‘the Wild West’, for example).

‘Disappearing’

The third view argues that the trend is for cultural differences to gradually disappear as all societies start to adopt ideas and attitudes broadly similar in style and content. Plumb (1995), for example, argues culture has become a **commodity** for people to buy.

Lechner (2001) suggests the economic behaviour and power of global companies (like Coca-Cola, Nike and McDonald’s) create a **consumer culture** where standard commodities are promoted by global marketing campaigns to ‘create similar lifestyles’, an idea we can connect to **McDonaldisation**. Ritzer (1996) argues contemporary corporate cultural products are standardised, homogenised and formulaic. Everyone who buys a McDonald’s hamburger gets the same basic product, made to the same standard formula and tasting much the same; where Disneyisation seeks to create variety and difference, McDonaldisation focuses on likeness and similarity — and cultural products are increasingly predictable, safe and unthreatening.

Products must be created to appeal to the widest possible range of tastes across the widest possible range of cultures — from Britain to Bosnia and Bangalore. Berger (1997) characterises this as **McWorld Culture**: global (popular) culture is increasingly Americanised:

Young people throughout the world dance to American music...wearing T-shirts with messages...about American universities and other consumer items. Older people watch American sitcoms on television and go to American movies. Everyone, young and old, grows taller and fatter on American fast foods.

However we actually theorise the precise impact of global culture on local (or national) cultures, its development pulls into sharp relief a distinction that's frequently made in our society between 'high' and 'low' (or 'popular') culture.



Identify and explain two ways in which people 'buy culture' in our society.

High culture

This involves the idea that some cultural products and practices are **superior** to others: classical music, opera, the works of Shakespeare and so forth are high cultural forms whereas pop music, cinema and the works of J. K. Rowling (*Harry Potter*) or Stephanie Meyer (*Twilight*) are not. As Gans (1974) puts it, high culture relates to 'the art, music, literature, and other symbolic products that were (and are) preferred by the well-educated elite...[as well as] the styles of thought and feelings of those who choose these products — those who are "cultured"'.

This distinction also means that those who prefer high cultural products are 'superior' to those who do not: the 'cultured' (a relatively small, exclusive **elite**) have more refined tastes than those who are 'uncultured' (the **masses**). The elite see themselves as being at the very top of society. In the past they could separate themselves from 'the masses', who could be expected to 'know their place'; and **status distinctions** between rich and poor, master and servant could be easily (if sometimes forcefully) maintained. Contemporary societies, however, give far greater opportunities (for example through mass education and the development of highly paid, high-powered professions) for the lower classes to work their way up the social scale (in both economic and political terms).

This increasing economic and political fluidity — making it possible for someone of lowly social origins to become hugely wealthy — leads to an **identity crisis** among elite groups; they are increasingly unable to maintain their sense of superiority over the masses on the basis of wealth and income (since these are something that 'anyone' can have). This is where 'taste' comes into play because, from this exclusive viewpoint, 'taste' can't be bought or learnt; it is something that, rather conveniently, is bred into an elite over many generations. In a society where it's increasingly difficult to maintain status distinctions on the basis of how one speaks, lives or dresses, differences can be maintained through the consumption of cultural products and ideas.

Katz-Gerro et al. (2007) suggest this view of high culture sees societies as 'culturally stratified' in terms of a basic division between a small, cultured elite at the top and a

large, **acultured** mass at the bottom ('acultured' meaning literally 'without culture' in the sense of not being able to appreciate high culture).

Elite cultural identity, therefore, is not only reflected in the things consumed, but also involves questions of leadership (since elites see themselves as 'determining what happens in society'). An elite group identifies those aspects of culture that are 'the best in thought and deed' (a judgement that happily coincides with the cultural products they consume) and separates them from (as they see it) the worthless, the mass-produced and the artificial.

By taking ownership of these cultural forms and elevating them to a position of cultural superiority, an elite group does three things:

- asserts its own cultural identity ('this is who we are and who you are not')
- establishes its **cultural hegemony** (leadership) over questions of taste (the elite decide what is high culture and what is not)
- creates a strong 'taste barrier' between an elite and the masses (most importantly, those of the latter who might aspire to elite membership)



Identify and explain two examples of high culture, apart from those given in the text.

Popular culture

Giddens (2006) defines popular culture as 'entertainment created for large audiences, such as popular films, shows, music, videos and TV programmes' (the very opposite of high or elite culture). It is the '**culture of the masses**' — a term often used in a disparaging way to suggest a culture that is shallow, worthless and disposable. Popular culture is, however, a wide-ranging concept (it takes in a vast range of cultural ideas and products), and we can examine it using two contrasting viewpoints: critical and progressive views.

Critical view

This view sees popular culture as having the following characteristics:

- It is **manufactured**, in that it is created by 'culture professionals' (record and film producers, television executives and so forth) on an industrial scale; it is, in other words, **mass-produced** (the opposite of the 'individual crafting' of high culture). As Fiske (1995) argues: 'The cultural commodities of *mass culture* — films, TV shows, CDs, etc. are produced and distributed by an industrialized system whose aim is to maximize profit for the producers and distributors by appealing to as many consumers as possible.'
- It is also manufactured in the sense of being **artificial** (those who create it have no great interest or emotional investment in their cultural products) and formulaic — once a cultural product becomes a popular success the 'winning formula' is simply reproduced in order to churn out increasingly pale copies.

The formation of culture

- It is **bought and sold**. It is a purely commercial enterprise — the only objective is to make money.
- It has **mass appeal**. Cultural products are aimed at the widest possible audience — not to enrich their lives but to achieve commercial success. In order to be as inclusive (and profitable) as possible these products must appeal to the **lowest common denominator** (LCD). To appeal to ‘the uncultured masses’, products have to be safe, intellectually undemanding and predictable — in other words, bland, inoffensive and simple to understand. Davis (2000), for example, notes that **high culture** is ‘the preserve of very few in society’ and that it involves ‘art, literature, music and intellectual thought which few can create or even appreciate. **Popular culture**, by contrast, is regarded as the mediocre, dull, mundane entertainment to be enjoyed by uneducated and uncritical “low-brow” hordes.’
- It is **accessible**. Popular culture must be easy (and relatively cheap) to buy and easy to consume (in the sense of being intellectually undemanding).
- It is **transient**. If popular culture is to be accessible it must be undemanding, shallow and above all else entertaining — and so can’t involve anything of lasting value.
- It is **disposable**. Where the objective is to make money, old cultural products have to be discarded and new products introduced in the constant search for profit. (If high culture must be unchanging and challenging, because it represents the pinnacle of cultural achievement in a society, popular culture must be the reverse.)
- Its consumers are **passive**. They play no part in its production; their role is simply to buy whatever is produced by culture professionals. ‘The masses’ are simply passive consumers of an artificial, disposable, junk culture.

Mass consumers, therefore, are seen as:

- **undifferentiated** — people like much the same kinds of things.
- **manufactured** — cultural tastes are created by the media.
- **uncritical** — audiences generally accept whatever they’re given and choice is restricted to a narrow range of popular products.
- **uncreative** — popular culture is created by professionals, not consumers.



Identify and explain two features of popular culture.

Progressive view

Technological developments (such as personal computers, mobile phones and the internet) have changed the way at least some elements of popular culture are characterised. Where the critical view sees mass audiences as ‘willing dupes’, the progressive view has a different take on the nature of audiences and the production and consumption of cultural products.

This view challenges some of the assumptions about **audiences** made by the critical approach by arguing the audience for cultural products is:

- **differentiated** — rather than being a mass with similar tastes, audiences differ hugely in terms of their tastes.
- **critical** — audiences are active in seeking out new cultural products and increasingly selective of the cultural products they consume. Audiences don't just uncritically accept whatever 'culture professionals' serve up for popular consumption.
- **creative** — new digital technologies allow consumers to become producers. For example, a social network such as Facebook only exists because consumers create it through their day-to-day interactions.

A combination of simple-to-use technology and more critical and creative audiences has led to the development of contemporary forms of popular culture with three distinguishing features:

- **new places and spaces** for the production and consumption of popular culture, such as the World Wide Web
- **fragmentation** — the audience for cultural products has fragmented into **niche consumers** with different tastes, desires and cultural motives. Fragmentation suits small-scale producers and consumers by providing markets for cultural products that are too small to be adequately (or profitably) addressed by commercial producers.
- **placelessness** — although audiences are fragmented, they are not necessarily small; the internet connects niche consumers to create a global mass that is 'placeless' in the sense that it only exists as a mass in cyberspace.

Whichever viewpoint you favour, it is clear that the development of global cultures has changed the way a mass consumer audience relates to cultural products. While elites have frequently used cultural products as symbols of both status and identity, global cultural development has created similar opportunities for 'the masses' through the agency of consumer culture.



Using examples to illustrate your answer, explain the difference between critical and progressive views of popular culture.

Consumer culture

Boden et al. (2005) suggest consumption involves ideas about 'how we shop, where our purchasing "needs" come from, how we treat the products we buy and how consuming shapes our lives'. The slogan 'I shop, therefore I am' neatly captures the flavour of the relationship between consumption, culture and identity.



Boris Roessler/dpa/Corbis

Consumption (in the form of shopping) is culturally significant behaviour that has the added bonus of saying something important about — and perhaps actually defining — ‘who we are’. The significance of **consumer culture** is, in this respect, twofold.

First, there has been a change in the nature of consumption in recent years, away from shopping as a ‘chore’ (something that is necessary, routine and mundane) and towards the idea of shopping as something we do for **pleasure** — a leisure and lifestyle choice.

Second, it expresses the idea that, in contemporary Western societies, we ‘shop for **identities**’. The *objects* we buy or consume tell us something about who we think we are and want to be. **Conspicuous consumption** — buying things to use as a sign of higher social status — is also used to project an image about our identity to others. *Ideas* are also involved: as ‘identity consumers’ we have an expanding range of choices about ‘who to be’ and how to express our sense of self.



Identify and explain two features of consumer culture.

Here are some key features of consumer culture that can be related to identity in contemporary society:

- **Consumption** is the most important organising principle in society: everything, from work through education to family life, is related to the need and desire to consume.
- The values of the **market** (everything is a commodity, has a price and can be bought or sold) become the dominant values. Identities too become commodities to be worn, altered and discarded in favour of something new, different and more exciting.
- **Choice** — not just over what to buy but also ‘who to be’ — is seen as important. Identity construction becomes a private choice over which others have no control or input — society, in the shape of social identities, can no longer tell you your place in the great social scheme of things and expect to be obeyed. The consumer (or individual) is sovereign and identities are negotiated and negotiable.
- **Never-ending needs** are created. A consumer society continually changes; consumption feeds itself. Never-ending needs mean never-ending consumption, which means never-ending profits.

1 Define the concept of status. Illustrate your answer with examples. (8 marks)

2 Outline and explain any two aspects of high culture. (16 marks)