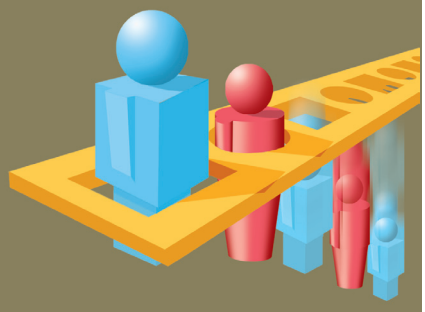
Chapter 2

The process of socialisation



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

- understand the process of socialisation and how it links to cultural formation
- identify and explain different types of socialisation (primary and secondary) and social control (formal and informal)
- explain the role of a variety of agencies in the socialisation process
- understand the difference between structure and action approaches and the different sociological perspectives that flow from this distinction

This chapter examines the question 'How is culture created?', first by outlining a non-sociological ('**nature'**) approach and then by considering a general sociological ('**nurture'**) approach focused around examining different **types** and **agencies** of **socialisation**. We will also examine a range of different **sociological perspectives** on cultural development, grouped in terms of **structure** and **action** approaches.

Nature or nurture?

Personal experience shows that life is not simply a series of random, purposeless or unstructured events. Wherever we look we're surrounded by **patterns of behaviour** (in families, schools, workplaces, and so on). A **social institution** (such as the family, marriage or the education system) is defined as a 'pattern of shared, stable behaviour that persists over time'. The existence of **institutionalised behaviour** suggests it must have a cause — something that encourages people to behave in ways that are generally predictable on a day-to-day basis (we can predict, for example, that a certain percentage of people will go to school or to work each day).

While the existence of patterns of broadly predictable behaviour is a necessary component of culture, this doesn't explain *why* people act in predictable ways. We consider two possible explanations for this — one ('nature') non-sociological, the other ('nurture') non-sociological.

Nature (instinct)?

One explanation is that human behaviour is guided by our genes. The idea is that human beings naturally have **genetic imperatives** (commands that cannot be ignored). In other words, people are born with certain instinctive abilities and capabilities, which are part of human nature.

At one extreme, **instincts** are seen as fixed human traits — things we are born knowing (such as a 'mothering instinct'). The cultural environment into which we are born plays little or no significant role in individual development.

A less extreme view is that people are born with certain **capabilities** that are realised through environmental experiences. Nature gives us 'strong hints' about cultural organisation, but people are free to ignore those hints. For example, if women have greater child-nurturing capabilities it 'makes sense' for them to take on a caring role within a family.

One problem with both views is that they suggest instinctive behaviour is somehow natural — that we are born with certain abilities we either have no choice but to use (instinct) or ignore at our peril (capabilities). But does the evidence of human behaviour actually support either of these positions? One way to test them is to look at feral children.

Feral children

Evidence of human infants raised by animals 'in the wild' is rare and not always reliably documented (one exception being Saturday Mifune, discovered in 1987, aged 5, living in a pack of monkeys in South Africa). However, evidence of children raised with little or no human contact is much more common. A well-documented example is 'Genie', a 13-year-old Californian girl, discovered in 1970. Pines (1997) notes that Genie had been 'isolated in a small room and had not been spoken to by her parents since infancy'. Although she 'seems to have been a normal baby...she was malnourished, abused, unloved, bereft of any toys or companionship'. The result of this experience was that, when found, 'she could not stand erect...she was unable to speak: she could only whimpeFeral children are significant for two main reasons. The first concerns **development**. When children are raised by animals or in the absence of normal human contacts, they invariably fail to show the level of social and physical development we would expect from a conventionally raised child. For example, they do not develop the ability to talk.

The second reason concerns **recovery**. If behaviour was instinctive we would expect that, once a feral child had been returned to human society, they would relatively quickly and easily pick up those things we consider part of being human (talking, walking upright, eating with utensils and so forth). This, however, is not the case — and for this reason we have to look at a different form of explanation for the development of human cultures, based around the two ideas of choice and diversity.

Choice and diversity

Instincts, by definition, involve a lack of **choice** (their purpose, after all, is to create order by removing choice from our behaviour). Human behaviour, however, involves an almost limitless set of choices, some of which are fairly banal ('Should I do my sociology homework or play 'Call of Duty' on the PlayStation?') and some of which are not ('Should I buy or steal this PlayStation game?').

The fact that we can make behavioural choices contributes to the **diversity** of our behaviour: people develop different (or diverse) ways of doing things. Sometimes these are relatively trivial — Billikopf (1999), for example, found out the hard way that 'In Russia, when a man peels a banana for a lady it means he has a *romantic* interest in her' — but at other times they are more fundamental. Wojtczak (2009) notes that in Victorian Britain most women:

> lived in a state little better than slavery. They had to obey men, because in most cases men held all the resources and women had no independent means of subsistence...A woman who remained single could not have children or cohabit... Nor could she follow a profession, since they were all closed to women. Girls were barred from universities, and could obtain only low-paid jobs. Women's sole purpose was to marry and reproduce.

This is not a situation we would recognise in contemporary Britain.

These intercultural and intracultural comparisons are important because if human behaviour was simply based on instinct we would expect to see much the same sort of behaviour anywhere in the world and at any time in history. Sociologists, therefore, suggest an alternative explanation for human behaviour, based on the idea that 'culture isn't something we're born with, it is taught to us' (Podder and Bergvall 2004).

? How do feral children illustrate the idea that human infants need to be socialised?

Nurture?

For sociologists, culture is learned through **socialisation** — a process whereby we are taught the behavioural rules we need to become members of a particular culture. Sociological explanations for patterned behaviour, therefore, focus on culture as **learned behaviour,** for two reasons:

- **Shared rules**: To live in social groups people must define behavioural rules shared with others.
- **Flexibility**: The exact form of these rules differs from culture to culture, mainly because people live in different physical and social environments. Cultural rules, therefore, have to be sufficiently flexible to cope with these different environments (unlike instinctive behaviour).

Types of socialisation

We can distinguish two broad types of socialisation: primary and secondary.

Primary socialisation

Primary socialisation occurs, according to Cooley (1909), within **primary groups** that involve 'intimate face-to-face association and cooperation' and which are fundamental to the development of those behaviours we recognise as 'fundamentally human' (such as walking upright and talking). The first primary relationship we form is usually with our parent(s), followed by primary attachments to people of our own general age (our **peers**) and, subsequently, to other adults (such as work colleagues).

Primary socialisation is necessary because human infants require the assistance of other members of society to develop both as human beings and as members of a culture. We don't just need to learn 'general human behaviours', we also have to learn about social relationships, how to play roles and so forth. Primary socialisation within the family, for example, teaches us some of the basic skills and values we will need in adult life.

Most importantly, it does this in the context of a family group governed, according to Parsons (1951), by a**ffective relationships** (relationships based on love, affection, responsibility and duty), where mistakes can be made and lessons learned without too much harm being caused. Much of this type of learning is **informal** (there is no set curriculum for primary socialisation).

? Identify two things you were taught through primary socialisation.

Secondary socialisation

Secondary socialisation involves **secondary groups** and is characterised, according to Berger and Luckmann (1967), by 'a sense of detachment...from the ones teaching socialisation' — it doesn't necessarily involve close, personal face-to-face contacts. One of its main purposes (or functions), Parsons (1951) argues, is to 'liberate the individual from a dependence on the primary attachments and relationships formed within the family group'. In other words, where the majority of people we meet are strangers it would be impossible and undesirable to treat them in the same way we treat people we love or know well.

For this reason we must learn how to form **instrumental relationships** — how to deal with people in terms of what they can do for us and what we can do for them in particular situations (the opposite of the **affective relationships** we find in primary groups). Berger and Luckmann (1967) suggest that, while primary socialisation involves 'emotionally charged identification' with people like our parents, secondary socialisation is characterised by 'formality and anonymity' — you don't, for example, treat a stranger who asks you for directions as your closest friend.

? Briefly explain why we have to be taught 'instrumental relationships'.

Other types of socialisation

In addition to these two main types of socialisation, we can note some related forms that apply in certain situations:

- **Anticipatory socialisation**: It's quite rare to go into a social situation (such as a job interview) with no knowledge about that situation. Even if someone has no personal experience of job interviews they will be able to imagine what it involves (because they've read about other people's experiences, watched television programmes about interviews and so forth). An individual may, therefore, anticipate the demands of the role ('how to be an interviewee') and rehearse in their mind how to play the role correctly in normative terms — the appropriate way to dress, to talk and the like.
- **Resocialisation**: There are times when we have to learn to play new roles. For example, someone promoted to a position of authority over their former colleagues must learn how to deal with this change of situation — from being one among 'equals' to having to manage, organise and perhaps discipline people. A change like this can be a culture shock, which may be resolved by a resocialisation process (such as attending a training course on how to manage others). In some situations, such as joining the armed forces or going to prison, an individual is forced to undergo a radical form of resocialisation that Goffman (1961) calls **mortification**: they are subjected to procedures (such as being dressed identically, only being allowed to speak when spoken to by someone in authority) designed to kill off ('mortify') everything they've previously learned and taken for granted in their life prior to their new role. Once this process is complete the individual can be resocialised into the norms and values of their new role.
- **Developmental socialisation** reflects the fact that socialisation is a lifelong process — we are constantly being forced to adapt to changing situations and circumstances.

Social control

Socialisation represents a way in which any society tries to bring order, stability and predictability to people's behaviour. If a child is socialised into a 'right' way to do something (such as eat with a knife and fork), there must also be a 'wrong' or 'deviant' way (such as eating with fingers) to be discouraged. Socialisation, in other words, involves **social control** — a relationship Pfohl (1998) characterises thus:

> Imagine *deviance* as noise — a cacophony of subversions disrupting the harmony of a given social order. *Social control* is the opposite. It labours to silence the resistive sounds of deviance...to transform the noisy challenge of difference into the music of *conformity*.

Social control has two related elements:

- **Rules:** Human behaviour involves a lifelong process of rule-learning. We may not always agree with those rules (nor always obey them) but we have to take note of their existence — mainly because rules, whether **informal** (norms) or **formal** (laws), are supported by sanctions.
- **Sanctions:** These are things we do to make people conform to our expectations. **Positive sanctions** (or rewards) are the nice things we do to make people behave in routine, predictable ways. Examples range from a smile, through words of praise and encouragement, to gifts and the like. **Negative sanctions** (or punishments) are the nasty things we do to make people conform. These range from not talking to people if they annoy us to putting them in prison. The ultimate negative sanction, perhaps, is to kill someone.

The distinction between formal and informal norms is mirrored by a distinction between formal and informal social control.

Formal social control

Formal social control involves written rules:

- **laws** (legal rules) that apply equally to everyone in a society and cover both individual and organisational behaviour
- **organisational rules** (non-legal rules) that apply to everyone playing a particular role in an organisation (such as a school or factory)

Sanctions are enforced by:

- **agencies of social control** (such as the family)
- **agents of social control** — individuals (such as parents) within each agency who take responsibility for social control

Table 2.1 outlines examples of legal and non-legal rules, control agencies and sanctions.

Table 2.1 Agency rules

	Legal rules	Non-legal rules
Examples	Theft Assault	Dress codes Attendance rules
Control agents	In contemporary societies law enforcement is carried out by government agents (such as the police or traffic wardens) and, in some cases, private agencies employed by the state.	Enforcement is the responsibility of those in a position of organisational authority (such as a teacher or employer).
Control agencies	The main agencies of formal social control in Britain are the police and the judiciary (the legal system), although the armed forces are, on occasion, used as formal control agents. Some private agencies supply prison officers.	These include any organisation — from businesses through schools and colleges to libraries and social clubs.

Sanctions	Formal prosecution procedures that may entail arrest, charge and trial. Penalties for breaking the law vary depending on the nature of the offence: examples include fines, community orders, antisocial behaviour orders (ASBOs) and imprisonment.	Formal disciplinary procedures (that may involve verbal and written warnings). Sanctions vary between organisations: showing disrespect to a teacher might lead to detention; being disrespectful to an employer might lead to sacking.

Formal written rules and controls tell everyone within a group exactly what is and is not acceptable behaviour. Rule infringement ('deviance') brings with it the threat of formal sanction. While laws are applicable across the whole of a society (including organisations), organisational rules only apply when an individual plays a particular role within a group.

? Identify two formal rules that operate within schools.

Informal social control

Informal controls similarly exist to reward acceptable behaviour or punish unacceptable behaviour. They cover a vast array of possible sanctions that may differ from individual to individual, group to group and society to society. Such controls relate to informal norms and may involve the use of ridicule, sarcasm, disapproving looks, personal violence and so forth.

Informal controls operate between people in everyday, informal settings (such as the family) and don't normally involve written rules and procedures. These controls work through **informal enforcement mechanisms**, their object being the type of informal normative behaviour we find between family members, friends or indeed strangers (for example when buying something from a shop).

Generally, informal social controls apply to the regulation of primary relationships and groups, although there are many exceptions to this rule (because primary relationships can occur in secondary groups). To take an exceptional example: calling your partner 'Honeybuns' may be perfectly acceptable in private; but if your partner also happens to be your employer, calling them 'Honeybuns' in front of work colleagues may not be considered acceptable.

Generally, informal social controls relate to 'unofficial rules' — the behavioural rules we create in informal groups. Although every social group is governed by norms, these can vary from group to group; while some might be generally applicable (punching people in the face is probably universally unacceptable — unless you're in a boxing ring, when such behaviour is encouraged), the majority are specific to particular groups. Swearing when with friends, for example, will probably not invite sanction; swearing at your mother or father might, however, invite negative sanction.

A further general aspect of social control is **self-control**. We don't need to be constantly told where behavioural boundaries lie because we learn the norms that apply in certain situations and what will happen if we deviate from them. If you continually

skip your sociology class you may be asked to leave the course and, since you don't want this to happen, you (indirectly) control your behaviour to obey the norm.

? Identify and explain two informal rules that operate within the family or the school.

Agencies of socialisation

In this section we will take a more detailed look at the organisation of cultural behaviour through a variety of **primary** and **secondary agencies of socialisation**.

Primary agencies

The family is one of the most influential socialising agencies in any society and the main agents are parents (although immediate relatives such as brothers and sisters and less immediate relatives such as grandparents may also be involved). We can consider the family in terms of roles, values, norms and sanctions.

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A family — one of the most important socialising agencies

Roles: The relatively limited range of roles within the family (both for adults and children) hides a complexity of **role development** (how roles change depending on the way a group develops — something that may involve **resocialisation processes**). Adults, for example, may learn roles ranging from husband or wife to parent or step-parent while children have to come to terms with being a baby, infant, child, teenager and, eventually perhaps, an adult with children of their own.

Values: Parents represent what Mead (1934) calls **significant others** — people whose opinions we respect and value deeply — and they are influential in shaping both our basic values (such as manners) and moral values (such as the difference between right and wrong).

Norms: Although these differ between families, basic norms normally taught within the family include, for example, how to address family members (Mum, Dad); when, where and how to eat and sleep; and definitions of 'good' and 'bad' behaviour.

Sanctions: These are, as we've seen, mainly informal. **Positive** sanctions range from facial expressions (smiling) through verbal approval or reinforcement ('You are a good boy/girl') to physical rewards (such as gifts). **Negative** sanctions are similarly wide-ranging — from showing disapproval through language (shouting at someone) to physical punishment.

To some extent children are socialised by copying behaviour. For example, Hartley (1959) argues that **imitation** of adult family behaviours (e.g. girls 'helping mum' with domestic chores) is a significant part of a child's socialisation. However, while we often see primary socialisation as a one-way process (from parents to children), socialisation is generally more complicated than simply teaching behaviour that is then adopted without question. Children are also actively involved in negotiating, to some extent, their socialisation: for example, they don't always obey their parents. They may also receive **contradictory socialisation** messages from differing agents — another relative may reward behaviour a parent would punish.

? Suggest two values people are taught within the family group.

Secondary agencies

Secondary socialising agencies include schools, religious organisations and the media; agents include teachers, priests, television personalities and pop stars. In some cases, such as in school, we are in daily, face-to-face contact with the people socialising us, without ever developing a primary attachment to them. In others, such as admiring a particular actor or musician, we may never meet them yet are influenced by their appearance or what they say and do.

Below we will look at secondary agencies of socialisation within education, the media, religion, peer groups and the workplace.

Education

School is one of the first times children in our society are separated from their parent(s) for any length of time and it provides both opportunities (to demonstrate your talents to a wider, non-family audience) and traumas — in learning how to deal with people who are 'not family' or **authority figures** such as teachers.

Behaviour: One function of education is to teach things required for adult life. These include:

- knowledge, for example of history (giving us a sense of our society's past) and geography (which confers a knowledge of both our own and other societies)
- skills, such as learning to read and write or solve mathematical problems

In addition to the **formal curriculum** (the subjects we go to school to learn) children are also exposed to a **hidden curriculum** — what Jackson (1968) called the things we learn from the experience of attending school (such as how to deal with strangers and deference to adult authority).

Roles: A number of roles are played within the school (such as teacher and pupil) and these, as we've seen, fit into a range of further roles that are part of a teacher's or student's **role-set**.

Values: Schools project a range of values, from the idea that pupils should work hard to achieve qualifications to a range of ideas about:

- individual competition for academic rewards, versus teamwork (especially in sports)
- conformity to authority (not questioning what is being learnt and why it is necessary to learn it)
- achievement on the basis of merit ('you get what you deserve')

Norms: Bowles and Gintis (2002) argue for a correspondence between school norms and workplace norms: 'Schools prepare people for adult work rules by socialising people to function well, and without complaint, in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation.' This **correspondence theory** is evidenced through school norms like the daily need to attend and register, and the right of those in authority to give orders they expect will be obeyed.

Sanctions: Positive sanctions include the gaining of grades, qualifications and prizes, as well as more personal things like praise and encouragement. On the negative side, teachers use sanctions like detentions, suspensions and exclusions; failure to achieve qualifications or gaining a reputation for 'stupidity' also function as negative sanctions (at least from the viewpoint of teachers, if not always from that of the pupil).

? Briefly explain the difference between the formal school curriculum and the hidden one.

The media

This is a slightly unusual secondary agency because our relationship with it is impersonal; we may never actually meet those doing the socialising.

Behaviour: There's very little hard evidence that the media have a direct long-term effect on behaviour, although there may be short-term effects — advertising, for example, aims to make short-term changes in our behaviour by encouraging us to try different consumer products. Potter (2003) suggests **short-term effects** include:

- **learning**, when we are introduced to novel ideas and places
- **imitation**, such as copying behaviour seen on television
- **desensitisation**, whereby our emotional reaction to something (such as violence or poverty) is lowered through constant and repeated exposure

There is stronger evidence for ***indirect*** long-term effects. Chandler (1995) argues that 'Television has long-term effects, which are small, gradual, indirect but cumulative and significant.' **Long-term effects**, according to Potter (2003), include the following:

- **Consumerism**: Repeated exposure to affluent lifestyles and desirable consumer goods suggests 'happiness' is something that can bought.
- **Fear**: 'Heavy exposure to negative and violent' media leads some people to overestimate things like the extent of crime and their likelihood of being a victim.
- **Agenda-setting**: Philo et al. (1982) argue that the media determines how something will be debated (for example, immigration is currently framed and discussed in

terms of numbers of immigrants, and Islam is frequently discussed in the context of terrorism).

Values: The extent to which the media can *impose* its values on our behaviour is uncertain, but it does represent a potentially powerful force in terms of supporting or marginalising certain values. For example, the media has a (loud) voice in debates over nationality (what it means to be 'British'), and many English newspapers take an anti-European Union stance. Potter (2003) suggests this involves a process of **habituation** — the more we are exposed to certain images and ideas, the greater the likelihood we will incorporate them into our personal value systems.

Norms: The media has what Durkheim called a **boundary marking** function; it publicises acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour to reinforce perceptions of expected behaviours. This idea does, of course, work both ways — it can try to preserve particular ways of behaving (through anti-paedophile campaigns, for example, that highlight 'abnormal sexuality' and, by so doing, underline 'normal sexualities') or promote changes in behaviour (e.g. through campaigns against racism).

Sanctions: Positive sanctions involve the use of praise, flattering pictures and uncritical treatment, whereas negative sanctions may involve the use of unflattering pictures, criticism or public ridicule.

Religion

Whether or not we see ourselves as 'religious', religious institutions have played — and continue to play — a significant role in the general socialisation process in our society.

Behaviour: Religions play an important indirect socialising role in terms of both influencing general social values ('Thou shalt not kill') and performing certain ceremonial functions (such as marriages, christenings and funerals).

Values: Many of our most important **moral values** have been influenced by religious values; many of the Ten Commandments of Christianity, for example, are reflected in our legal system. In terms of moral beliefs, few people would argue you should be allowed to kill people or that theft is desirable.

Sanctions: In some respects the power of religions to apply positive and negative sanctions probably turns on the extent to which you are a believer in the god — or gods — being promoted. Hinduism, for example, involves a belief in reincarnation (once you die you are reborn into a new life) based on how well you observed religious laws in your previous life; the reward for good behaviour in one lifetime is being reborn into a higher social position. Similarly, Christian notions of sin can be significant in religious control.

Peer groups

'Peer group' typically refers to a group of people of a similar age (although friends can usually be included among our peers). Peer groups can exert considerable socialising influence.

Behaviour: Peers are influential on both a *primary* level (close friends, for example, who influence what we wear or how we behave) and a *secondary* level (as a **reference group** — what Hughes et al. (2002) call 'the models we use for appraising and shaping our attitudes, feelings and actions'). In both cases, peer groups provide 'both normative and comparative functions' — the former in terms of direct influences on our behaviour and the latter in terms of how we compare ourselves with others (such as friends or people we see on television). This illustrates **peer pressure** as a form of social control.

Roles: We play a range of peer-related roles, depending on our age group and situation. 'Friend', for example, expresses very personal role play, whereas at school or work we may have a variety of 'acquaintances'. In the workplace we are also likely to play the role of 'colleague' with at least some of our peers.

Values: The values we're taught within a friendship or peer group vary with age and circumstances. However, something like the value of friendship will probably be carried with us throughout our life.

Norms: Peer group norms involve issues such as age-appropriate behaviour. Young children, for instance, are not allowed to smoke or buy alcohol. Conversely, it's generally not considered age-appropriate for the elderly to take part in extreme sports or wear clothes considered more appropriate to younger age groups.

Sanctions: These are informal and the norms of different peer groups can vary considerably. The same behaviour in different situations may also produce different responses. Swearing at your grandmother, for example, will probably be met with disapproval, whereas swearing in the company of friends may actually be a norm. Approving gestures and language, laughing at someone's jokes and seeking out their company may represent positive sanctions; refusing to speak to someone, rejecting their friendship and physical violence are negative sanctions.

? Suggest two ways people's behaviour is shaped by their peers.

The workplace

Although the workplace has primary socialising elements (such as the relationship between close colleagues), it also has important secondary characteristics.

Roles: The two main workplace roles of **employer** and **employee** hide a range of differences in terms of how such roles are performed; an employee may be a professional worker (such as a lawyer) with an associated high status or they may perform a low-skill, poorly paid role with few, if any, prospects. A professional employee may also occupy a position of trust and responsibility that involves controlling the behaviour of other employees, whereas a casual manual labourer or shop assistant may experience high levels of boredom, frustration and control by others.

Values: One clear work-related value concerns **payment** — we should get money in exchange for our labours. Less obvious values include competition and the belief that

hard work and competence should be rewarded by promotion, increased responsibility, control over the working environment and so forth.

Norms: We expect to be paid for work (although some types of work, like housework and voluntary work, don't involve money). Similar norms to those in the education system apply here — attendance, punctuality, obedience and the like.

Sanctions: Employers have a range of positive sanctions at their disposal — pay increases, more responsibility, freedom (to work from home or at your own pace, for example) and control over both your working day and the work of others. On the other hand, disciplining, demoting or sacking someone constitutes the main negative sanctions available.

? Suggest one value we learn in the workplace and one norm associated with that value.

Sociological perspectives

In the 'nature–nurture' debate sociologists come down squarely in favour of the latter; human behaviour is built around a combination of **structures** (such as families and education systems) and **choices** (whether to have children, how to raise them and so forth). On the one hand social structures clearly place limits and restraints on our individual behaviours (we all, for example, have to attend school between the ages of 15 and 16), while on the other hand the choices we make (such as bunking off school) are also a significant part of 'being human'.

These two behavioural dimensions are also important within sociology itself, with some sociologists arguing **social structures** are the most important influence on our behaviour and others arguing **social actions** (how and why we express individual choices) are more significant. It would, therefore, be useful to outline these two general positions.

Social structure

It sometimes helps to visualise social structures as a '**framework of rules**' — a rule being something you're supposed to obey and a framework being the way such rules are created, maintained and policed. We can illustrate this general principle by thinking about how everyday behaviour is governed by laws — we can talk about a *legal framework* (or structure) involving:

- politicians making laws (formal, legal rules)
- police enforcing these rules
- judges deciding whether you've broken the law
- prisons in which to lock up the guilty

This is a useful way of visualising the concept of a social structure, for a couple of reasons:

- Even though we may never 'break the law', this doesn't mean our behaviour isn't influenced by legal rules; we may *choose* not to break the law precisely because we understand the possible consequences.
- Although 'legal rules' have no physical existence (we can't see, smell or touch them), we know they exist because we experience their *effect* if we're caught breaking the law.

If you think about the different ways behaviour is governed by norms, the idea of a social structure should become a little clearer. As we've seen, every relationship involves:

- role play
- values relating to the role
- norms expressing a value

Every time we play a role, therefore, we experience (however unwittingly) the effect of social structures — rules that shape our behavioural choices.

Social action

The social action perspective focuses on our ability to make behavioural **choices**. Just as we make choices about our friends, so too, ultimately, we make choices about the rules we obey or disobey — although, because social structures exist, there will be punishments (negative social sanctions) for choosing to disobey. Regardless of how social structures try to influence our behaviour, we always have a *choice*. To put this another way, our behavioural choices are potentially unlimited — we can act in whatever way we choose.

However, by and large, we don't. Most of us follow 'the rules' most of the time and this is because our *actual* behavioural choices are limited by the effects of social structures — by the framework of cultural rules that make group behaviour possible.

We can understand these ideas a little more clearly by thinking about society as a game, such as chess:

- **Structure**: Chess, like a society, has certain *physical boundaries* (the playing area). It also has *rules* governing how it's played: these are both *technical* (relating to the basic mechanics of the game: the starting position of each piece, how different pieces are allowed to move, taking it in turn to move) and *cultural* (it's a competitive situation, the objective being to beat your opponent). This is the basic *framework of rules* (social structure) within which the game is played.

Fotolia

Society is like the game of chess

- **Action**: Each player is free to choose their particular *strategies* and *moves*, based on an assessment of how to successfully play to win.

In chess, therefore, structure and action combine in the sense that each player's behaviour (action) is limited, in some ways by rules and conditions:

- **Rules**: If one player decides to break the rules, their opponent will react to this deviant act (by protesting or refusing to continue playing).
- **Conditions**: Each player must, in this competitive environment, take note of how their opponent is playing — by responding to certain moves or moving in ways that produce particular responses from their opponent.

Structure and action are both important, in terms of understanding the relationship between society and the individual, and complementary. Just as we can't imagine society without individuals, we can't think about people without society. Ideas about structure and action are, therefore, fundamental to sociologists — but the question is, which is more important: the structures that influence actions, or the actions that create structures?

? Suggest two differences between social structural and social action approaches in sociology.

Structure perspectives

For sociologists who take a structure perspective, society is, as Jones (1985) argues, 'a structure of (cultural) rules', telling us how to behave appropriately in any given situation, and what to expect in terms of others' behaviour. Individual behaviour is considered relatively unimportant — structuralists are not really concerned about why some individuals don't like going to school; all that really matters is that enough people do go to school. This perspective (or way of seeing the social world) takes two different forms: consensus and conflict perspectives.

Consensus perspectives

The focus here is on how social order is created and maintained through agreement (by developing shared norms and values). One of the main consensus perspectives is **functionalism**. Functionalists explain how **social order** and **stability** are created and maintained by looking at how societies are organised at the level of the **social system** (sometimes called the 'systemic level of analysis').

This involves the idea that the various parts of a society (family, education, work and so forth) work in harmony, such that each part is dependent on other parts of the system. This idea is expressed using an **organismic analogy** (society is like a human body). The different parts of the human body are interconnected — the heart, lungs, brain and so forth work together to form something greater than the sum of their individual parts (a living body). In a similar way, the interconnected parts of a society

work together to form a social system. Just as a human body has vital organs that, if damaged, can lead to death, so according to Parsons (1937), does society.

Just as the human body requires the various organs of the body to be connected and working together (the heart pumps blood containing oxygen to the brain and so forth), a functioning social system requires connections between its various 'parts', such as the family, school, work and government, on the basis of **purpose and need**. Social systems fit together on the basis of *institutional* purposes and needs.

For example, for a *family institution* to exist (and perform its *functions*) its members *need* to survive. The *work institution* performs this function by allowing family members to earn the money they need to buy the food (among other things) they consume; conversely, to fulfil this *purpose*, work *needs* families to produce human beings who understand cultural rules; in more complex societies, such as contemporary Britain, an *education system* is also needed to provide the skills (such as literacy and numeracy) required by more advanced work processes.

For these reasons, functionalism focuses on **consensus**; each part of society must work in cooperation with other parts. Everything that exists, therefore, has both *purpose* (what it exists to do) and *needs* (things it requires from other parts of the system to fulfil its purpose or functions).

Functionalists like Parsons (1937) explain how individuals fit into the overall structure of society on the basis of **functional prerequisites** — the things that *must* happen if society is to function properly. For individuals to survive and prosper they need to be part of larger cooperative groups — they must *combine* to solve a number of fundamental problems. Every social institution (such as an education system), therefore, must develop ways (through roles, values, norms and rules) of ensuring that individuals conform to the needs of both institutions and society as a whole.

Social institutions, therefore, can only function if people do not simply pursue their own individual self-interests; if millions of individual human beings did that, things would fall quickly apart. We must, therefore, be compelled to behave in ways that are reasonable, consistent and broadly predictable if societies are to function for the overall benefit of everyone.

? Identify and explain two ways society is like a living organism.

Criticisms

- **Social change**: It's difficult to explain why anything in a society should change if it already performs an essential function. In this respect, functionalism is often seen as a politically conservative perspective that lends its support to the status quo (the desire to 'keep things as they are').
- **Dysfunction**: Functionalists place too much emphasis on the beneficial aspects of social institutions and downplay dysfunctional tendencies (things that can be

damaging to the individual or society). Schools, for example, may be places where children learn many useful things — but they're also places where bullying, sexism and racism can exist.

- **Tautology**: This a statement that contains its own proof and functionalists are sometimes accused of producing such arguments to justify their ideas. For example, the claim that 'If something exists in society, it has a function' is supported by the argument that 'It has a function because it exists'. A tautological statement, in other words, cannot be disproved.

Conflict perspectives

For the conflict perspective, societies are generally stable and orderly because powerful groups impose their ideas on other groups (the powerless). Therefore, conflict theorists argue, some groups benefit from the maintenance of the status quo far more than others. Below we discuss two types of conflict perspective: Marxism and feminism.

Marxism

The fundamental conflict from this perspective is different economic groups (**social classes**) constantly battling against each other. For Marxists work is the most important form of activity in any society because other social activities (politics, family, culture and the like) can only exist if people have first secured the means for survival (if you don't have enough to eat or a roof over your head, then the lack of interesting television programmes is not going to be your most pressing concern). Thus, how work is socially organised (who does it, what they do and who benefits from it) is the key to understanding how all other social relationships are organised.

Conflict

The workplace is a key area of conflict because of how it is organised. Marxists argue that, in our capitalist society, the '**means of economic production**' (things like factories, machinery and land) are owned by one **class** of people (the **bourgeoisie** or ruling class). The vast majority of people own little or nothing, and so are forced to sell the one thing they do have — their ability to work (their '**labour power**'). This creates a situation where:

- A small number of people own the means of production — in capitalist societies they become very rich because they keep **profits** made from producing goods and services.
- A large number of people own nothing but their ability to work for wages — these people (the working class or **proletariat**) are relatively poor (when compared to their bourgeois employers).

Conflict occurs in this type of society because:

- Owners want to keep as much of their profit as possible (the less you pay in wages, the more you have to buy desirable things).

- Non-owners want a larger slice of the economic pie. The working class also want the desirable things society has to offer — it's in their interests, therefore, to demand more from employers.

James Boardman/Alamy

Postal workers on strike in London

Competition

Competition is not merely encouraged in capitalist societies; it is also considered desirable since it's through competition, capitalists argue, that wealth is created and progress made (through the constant invention of new ways of doing things, for example). Competition — between businesses for customers or workers for jobs — also inevitably leads to conflict. With competition there will always be winners and losers. Although, for Marxists, economic competition and conflict are most significant, competition occurs throughout society — between businesses, different groups of workers, men and women, and so on.

Social class

Social class involves grouping people according to their 'relationship to the means of production'. As we've seen, two basic classes exist in any capitalist society:

- the **bourgeoisie** (the ruling or upper class) — those who own the means of production
- the **proletariat** (the lower or working class) — people who own nothing but their ability to work

The picture is not as simple as this, of course; there can be many different relationships to the means of production — managers (sometimes called the middle class or petit bourgeoisie) may not own a business but they belong to a different social class from non-managers.

Power

Given the emphasis on conflict, you could be forgiven for thinking our society is engaged in a war of all-against-all; this, however, is clearly not the case. Marxists explain this by suggesting that those at the 'top' of society (the ruling class) are not only **economically powerful**, but also **politically powerful**: they control how laws are made (through politicians identifying with the interests of a ruling class) and they can use force (the police and the army, for example) to minimise conflict. Althusser (1968) characterises these methods of social control as '**Repressive State Apparatuses**' because they are a way of compelling people to conform.

A ruling class is also able to influence how people generally *think* about the social world through their control of **ideological institutions** (such as the media and the education system) that deal in ideas (what Althusser calls '**Ideological State Apparatuses**').

? Suggest one difference between those who 'own the means of production' and those who do not.

Criticisms

- **Conflict**: Marxism overstates the level of conflict in society and underplays the significance of non-economic types of conflict (gender or ethnic conflict, for example). Some feminists (see below) are especially critical of the emphasis on work-based conflicts.
- **Communism**: Class conflict can only end once capitalism is replaced by communism — a type of society where work is not organised around private profit. Whatever the shortcomings of capitalist societies, communism does not appear imminent.
- **Economic determinism**: Marxism assumes work is the most important institution in any society. While this may (arguably) have been true in Britain in the past, some writers (especially postmodernists — see below) argue this is no longer the case. They question both the significance of social class as a source of people's identity and, consequently, the view that class conflict is the key area of conflict in any society.

Feminism

This conflict perspective has a number of varieties: we'll look at liberal, Marxist and radical feminism, and at post-feminism. One theme common to most varieties is the belief that society is **male-dominated** — that the interests of men have always been considered more important than the interests of women.

Liberal feminism

The key ideas of liberal feminism are as follows:

- **Equality of opportunity**: Liberal feminists are mainly concerned with equal opportunities for men and women (not 'equality', as such, but the chance to compete equally with men); in broad terms, they want an end to **sexual discrimination**.
- **Legal reform**: Liberal feminists have been active, in Britain and America for example, in promoting a range of **anti-discriminatory laws** which, they argue, are needed to redress the historical gender imbalance. UK examples include the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975; updated in 2003), which made discrimination in the workplace illegal.
- **Dual role**: The situation where women increasingly play a dual role (as both carers within the family and paid employees) is seen a major area of inequality that needs to be addressed, by changing male attitudes to family life and through the continued development of anti-discriminatory laws and practices (such as the introduction of child-care facilities for working women, maternity and paternity leave, and so forth).

O pportunity
L egal
D ual role

Criticisms

- **Status inequality**: Legal equality is not the same as status equality (women having equal status to men). Women are still treated in ways that assume they are inferior to men; in Britain, for example, women can expect to earn, on average during their working lifetime, 70–80% of male income — even when they do comparable work.
- **Class differences**: By lumping all women together as a 'class', liberal feminism ignores differences in life experiences. Working-class women don't have the same advantages as upper-class women — they face far greater difficulties in securing equal opportunities. In addition, black women, in general, have different life experiences and chances from white women.

? Do you think men and women have equality of opportunity in our society? Give two reasons to support your argument.

Marxist feminism

This applies Marxist ideas to gender relationships and involves the following key ideas:

- **Class inequality**: Marxist feminists see class inequality as the main cause of female oppression, exploitation and discrimination. In a competitive, capitalist society men are encouraged to exploit any 'weaknesses' in women's market position (the fact that women may be out of the workforce during and after pregnancy, for example) to their own advantage.
- **Patriarchal ideology** (ideas that support male domination of women): Although patriarchy is an important concept, Marxist feminists use it to show how the social and economic exploitation of women is justified (by both men and women) through powerful ideas about masculinity and femininity. Ideas of men as 'natural breadwinners' and women as 'natural homemakers' can be strong influences on people's behaviour.
- **Social class**: Men and women are not separate (sex-based) classes; upper-class women, for example, have very little in common with working-class women apart from being biologically female. Men and women have a common interest in creating a form of society (communism) in which all are treated equally.
- **Gender socialisation**: Patriarchal ideas, attitudes and practices (such as sexual discrimination) are the product of cultural differences in the way males and females are raised. Men are not naturally exploitative of women; rather, it is the economic system (capitalism) that encourages and rewards sexist attitudes and behaviour.

Criticisms

- **Patriarchy**: Radical feminists argue patriarchy is a feature of all known human societies, not just class-based (capitalist) societies. Patriarchal relationships, therefore, should be given more emphasis than economic (class) relationships.
- **Patriarchal exploitation**: Marxist feminism assumes (rightly or wrongly) that

men and women have similar 'long-term' interests: the replacement of an unequal, patriarchal, capitalist society with an equal, non-patriarchal, communist society. Such a development doesn't, however, look a very likely prospect in our society for the foreseeable future.

- **Social change**: Marxist feminism ignores the extent to which society, and the respective positions of men and women, have changed and continue to change. Female lives, for example, have altered quite dramatically over the past 30 years, considered in terms of family responsibilities, educational achievements (where women now out-perform men at just about every level) and work opportunities.

? Suggest two ways women are exploited by men in our society.

Radical feminism

Radical feminism has a number of key ideas:

- **Patriarchy**: The source of female oppression, for radical feminists, is that all known societies have been male-dominated — and improvements in female lives can only come about through the overthrow of the patriarchal ideas and practices on which such domination is based.
- **Sex class**: Males and females are viewed as sex classes, with fundamental psychological differences; in crude terms, men are naturally aggressive and confrontational whereas women have qualities of cooperation, caring (nurturing) and so forth. Women form a class (based on both a common biology and gender) whose experiences and interests differ significantly from those of men. Just as Marxist perspectives see the overthrow of the ruling (economic) class as the way to achieve human liberation, radical feminists argue female liberation involves overthrowing the ruling sex class (men).
- **Matriarchy** (female domination of men): Men are the enemy of women because they have always exploited women. For this situation to end women must establish a matriarchal society in which the current (patriarchal) roles are reversed; instead of men dominating and exploiting women, women are to dominate men.
- **Sexuality**: Rich (1980) developed the term 'compulsory heterosexuality' to express the idea that male–female relationships are the basis of patriarchy (and therefore the source of male domination), and radical feminists often advocate lesbian relationships and women-only support groups as a way of both developing matriarchal ideas and practices and rejecting their patriarchal counterparts.
- **Public and private spheres**: Discrimination against women takes place in two main areas: the Public (the workplace, for example, where women are paid less and have lower status) and the Private (the home, where women carry out the majority of unpaid domestic work). This is a dual form of female exploitation not experienced by men.

Criticisms

- **Sex class**: As we've noted, female life chances, considered across categories like class, age and ethnicity, are not necessarily very similar. ('Life chances' refers to our ability to get the desirable things in life, such as money, health and happiness, while avoiding the undesirable, such as ill health or going to prison.)
- **Psychologies**: Differences in male and female psychologies — if they actually exist — can be the product of gender socialisation rather than innate (fixed and unchanging) differences. Given the right conditions, women appear as capable as men of aggressive behaviour, for example.
- **Relationships**: Not all gender relationships are characterised by oppression and exploitation, and the relative position of women in our society has improved over the past 30 years.

? Briefly explain two ways the life chances of a young, black, working-class woman are likely to be different from those of an elderly, white, upper-class woman.

Post-feminism

The newest form of feminism is based on the idea that the 'battle for sexual equality' has been fought and largely won; feminists should, therefore, focus on understanding (and to some extent celebrating) the diversity of female identities: how they are constructed and how they impact on female lives. The key ideas of this general position include the following:

- **Anti-essentialism**: The concept of essentialism involves the idea of fundamental ('essential') differences between males and females. These relate not simply to biology but, most importantly, to psychological differences in the way men and women think, act and feel. Butler (1990) argues this essentialism is mistaken for the following reasons:
  - Women are not a sex class — they are too diverse a group for this.
  - Categories such as 'male' and 'female' now involve more differences than similarities. Gay and lesbian identities, for example, have little in common with their heterosexual counterparts.
- **Gender is not biology**: Butler (1990) sees 'gender' in terms of how it's performed: that is, things we do at different times rather than something we 'always are'. Her solution to gender essentialism is the subversion of separate 'male' and 'female' identities. She argues we should no longer see men and women as distinctive sexes; rather, we should see gender as a range of social processes, some of which are similar (such as some gay men who display traditional female traits and women who display traditional masculine traits) and some of which are different.
- **Choice**: This idea, central to **postmodern perspectives**, reflects the fact that men and women have a range of choices open to them in contemporary societies that were denied to all but the (rich) few in the past. One choice is expressed in terms

of how we define ourselves (our personal identity) — people have greater freedom to construct gender identities in almost any way they choose. For post-feminists, this 'personal construction' often involves 'reclaiming femininity' in the sense that women can be both 'feminine' (whatever that means in practice) and able to pursue what in the past were almost exclusively masculine roles —a full-time education, a career and so forth.

- **Interchange**: Choice leads to an interchangeability of gender roles and relationships; behaviours once considered masculine may now be incorporated into female identities (and vice versa). Traditional ideas about masculinity and femininity are, therefore, no longer valid. Post-feminism argues **identity transgression** occurs when, for example, women choose to adopt ways of thinking and behaving which have traditionally been seen as 'masculine'. Examples here range from 'ladettes' (young women who mirror the outrageous behaviour of young males — 'booze, bonking and the beautiful game') to transgendered individuals who define themselves as 'neither male nor female'.

Criticisms

- **Choice**: The idea of all women being able to exercise choice in their lives is questionable. For the rich (whether male or female) a massive range of behavioural choices exist. For the poor, behavioural choices are far more restricted (not least by patriarchal ideologies).
- **Class**: Concepts such as social class, age and ethnicity have a serious impact on the range of choices open to both men and women. Post-feminists are accused of assuming that the freedoms and behaviours enjoyed by a very select (and usually very rich) group of women are available to all women.
- **Individualism**: Post-feminism has been accused of downplaying the problems faced by the majority of women because most women's lives are not characterised by unlimited choice, freedom and individual self-expression (just as the same is probably true for most male lives).

LEDPIX/Alamy

'Ladettes' at a club

Action perspectives

Although there are a number of social action perspectives, for our current purpose we can use the catch-all category of **interactionism**, where the emphasis is on how we construct the social world through our everyday relationships. Unlike structuralists who focus on the way society pushes and pulls the individual in various directions,

'making' us form family groups or develop educational systems, interactionists reverse this picture; society, in this view, is created and recreated on a daily basis by people going about their lives. The objective is to understand how people constantly, if not always consciously, produce and reproduce the social world through their individual and collective behaviour.

From this perspective society is an 'elaborate fiction' people create to explain the limits they place on their behaviour — it doesn't actually (or *physically*) exist anywhere; it does, however, 'exist' *mentally* (inside our heads). We act *as if* society exists. For this reason, interactionists question the idea — fundamental to consensus and conflict structuralism — of society as a vast, invisible, all-pervading force acting on people in ways that propel them into particular forms of behaviour.

Interactionists changed the sociological focus — from social structures to social actions — by examining the **socio-psychological processes** through which people constructed both social groups and, by extension, a sense of society. Writers such as Garfinkel (1967) have demonstrated just how precarious our 'taken-for-granted' beliefs about the social world actually are by disrupting social norms and observing how agitated, confused and angry people become when this happens.

For interactionism, therefore, social life is a series of **encounters** — separate, but linked, episodes that give the appearance of order and stability, not something imposed on us ('from above', by society). Order and predictability exist for as long as we *act* in ways that maintain them.

Social interaction is a key idea for this perspective: the social world is created by interactions between people, a process that involves **meanings**. Interactionism stresses the importance of meaning (what we each understand by something) on two levels:

- **Definitions**: First, to interact socially we must develop shared 'definitions' of a situation. For example, if a teacher defines a situation as 'education' and her student defines it as a skateboard park, this is probably a recipe for confusion (unless and until the teacher simply *imposes* her definition of the situation by excluding the skater dude from her class).
- **Negotiations**: Meanings can easily change; the meaning of 'gay', for example, has changed dramatically over the past 50 years (once it meant 'carefree', now it means homosexual). In terms of gender, the meanings of 'masculine' and 'feminine' have also changed over the past few years.

Society and culture are not 'things', fixed or slow to change. On the contrary, because meanings are argued over (**negotiated**) the social world is a fluid and flexible space that can rapidly change. If society is not a 'thing' acting on our behaviour (since it has no objective reality outside of social interaction) it becomes a convenient label we give to the pressures, rules and responsibilities that arise from our relationships. The idea of labelling (or naming) is important because it suggests how interactionists view social structures as forms of social interaction.

Labelling theory, for example, argues that when we name something (e.g. categorising people as 'young' or 'old') we associate the name with a set of characteristics, our knowledge of which is used to guide our behaviour. For example, the characteristics we assign to the label 'student' lead us to expect certain things from a person so labelled, in the same way we would expect something quite different if they were labelled as a 'criminal'.

Criticisms

- **Overemphasis** on individual meanings and interactions ignores the impact of social structures on our lives. Meighan (1981), for example, uses the concept of **haunting** to show how social actions are always surrounded by the **ghosts of social structures**. We are all haunted by things we cannot see but which nevertheless affect our behaviour; when teachers and students enter a classroom the interaction between them is haunted by things like the knowledge that can be taught (because it reflects what our culture values).
- **Patterned behaviour**: By focusing on the **social-psychological** aspects of social life, interactionist sociology fails to explain why people seem to behave in broadly similar ways (such as living in families, obeying the law, going to school or work and so forth).
- **Social structures**: Interactionism doesn't explain how individual meanings, definitions and interpretations are affected by social structures. For example, if I define a situation as one thing (a fancy-dress party, for example) and others define it as something else (a game of cricket), this will have serious consequences (and not just in terms of the fact that I can't bowl properly in my chicken outfit) — which introduces the idea of power as an important concept. We are not equal in our ability to define situations — some groups (or classes) have greater power than others when it comes to defining a situation as 'real'.

? Identify and explain any two labels you have been given by your family, teachers or peers.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a relatively new sociological perspective, developed over the past thirty years or so. While it doesn't always fit neatly with action perspectives, it has more in common with these perspectives than their structural counterparts — hence its inclusion in this section. The key ideas of postmodernism concern narratives, metanarratives, globalisation, identity and uncertainty, discussed below.

Our lives are seen as a seamless web of interlocking **narratives** (stories) which we define and move between at will. For example, when I'm with my wife the narrative I construct is one of a loving, helpful, dutiful husband, alert to her every need, whim and desire. However, when I'm in the pub with my mates the narrative I construct is somewhat different. I have no problem moving between these narratives and I am

always the person I believe myself to be in each (which means I'm either a fantastic person or a very good liar).

Metanarratives are 'Big Stories' we construct either individually or, more usually, as a culture to explain something about the nature of the world. Examples include:

- religions (such as Christianity or Islam).
- political philosophies (such as socialism or conservativism)
- social sciences such as psychology or sociology (and, within sociology, perspectives like functionalism, Marxism and feminism)

For Lyotard postmodernism involves an 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. Big Stories about the world cannot be sustained anymore because their claims to explain 'everything about something' are increasingly challenged. Christianity and Islam can't both be 'right' since they explain the same thing (religion) in different ways, just as political philosophies like conservatism or socialism offer competing explanations and solutions for social problems. We are, according to the postmodern view, increasingly cynical and sceptical about the claims made by metanarratives.

Globalisation is another key idea of postmodernism. We live in a global society that transcends national boundaries; the way we think about and interact with people is changing rapidly. Email, social networks and internet phones all enable instant global communication that broadens our cultural horizons — and opens our eyes to new and different ways of doing things.

This has impacted on **identity**. In the past identities were more likely to be **centred**: clear, relatively fixed and certain. For example, people in our society once had a much clearer idea about what it meant to be 'a man' or 'a woman' because there were relatively limited ways to play these roles. The same is true for categories like age, class and ethnicity. In postmodern society, however, things have changed (perhaps) to such an extent that we now have a wide range of possible choices about identity (in terms of sexuality, for example, I can choose to be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, transsexual...).

This leads to **decentred identities**. As the range of possible meanings expands, people become less certain about how they are supposed to behave. Under the influence of globalisation, categories like class, gender, age and ethnicity are easily combined to create a new range of identities (such as some young British Asians defining themselves as Brasian — a mix of British and Asian cultures and identities).

Photo of young British Asians to illustrate the idea of 'mixed identities'

The downside to the wide range of choices from which we 'pick and mix' our identities is **uncertainty** and confusion about who we are and how we're supposed to behave. The old certainties of class, gender, age and ethnicity no longer have much currency in terms of telling us how to behave appropriately. While this is neither a good

nor a bad thing, it does cause us problems since we lack the reference points we once had that told us how to play roles successfully.

? Briefly explain the difference between a centred and decentred identity, using an example based on one of the following: age, gender, class or ethnicity.

Criticisms

- **Choice**: While choice is an important concept, postmodernism overestimates the levels of choice that can be and are exercised by the majority of people in contemporary societies. While a relatively small minority have the money, power and resources to exercise choice in meaningful ways, this has probably always been the case.
- **Identity**: Many people still define themselves (or are defined by others) in fairly traditional ways when it comes to categories such as class, gender, age and ethnicity. While these identities are now more fluid and changeable, the significance of these changes is not as great as postmodernists claim; inequalities based around class, age, gender and ethnicity are still important and impact directly on our sense and understanding of identity.
- **Metanarratives**: While postmodernism is right to point to widespread scepticism concerning Big Stories about the world, it can be argued that postmodernism itself is just one more metanarrative competing for our attention.

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

2 Outline and explain any two mechanisms of social control. (16 marks)