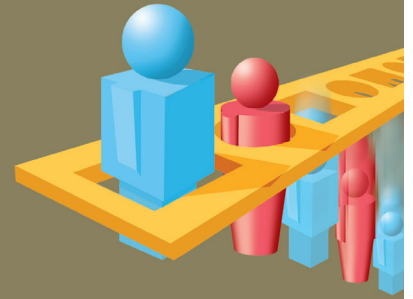# Chapter 3

The role of socialisation in the creation of identities

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

➤ explain the role of socialisation and culture in the creation of identities

➤ explain how gender, class, ethnic and age identities are created and reinforced by agencies of socialisation

'Identity' refers to how we define ourselves (how we answer the question 'Who am I?'). Any response to this question will probably include references to **social characteristics** like:

➤ **Family** (name and general background)

➤ **Age** (whether you are, for example, young or old)

➤ **Nationality** (such as English or Scottish)

➤ **Gender** (whether you are male or female)

➤ **Sexuality** (whether you are heterosexual or homosexual)

F amily
A ge
N ationality
G ender
S exuality

In other words, answers will typically be expressed in explicitly social terms. This illustrates two ideas:

1 To describe (or identify) ourselves we draw on a range of **sources of identity** (such as class, age, gender and ethnicity) — that is, a range of social characteristics we use to construct a sense of 'who we are'.

2 To define ourselves as *individuals* we draw on *cultural* ideas and beliefs — something that illustrates the central importance of both **culture** and, by extension, **socialisation** in the identity-creation process.

Identity in this respect involves understanding the things that are 'important to us' and, by extension, the culture into which we are born and socialised. This suggests that

our identity is at the very least shaped — and possibly determined — by culture *and* socialisation. The difference between them is as follows:

➢ When we consider **socialisation and identity** the focus is on how we're socialised into various identities (such as male or female).

➢ Considering **culture and identity**, on the other hand, involves looking at the various ways a particular culture defines identities, such as male or female.

> **?** Suggest three ways you would respond to the question 'Who are you?'

Before we examine these relationships in more detail, it will be helpful to identify two dimensions of identity: social and personal.

Social identities

Every culture classifies behaviour in some way; it groups similar types of behaviour under a particular name and, most importantly, assigns various meanings to that behaviour. Interactionist sociologists like Hayes (1997) call this a process of **labelling** and an example might be gender. Our culture generally recognises two biological sexes (male and female) and assigns to each a set of social characteristics; these, being cultural in origin, may change over time or differ from society to society. In this respect social identities relate to the attributes we are given when we play different roles (achieved or ascribed); men and women, for example, are expected to take and show, respectively, the masculine and feminine traits that our society associates with biological sex (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1   Gender stereotypes

Men are:	Women are:
Strong	Gentle
Brave	Timid
Rational	Emotional
Standoffish	Attached
Providers	Carers
Aggressive	Passive
Impulsive	Reflective
Dominant	Submissive
Independent	Dependent
Insensitive	Sensitive

As this list shows, the stereotypical social characteristics assigned to biological opposites tend to mirror each other — which tells us something about how our culture theorises gendered social identities.

Personal identities

Personal identities relate to what we each *believe* ourselves to be, considered in two ways. The first is how we *interpret* the particular role we're playing at any given time. 'Being male', for example, can mean something different (or personal) to me than to some other men, just as the concept of masculinity can have different interpretations

and meanings — for some men (and women) it involves traits of toughness, ruggedness, aggression and so forth, whereas for others it has a completely different meaning.

The second way involves what Marshall (2003) defines as 'a unique core or essence — the "real me" — which is coherent and remains more or less the same throughout life'. Personal identity can relate to deep beliefs about who we are when we strip away our social pretensions (the person we present to others, for example, when we're trying to impress or influence them).

Culture and identity

Concepts of culture and identity are linked because one presupposes the other. We can only have a 'sense of our self' through our ability to interact culturally with others. Culture and identity, therefore, presupposes what Smith (1996) terms **communities of identity** — the idea that *social identities* based around class, age, gender, ethnicity and the like represent sets of culturally developed ideas about how to 'behave appropriately' when we assume particular identities. *Personal identities*, on the other hand, can only develop in a cultural context as people 'express their individuality' by drawing upon a selection of identity sources which they then shape in particular ways.

Alcoff (2000) suggests 'Identity categories are cultural negotiations' in that what it means, for example, to be young or female differs both *historically* (in the same society over time) and *cross-culturally*, between different societies. Differences in the way societies interpret the meaning of 'being female', for example, suggest such meanings are neither inherent (we are not born knowing how to be or behave as 'a man or woman' — something that once again relates to *socialisation*) nor unchanging. The general idea that identity is 'culturally negotiated', however, hides a range of sociological arguments about the nature and purpose of identity we can explore in terms of two broad approaches we outlined in Chapter 2: those emphasising **social structures**, and those emphasising **social actions**.

Social structures

Although there are differences of interpretation between, for example, functionalists and Marxists, this general approach argues that **structural forces**, such as the socialisation process, shape identities in ways that push people into behaving in an orderly and broadly predictable fashion. Socialisation, therefore, is viewed as a powerful guiding force in terms of how people are made into self-aware beings and categorised into particular forms of cultural identity. As in Chapter 2, we can divide structure perspectives into two types: one stressing consensus structures and the other stressing conflict structures.

Consensus structures
Functionalism focuses on how people are socialised into the norms of pre-existing social identities because it is only by learning cultural rules that social interaction

becomes both possible and manageable. Social identities (such as class) structure people's behaviour, channelling it in some ways but not others, and the emphasis here is on the way individual identities and behaviours are *constrained* and *controlled* by the rules governing the performance of social identities. Identities, therefore, function at an **institutional level** of society and ultimately social identities such as age or gender develop as a means of:

➢ establishing a sense of **order** in an unpredictable (individualistic) world
➢ providing the means by which broadly **predictable** behaviour can take place (through role play and the adoption of particular identities), an example being the way **gendered social identities** are constructed to complement (or mirror) one another in our culture
➢ limiting conflict in our relationships by specifying clear behavioural boundaries

For Parsons (1951) the significance of social identities is that when people take on certain identities they necessarily **internalise** the basic 'rules of society' (behavioural norms are incorporated into our **personal value system**; we don't question them because they appear self-evident, natural and normal). Thus, once the label 'male' or 'female' is applied to a child they are subjected to a socialisation process that reflects how a culture interprets and applies the meaning of these categories. Individual identities, therefore, are shaped by socialisation and people are a product of their cultural upbringing.

Five functions of identity

We can contextualise these ideas by looking at a contemporary application of the way identity is functional for the individual and society. Adams and Marshall (1996) have suggested five functions of identity that focus on what identity *does* 'rather than how identity is constructed':

➢ **Structure**: Identities provide a 'framework of rules', used to guide behaviour when playing certain roles, that helps us understand our relationship to others.
➢ **Goals**: We develop a sense of purpose by setting goals for our behaviour. A 'student identity', for example, involves the desire to achieve goals like educational qualifications.
➢ **Personal control**: Identities provide a measure of 'active self-regulation' in terms of deciding what we want to achieve and how we plan to achieve it. An A-level student, for example, understands the need to take notes to help them remember the things they might be tested on in an exam.
➢ **Harmony**: When adopting a particular identity (such as that of a

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Students celebrating exam results

teacher or student) we have to ensure the commitments we make (the things others expect from us) are consistent with our personal values and beliefs. A teacher or student who sees education as a waste of time is unlikely to be able to successfully perform this particular role.

➤ **Future**: Identities allow us to 'see where we are going' in terms of likely or hoped-for outcomes (what we want to achieve). A student identity, for example, has a future orientation: the role may be performed to achieve the goal of going to university, which requires the passing of A-level exams.

> **?** Suggest one example for each of the 'five functions of identity'.

Conflict structures

Conflict approaches focus on the different ways identities are used for social action: they examine how *primary* forms of identity (such as **social class** in Marxist sociology and **gender** in feminist sociology) form the basis for both personal and social change. We will illustrate this by looking briefly at the implications of Marxist and gendered (feminist and masculinist) approaches.

Both approaches focus on particular forms of **conflict** as the basis for **primary identities** (sources of identity that are so powerful that all other forms of identity are *secondary* to, or dependent on them). Identities, in this view, are both formed and given meaning through relationships based around exploitation, domination and subordination.

Marxist approaches

Marxist approaches see identity formation in terms of the fundamental conflict between **social classes**, defined in *economic* terms. Economic production is organised so as to produce distinctive social classes (upper, middle and working classes), with attendant identities, based on their relationship to the **means of production**.

We can distinguish two ideas concerning class in this situation. The first is that of a **class-in-itself** — the idea of a distinctive class based on its relationship to the means of production. The second is that of a **class-for-itself** — the idea that the members of a particular social class may develop a sense of their common group identity and interests.

This approach to culture and social identity, therefore, argues that classes involve people who have:

➤ particular roles to play in the production of goods and services
➤ a particular relationship to other classes in society
➤ class interests they are organised to pursue

Wood (1995) argues that a sense of class identity (a belief that one belongs to a particular class group) is forged through different experiences of 'exploitation and domination'. Working-class identities are based around the experience of being exploited and

dominated in the workplace, while upper-class identities are forged through the experience of doing the exploiting and dominating. Primary identities develop from these two very different economic experiences, since they condition the way we see the world and our respective positions in that world.

Gendered approaches

Gendered approaches also see identities as being forged through conflict, although both **feminists** and **masculinists** (in their different ways) see **gender** as the key source of identity in contemporary societies.

Feminist approaches start from the assumption of female inequality as the fundamental form from which all other inequalities flow. In patriarchal societies, where women are considered inferior to men, this lowered relative status is translated into areas like *family life* (where women perform the majority of household tasks) and the *workplace* (where women, on average, earn less than men and the latter occupy many of the higher-status positions of power and influence). Different feminist approaches put forward slightly different explanations of how gender differences are exploited by men, as discussed below.

Liberal feminists

Liberal feminists see female inequality as enshrined in general day-to-day male behaviours and practices. Hammer (1997), for example, argues that 'gendered language… symbolically excludes women' from male-dominated spheres. The masculine pronoun 'he', for example, is often used in the media in reference to both men and women, and adult women are frequently referred to as 'girls' whereas adult males are rarely called 'boys' (outside of sporting events or the armed forces). Women also routinely suffer **sexual discrimination** in the family and the workplace.

For liberal feminists, however, biological differences do not automatically translate into gender differences — male domination and exploitation can be limited through the legal system and enlightened social policies (in the UK, for example, the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of sex).

Marxist feminists

Marxist feminists point to **class inequalities** as the main cause of female oppression, exploitation and discrimination. Traditional forms of male economic dominance (such as higher status and pay) exist, and women are encouraged to see their main identities as 'mothers and carers' within the home (making them economically dependent on men).

This male domination of women is supported by **patriarchal ideologies.** An example is the belief that 'a woman's place is in the home' — that men are 'natural breadwinners' and women 'natural carers'. The development of distinctive masculine and feminine identities is reinforced through primary and secondary socialisation processes that encourage men to exploit women in all areas of society.

Radical feminists

Radical feminists similarly view female identities in terms of patriarchal ideas and practices, but a major difference here is the emphasis placed on gender identities being based around fundamental *psychological* differences. Women are seen as having cooperative and caring qualities that set them apart from men as a **sex class**.

Female identity develops out of the experiences and interests women share (such as the experience of sexual discrimination) and is forged through the experience of patriarchal practices in both the *private sphere* of the home and the *public sphere* of the workplace — a dual form of exploitation not experienced by men.

Post-feminism

For post-feminists, the battle for gender equality in contemporary societies has, by and large, been fought and won. Unlike in the past, women have complete legal equality and are free to make the same choices as men — to work, develop a career, attend university, marry, start a family, remain childless, engage in heterosexual or homosexual relationships, and so on. There is no area of contemporary society closed to women simply on the basis of gender.

Post-feminists are highly critical of other feminist perspectives for misrepresenting women's achievements and for denying women **choice**. In their view, contemporary female identities are built around a wide range of choices opened up by global cultures and postmodern societies. Personal choices have been freed from the constraints of past (patriarchal) social identities. Postrel (2003), for example, argues that 'the idea that women must choose between intelligence and beauty, mind and body, substance and surface' reflects 'the stereotypes of an earlier era'.

Both sexes have a range of choices open to them in contemporary societies, one being how we define ourselves (our 'personal sense of social identity'): men and women have the freedom to construct gender identity in any way they choose. For post-feminists this 'personal construction of femininity' often involves 'reclaiming femininity' in the sense that women can be both 'feminine' (whatever that may mean) and able to pursue their education and career independently of men.

> **?** Suggest three differences between feminist approaches to understanding identity.

Masculinist approaches

Traditionally men have been able to draw on a wider range of social and personal identities than women for two main reasons:

➢ **Power**: Men have, to greater or lesser extents, occupied the most powerful positions in society (e.g. in the economic and political system, and in the traditional role of 'head of the household').

➢ **Spheres of influence**: Where, traditionally, female roles have centred on the private sphere of the family, men have had greater freedom in the public sphere and, consequently, have been better positioned to create a wider range of identities

because of their greater involvement with significant others outside the restrictions of home and family.

Male abilities to move easily *between* these spheres, coupled with higher levels of power *within* each sphere, have meant that men potentially have a wider range of economic, political and cultural sources of identity.

One (extreme) aspect of a masculinist perspective is the Men's Movement in America. Their argument is that rigid, fixed biological sex differences translate into cultural (gender) differences. Bly (1990), for example, has argued for a version of masculinity that, according to Wolf-Light (1994), is 'authoritarian and autocratic, impersonal, contemptuous and violent. In short, the very image of patriarchy.'

Social actions

Interactionist approaches focus on how people construct and make sense of the social world, where identities are used to establish a sense of order and predictability in potentially chaotic situations. Such identities develop for two main reasons:

➢ **Social**: A 'female identity', for example, keys into a general set of roles, values and norms that provide guidelines for behaviour. Interactionists, however, take this idea of 'structure' one step further by arguing that, first, social structures can't exist independently of the people who create them; a 'woman', for example, is not automatically a prisoner of what others associate with this identity. Second, therefore, social identities are spaces within which we have the scope to interpret and negotiate the actual personal meaning of any identity (someone can be 'a woman' in a wide variety of ways).

➢ **Personal**: Identity structures provide, in Goffman's (1959) terms, a means for the presentation and expression of 'Self'. This idea is based around a **dramaturgical model** of self and identity, where social life is a series of dramatic episodes and scenarios. We participate as actors: we write and speak lines (expressing our personal identity) or repeat lines written for us (under the influence of social identities that tell us how we should behave in particular situations and roles). As Barnhart (1994) puts it: 'Interaction is viewed as a performance, shaped by environment and audience, constructed to provide others with impressions' that match 'the desired goals of the actor'.

This involves us in **impression management**. When we adopt a particular identity we 'perform' in ways that tell others something about who we are. We try, in Goffman's words, to 'manage the impression others have of us'. Identity performance is directed at achieving desired ends (what we want from others); when you want to create a favourable impression on someone, for example, you 'act' in ways you believe they will like. Every social encounter, therefore, is just one more part of the act.

This isn't to say we simply 'use people' for our own particular ends; we're not always as cool and calculating as this might suggest. Rather, in the majority of our social

encounters we use people as a **looking-glass self**: people are like mirrors that reflect 'our self as others see us'. When we 'look into the mirror' of how others behave towards us, we see reflected an image of the person *others* think we are. Depending on how significant these people are to us, this may or may not affect our sense of personal identity.

For Goffman, the '**presentation of self**' always involves:

➢ **Interpretation**: Identities are broad social categories whose meaning can differ (historically and cross-culturally).

➢ **Negotiation**: Identities, because they are socially created, are open to discussion. What it means to be male, female, young, and so forth is constantly changing as people 'push negotiated boundaries' of these identities.

S elf
I nterpretation
N egotiation

? Identify and explain one way people try to 'impression manage' their identity.

Postmodernism

Postmodernist approaches take up the theme of '**identity as performance**' and develop it in relation to ideas of centred and decentred identities.

Centred identities are clear, fixed and certain in terms of what is expected by others when we adopt (or are given) them. In the past, people had a much clearer (*centred*) idea about what it meant to be 'a man' or 'a woman' because there were relatively few *choices* available to them for the interpretation of this category:

➢ Social groups and communities were much smaller and more close-knit.

➢ Travel to and from other countries was only available to a select few.

➢ People were not exposed, as we are now through media like television and the internet, to new and different ideas about how to be male or female (or a range of other identities).

For these reasons *social identities* (whatever rules a culture developed to govern how to play a particular identity) were incorporated wholesale into *personal identities*. The rules governing 'how to be young or old', for example, were clear, consistent and rigidly enforced (and we sometimes see echoes of this 'centred past' when both young and old are criticised for 'not acting their age').

For postmodernists a key change has been the development of *global* economic and cultural influences that have opened up societies, communities and individuals to new and different experiences, behaviours, ideas and consumption patterns. Just as we now eat food from America, wear clothes from China and listen to MP3 players from Japan, we've also imported a range of cultural ideas, styles and fashions from around the globe

This has resulted in **fragmented identities** — a concept that involves two main ideas:

➢ **Sources of identity**: Primary sources of identity such as class, age and gender have become significantly less important as ways of defining 'our Self', while other

sources, such as consumption, the Green movement and cyberspace, have become increasingly significant.

➢ **Heterogeneity**: Under the cultural onslaught of exposure to different ways of living, behaving and being, traditional identity sources like gender, age or class can no longer be sustained as monolithic entities (with the idea that there is only 'one' correct way to be 'female' or 'elderly'); there are, in contemporary societies, such a diversity of ways to be these things that relatively simple, centred social identities can no longer be supported, sustained, policed and controlled.

Consequently, the rules once governing the *correct* way to play out these identities ('Big boys don't cry') are relaxed as people develop the freedom to both invent and adapt identity sources to their own personal tastes and styles. Identity categories such as class, gender, age and ethnicity are easily and effortlessly combined to create a whole new range of **hybrid identities**. We can, for example, mix masculine and feminine styles to

A Gay Pride march

create an identity that is neither quite one nor the other. In terms of sexuality, where in the past a form of **compulsory heterosexuality** was the norm (with homosexuality hidden from view and criminalised), we now have a range of sexualities from which to choose — heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, asexual.

This leads to the idea of **decentred identities**. One outcome of fragmentation is that people become less certain (*decentred*) about how they are supposed to behave in a particular identity; if there are many ways to be 'middle class', for example, which is the 'right way'? The downside to the new range of choices is uncertainty and confusion about who we are and how we should behave. The old certainties of class, gender, age and ethnicity no longer have much currency in terms of telling us how to behave appropriately.

> **?** Identify and explain one hybrid identity in modern Britain.

New identities

The discussion above suggests that identities in contemporary society are changing. We can identify two examples of new forms of identity that have arguably arisen as a consequence of consumer society: Green identities and cyber identities.

Green identities have developed around the environmental movement and reflect an increasing concern about consumption and the environment. For example, some people have become **ethical consumers**, who 'tend to buy environmentally friendly products when possible, who will not buy products for political reasons and will boycott

certain labels' (Brusdal and Lavik 2005). Wray (2007) notes how companies have experienced consumer boycotts for the way they allegedly use child labour in products like trainers and footballs.

Cyber identities are another recent phenomenon. The development of the internet has brought us the World Wide Web, email, blogging, peer-to-peer (file-sharing) communication such as BitTorrent, and social networks such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter. All this has opened up possibilities for identity formation, development and change on an unprecedented scale.

Sometimes these identities are real. **Social networking** is a recent but rapidly growing cyberspace development (Facebook registered its 500 millionth member in 2011) that provides the tools for people to create an online presence and, by so doing, network with like-minded individuals. In terms of identity, social networking is a space where the real and virtual worlds intersect; people generally use networks to present their real-world, conventional identities to an invited audience. (Of course, as with real-world interaction, people may attempt to *impression manage* by presenting an *ideal self* for public consumption.)

Very frequently, however, identities are **anonymised**. The ability to connect and converse 'anonymously' with a huge potential network across the globe provides opportunities for identity experimentation, allowing people to construct and play with a variety of different identities in different situations in online forums and chatrooms.

Transformations

Although the virtual world is an obvious place for different forms of identity **transformation**, Phillips (2003) notes ways in which personal identities are transformed through consumption in the real world:

➢ **Surgical transformations**: The body may be altered by surgery for cosmetic reasons (e.g. to gain a 'new nose') or medical reasons (e.g. to repair damaged limbs). Changing the appearance of one's body can have symbolic significance for identity because changes to our body image impact on our self-concept, making us more comfortable in the identities we've already developed or allowing us to create a new identity, such as changing gender through surgery (transgenderism).

➢ **Landmark events**: Events such as childbirth or divorce encourage identity changes through changes in consumption practices, such as discarding the clothing we associated with a past identity (being married, for example) and buying a new wardrobe to reflect our changing sense of identity.

➢ **Transition periods**: When we undergo transitions, such as the move from childhood to youth, consumption patterns and preferences may change to reflect our newfound sense of identity.

Socialisation and identity

A range of increasingly complex social identities exist in contemporary societies and there are various ways we learn the general social expectations and behaviours associated with such identities. **Agencies of identity socialisation** (family, peer group, education, workplace, media and so forth) use a variety of socialising techniques.

One of these techniques is **labelling**. Identities (e.g. 'adult', 'non-adult') are culturally labelled in ways that indicate the associated social expectations and behaviours (e.g. how an adult is expected to behave). Labelling is also applied to sub-identities (identity subcategories, e.g. 'child', 'teen', 'youth' as age-graded subdivisions of 'non-adult'). The identity characteristics associated with the label are reinforced in various ways:

➢ **Verbalisation**: We may be told the social characteristics of a label or how to express a particular identity.

➢ **Channelling**: Pressure is always exerted by others to make us conform to the norms of a particular identity. People also try to channel our behaviour to conform to identity norms (within the family, for example, male and female identities and differences are reinforced by differences in language, toys and games, treatment and the like).

➢ **Manipulation**: As with all types of role play, others attempt to manipulate our behaviour to conform to identity norms. In the past this may have involved less-than-subtle forms of (legal) discrimination — racial, sexual and so forth — designed partly to reinforce ideas about dominant and subordinate identities. Homosexual identities, for example, were illegal in Britain as recently as 50 years ago.

Identities are also learnt and reinforced through the following means:

➢ **Experience**: As we take on a particular identity we learn about what it involves through personal experience and interaction with others. We learn, for example, how far we can push the boundaries of an identity before we experience adverse reactions.

➢ **Oppositions**: As we've seen, a feature of identity in our culture is its love of opposites (what postmodernists call **binary oppositions**). When we adopt one social identity we quickly come to understand its characteristics by seeing it in opposition to a related identity.

➢ **Choice**: Although the behaviours associated with a particular identity are heavily influenced by social norms and values, we have far more personal input into how to construct particular identities than we did in the past. This is partly because we are exposed (through television, the internet and international travel) to many more different ideas about the meaning of particular identities than was once the case.

A couple of further ideas relating to identity and socialisation are worth noting:
- ➤ **Master identities**: These are identities so powerful that they mask and influence all other aspects of someone's identity — 'paedophile' or 'mass murderer' would fit this category. (The term is borrowed from Becker's (1963) notion of master labels.)
- ➤ **Secret identities**: These are complete identities (such as sexual deviant or criminal) or parts of identities that people 'keep hidden' from others.

> **?** Identify and explain two reasons why people might want to keep aspects of their identity secret.

So far we have discussed the general ways in which socialisation and identity are connected. In the following sections we will examine how a range of identities (**gender**, **class**, **ethnic** and **age** identities) are culturally produced by a range of primary and secondary socialising agencies (**family**, **education**, **peers**, **media**, **religion** and **work**).

Gender identities

As a starting point we can note Connell et al.'s (1987) argument that we are not *born* as 'men' or 'women'; rather, we *become* 'men' and 'women' through the social construction of gender identity — an idea we can develop in terms of a distinction between biological sex and gender.

Giddens (2006) argues that 'sex' refers to the **physical characteristics** that lead to people being labelled 'male' or 'female'. Sex characteristics are **biologically determined** and have for the majority of human history been 'fixed' — biological sex could not be physically changed (although it is now possible in our society to do this — an idea known as **transgenderism**).

In contrast, **'**gender' refers to the **social characteristics** assigned by a society to each biological sex. Gender, therefore, represents the ideas, beliefs, practices and behaviours a culture associates with being biologically male or female.

Stoller (1968) argues, 'If the proper terms for sex are "male" and "female", the corresponding terms for gender are "masculine" and "feminine"; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex.' While all societies have 'men and women', the meaning of gender can vary both historically and cross-culturally. This suggests, according to Lips (1993), that differences in male and female behaviour and experiences do not spring naturally or fully-formed from biological differences.

These ideas are important for two reasons. First, gender identity has to be taught and learned — if the meaning of gender differs across time and space it follows that we can't be born knowing how to be 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Second, gender identity is **culturally relative**, and this means there can ultimately be no 'correct' way to perform this identity. All we have to guide our behaviour are cultural norms and values.

> **?** Suggest one difference between sex and gender.

Gender identity socialisation

The following sections outline how a range of agencies help to construct gender identities.

The family

Some examples of identity socialisation include assumptions, associations and reinforcements.

Assumptions

Parents assume boys are different from girls, so they treat them in different ways, as was clearly evidenced in Will et al.'s (1976) experiment described by Giddens (2006):

> Five young mothers were observed in interaction with a six-month-old called Beth. They tended to smile at her often and offer her dolls to play with. She was seen as 'sweet', having a 'soft cry'. The reaction of a second group of mothers to a child the same age named Adam, was noticeably different. The baby was likely to be offered a train or other 'male toys' to play with. Beth and Adam were actually the same child, dressed in different clothes.

Associations

Parents develop identities in their children through the way they associate different things with each gender:

➢ **Colours** (pink for girls, blue for boys in our society, which Wagner (2007) suggests 'is a fairly modern, even a 20th-century, convention') and **styles**: Shakin et al. (1985) found strangers were able to identify the sex of very young babies through the cultural clues given by how parents dressed each sex.
➢ **Toys** reinforce both gender ideas (girls are associated with dolls and domestic toys because it reflects a future caring role) and performance — the things males and females do; boys are, for example, associated with active, mechanical and scientific activities, girls with reflective, non-mechanical pastimes.
➢ **Demands**: Girls are more likely to be required to do domestic chores, for example.

Reinforcements

Hartley (1959) suggests ideas about gender norms and values are reinforced in a range of ways:

➢ **Imitation** of adult family behaviours: For example, girls 'helping mum' with domestic chores leads to gender-typing; children come to see different ideas, behaviours and practices as being associated with different sexes.
➢ **Identification**: Children, by seeing themselves reflected in their parents, come to understand the essential features of their different gender identities.
➢ **Role learning**: By adopting roles in line with adult gender expectations, children understand how it is 'normal' for men and women to behave.

➢ **Conditioning**: Adult understanding of gender identities is passed down to children through several means:

    ➢ **Language**: Praising a girl for being pretty, for example, not only rewards her, it teaches her that if she wants to continue to receive praise she must reproduce behaviour that gains parental approval.

    ➢ **Canalisation**: Boys and girls are channelled into different activities and behaviours, reinforcing both a sense of difference and the idea that certain ways of behaving are masculine or feminine.

    ➢ **Identity maintenance**: Parents act in routine ways to maintain a child's gender identity — through things that either are themselves gender-specific (clothes, jewellery and toys) or contain gender-specific messages (such as books and films).

The processes Hartley identifies remain applicable to modern families (even though her research is over 50 years old), but the *outcomes* of this gender reinforcement are much less certain in contemporary societies for two reasons:

➢ **Changing social identities**: Both girls and boys have many more gender identity options than in the past, making it more difficult for parents to channel children into clearly defined gender identities.

➢ **Exposure**: The media, for example, intrudes into the family group far earlier and more forcefully now than in the past, making it difficult for parents to limit their child's exposure to different ideas about gender identities. The 'mental maps' about gender held by parents are less clear and decidedly more confused than in the past, and processes of gender identification can be further blurred by the intrusion of media messages that contradict parental messages.

Although the ideas, attitudes and behaviours surrounding gender identity within the family are significant, we should see this in terms of broad tendencies (pointing boys and girls in different gender directions) rather than specific, clearly articulated, received and understood messages about masculinity and femininity. In other words, while we can identify **gendering processes**, as Hartley suggests, **gender outcomes** are much less easy to predict.

> **?** Suggest two reasons why girls and boys might grow up to be like their parents.

Education

Murphy and Elwood (1998) argue that boys and girls start school with some general understanding of gender identity — but the question here is the extent to which schools reinforce or call into question cultural ideas about masculinity and femininity. Eichler (1980) has highlighted how, in the past, the education system built on family experiences to influence educational experiences because girls saw their primary adult role in terms of the **private sphere** whereas boys saw their primary adult role as being in the **public sphere** (perceptions that reflect gendered ideas about identity introduced in the family group).

The problem here is that over the past 30 years social changes have contributed to a widening of female horizons and a narrowing of male expectations. Economic changes have meant a decline in traditional male work in manufacturing and engineering, allied to the expansion of service industries employing large numbers of women. Cultural changes mean it's no longer simply assumed that women will marry, have children and spend their life raising them.

The question, therefore, is the extent to which traditional assumptions about masculinity and femininity have been weakened. One way to objectively test this is through subject choice. If traditional notions of masculinity and femininity still hold strong, we would expect to see significant gender differences in these choices — and there is evidence subject choice at the higher (non-compulsory) levels is broadly **gendered** (more boys, for example, study science subjects, as shown in Table 3.2).

Table 3.2   UK A-level or equivalent entries for young people (source: Babb et al. 2006)

Subject	Males (%)	Females (%)
physics	76	24
computer studies	73	27
economics	70	30
design and technology	65	35
mathematics	60	40
biology	38	62
English literature	30	70
social studies	30	70
modern languages	30	70
drama	30	70
art and design	30	70
home economics	06	94

The evidence in higher education is less clear-cut (many subjects show no real gender difference) but Hughes and Church (2010) note some gendering:

➢ **Male-dominated subjects**: engineering and technology, computer science, architecture and, to a lesser extent, physical sciences.
➢ **Female-dominated subjects**: education, sociology, psychology, law, medicine and dentistry, and agriculture.

Educational choices are further reflected in adult career choices (engineering, for example, is male-dominated while nursing and secretarial work are female-dominated) and these patterns point us towards the idea of underlying social and educational processes that contribute to this gendering process.

Overall the relationship between subject choice and gender identity is perhaps weaker than might be expected. Myers (2000) for example argues, 'There is no doubt

that things have changed. Attitudes about what is possible for men and women, boys and girls to do and aspire to are more open. Girls are doing even better and in a wider range of subjects in schools.' This is not to say schools are unimportant in terms of some aspects of identity formation; a range of studies suggest otherwise:

➤ Lobban (1974) showed how reading schemes in early-years education represent a readily available source of sex-role socialisation.

➤ Mahony (1985) demonstrated how girls were frequently marginalised in the classroom by both boys and teachers. Staffing structures also reflected male importance in the workplace (the highest-status teaching jobs were — and still are — occupied largely by men). Mirza et al. (2005), for example, noted 'Women make up over half (53%) of the secondary teaching population, but are still under-represented in secondary school senior management positions, particularly headships' (around 30% of secondary heads are women).

➤ Kelly (1988), who explored female under-representation in science, concluded that science was seen as difficult and demanding and that the image of scientists was considered by girls to be unflattering and unfeminine.

? Does the evidence from subject choices suggest traditional assumptions about masculinity and femininity have been weakened? Give reasons for your answer.

Peer groups

Martin and Ruble (2004) observe that 'From an early age, children are like "gender detectives," searching for clues about gender, such as who should and shouldn't engage in certain activities, who can play with whom, and why girls and boys differ.' Among young children, peers shape and reinforce gender identities by drawing on and reproducing existing social identities in play, games, activities and pastimes.

Play is semi-structured in that children adopt a theme (such as 'doctors and nurses') and improvise around it — which means they have to draw on ideas about masculinity and femininity in order to maintain their play. Games are structured forms of play (they have rules) and have gender associations in terms of who can and cannot play them. Particular sports (such as football and cricket) have masculine associations — participating may reinforce notions of masculinity (if you can play them to an acceptable standard).

Activities and pastimes also have gender connotations and expectations because they act as focal points for participation and inclusion (both of which are important in terms of peer groups). Thus, common interests in areas like cars, motor bikes, heavy and death metal music (boys) and fashion, cosmetics and shopping (girls) help to both create bonds and reinforce identity barriers. Individuals who cross those invisible boundaries (the girl who likes bikes and death metal, the boy who likes fashion and cosmetics) risk being negatively sanctioned for breaking identity norms.

This involves **peer pressure** — trying to make others conform to group norms, to fit in with the crowd. Children who fail to conform to gender norms face a range of negative sanctions — from being bullied to exclusion from valued peer and friendship groups.

Peer groups can also function as **reference groups** or sounding boards, used to explore various aspects of gender and identity. Looking for clues about how to behave appropriately from people of our own age and gender leads to a kind of 'collective mentality' in the establishment of age and gender norms. To be part of the group we need to like what our friends like, wear what they wear and, to some extent, behave as they behave — all things that serve to reinforce gender ideas, attributes and identities.

> **?** Suggest two ways peer pressure might influence our behaviour.

The media

In a society as thoroughly media-saturated as our own (with 24/7 television, 24-hour news, hundreds of television stations, web-enabled mobile phones, social networks) it's easy to forget that as recently as 50 years ago the media in Britain was far smaller (two television channels, one public and one private, broadcasting for a few hours each day — in black and white), less diverse and resolutely non-interactive (not a red button in sight).

British society was also very different, at least in terms of gender relationships — homosexuality was illegal, relationships outside marriage were still seen as 'living in sin', and divorce, if not exactly uncommon, was by no means as simple, straightforward and relatively risk-free as it can be today. This distinction between (relatively recent) past and present is important because mainstream media —television, radio, magazines and newspapers — were not only a major source of information, but were also far less diverse in terms of ideas about gender. The 'gender scripts' pushed by the media were very similar and very limited: gendered social identities were **centred** around traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. These ideas are confirmed by research examples from 20 to 30 years ago:

➤ McRobbie (1977) argued that young female identities — as depicted in the pages of *Jackie*, the best-selling teenage magazine of the time — were shaped by a 'narrow and restricted view of life', marked by 'romance, problems, fashion, beauty and pop', coupled with an 'idealised and romanticised' view of boys. The *Jackie* girl inhabits a world of 'romantic individualism' where the objective is to find and keep 'her man' — and, by so doing, escape the 'bitchy, catty atmosphere of female company'.

➤ Ferguson's (1983) analysis of women's magazines over a 30-year period described a 'cult of femininity' revolving around traditional female values of caring for others, marriage, concern with appearance and the like. The general message, as far as female identities were concerned, was that women should define themselves in terms of male needs.

➢ Sharpe's (1976) study of teenage girls found female identities were shaped around 'love, marriage, husbands, children, jobs and careers, more or less in that order'.
➢ Cumberbatch (1990) found that television advertisements used male and female identities in very different ways — older men and younger women were more likely to be used than other age groups. Older men featured heavily when an advertiser wanted to convey authority (especially when technical expertise was involved) while young women were used to convey sexiness.

Although these studies are informative and interesting, their current relevance to gender identity as anything more than historical documents is more debatable — partly because of significant economic and cultural changes in our society and, more importantly, changes in the range of the media over the past 15 to 20 years. In addition, our relationship to media has not remained static; we don't consume media in the way we did 5 years, let alone 30 or 50 years, ago. In this respect we can note two ideas:

➢ As audiences have changed so too has the media. Not only has the range of male and female portrayals changed, even fairly traditional gender portrayals are subtly different from what they once were.
➢ Access to and consumption of media have changed — not only in terms of the range of available media (Cumberbatch's study was based on the two commercial television stations at the time; there are now hundreds of commercial channels) but also in terms of how we use it.

Just as they always have, the media still send a range of gender socialising messages. Kraeplin (2007), for example, notes how 'Popular teen magazines link appearance and consumerism. Women are constantly being made aware of their imperfections, then offered products that will help them attain the socially constructed ideal' (something increasingly true of men, too, as advertisers attempt to exploit the largely untapped 'male grooming market').

However, we shouldn't assume women (or indeed men) treat these kinds of media messages uncritically — that the media tell us to do something and we blindly obey. While the relationship between the media and behaviour may, in the past, have been much closer — because of the limited range of media all saying much the same thing about gender (the idea of **agenda setting** we noted earlier), the limited range of gender roles played and, most importantly, the limited number of gender scripts — this is arguably not the case now. As Butler (1990) suggests, gender scripts are no longer limited, but many and varied; there are now many more ways to 'perform gender'.

Contemporary style magazines, for example, aimed at different age groups (from pre-teens to adults) and genders, offer a range of information about gender performance and while some of it undoubtedly reflects fairly traditional gender concerns and behaviours (magazines aimed at women tend to focus on the **individual self** and how

it can be 'improved' through practical advice and tips on make-up, sex, partnerships, love, career and so forth), much of it does not.

We are more 'media-literate' now than in the past (we know how it works and what it's trying to do). Gauntlett (2002), for example, suggests:

> Teenagers were well able to think critically about the magazines they read. Although some young and not-quite-so-young readers found the repeated sex themes to be rather claustrophobic, most readers recognised that they were useful in information terms, and also somewhat empowering, particularly when considered in contrast with gender roles and attitudes of the past.

Different ways of accessing, consuming and using media (mainly, but not exclusively, brought about by the development of the internet and, more recently, mobile technology) have led to a change in the range of gender scripts — from the very traditional to the more radical — presented through the media. Macdonald (2003), for example, argues, 'gender is not static and women are permitted to take on certain masculine behaviours in certain situations'.

The key idea here is 'certain situations'; while gender identities are not as clear-cut and fixed as they once were, this doesn't mean the media doesn't attempt to both exploit and reinforce 'traditional stereotypes' in its use of sexuality and representations of male and female bodies. Female sexuality is often used to sell consumer goods and a particular form of (hetero)sexuality is frequently emphasised, one combining particular body shapes (thin, large-breasted and so forth) with patriarchal notions of 'availability'. 'Normality', in terms of gender concepts and relationships, is usually represented by heterosexuality.

While representations of male and female bodies have changed in some ways (images of sexualised male bodies — the 'sixpack', for example — are held up as sexually desirable for women and culturally desirable for men), they have in other aspects stayed the same, such as the way female bodies are displayed through the media to sell everything from cars to camping equipment.

The contemporary relationship between gender identities and media representations is one where men and women are represented in many different ways — from traditional gender stereotypes to ways that confront, challenge and break down these stereotypical representations (the powerful and dominant female, the happy resourceful gay couple). This reflects the fact that both gender and media are no longer simply homogeneous (all the same).

Gender is arguably more **fluid** in contemporary societies: people see themselves (their personal identities) in new and different ways. This sometimes involves identities that have little or no apparent permanence but which change from day to day and

situation to situation. This, in turn, involves the idea that gender identities are more **fragmented** now than at any time in the past — there are no longer clear, simple ways to be male or female. This makes it harder — if not impossible — to talk about 'men' or 'women' as simple gender categories. Rather, we may need to think in terms of the different ways it is possible to be 'a man' or 'a woman' in our society.

In terms of current relationships between the media and gender identities, Gauntlett (2002) suggests that '*within limits*, the mass media is a force for change'. He argues traditional views of women have been replaced by 'feisty, successful "girl power" icons', while male representations have changed from 'ideals of absolute toughness, stubborn self-reliance and emotional silence' to a greater emphasis on emotions, the need for help and advice and the 'problems of masculinity'.

> **?** Suggest two ways the media might influence gender identities.

Religion

An initial problem with tracing the influence of religious beliefs on identity formation is that, in Britain at least, there is increasing evidence that the majority of the population are not particularly religious (something that is certainly true in terms of religious practice, such as attending church). Religious beliefs and practices for the majority may not extend much beyond the (secular) celebration of religious festivals such as Christmas, a general 'belief in God' and the odd silent prayer. Among those who *do* hold strong religious beliefs, the effect on gender identities tends to be more marked, partly because of the **patriarchal** nature of many of the world's major religions (including Christianity and Islam). This is expressed in two main ways: through structure and through language.

Structure

Religions tend towards a 'top-down' pyramid structure where men hold positions of power and authority and women occupy a variety of supporting roles. Different religions have different levels of **gender segregation**: for example, the Catholic Church — characterised by Morgan (1970) as 'an all-male hierarchy' — doesn't allow women to occupy any positions of power and authority, whereas the Church of England increasingly does.

Such power imbalances between men and women have **symbolic significance**, in terms of demonstrating differences in male and female power (and hence identity). They also have **practical importance** because female identities may be defined and controlled by men. Islam, for example, is particularly clear on things like gender relationships, associations and even dress (with some forms of Islam insisting on female bodies being hidden from view in public) which, in the main, reflect male power over women. Christianity too has beliefs about gender relationships, such as 'sin originating in women' and women being requested to 'love, honour and obey' their male marriage partner (although many women choose not to utter these words nowadays).

Language

Religious texts are generally patriarchal in tone (the male God of Christianity, for example) and teaching. Elliott (2009), for example, argues 'The Bible itself is a handbook for the subjugation of women. But then the Bible, like religion, was created by men for men, and has been used ever since its inception as a tool to keep women in their place.'

> **?** Identify and explain two ways in which religion is patriarchal.

Work

The workplace is an important source of male identity. Men have traditionally used occupation to establish their identity, in terms of both paid work (something that has traditionally differentiated male and female identities) and particular occupations within the workplace (from plumber through accountant to managing director). *Within* the workplace gender identities are reinforced through **stratification**. This can involve vertical or horizontal segregation.

Vertical segregation

Within many occupations, the positions with highest status and pay are still mainly filled by men — something we can explain in terms of four related concepts:

➢ **The glass ceiling**: Even where overt forms of sex discrimination do not exist, women are still, in the main, unable to reach the top positions in companies. They can, however, 'see' others in these positions.

➢ **The glass trapdoor**: This more sophisticated concept suggests that those few women who reach higher occupational levels do so on the basis of adopting male organisational behaviours, practices and identities. Once in higher managerial positions such women effectively 'close the trapdoor' to prevent other women following in their footsteps.

➢ **The glass cliff-face**: This involves 'the tendency for women who break through the glass ceiling to be placed in more precarious leadership positions than men' (Ryan and Haslam 2005). They are, as Henderson (2004) reports, 'much more likely than men to be given "poisoned chalice" jobs in which they struggle to succeed'. This reinforces perceptions of both male and female identities because frequent 'female failures' reinforce the idea that higher managerial positions are a male preserve.

➢ **The concrete ceiling**: This expresses the idea that higher occupational levels are simply 'closed off' to women, so that they have no real prospect of attaining them or interest in trying.

Horizontal segregation

Many occupations are sex-segregated in the sense of being mainly performed by either males or females. Female-dominated occupations include teaching, nursing, shop and secretarial work — occupations that frequently involve a 'caring and support role' that reinforces traditional notions of female (and by extension male) identities.

This type of segregation is further reflected in **dual labour markets** that involve a **primary sector** with high levels of profitability, job security, promotion, career prospects and wages and a **secondary sector** with lower levels of each. The primary labour market, as Sommerlad and Sanderson (1997) argue, is male-dominated and also 'conceptualised as male and characterised by male ways of working and career norms'.

Masculinities and femininities

Historically, the relationship between gender and identity in our society has turned on the way each biological sex is socialised into what Connell (1995) calls two forms of **dominant** gender identities:

➢ **Hegemonic masculinity**: In the past, 'traditional' masculinity centred around a variety of male physical and mental characteristics that Gauntlett (2002) expresses in terms of **role modelling** — the idea that primary and secondary socialisation processes defined a clear set of roles for men and women (the former as paid workers and providers, the latter as homemakers and carers) from which an equally clear set of identity characteristics could be read. In terms of physical characteristics, men were encouraged to adopt a particular body shape that, ideally, emphasised physical strength and physique. In terms of mental characteristics, men were supposed to be 'leaders' and 'providers' (a source of authority in society), and to lack emotion (to be rational, calm, cool and calculating).

➢ **Emphasised femininity**: Female identities were defined in terms of 'accommodating the interests and needs of men' and the dominant identity was one that 'matched and complemented' hegemonic masculinity. Women were supposed to be essentially passive, emotional beings whose identity was expressed in the service of others (either within the family or, where work was involved, through similar 'caring' roles — nursing, teaching, social work and the like). Kitchen (2006) suggests this is a type of **complicit femininity** — one that is defined by male needs and desires.

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that, even in a society where different masculinities exist, one is always dominant — and it need not be the 'traditional' type we've just outlined. Given that gender identities are closely associated with the work people do (the traditional idea, for example, of men doing paid labour and women doing unpaid domestic labour), changes to working arrangements mean that contemporary forms of hegemonic masculinity should differ from those of the past. Such changes *should*, according to Gauntlett (2002), generally mean that gender identities in contemporary Britain exhibit the following qualities:

➢ **Fluidity**: A range of male and female identities are now available and the meaning of these identities changes over time. What it means to be a woman in 2011 is quite different from its meaning in 1961.

➢ **Non-conformity**: Economic and social changes (on both a national and global level) weaken the hold of cultural traditions on people's behaviour. Without strong,

traditional gender reference points, it becomes possible for people to develop new and different forms of gender identity (as described in the next point).

➢ **Knowing construction of identity**: In the past, male and female identities were largely *ascribed*; people were socialised into a relatively narrow, fixed set of ideas about masculinity and femininity. In contemporary societies, exposed to different cultural ideas about gender, the individual plays a more central role in the construction of their personal identity.

? Briefly explain what is meant by 'hegemonic masculinity'.

Masculine identities

If one form of masculinity is always dominant, it follows that alternative forms must exist. Schauer (2004) identifies examples of these 'multiple masculinities':

➢ **Subordinate**: Subordinate masculinities generally relate to gay men, with homosexuality being, at worst, criminalised and, at best, tolerated as an example of a 'lower' form of masculinity.

➢ **Subversive**: However, gay identities can also undermine 'traditional' forms of masculinity because they are in complete opposition to hegemonic masculinity.

➢ **Complicit**: Connell (1995) suggests that 'as women have become more powerful, male identities have begun to change'. One form of possible change is reflected in 'newly feminised' masculinities such as the new man — an identity arising in the 1980s (especially in advertising) based around men who are willing to combine paid work outside the family with their share of unpaid work within the home. Lewis (1999), however, wryly notes 'There are few sightings of the new man.'

➢ **Marginalised**: Willott and Griffin (1996) discovered 'marginalised masculinities' among the long-term unemployed working class as traditional beliefs about 'the good family man' providing for wife and kids collided with the reality of an inability to provide for their partner and children.

Writers such as Mac an Ghail (1994) and Benyon (2002) have suggested a **crisis of masculinity** in contemporary societies caused by a combination of factors:

➢ unemployment
➢ loss of traditional male employment in manufacturing industries
➢ lower educational achievement relative to girls
➢ female-friendly service industry work

Where men once 'knew where they stood' in terms of the kinds of masculinity they were expected to display (the traditional masculine features outlined above), this is no longer the case. For example, 'marginalised masculinities' are unable to demonstrate traditional male qualities because they no longer control the economic resources (such as regular income) on which such masculinity was based. The response to this crisis has been the development of a variety of **exaggerated masculinities**.

Retributive masculinities aim to 'reclaim' (from their 'emasculated peers') traditional forms of masculinity. An example is the **new lad** — someone whose (young) life centres around 'birds, booze and the beautiful game'. In this instance the emphasis is on a late twentieth century 'reinvention' and reinterpretation of a more traditional form of masculine identity. In this respect 'laddishness' embodies a form of exaggerated masculinity, expressed in a range of behaviours (drinking to excess, smoking, fighting, womanising, 'loutish' behaviours and the like) that draw on an idealised version of a 'traditional' form of (sexist) hegemonic masculinity — when 'men were men and women were glad of it'. This type of masculinity is:

➢ patriarchal — with 'birds' considered merely as adornment to masculinity
➢ centred around a relatively small range of acceptable male behaviours
➢ aggressive in both thought (the idea that masculinity is bound up in fearlessness) and deed (being prepared to use violence to solve problems if necessary)
➢ oppositional, in the sense of going against contemporary norms of 'feminised masculinity'
➢ reclamational — involving the idea of 'reclaiming masculinity' as an identity

Hypermasculinity represents a version of masculinity that Wolf-Light (1994) characterises as 'authoritarian and autocratic, impersonal, contemptuous and violent. In short, the very image of patriarchy.' Hypermasculinity is, in some respects, a logical extension of 'laddishness' although, as Robinson (2006) argues, it is a form particularly but not exclusively found in America, with 'a substantial following amongst white, middle-class and middle-aged men primarily because of its ability to provide a degree of certainty about what it means to be a man…a belief in an essential and unchanging "deep masculinity"'.

? Suggest two reasons why some sociologists argue there is a 'crisis of masculinity'.

Feminine identities

There are a variety of ways for women to express their identity in contemporary society.

Contingent femininities

Contingent femininities involve a variety of identities which are shaped around male beliefs, behaviours and demands.

➢ **Normalised identities** are those where women learn to play a secondary role to men: identities (such as mother, girlfriend, partner) that play a supporting role for their 'male leads'. Normalised identities, Chambers et al. (2003) argue, continually struggle with the problem of 'producing a femininity that will secure male approval'.
➢ **Sexualised identities** inhabit the other extreme in that they are largely fashioned through male eyes and fantasies. Women are reduced to sexual objects that exist for male gratification.

Assertive identities

Assertive identities reflect the changing position of women in society, partly as a result of feminist political and cultural ideas and partly as a reflection of changing economic circumstances. They involve women 'breaking free' from traditional ideas about femininity while not completely setting themselves apart from their male counterparts. Froyum (2005) suggests assertive femininities are adopted to 'resist male power without actually threatening to overthrow such power'. Examples include the following:

➤ **Girl power**: Although a much-derided concept, this identity has become available to women in recent times. Hollows (2000) suggests that, while the emphasis on 'sex as fun', 'girls behaving badly' ('ladettes') and the importance of female friendship may represent one way of 'coping with masculinity', older women are largely excluded from adopting 'the new femininity'.

The concept of 'girl power' is a relatively recent development

➤ **Modernised femininities**: These relate to a slightly older age (and class) group by locating new-found female economic and cultural power within a relatively traditional context of family relationships (the assertive aspect here being a desire for personal freedom and expression within the context of traditional gender relationships). For McRobbie (1996), modernised femininities involve attributes like the pursuit of a career, 'individualism, liberty and the entitlement to sexual self-expression'.

➤ **Ageing femininities**: Older female identities have generally been stigmatised as objects of pity and charity. Alternative identities as fashionable, active and sexual beings are a more recent development and reflect both the general ageing of the UK population and higher levels of disposable income in this age group.

Autonomous identities

Froyum (2005) suggests that autonomous identities are characterised by female attempts to 'establish power by negotiating within their heterosexual relationships'; they involve *competition* with men, on female terms. Where women have greater choice over how to live their lives and express their femininity, Evans (2006) points to **female individualism** as part of a 'new gender regime that frees women from traditional constraints' (such as pregnancy and child care). Autonomous women are likely to be:

➤ highly educated
➤ successful
➤ professional
➤ career-focused

In terms of relationships, Evans suggests they tend to form non-committal heterosexual attachments that may involve marriage, but are unlikely to involve children.

? Identify and explain three contemporary forms of femininity.

Class identities

The idea of **social class** implies that we can identify very large groups based on a range of indicators such as occupation, values, norms and lifestyle. Some writers have questioned its usefulness in contemporary society: for example, Bauman (1990) argues we should think instead about **in-groups** ('people like Us') and **out-groups** ('people like Them'). However, class remains a widely used sociological concept.

Class identity socialisation

Work

Crompton (2003) notes that 'Employment position has long been used as a proxy for class.' We can outline the relationship between identity and class in terms of a distinction between three conventional categories: working class, middle class, and upper class.

Working-class identities

Working-class identities have changed as the nature of employment has changed in our society.

Traditional working-class identities are centred around manual work and manufacturing jobs — both of which were in reasonably plentiful supply even into the latter part of the twentieth century. In Willis's (1977) study of working-class boys, for example, 'the lads' looked forward to leaving school at the earliest opportunity to enter the adult world of paid manual work.

Writers such as Crompton (2003) have suggested the emergence of a **new** working class. This contrasts a traditional working-class identity (male, associated with manual work and work in traditional industries such as mining or manufacturing) with a new form of class identity first found in Goldthorpe et al.'s (1968) study of affluent car workers. The study questioned the belief that class identities were converging into a general 'middle-classness' (expressed by Zweig's (1961) *Embourgeoisement* thesis' — the idea people were 'becoming middle class' in terms of both their lifestyles and identities).

Goldthorpe et al. demonstrated that even those members of the working class who had good, well-paid jobs were sufficiently different from their middle-class peers in terms of identities, attitudes, values and behaviours to make traditional class distinctions valid. They did, however, argue that 'affluent manual workers' represented a new development in working-class identity, one that was increasingly **privatised** (focused on the home and the family) and **instrumental** (with work seen as a means to an end — the creation of a comfortable home and family life — rather than an end in itself).

In terms of class identity there were still important differences between the new working class and the middle classes; Devine (1992), for example, notes the former still showed a strong sense of 'being working class'.

> **?** Suggest one difference between 'old' and 'new' working-class identities.

Middle-class identities

Self and Zealey (2007) note that those employed in 'middle class occupational positions' (both at the higher, managerial and professional level and at the lower, sales and customer service level) now account for around 65% of the UK employed workforce. This involves a range of 'occupational identities':

➢ **Professionals** such as doctors: This kind of identity combines high levels of educational achievement with personal **autonomy** (freedom of action) in the workplace and in decision-making.

➢ **Managers** involved in the day-to-day running of private and public companies: This identity, as Brooks (2006) suggests, combines career progression, decision-making, power and control over others, and the organisation of work routines.

➢ **Intellectuals** (such as university lecturers): This group has an academic identity dealing with knowledge and information services.

➢ **Consultants**: This identity is focused on selling knowledge, information and skills across both national and global markets.

➢ **Service workers** (such as shop assistants or care staff): This identity group represents workers at the bottom end of the middle-class scale. They may have lower earnings and levels of skill than those in some higher working-class occupations, but qualify as middle class on the basis of their non-manual work and (in occupations such as nursing) higher levels of social status (a significant factor in their class identity).

> **?** Identify and explain two reasons why middle-class identities differ from one another.

Upper-class identities

This relatively small but immensely powerful class consists of two major identity groupings:

➢ **Landed aristocracy**: The traditional source of this group's power is their historic ownership of land and their political connections to the monarchy that, in the past, made them the most significant section of society. Over the course of the twentieth century their economic power and influence have arguably declined but they remain a not insignificant 'upper-class cultural rump'.

➢ **Business elite**: This group is characterised by their ownership of significant national, international and global companies. They can be subdivided into **financial elites** (involved in the provision of banking, insurance and knowledge services) and **industrial elites** (focused around manufacturing). Of the two it can be argued that, in a contemporary context where service industries predominate (the 2008 global

banking crisis notwithstanding), financial elites are now the most significant class identity in terms of wealth, power and political influence.

Education

Occupational class identities are supported by a range of educational identity indicators and markers:

➢ **Type of school**: Around 7% of the school-age population attend private, fee-paying schools. These schools contribute to a distinctive sense of identity by setting a certain class of children apart (those whose parents can afford private education). Grammar schools, although far fewer in number than thirty years ago, attract large numbers of middle-class pupils and contribute to middle-class identities through educational attainment.

➢ **Types of study**: Although the distinction doesn't hold true in all instances, class identities do fit reasonably well with the educational divide between vocational education and training (mainly associated with the working class) and the academic studies leading to higher-status (middle-class) occupations.

➢ **Type of university**: Different universities have different levels of status and, while university students are overwhelmingly middle class, a grading 'system within the system' applies: universities such as Oxford and Cambridge have greater status than many others, and attract a disproportionate number of wealthy and privately educated students.

The association of education with class and identity is evidenced by Aries and Seider's (2007) study of privately and publicly educated students: they found that 'affluent students regarded social class as significantly more important to identity than did the lower income students'. Heath and Payne (1999) further argue upper-class identities are maintained by restricting and closing access to 'economic and political networks of mutual self-interest'. Such networks develop through a pattern of attending an expensive, high-status public school (such as Eton) and a high-status university (such as Oxford or Cambridge).

> **?** Suggest one way in which a private school education contributes to class identity.

Family

The family is an important source of identity across all classes and general class identity is expressed in terms of:

➢ **Background and history**: Although these give most of us some kind of fix on our personal and family identity (at the very least giving us a family name), they can be particularly important as identity markers for the upper classes (especially some of the aristocracy) since they locate the individual in a historical continuum that, in some cases, extends over many hundreds of years.

> **Location**: Where you live and how you live is an important identity marker because it says something about you to others and also cements a sense of identity to a physical location — as evidenced, perhaps, by the difference between those who live on council estates and those who live on landed estates.

The family is also an important arena of **consumption**. Here we are concerned not only with the physical objects that contribute to our personal sense of identity, but with cultural changes in taste and consumption. It is argued that there has been a general *convergence* of working- and middle-class tastes, such as to make class distinctions increasingly blurred. Fenster (1989), for example, notes that 'even into the 1980's class-based *taste cultures* (defined in terms of a recognisable group "of similar people making similar choices") could be relatively easily identified'.

Working-class identities were reflected in cultural **orientations** such as:
> **present orientations** (a concern with **immediate consumption** — because you might not get the opportunity later)
> **immediate gratification** (leaving school at the earliest opportunity to take paid employment, for example)
> **tastes** such as pop music, football, television, not 'eating out'

Middle-class identities were reflected in orientations such as:
> **future orientation**
> **deferred gratification** (staying in education to obtain qualifications that give entrance to professional careers, for example)
> **tastes** such as 'popular' classical music, theatre and 'eating out'

P resent
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T astes

Taste cultures as indicative of distinctive boundary lines between working- and middle-class identities have, however, changed dramatically in recent times. Prandy and Lambert (2005) suggest 'there is a gradual shift amongst the population from seeing themselves as working class to middle class'. Savage (2007) argues that although people generally still use traditional class categories as a source of identity, the *meaning* of this identity has changed over the past fifty years: greater emphasis is now placed on *individual*, rather than collective, experiences. Savage argues people now talk in terms of **hybrid class identities**, which involve a mixture of traditional working- and middle-class tastes. For him this reflects the idea that social class is a **fluid identity** based on the 'ability of people to make some kind of choice'.

Brooks (2006) identifies three general cultural themes contributing to **middle-class identity**:
> **Not working class**: Brooks argues 'The construction of middle class identities has primarily been related to the claim that one is "not working class"' — expressed in contemporary society by the idea that middle-class identities involve taste cultures

(the consumption of music, food, literature, film, clothing and so forth) qualitatively different from those of the working class (the difference, perhaps, between shopping in Lidl and Waitrose).

➢ **Disgusted subjects**: Lawler (2005) argues 'expressions of disgust at perceived violations of taste [and] white working-class existence' are a consistent and unifying feature of middle-class identities. An example here is the idea of **chav culture** — that large sections of the white working-class lack taste. Although 'chavs' may buy expensive clothes (brands such as Burberry that were once exclusively middle class), their lack of taste (involving cheap flashy jewellery, for example) marks them out for (middle-class) ridicule. The 'ownership of taste' allows the middle classes to distinguish themselves from those below and, to some extent, those above (who can be categorised in terms of 'vulgar and tasteless shows of wealth'). As Bourdieu (1984) puts it, 'Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, that which represents the greatest threat.'

➢ **Social capital**: This involves the ways in which people are connected to (or disconnected from) **social networks** ('who you know') and the value these connections have for what Putnam (2000) calls 'norms of reciprocity' (what people are able and willing to do for each other). Middle-class families are better positioned to tap into significant social networks (such as those found in schools or the workplace) that reinforce their sense of identity and difference. One important aspect of this is what Bourdieu (1986) calls **cultural capital** — the various (non-economic) resources, such as family and class background, educational qualifications, social skills and status, that give people advantages over others.

Cohen and Prusak (2001) argue that social capital involving 'the trust, mutual understanding, shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks' produces a distinctive set of **upper-class identities** that are continually reinforced by both mutual self-interest and cooperation. Such identities are based around:

➢ **Privilege regimes** whereby the upper classes tap into top-level social networks that give access to the most powerful decision-makers, high-ranking politicians, top civil servants and so forth. From a Marxist perspective Milliband (1969) argues that upper-class identities are based around common cultural backgrounds that develop out of family relationships and networks and continue through the secondary socialisation process of (private) education.

➢ **Privileged networks** and, in particular, **personal private networks** (such as the so-called **old boy network**, forged through a common educational experience and exploited for mutual benefit). For Heald (1983), private personal networks originate within the family — family name and connections give access to wider upper-class social networks which are closed to other classes.

➢ **Privacy**. As Galbraith (1977) puts it, 'Of all classes the rich are the most noticed and the least studied.' Upper-class identities are cemented through **social distance**:

members of this class live, work and socialise predominantly with members of their own class. Privacy extends from private education and healthcare, through employing professionals (such as tax lawyers) to shield their economic activities from close inspection, to creating physical distance — gated communities, country estates and mansions where access is tightly controlled, patrolled and regulated.

? Suggest two ways in which social capital contributes to middle- and upper-class identities.

Peer groups

Peer groups are significant for class identity in a range of ways, partly because of their use as reference groups and partly because of the tendency for people of similar social class and status to live in close proximity.

In the past, an important source of working-class identity was traditional **communities** — largely urban, relatively close-knit in terms of social relationships and further characterised (unlike their middle-class peers) by a lack of home ownership. With this 'sense of community', people of a similar background, occupation and general social outlook could have their cultural identities and beliefs continually reinforced through personal experience and socialisation. 'The (working-class) Self' could be contrasted with 'the (middle-/upper-class) Other' (those who lived in the suburbs or the countryside).

Traditional working-class culture revolved around what McKibbin (2000) calls

> a fairly distinctive lifestyle and cultural life; industrial villages such as those around coal mining or the industrial areas of the big cities typified this lifestyle with their terraced housing, pubs and working men's clubs, keenness on sports and…a rigid sexual division of labour.

Traditional working-class female identities were largely constructed around marriage, child-rearing and the home.

New working-class identities underwent a radical change into what Goldthorpe et al. (1968) called a **privatised** working class, centred around the private sphere of the home, family life and children. A further change, noted by Peele (2004), was that 'affluence had affected working-class attitudes, making workers more *instrumental* and less solidaristic'; in other words, new working-class identities were less likely to form around shared experiences in trade union membership and close-knit communities, and were more likely to involve expressions of an individual desire for personal and family advancement.

More recently, Peele argues, traditional class divisions (especially between the working and middle class) have become less clear — the result of 'The shrinking of Britain's *manufacturing* base and the rise of the service economy [that] created a

different social environment even from that of the1960s'. Global economic changes (such as manufacturing industries moving to countries where labour costs were significantly lower) have drastically reduced the number of manual, manufacturing jobs, replacing them with service employment: both low-skill, low-pay, low-prospects work (in shops and restaurants) and more highly skilled and well-paid work in areas like finance, investment and information technology. Where the latter reflect conventional middle-class areas of employment, this has resulted, Peele argues, in 'a blurring of traditional class identities'. As traditional sources of shared working-class occupational identity gradually disappeared, so too did the strong, centred identities based around these occupational certainties.

The media

Class identities are reflected and reinforced through the media in a number of ways.

Desirability

Skeggs (2004) argues that television representations of the working class devalue them relative to the middle class. In other words, the media function to uphold 'desirable' middle-class attributes, traits, ideas and behaviour by contrasting them with 'undesirable' working-class attributes, such as tastelessness. A recent media phenomenon, reflected in both mainstream media and the World Wide Web, is the mocking persecution of 'chavs' — young working-class men and women seen to be deserving of ridicule for their tasteless and vulgar behaviour and personal adornment.

Morality

Skeggs et al. (2007) discuss reality television shows that highlight **moral failures** among the lower classes (in areas like childcare, employment or personal care) and, by extension, the **moral superiority** of the middle classes, in the form of professionals charged with correcting these failures:

➢ supernannies who demonstrate how to control unruly (lower-class) children
➢ 'benefit busters' finding gainful employment for 'workshy' lower-class layabouts
➢ secret millionaires — a modern-day version of private help for the 'deserving poor', whose lives are changed by the intervention of middle-class benefactors

In this respect, repeated media demonstrations of working-class 'lifestyle failures' (from their lack of taste to their cultural failings) serve to reinforce middle-class identities by devaluing working-class identities. Conversely, mainstream media shape middle-class identities by presenting them as the norm, in two main ways:

➢ **Virtues**: They are presented in terms of their positive attributes: resourceful, self-reliant, practical in their ability to solve 'social problems' and, above all, successful.
➢ **Vices**: Middle-class virtues are contrasted with stereotypical representations of those *below* (the working classes who lack middle-class attributes and are consequently in need of their help) and those *above*, portrayed as eccentrics (Channel 4's *The F***ing Fulfords* of 2004, for example) or as part of sinister and shadowy upper-class cliques

who use their power and influence in selfish, frequently corrupt and self-serving ways (which contrasts with middle-class virtues of help and advice for others).

> **?** Suggest two ways in which the media shape working- and middle-class identities.

Ethnic identities

When thinking about ethnic identities, we need to avoid the misconception that '**race**' and '**ethnicity**' have the same meaning.

➢ **Race** involves the belief that we can distinguish between people on the basis of things like physical characteristics (such as skin colour) — what Ossorio (2003) terms 'simple divisions of people…that are deep, essential, somehow biological or even genetic, that are unchanging, [involving] clear-cut, distinct categories of people'.

➢ **Ethnicity**, as we've previously seen, refers to **cultural differences** between social groups in areas like religion, family structures, beliefs, values and norms.

This distinction is important in terms of understanding how and why ethnic identities develop because it rejects the idea that 'racial identities' are somehow inherent, natural and definable independently of the cultures in which they exist.

Ethnicity is not, as Modood et al. (1997) argue, always easy to define; it can be difficult to precisely identify the cultural differences that mark one ethnic group apart from another because ethnic identity, as Burton et al. (2008) put it, 'is a multi-dimensional concept'. Song (2003) suggests that investigating ethnic identity involves discovering whether people are 'conscious of belonging to the group'; as Self and Zealey (2007) suggest, 'Membership of an ethnic group is something that is subjectively meaningful to the person concerned.'

Ethnic identity socialisation

As with other identities, a range of socialising agencies contribute to the formation of ethnic identities.

The family

This group is an important source of ethnic identity in terms of **markers**. Song (2003) suggests an ethnic group is a group within a larger society that has a 'common ancestry' and 'memories of a shared past'; the group has a shared identity based around a variety of 'symbolic elements' that include:

➢ family and kinship
➢ religion
➢ language
➢ territory
➢ nationality
➢ physical appearance

The family is a crucial **reference group** for the construction and maintenance of ethnic identities in terms of **cultural markers**:

➤ **Traditions and customs**: This involves a range of unique cultural practices that mark one ethnic group off from another (which may also include things like a shared language).

➤ **History**: The family group contributes to the maintenance of unique ethnic identities by drawing on a range of oral histories and testimonies about shared experiences (such as being victims of white slavery in the case of black Caribbean and African identities).

➤ **Origins**: This involves country of origin and the sense of a common geographic location. Mehrotra and Calasanti (2010) suggest first-generation immigrants (people relocating to a new country) use the family group to maintain their previous ethnic identity in the face of a changed geographic and cultural situation.

➤ **Religion**: The beliefs, celebrations and traditions associated with different religious backgrounds also help to bind people together on the basis of shared cultural practices (such as common forms of worship).

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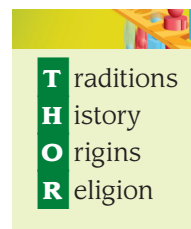
Peer groups

The peer group also act as a significant **reference group**, especially in situations where ethnic identities in contemporary, globalised cultures are not fixed and unchanging. Ethnic identities are, in this respect, **negotiable**: their nature and meaning, Song (2003) suggests, change through both external stimuli (contact with other cultures) and internal stimuli (such as a clash of ideas and experiences between different age, class or gender groups within a particular ethnic identity). Ethnic identities involve:

➤ **Constant maintenance**: The peer group and community offer various forms of support: from collective activities (festivals, celebrations, religious gatherings and the like) to a variety of material and symbolic cultural artefacts. These might include traditional forms of dress, food and crafts.

➤ **Choice**: There is choice in how a particular ethnic identity is interpreted and constructed. There is also the choice of identity itself (e.g. whether to style oneself British and Asian, Brasian, British, Asian or whatever). Although these are personal choices, such identities usually require the support of a peer group of like-minded individuals if they are to be maintained.

➤ **Oppositions**: Wimmer (2008) argues an important aspect of ethnic identities is the ability to define them in relation to other ethnic groups by constructing a sense of difference that establishes boundaries for a particular identity. While these oppositions can be positive (by conferring a sense of belonging to a definable cultural group and identity), they can also be **defensive** (a means of combating or lessening the effects of racism and discrimination, for example) or **imposed** through cultural

stereotypes about ethnic groups and identities (which also have the unintended consequence of reinforcing a stereotyped group's sense of identity).

Ethnic identities can also be reinforced by **segregation** between different ethnic groups. Phillips (2006) argues that in some areas of Britain two forms of segregation are taking place:

➢ **Hard segregation** involves ethnic separation in schools ('faith schools', for example, whose intake is restricted to followers of a particular religion) and residential districts that are 'on their way to becoming fully-fledged ghettoes'. Tyler (1999) found clear ethnic segregation in and around Leicester with the maintenance of 'white enclaves' in the context of black and Asian settlement.

➢ **Soft segregation** occurs when 'outside work, people confine their social and cultural lives to people of their own background and seldom make friendships across ethnic boundaries'.

> **?** Briefly explain what is meant by the idea that 'peer groups are important reference groups'.

Education

Within the education system ethnic identities are reinforced in a number of ways:

➢ **Faith schools**: The development of minority ethnic 'faith schools' based around religious preferences may contribute to the maintenance of ethnic identities in a multicultural society; it can also lead to the **segregation** of children from different cultural backgrounds.

➢ **Labelling**: Both positive and negative labelling within the education system contribute to ethnic identities. Indian and Chinese ethnicities generally attract positive labels based on their perception as academic and hard-working; black Caribbean pupils (boys in particular) generally attract negative labels based on a perception of low achievement levels.

➢ **Curriculum**: In both the National Curriculum (1988) and recent pronouncements by the education secretary Michael Gove (2009), the emphasis in history teaching is on British identity. Gove argues that 'There is no better way of building a modern, inclusive, patriotism than by teaching all British citizens to take pride in this country's historic achievements' that involves a 'proper narrative of British History'. Within this narrative, outside of passing reference to 1950s black Caribbean immigration, there is little or no reference to a British history as being anything other than white (although non-white ethnicities do appear as 'victims' or 'benefactors' of British imperialist history). Many schools, however, now recognise various aspects of minority ethnic cultures (such as celebrating different 'holy days' in addition to Christmas and Easter).

> **?** Identify and explain two ways ethnic identities can be reinforced through the education system.

The media

One feature of ethnic representation is the change from the *crude* forms of stereotypical, negative and demeaning representation prevalent in even the recent past (such as in the hugely popular television sitcom *Love Thy Neighbour* in the early 1970s, where black people were described as 'sambos' and 'nignogs') to forms of representation that are less negatively stereotypical and more positive — at least in some parts of the media (we need to keep in mind that 'the media' covers a wide and diverse range of outlets).

While black and Asian characters feature more frequently and positively in television programmes (from comedy to drama), there's also evidence that black actors are beginning to feature more frequently in prime-time starring roles: the BBC, for example, is currently (in 2011) featuring two black British actors in leading roles in programmes aimed at a mainstream British audience (Idris Elba in *Luther* and Chiwetel Ejiofor in *The Shadow Line*).

However, while representations are clearly changing, two qualifications should be noted. First, the baseline for measuring change was one where black and Asian actors rarely appeared on television other than in minor supporting roles or as the object of white derision, fear and stereotyping: any move away from this situation, however small, would represent a large increase. Second, across the media as

Idris Elba

a whole, black and Asian actors are under-represented. Cassidy (2011) reports, 'Actors from black, Asian or other ethnic minorities appeared in just 5.3 per cent of UK TV ads screened in 2010.'

Inferential racism

Hall (1995) argues that, while ethnic stereotyping has changed, it has not disappeared. Rather than the **overt** (or '**crude'**) **racism** of the past, ethnic groups face **inferential racism**. While representations are now less overtly and crudely racist, ethnic groups are still represented in ways that stress their *difference* (usually in cultural rather than biological terms) and their *problematic nature* (debates about immigration, for example, centred around ethnic groups as the source of social problems and terrorism). A recent (2011) example of this idea was Brian True-May (producer of *Midsomer Murders*) describing the programme as the 'last bastion of Englishness'; he didn't feature black and Asian actors because 'it wouldn't be an English village with them'.

? Briefly explain the difference between 'crude' and 'inferential' racism.

Stereotyping

Sreberny (1999) suggests ethnic minorities are 'represented by two dimensional characters, and...often negatively stereotyped'. Examples noted include *Coronation Street* introducing a black character who promptly helped burgle a house and an Asian family who took over the corner shop.

Ethnic stereotyping in comedy is more difficult to assess because of the fine line between 'laughing with' ethnic stereotyping and 'laughing at' crude ethnic stereotypes. Ravichandran (2010) argues that the BBC comedy *Come Fly with Me* crossed that line in featuring:

> a middle-aged black woman played by a 'blacked-up' white man, who utters 'Praise the Lord' at the end of every sentence, is too lazy to run her coffee shop and who spends her time shopping for cheap bargains at the airport and of course, the token sexist Muslim who calls every female 'a bitch' and sexualises anything in a skirt.

Labelling

Klimkiewicz (1999) points to three areas where ethnic minorities are negatively labelled in the media:

➢ **Crime**: They most frequently feature as agents of both domestic criminality and international terrorism.

➢ **Victims**: A 'victim identity' is established through the news reporting of natural disasters in places like Africa, and of ethnic minorities in Britain as victims of racism and discrimination.

➢ **Problems**: Non-white immigration is frequently discussed in terms of the 'problems' it creates for the host country. In a relatively new twist, however, ethnic groups such as Poles and Romanians have attracted negative newspaper labelling in terms of 'benefit tourism' (the idea that various Eastern European ethnic groups are able to freely enter Britain and live off 'generous State benefits').

The gaze

Ethnic minorities and their lives are generally viewed through a white, largely middle-class gaze (with notable exceptions such as the comedy programme *Goodness Gracious Me*, featuring an all-Asian cast — the title is an ironic reference to film and television stereotypes of Asian speech). Carrington (2002) notes how apparently 'positive' black identities are constructed around cultural spaces like sport, fashion and music (rap and hiphop, for example), based around a concept of **hyperblackness** — representations that promote stereotypes of 'black bodies' that reflect white perceptions of race conceived in terms of 'athleticism and animalism' (the idea these are somehow 'natural' features of black excellence).

'The Other'

Ethnic minorities are frequently discussed in terms of their 'otherness' — how 'They' are different from 'Us'. Representations are produced against a social background that constructs ethnic identities in terms of not just difference but also social problems.

Threat

Ethnic minorities are often characterised in the media as a threat: a **cultural threat**, presenting challenges to a 'British' (by implication, 'white') way of life through cultural practices like 'arranged and forced marriages'; or a **physical threat** — classically expressed in terms of the connection between 'Muslims' and 'terrorists' following the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 in the USA.

Religion

Religion promotes a sense of ethnic identity through:

➢ shared experiences (such as worship and cultural activities)
➢ customs and traditions associated with religious festivals
➢ 'cultural rules' that describe how to be a good Christian, Muslim or whatever

Religious identities can be used as **defensive identities** by drawing ethnic groups into a much stronger cultural grouping that becomes a vehicle for fighting racism, discrimination and social exclusion from mainstream society.

Work

One aspect of work-related identity noted by Song (1999) is 'the importance of small family-based businesses as a key form of immigrant adaptation' in two ways. The first involves the significance of 'the family as workplace' for some ethnic minority groups (such as Chinese, Italian and Asian groups). The second concerns the way in which children are co-opted into the family work space. In the case of Chinese families running takeaway restaurants in Britain, Song notes how 'children contribute their labour [and] come to understand and believe in "helping out" as part of a "family work contract"'.

Hybrid ethnic identities

In considering hybrid ethnic identities, we can contrast conventional and contemporary hybridisation.

Conventional hybridisation

Conventional hybridisation suggests that the mixing of distinctive ethnic identities produces new and unique identities. In the main this mixing tends to take place on the margins of identity, involving the combination of specific *features* of different ethnic identities, rather than a complete identity interchange. Examples include:

➢ food (where Indian, Chinese and Italian cuisine have become embedded in British culture, often with subtle changes that give them a unique 'British' identity)

➢ dress (where American jeans and T-shirts become incorporated into a variety of ethnic identities)

➢ music (displaying cross-over styles that produce unique musical fusions and genres)

Contemporary hybridisation

In modern societies ethnic identities undergo frequent maintenance, change and development under the influence of two main processes: **mass immigration**, where different ethnic groups physically meet, and **cultural globalisation**, where agencies such as the internet bring increasing exposure to different cultural influences. The key feature of contemporary hybridisation is that cultural changes, rather than creating a new and different hybrid identity (something that is actually quite rare), produce gradual changes to an *established identity*.

Ethnic identities, in this view, are constantly drawing on new influences, re-establishing old constants in the face of new challenges and so forth. An obvious example is white English youth identities that have variously *incorporated* aspects of other cultures:

➢ music (rock, pop, rap, hiphop)

➢ food (hamburgers, Asian cuisine, German beer)

➢ language (especially slang terms)

➢ clothing (blue jeans, T-shirts)

While these cultural imports have undoubtedly changed these identities, this has been by way of **incorporation** and **modification** to an existing sense of cultural identity and style, rather than through a conventional form of hybridisation.

> **?** Suggest two examples of how the mixing of distinctive ethnic identities produces new and unique identities.

Age identities

We can understand the idea of different age identities in terms of **life-course** — the idea that we can identify major phases in our biological development (such as childhood, youth, adulthood and old age) associated with different cultural meanings and identities. Although we can trace ways that socialising institutions such as the family, peer group and media help to establish, maintain and change age-related identities, we need to remember that age categories are **transgressive** — they cut across such institutions (family groups, for example, help to establish adult age identities as well as those of children and these, in turn, are influenced by media and the workplace).

A complicating factor in age-related identities is the lack of clear *historical* or *cross-cultural* agreement about the age at which the individual loses one identity and takes

on another (when, for example, does adulthood begin?). Settersten (2006), however, suggests age identities are significant in contemporary societies for three reasons:

➢ **Salience**: Age identities have a formal, organisational importance (salience) for societies as a way of structuring 'rights, responsibilities and entitlements' (between, for example, adults and children). Informally, individual age identities 'shape everyday social interactions' (such as those between a parent and child) and provide a basic structure to these exchanges.

➢ **Anchorage**: The passage of *biological time* is a way of fixing the passage of *social time* in that we give certain age-related events (an eighteenth or twenty-first birthday, retirement from work and so forth) social significance as markers (see next point).

➢ **Markers**: These denote the transition from one phase in the life-course to another (such as from child to adult). These processes are called **rites of passage**; they take different forms in different cultures, but in contemporary Britain include things like christenings, marriage ceremonies and funerals (with birthday celebrations also being part of the age ritual). Significantly, Settersten suggests biological age itself is relatively unimportant here: 'What matters is what the age *indexes* — the important experiences that happen at those times.'

We can note two further aspects of age identities related to the above:

➢ **Mapping**: Age identities come bundled with normative expectations (concerning the types of behaviour expected from different age groups) that we use as a 'life map'. Polkinghorne (1991), for example, suggests 'Individuals construct private and personal stories linking diverse events of their lives into unified and understandable wholes...They are the basis of personal identity and they provide answers to the question "Who am I?"'. In other words, I come to understand 'my self' by linking a range of age-related experiences to create 'the story of my life'.

➢ **Strategies**: Riach (2007) suggests that, by understanding how age identities are organised, we can use this knowledge to both upset normative expectations (of age-appropriate behaviour, for example) and 'pre-empt possible forms of marginalization'. For example, in situations where **ageism** is at work, people may take conscious steps to avoid 'embodying the older worker'.

> **?** Identify and explain two ways in which age identities are significant in modern British society.

Age identity socialisation

The family

Family groups can be important in the fixing of adult age identities (by having responsibility for children, for example). However, the family is particularly important for **childhood**, which, according to Woodson (2000), 'is the manner in which we understand and articulate the physical reality of biological immaturity' and, as such, is

arguably the first social identity consciously experienced by 'immature humans'. During this period we're first exposed to *primary* socialising influences from adults (mainly parents) and, increasingly, *secondary* influences from sources such as the media.

Jenks (1996) argues 'childhood is not a natural but a social construct' and is associated with a variety of meanings — from the idea of 'innocence' to the need for adult care, supervision and protection. Childhood also involves socially constructed ideas about **permissions** (children are 'allowed' to exhibit behaviours — such as play — discouraged in adults) and **denials** (children are not allowed to do a range of things — such as marrying — open to adults).

The family group is also important for age identification in the following ways. It's where we're first introduced to a range of different age groupings (from baby, through child, youth, adulthood and old age); our first practical experience of age gradations comes through contacts with parents and relations who fall into different age groups. In addition, it introduces age expectations and norms — different age identities are associated with different behaviours (the way they dress, relate to one another, talk to each other, exercise varying levels of social control and the like).

Education

In Britain the education system is **age-grouped** — children of similar ages are always placed together in classes. This contributes to a sense of age identity in two ways. First, children learn age-related differences, in terms of the different behaviours expected of different age groups. Second, children have age-related things in common; this is reinforced by age-grading and subcultures:

➢ **Age-grading**: This involves testing children at different age-related stages in their school career (culminating with GCSE at the age of 16). Each of these key stages reinforces the association with age identities and cultural knowledge (the things our society expects children of a specific age to know).

➢ **Subcultures**: Although youth subcultures tend to have wider associations with peer groups (and class and gender identities), school subcultures are a significant dimension of age identities, given that they tend to arise in particular (mainly teenage/ youth) age groups. Francis (2000), for example, argues teenage boys used 'laddish' behaviour in the classroom as a way of offsetting the generally low levels of esteem they received from both teachers and (female) pupils. Power et al. (2003) found a subcultural labelling process at work when they noted how successful middle-class students labelled themselves as failures for their inability to match the achievements of some of their highflying peers.

Peer groups

Shields (1992) rejects the notion of 'youth subcultures' and instead suggests age identities can be characterised by:

➢ **fragmentation** (lots of different identities co-existing within different age groups, for example, rooted in 'fleeting gatherings' rather than rigid groups)

➢ **consumption** (the things people buy and use — in the physical sense, or in the metaphorical sense of buying into a particular **lifestyle**)

Lifestyle and consumption differences seem to be particularly important in contemporary societies among **youth** which, like childhood, reflects a range of identities (such as pre-teens or 'teenies', teens and young adults) that have recently come into existence to reflect changes in areas like education, work and consumption patterns. Hine (2000), for example, argues 'teenagers didn't make much of an appearance in Britain until the mid-to-late 1950's', with the development of this identity reflecting changes like the extension of education and the development of consumer goods (music and fashion in particular) aimed at a specific post-child, pre-adult market.

Baron et al. (1999) note functionalists have argued that **youth cultures** and **subcultures** (spectacular versions of which include skinheads, punks and goths) function to provide a '**period of transition**' between childhood (the narrow family) and adulthood (the wider workplace). In other words, societies create 'youth identities' as a way of allowing young people to gradually move away from childhood and into adult identities.

Goths are an example of a youth subculture

Age-appropriate behaviour

Within and between peer groups generally (from childhood through youth to adulthood and old age), different age groups reflect different cultural assumptions about how it is appropriate for people of a particular age to behave and these assumptions reflect back onto individual identities:

➢ through a process of **identification** with people of a similar biological age. This creates a sense of belonging (**social solidarity**) to a specific grouping with its own particular values, norms and forms of behaviour.

➢ through **peer pressure** to conform to an **ascribed** age grouping. Children, for example, are denied some of the opportunities open to adults in our culture while the elderly are similarly denied opportunities to behave in 'age-inappropriate' ways (concerning sporting activities, sexuality and so forth).

In this respect, strong age identities act to control behaviour both within and across age groups. Young peer groups, for example, are generally sensitive both to consumption patterns within their group (wearing the right clothes, owning the latest mobile and so forth) and to the 'age-inappropriate' behaviour of other peer groups (such as the acute embarrassment created when your father tries to 'get down with the kids').

> **?** Suggest two examples of what some might consider 'age-inappropriate behaviour' in modern Britain.

The media

The significance of how different age groups are represented through the media relates to two ideas:

➢ **Self-concept**, where members of an age group come to define themselves in terms of how they're represented in the media. This is a form of **self-fulfilling prophecy** — a claim that, by being made, brings about the predicted behaviour. For example, if we expect 'teenagers' to be moody and introverted, we look for evidence in their behaviour to support this belief. When we find it, this confirms the original prediction.

➢ **Other-concept**: This is the idea that how we expect others to behave is based less on personal knowledge and experience and more on how we see them represented in the media.

Children, as Buckingham et al. (2004) note, 'have always been seen as a 'special' audience in debates about broadcasting — an audience whose particular characteristics and needs require specific codes of practice and regulation'. This group is subject to particularly strong forms of **censorship** (what they're allowed to watch and when it can be viewed). This reflects how children in our society are seen as a particularly vulnerable group, easily influenced by the media.

Youth identities are often represented in terms of being 'a problem' — rebellious, disrespectful, ungrateful, sex-obsessed and uncaring. A dominant form of representation over the past 40 years has been the distinction between 'normal' and 'abnormal' youth, with the former being largely defined in opposition to various spectacular forms of youth subcultures. Teddy boys (ask your grandparents), mods and rockers, skinheads, hippies, punks, emos and, indeed, chemos (emo chavs) have all featured heavily in the media as examples of abnormal youth.

Elderly people have also traditionally been represented as social problems (a burden on the young). They have often been portrayed unsympathetically, as being senile or forgetful, ill (mentally and physically) and unattractive (physically and sexually). Willis (2003) notes 'older people were often crudely stereotyped in drama, with fictional portrayals showing them as grumpy, interfering, lonely, stubborn and not interested in sex. Older women are often seen as "silly", older men as "miserable gits"'. However, the changing nature of television audiences — with more elderly viewers, who demand programming that reflects their identities, interests and abilities — means that representations are also gradually changing. In some situations, middle-aged or elderly men (in particular) are used to add a sense of seriousness or moral gravity to a situation.

It's also interesting that different age groups are neatly compartmentalised into discrete (separate and self-contained) categories. The conflicts that supposedly arise when adults meet youth, for example, are an unending source of inspiration for media writers (from *The Simpsons* onwards). Connor (2001) also points to the way ghettos exist *within* age groups and media: 'In print...youth magazines are often split along

gender lines and it is difficult to find any popular magazine that crosses the gender divide.' Willis (2003) notes, in terms of television, 'Everyone over the age of 55 tends to be lumped together as if they were a completely homogeneous group.'

Religion

Religion is potentially an important source of age identity because it provides a clear set of ideas, beliefs and practices that both bind believers together and give them a shared sense of identity based around religious certainties. The problem with this relationship, however, is twofold:

➢ O'Beirne (2004) found little evidence of religious belief or practice forming a significant part of self-identity in any age group. Across all ages only 20% of her respondents considered religion 'an important part of their personal description' — but even among these people religion was considered less important than family, age, work and interests as sources of identity.

➢ There is no clear evidence religious beliefs and practices are closely tied to particular age groups. While the elderly, for example, tend to show the greatest levels of religious commitment, this is not true of the elderly *as a whole*. Similarly, while young adults generally show the *least* religious commitment, *some* young adults show *more* religious commitment than other age groups.

While there is no *general* relationship between religion and age identity, religion can be a significant identity source for particular groups *within* age groups. Gans (1971) suggests membership of a religious group may provide certain benefits to individuals (by defining who they are, promoting clear moral guidelines and satisfying psychological, social and spiritual needs) — but as Perry and Perry (1973) note, this may only be important 'in times of rapid social change, in which problems of identity are critical'.

In other words, when social groups experience rapid changes that challenge their world view and make them anxious about the future, religious certainties can act as an important source of identity. Two groups that, for different reasons, are more likely to experience the dislocating effects of social change are the young and the elderly.

> **?** Suggest two ways in which religion can contribute to centred age identities.

Youth identities

Traditional religions have less appeal to the young (as one of Robins et al.'s (2002) respondents put it, 'It's not cool to be a Christian'). However, smaller sects and cults can have greater appeal, one based, for Zimbardo (1997), on the idea that they offer comfort and certainty at a point in people's lives where these things may be in short supply:

Imagine being part of a group in which you will find instant friendship, a caring family, respect for your contributions, an identity, safety, security, simplicity, and an organized daily agenda. You will learn new skills, have a respected position, gain personal insight, improve your personality and intelligence. There is no crime or violence and your healthy lifestyle means there is no illness...Who would fall for such appeals? Most of us, if they were made by someone we trusted, in a setting that was familiar, and especially if we had unfulfilled needs.

For those without 'unfulfilled needs', Hunsberger (1985) argues, religious belief doesn't increase with age — those who were nonbelievers in their youth don't become believers as they get older.

Although the absolutes and certainties of religion can be attractive for some young people (as a source of social and psychological stability), the reverse may also be true: prescriptive moral codes (such as the anti-abortion, anti-contraception and anti-gay teachings of some religions) may, in the words of another of Robins et al.'s (2002) young respondents, become 'a big turn-off '.

Elderly identities

Jowell and Park (1998) argue 'All the differences between age groups...are minor in comparison with those on religion. The fact is the young are overwhelmingly less religious than their elders.' Cumming and Henry (1961) suggest one reason for greater religious involvement among older people is that religious belief is a means of psychologically coping with the trauma of death.

De Geest (2002), however, relates religion to age identity on the basis that the elderly in our society progressively '**disengage**' from the world (retirement forces them out of workplace relationships, families no longer live together, friends start to die). Religion can help them form new group connections.

Work

For Magolda (1999), adulthood represents a shift in individual identity focus, away from the various forces that shape children and young adults and towards a sense of 'what to make of themselves within the context of the society around them'. The workplace represents a **symbolic separation** between adult and youth identities — even in terms of young adults being paid less than their older counterparts. The workplace can be central to the construction of age identities — something negatively evidenced, perhaps, when the individual is excluded from work through retirement.

In contemporary societies 'old age' is both separated from general notions of adulthood (although the old do, of course, retain certain aspects of adult identity) and an identity in its own right — one becoming increasingly significant in Britain through the twin trends of an **ageing society** (where the elderly outnumber the young) and **longer life expectancy**.

Retirement from work can, therefore, be a significant **rite of passage**, marking the transition from an adult to an elderly identity — a **diminished** identity resulting from the loss of status when retirement is enforced. Mutran and Burke (1979) note 'old people have identities which, while different from middle-aged persons, are similar to young adults: they see themselves as less useful and less powerful than middle-age individuals'.

? Identify and explain two examples of age 'rites of passage' in modern British society.

In addition, elderly identities can be **stigmatised** by seeing old age as an inevitable process of decline, senility, helplessness, withdrawal from society and loneliness. The elderly, in other words, are reconceptualised as a **deviant minority group**. Gianoulis (2005) argues the **medicalisation** of old age contributes to this process: 'Medicine defines and manages individuals deemed undesirable by the broader culture...and instead of viewing the disorientations of older people as being the result of personal and social change, they are viewed as symptoms of "senility".'

Conversely, we could note the contemporary **reinvention** of elderly identities based around longer life expectancy and more affluent lifestyles. This involves:

➢ the fragmentation of elderly identities (distinguishing between the old and the very old, for example)
➢ changing patterns of consumption and leisure (especially among the middle classes)
➢ different interpretations of the meaning of 'being old', whereby the elderly refuse to conform to conventional stereotypes and social identities

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

2 Outline and explain how any two agents of socialisation influence age-related behaviour.   (16 marks)

3 Answer **one** of the following questions:
  a Explain and briefly evaluate the reasons why males adopt a laddish culture.
  b Explain and briefly evaluate the ways in which ethnicity may shape a person's identity.
  c Explain and briefly evaluate the ways in which class may shape a person's identity.   (24 marks)