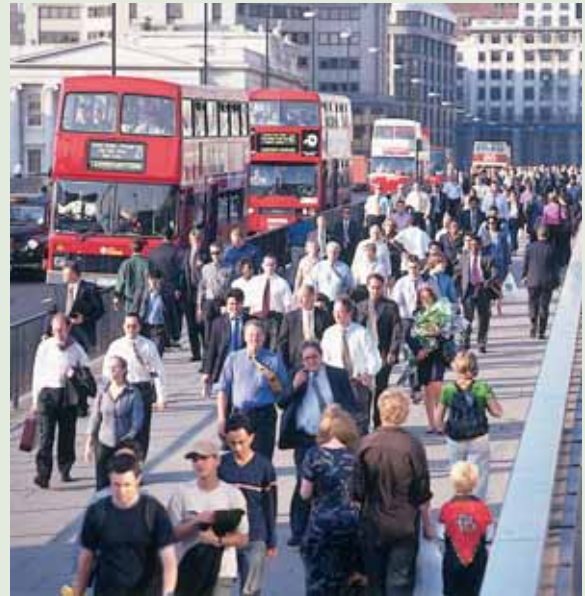# 1 *Culture and identity*

Introduction

Is there anybody else exactly like you? You'll probably answer 'no'. We like to think of ourselves as individuals and to see ourselves as unique.

Sociology does not deny this individuality. It does not claim that everybody is the same. However, it does argue that many of us have certain things in common. For example, members of a particular society usually share the same language. In this respect, we are not unique.

Most people live in social groups – in families, communities and nations – rather than as isolated individuals. As the poet John Donne said, 'No man is an island' (nowadays he would say that goes for women too). In other words, we are constantly coming into contact with other people. We are affected by them, we develop bonds with them. Indeed, we only become fully 'human' by participating in society.

Sociology has sometimes been described as the study of people in social groups. In this chapter we shall explore the fascinating story of how individuals are not isolated 'islands' but active members of society. We shall see how we learn certain values and ways of behaving, and how our membership of social groups gives meaning to our lives and shapes our identities.

Sociologists do not always agree on how and why things happen. But they help us to see more clearly how we are both 'individuals' and members of 'society'. And they help us see the connections between the two.

Unique individuals with many things in common

chaptersummary

▶ **Unit 1** identifies the main components of culture.

▶ **Unit 2** looks at socialisation – how people learn the culture of their society.

▶ **Unit 3** turns to the social origins of self and identity.

▶ **Unit 4** discusses age and identity.

▶ **Unit 5** looks at disability and identity.

▶ **Unit 6** describes the changing nature of ethnic cultures.

▶ **Unit 7** explores national and global identities.

▶ **Unit 8** charts the shifting patterns of gender identities.

▶ **Unit 9** considers the importance of class identities.

▶ **Unit 10** examines the relationships between leisure, consumption and identity.

Unit 1 *What is culture?*

keyissues

1   Are humans ruled by instincts?

2   How does culture shape human behaviour?

3   What are the main components of culture?

1.1 Becoming human

Instincts vs culture

Why do human beings behave the way they do? One view is that it is a matter of *instincts* – biological predispositions that tell us 'instinctively' what we should do. Instincts are something we are born with rather than something we learn. A great deal of animal behaviour seems to be ruled by instincts. For example, birds seem to follow fairly fixed patterns of behaviour as if they were a set part of their 'nature'.

Nowadays, a popular explanation for human behaviour is to look for the answer in our genes. People vary in their genetic make-up and this might explain why they behave differently. Some scientists claim there is a gene for crime, one for alcoholism, even a 'gay' gene. Some have offered genetic explanations for why men are unable to find butter in the fridge, or why women can't read maps!

Sociologists accept that humans have natural *reflexes* –

activity1 genes or culture?

Item A Nappies and planes

There is no gene or brain pattern which makes men incapable of ironing, shopping, changing nappies or expressing their emotions. And there is none which stops women running governments or multinational corporations, flying fighter planes, abusing children or committing murder. It is culture which explains why women do more of some things and men do more of other things.

Source: MacInnes, 1998

Item B A woman's place

questions

1 What view does Item A take on the genes versus culture debate?

2 Look at Item B.

   a) Why are the passengers reacting like this?

   b) Is there any justification for their reaction?

for example, we automatically flinch when someone strikes us. They also accept that we have certain biological *needs* that must be met – for example, the need for food and drink. But sociologists believe that human behaviour is too complex and diverse to be explained in simple biological or genetic terms. Rather, they see our actions as the result of our social and cultural environments. We *learn* to think and act in certain ways. And it is our *culture* which teaches us how we should think and act.

Feral children

People become fully human only when they are socialised into the culture of a society – when they learn the way of life of that society. It is culture which allows them to develop their human potential. We can see this in the case of so-called feral children – children raised in the wilds or in prolonged isolation from human company. Some reported cases are pure fantasy but the few authentic cases show that when these children are discovered and enter human society they encounter serious problems. They often seem stupid, unresponsive and animal-like. Deprived of the stimulation of human company, stripped of the opportunity to acquire human language early in life, these children are sometimes barely recognisable as human.

Cultural diversity

If human behaviour really is dictated by our genes or

instincts, we would expect to find people behaving in much the same way all over the world. But what is regarded as normal behaviour varies from one culture to another. If we lived in Victorian Britain or in modern China, we would follow different customs, have different lifestyles. So human behaviour is flexible and diverse. It varies according to the culture we live in. Even the way we display our bodies in public changes over time and from place to place.

The social body Norbert Elias (1978) provides a detailed account of changing cultural attitudes towards the body. In sixteenth century Europe there was little sense of shame or delicacy about bodily matters. People would happily wipe snot on their sleeve or blow their nose on the tablecloth. They usually ate with their hands, and belching, farting, scratching, and even urinating or defecating in public were commonplace. But Elias describes how in the succeeding centuries people gradually became more sensitive to the 'shame' and 'disgust' of bodily functions as they developed 'good manners' and disciplined their bodies to act in a 'civilised' way.

Becoming human – conclusion

The long-running debate over whether human behaviour is largely the result of 'nature' (genes, biology) or 'nurture' (culture, environment) shows no sign of coming to an end. Nature and nurture always interact in complex ways. Even if we have a biological inclination to behave in certain

activity2 from monkey boy to choir boy

Walking through a Ugandan forest, a woman spotted a group of monkeys. To her astonishment, she realised that one member of the group was a small boy. Local villagers 'rescued' this 'monkey boy' and identified him as John Ssabunnya who had been abandoned as a two-year-old.

For the past three years, John had lived with a troupe of colobus monkeys. He had learned to communicate with them – with chatters, shrieks, facial expressions and body language. He shared their diet of fruit, nuts and berries, he became skilled at climbing trees and, like those who adopted him, he walked on all-fours. He was terrified of his 'rescuers' and fought to remain with his family of monkeys.

John was washed and clothed – much to his disgust – and taken to an orphanage. He gradually learned to behave like a human being. Slowly but surely, he began to sing, laugh, talk, play, dress and walk like children of his age.

Today, John is a member of the Pearl of Africa Choir which has successfully toured the United Kingdom.

John, aged 14

Source: *Daily Mail*, 23.9.1999

question

How does the case of John Ssabunnya illustrate the importance of learned behaviour for human beings?

activity3 the body

Afghanistan

Brighton

question

What do these photographs suggest about culture and attitudes towards the body?

ways, this will be channelled by society – the aggressive individual could become a violent criminal or a successful boxer, depending on social circumstances.

Whatever our underlying nature, it is clear that culture has a huge effect on our behaviour. We saw this in the case of feral children. Also, human behaviour is enormously diverse, showing wide variations over time and between societies. Norbert Elias demonstrated how even our

intimate body habits are a product of society.

Sociologists suggest that if we want to explain social behaviour, then most of the answers can be found at the social and cultural level.

1.2 Looking at culture

Shared meanings and values

Sociologists usually define culture as the shared meanings, values and norms of a society or group.

Meanings Stuart Hall (1997) describes some of the key features of cultural meanings. First, it is largely thanks to *language* that humans are able to create meanings and make sense of the world. It is through language and other symbols, for example visual images, that people express their emotions and thoughts and communicate with one another. Second, culture is about *shared* meanings. People produce meanings together and so over time each social group builds up shared understandings of the world. Third, humans are constantly creating new meanings and revising old ones – so culture can be seen as a process or activity.

Values are things we regard as important, the most significant standards or principles in our lives. Love is an obvious example. Other examples are religious convictions and political loyalties. In everyday life, most people believe in the values of honesty, consideration towards others, justice and fairness – although we are not so good at living up to these values!

Norms are social expectations or rules about how people should or should not behave – for example, you should hold the door open for others, you should not grab the last biscuit. There are different rules for different situations – you can let your hair down at an end-of-term party, but the same behaviour would be frowned upon during normal class time. Norms also vary in their degree of seriousness. Committing murder will result in severe legal punishment but bad table manners might only provoke irritation in others.

activity4 *meanings, values, norms*

Item A *Meanings*

Item B *Values*

The Cheyenne lived on the Great Plains of North America. This account describes their traditional culture.

The Cheyenne believe that wealth, in the form of horses and weapons, is not to be hoarded by the owner. Instead it is to be given away. Generosity is highly regarded and people who accumulate wealth and keep it for themselves are looked down upon. A person who gives does not expect an equal amount in return. The greatest gift they can receive is prestige and respect for their generous action.

Bravery on the battlefield is one of the main ways a man can achieve high standing. Killing an enemy, however, does not rank as highly as a number of other deeds. Touching or striking an enemy with the hand or a weapon, rescuing a wounded comrade or charging the enemy alone while the rest of the war party looks on are amongst the highest acts of bravery.

Source: Hoebel, 1960

Cheyenne photographed in 1889

Item C Norms

Culture defines appropriate distances between people when they hold a conversation. In *The Silent Language*, Edward Hall observed that these distances are different in North and South America. This can cause problems when North meets South. In Hall's words, 'The result is that when they move close, we withdraw and back away. As a consequence, they think we are distant or cold, withdrawn and unfriendly. We, on the other hand, are constantly accusing them of breathing down our necks, crowding us and spraying our faces.'

Source: Hall, 1973

questions

1 What meanings does the symbol in Item A communicate?

2 a) Identify the values of the Cheyenne described in Item B.

   b) How do they indicate that values vary from culture to culture?

3 Norms are important. Discuss briefly with reference to Item C.

Roles are the parts we play in society. For example, in today's society, most of us play the roles of son or daughter, father or mother, student or worker. Culture provides guidelines on how these roles should be played. And just as culture varies from society to society, so do the cultural guidelines for role-playing.

Whole way of life

Anthropologists specialise in studying whole societies, especially small-scale, less technologically developed societies. Perhaps, as a result of this, they tend to adopt a sweeping definition of culture. Clyde Kluckhohn (1951) described culture as the distinctive 'way of life' of a group of people. This way of life includes their typical patterns of behaviour – their common lifestyles, the skills and techniques they use to make a living, and all their routines, customs and rituals.

Subculture

The functionalist perspective in sociology sees society as a giant system that 'works' because its various parts support one another. Each part of society has a function – it makes a contribution to other parts and to society as a whole. In this view, the culture of a society is seen as providing a sort of social 'glue' which creates bonds between people. An over-arching culture provides shared values and moral consensus – an agreement about what's right and wrong. These are regarded as essential for ensuring cohesion and harmony in society. Members of society tend to learn the same culture – the same meanings, values and norms.

However, as societies grow larger and more complex, it becomes increasingly difficult to talk about one culture which everybody shares equally. Rather, people select particular norms, values and lifestyles from the wide range on offer. For example, in Britain today there are groups who share many aspects of mainstream culture, but who also have certain beliefs, attitudes and ways of behaving of their own. In other words, they have their own *subcultures*.

High and low culture

High culture refers to artistic and intellectual work which is seen to be of the highest quality. It covers 'great works of art' such as the paintings of van Gogh, the compositions of classical musicians such as Mozart, and highly regarded literature such as the writings of Shakespeare. High culture is seen to be created by a talented few and is thought to be enjoyed mainly by people with refined and sophisticated tastes.

High culture is sometimes contrasted with *low culture* which, as its name suggests, is seen as inferior, of lower quality, as less worthy. Thus the high culture of classical music is contrasted with the low culture of pop music and the high culture of a Shakespearian play is contrasted with the low culture of *Eastenders*. Where high culture is seen to be enjoyed by the 'refined and sophisticated few', low culture is enjoyed by the 'ordinary and

unsophisticated' majority.

Clearly the idea of high and low culture is based on a value judgement – one is judged to be superior to the other. Sociologists usually try to avoid value judgements.

Popular culture

Popular culture refers to the cultural pursuits of, and cultural products used by, large numbers of the population. Examples of popular culture include football, pop music, websites such as Facebook and YouTube, television, movies, bestselling novels, DVDs and CDs, newspapers and magazines. It also includes popular fashions and lifestyles.

The term popular culture does not usually carry the same value judgements as high and low culture. As used by sociologists, it simply refers to the cultural products and pursuits which have widespread appeal.

Mass culture

Mass culture is culture which is produced for and marketed to the mass of the population. It is mass produced for mass consumption. It is seen as 'dumbed down', trivial, bland, superficial and undemanding. Examples of mass culture include Hollywood movies, reality TV, newspapers like the *Sun* and the *Star*, and celebrity magazines like *OK* and *Now*.

The consumers of mass culture are seen to be passive. They 'sit there' and consume what they're given. They buy what the ads tell them to buy, participate in the pursuits provided for them, and 'live' the fantasies created for their entertainment. As such, the masses are easily manipulated and open to exploitation. They 'buy in' to mass culture with little thought or critical awareness. They uncritically consume soap operas, celebrity gossip and the latest fashions. This lack of critical judgement prevents them from questioning the society they live in and from discussing the major issues of the day.

Marxism This view of mass culture has certain similarities to the ideas of Marxist sociologists – sociologists who have developed the ideas of Karl Marx (1818-1883). They argue that there are two main classes in capitalist society – the ruling class who own private industry and the subject class made up of workers who sell their labour in return for wages. Workers produce wealth in the form of goods and services, but a large part of this wealth is taken from them in the form of profits by the capitalist ruling class. In this way, the ruling class exploit the subject class – they gain at the expense of the workers.

The workers are unaware of their exploitation. They see the world in terms of *ruling class ideology* – a false picture of reality which supports the position of the ruling class. The mass media is largely responsible for broadcasting this ideology. It presents the capitalist system as normal, reasonable and perfectly acceptable.

And the 'mindless' entertainment it provides dulls any critical awareness, produces feelings of well-being, and disguises the reality of an oppressive society.

Global culture

Global culture refers to those aspects of culture which are worldwide. Many sociologists argue that there is a steadily growing global culture. They point to global music styles – for example, MTV Asia's top 10 singles chart for January 2008 with artists such as Britney Spears, Rihanna, KT Tunstall and Kelly Clarkson is similar to many other charts across the world. Many sports such as soccer, motor racing and boxing have an increasingly global audience and sportspeople such as David Beckham enjoy worldwide fame. Brands such as Nike and Gucci, drinks such as Coca-Cola, and fast-food restaurants such as McDonald's are increasingly global. And cultural icons such as Princess Diana and Nelson Mandela are no longer limited to particular nations.

This growth in global culture is seen as part of the development of *globalisation* – the increasing connections between various parts of the world. Many companies, for example BP, Ford and Sony operate on a global basis and trade is increasingly worldwide. The internet has provided a means of global communication. Globalisation and a global culture go hand-in-hand.

key terms

Instincts Genetically-based directives for behaviour.

Culture The learned, shared behaviour of members of a society. Culture includes meanings, values and norms.

Meanings Things which give sense and significance to people's experiences.

Values Beliefs about what is important, what is worth having, what is right and wrong.

Norms Social expectations or rules about how people should behave. Guides to behaviour.

Roles The parts people play in society.

Subculture Certain meanings, values and norms which are distinctive to a particular group within society.

High culture Artistic and intellectual work seen to be of the highest quality and enjoyed mainly by a sophisticated minority.

Low culture Cultural products judged as lower quality and enjoyed mainly by the unsophisticated majority.

Popular culture The cultural pursuits of and the cultural products used by large numbers of the population.

Mass culture Cultural products produced for the mass of the population which, some argue, are used to manipulate them and disguise their exploitation.

Ruling class ideology A false picture of society which supports the position of the ruling class.

Global culture Those aspects of culture which are worldwide.

Looking at culture – conclusion

Culture is essential to the operation of human society. Without shared meanings, people would be unable to communicate. Without shared values, they would be pulling in different directions. And without norms directing behaviour, there would be no order in society.

From a sociological viewpoint, human behaviour is primarily organised and directed by culture. We are not ruled by instinct, governed by our genes, or directed by biological needs and impulses. If we were, then human behaviour would be much the same in different times and in different societies. It isn't, as can be seen from the wide variation between cultures in different time periods and places.

activity5 global culture

Item A Movies

Buying pirated videos and DVDs in Shanghai, China. Titles include 'Gone With The Wind' and Disney's 'Sleeping Beauty'
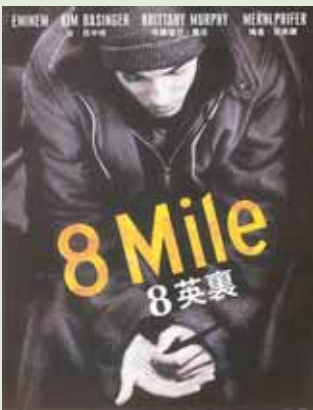
Vietnamese edition of '8 Mile' and Russian edition of 'Lord of the Rings'

Item B 50 Cent in Venice

American rapper 50 Cent performing in Venice

Item C Chinese hip-hop fans

Chinese hip-hop fans in Beijing

question

What evidence do Items A, B and C provide for a global culture?

summary

1. Although animals sometimes learn new ways of behaving, they are largely controlled by more or less fixed biological instincts.

2. Human behaviour is too complex and too diverse to be explained solely by biologically-based instincts, needs or drives.

3. From a sociological view, human behaviour is largely directed by culture. Culture is learned rather than biologically based.

4. The example of feral children shows the importance of culture in making us fully human. Culture provides us with language, values and a sense of our human identity.

5. Culture varies from society to society.

6. Culture provides meanings, values, norms and roles to guide our behaviour.

7. Sociologists try to avoid making judgements about cultures.

8. As societies become larger and more complex, there are growing numbers of groups with their own subcultures.

9. The idea of high and low culture is based on a value judgement. The term popular culture does not usually carry a value judgement.

10. The idea of mass culture often pictures the majority as easily manipulated and uncritically accepting their position in society.

11. Many sociologists argue there is a steadily growing global culture which they see as part of the process of globalisation.

Unit 2 *Socialisation*

keyissues

1   What is socialisation?

2   How do people learn social roles?

3   Who are the main agents of socialisation?

2.1 The learning game

In this unit we turn to the question of how individuals adopt cultural values and roles. The answer is that we *learn* culture through a process of *socialisation*. Since culture is not an innate thing, something we are born with, it has to be passed down from one generation to another. So we have to be taught the norms and values of our society or group. Over time we *internalise* many of these – they become part of our personal set of norms and values.

But socialisation is not a simple one-sided process of instruction in which we passively accept what we are told. We are not empty vessels into which culture is poured. Each of us actively participates in our own cultural learning, trying to make sense of society's values and beliefs, accepting some of them but rejecting others.

Types of socialisation

Primary socialisation The early years of life are important in the learning process. This is the stage of *primary socialisation*, when we are normally in intimate and prolonged contact with parents. Our parents are *significant others* – they have a great influence on us and we care about their judgements of us. Significant others play a key part in teaching us basic values and norms.

Secondary socialisation This refers to the socialisation we receive later in life, from a wide range of people and agencies. They include peer groups, teachers, media and casual acquaintances. Sometimes they play a supportive role, adding to the primary socialisation of earlier years. But teachers also introduce us to new and more complex knowledge and skills. And friends sometimes introduce us to values and lifestyles which wouldn't win the approval of our parents!

Re-socialisation We usually have to learn new ways when our roles change. This may be a gradual process – for example, growing into adulthood. At other times it can be dramatic and abrupt. For example, army recruits experience the shock of basic training, when they have to abandon their civilian identity and submit to strict discipline.

Anticipatory socialisation In many cases we have already 'rehearsed' roles before we take them on. We imagine ourselves in them, we read about them, we learn something about them beforehand. For example, the young person who enters medical school already knows a bit about the life of a doctor from personal experience as a patient and from watching television shows such as *ER* or *Casualty*.

2.2 Agents of socialisation

The *agents of socialisation* are the people or groups who play a part in our socialisation. Sometimes they play an important role without us realising it. Sometimes we overestimate the influence they have on us. For some views on this, see Table 1.

Parents

The majority of children still grow up in a family headed by both their natural parents. But over the last thirty years there has been an increase in the numbers of lone-parent

Table 1 Survey of young people aged 11-21

'From whom do you think you have learned the most about sex and growing up?'

Parents	7%
Teachers	22%
The internet	7%
Friends	27%
Brothers and sisters	4%
Newspapers and magazines	12%
TV and radio	13%
Church/clergy	0%
Don't know	9%

Source: *The Observer*, 21.07.2002

and step-families. So family life has become more diverse. But whatever the particular family set-up, parental figures remain the main agents of primary socialisation. In their first years of life children spend most of their time with their parents and are highly dependent on them. A sense of security during early childhood life is often seen as crucial for developing a stable personality and for effective learning of norms and values.

Learning from parents One way in which young children learn about social norms is by imitating their parents. They may copy the way adults talk, or their table manners for example. By a process of trial and error, they learn what is acceptable – asking politely – and unacceptable – rudely interrupting. As they get older they use their parents as *role models*. Girls may play with dolls 'just like mummy'. Later in life the roles might be reversed – young people sometimes have to teach their parents about things like mobile phones and computers!

For their part, parents try to instil social norms by setting an example and teaching their children how to behave. They use *sanctions* (rewards and punishments) to guide and control the learning process. If children follow the 'proper' norms, their parents will reward them with smiles, loving attention, praise and treats. But if they misbehave they are likely to be punished by frowns, reprimands, the denial of treats, and maybe even a smack.

This system of rewards and punishments does not guarantee that children will always behave 'correctly' – sometimes they will test the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, and sometimes they will show open defiance. But over a period of time they get a pretty good idea of the social norms held by their parents!

Diversity The socialisation process may vary according to the particular family structure. For example, an 'absent father' may find it difficult to act as a role model for his children, while a step-father may not feel entitled to control his step-children in the same way as their biological father could.

activity6 learning the drill

US army recruits during basic training

Getting married

question

What types of socialisation apply to the people in these photographs? (More than one type may apply.)

The experience of growing up within a family also varies according to its social and cultural values. For example, a devout Muslim family will ensure that religion plays a strong part in the child's upbringing.

Class and parenting Diane Reay (1998) made a detailed study of 33 mothers in London. All of these women put great effort into 'practical maintenance' of children – feeding, clothing and so on – as well as emotional work – reassuring and encouraging their children. All of them tried to support their children's schooling. However, Reay identified major class differences. The middle-class mothers had time and energy to spend reading to their children and were confident when talking to teachers. The working-class mothers, by contrast, had more of a struggle to make ends meet and so had less time and energy. They also had fewer cultural resources such as verbal confidence and knowledge of how the education system operates. This meant they were less effective in compensating for poor schooling and in persuading teachers to act on their complaints.

Paranoid parents? Frank Furedi (2001) describes a change in the role of parents in recent years. Traditionally, 'good' parents tried to care for and stimulate their children. Nowadays, they often see their main task as protecting their children from danger (accidents, paedophiles, bullies). Furedi believes parents have become paranoid. He thinks

activity7 parents and socialisation

Item A We have ways …

Item B Keeping in touch

Professor Kevin Warwick and Danielle Duval, with the chip that will be placed in her arm

The parents of an 11 year-old girl are having her fitted with a microchip so that her movements can be traced if she is abducted. The miniature chip implanted in her arm will send a signal via a mobile phone network to a computer which will be able to pinpoint her location on an electronic map.

Some children's charities have claimed that these parents are over-reacting as the chances of a child being abducted are small.

Source: *The Guardian*, 3.9.2002

questions

1 What ways do parents have of 'making their children conform'?

2 In what ways does Item B support Furedi's views?

the risks of harm to children have been exaggerated and the new focus on protection is unhealthy. Children are chauffeured and shepherded from place to place by anxious parents. All sorts of risks – adventure trips with schools, even messing around in school playgrounds – are increasingly closed off to them. This may prevent children from developing a healthy sense of adventure.

Education

Modern Western societies are too complex for young people simply to 'pick up' their culture as they go along. They are required to undergo a long period of formal education. In school they are formally taught the culture of their country – its history, language and religions. They also learn technical knowledge such as maths and science that often has practical applications in daily life.

The hidden curriculum School pupils also learn from the unofficial *hidden curriculum* – the background values and expectations that run through the school system. For example, they learn the importance of hard work and success through the exam system. When they take part in sports they learn the value of competition and teamwork. They learn the importance of conforming to rules when they get punished for being late, misbehaving, or not handing in work on time.

School is also a setting where children's social horizons are widened. They may mix with people from different social classes, ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds. They also become more aware of the different identities of people from various ethnic, gender and social class groups.

The importance of schools It is difficult to judge whether schools are becoming more or less important as agents of socialisation. On the one hand, educational qualifications are now seen as essential for getting good jobs. This means that pupils are working harder than ever, with increasing numbers staying on after the minimum leaving age. On the other hand, schools often complain that they have to fight a battle over values. Some pupils may not share the values expressed by the school. Also, teachers often feel they have to compete against the attractions of mass media and youth culture for the attention of pupils.

Schooling the boys An example of the tough uphill task some schools face is provided by Christine Skelton's (2001) study of a primary school in the North East. This school was set in an economically deprived area with a reputation for crime. The teachers regarded many of the local parents as 'inadequate' and so they felt the school had the important task of socialising children properly. When young boys came to school they brought with them the attitudes they picked up from the local 'lads' and 'hard men' – aggression, physical toughness, dominance and hierarchy.

The school attempted to maintain social control by relying on firm measures. It created a sort of fortress (locked gates, fences, security cameras) as a defence against violence and theft. Also, the teachers (both male and female) adopted 'masculine' styles – firm eye

activity8 learning

Pledging allegiance to their country

Playtime in a London primary school

question

What do you think these pupils are learning from the activities shown in the photographs?

activity9 *peer groups – the good and the bad*

Item A Talking

'I can talk to my friends about things I can't really talk to my parents about, because well – they seem to understand me more, and my parents don't really listen to me, and my friends do, because they've been in the same situation as me'.

Source: Young girl, quoted in Tizard & Phoenix, 1993

Item B 'Behaving badly'

Britain has the worst behaved teenagers in Europe. They are more likely to take drugs, have sex at an early age, indulge in binge drinking and get involved in fights. The collapse of family life is partly to blame. With no guiding hand from the family, youngsters are more likely to fall victim to peer group pressure. Just 64% of teenagers eat with their parents, compared with 89% in France and 93% in Italy. British children spend half their spare time watching television, playing computer games and using the internet.

Source: *Sunday Times*, 29.7.2007

Item C Friends

questions

1 What do Items A and B reveal about peer groups?
2 Why do you think *Friends* is so popular with young people?

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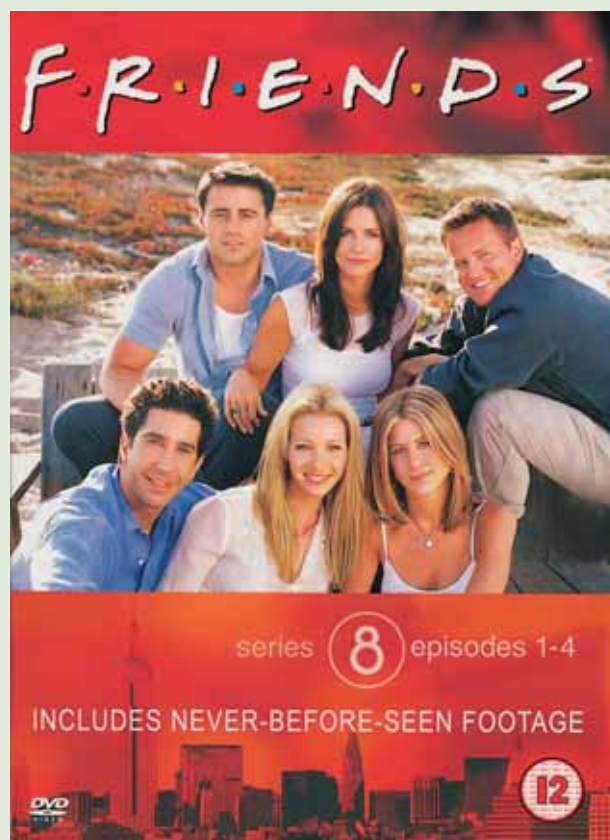
contact, intimidatory body language – to gain 'respect', show who was 'boss' and instil some 'fear' in the troublesome pupils. Skelton points to the irony that the school's control strategies were in many ways a reflection of the 'tough' values that were prized in the local community!

Peer group

A *peer group* is a friendship group formed by people of roughly the same age and social position. They meet each other as equals rather than being supervised by adults. In the early years of life, children like to play with one another for fun and amusement. But play is also a valuable learning experience. In play situations they learn about social norms (eg, treating others properly) and they develop social skills (eg, negotiating over toys). They can also experiment with social roles (eg, playing shop assistants and customers).

   When children become teenagers, they spend increasing amounts of time away from their families and in the company of their friends. Parents often worry that peer group pressures will encourage their children to steal, take drugs, or have sex. Young people themselves often worry about their popularity within the peer group. Nevertheless, these groups perform valuable functions for their members.

Within them, young people begin to develop independence from their parents. This prepares them for taking on adult roles themselves.

Peer power Adler and Adler (1998) studied a group of white middle-class children in the United States. They found that the peer group was enormously important in the lives of these pre-adolescent children. Being popular and having friends made children feel good about themselves, but being socially isolated had the reverse effect. Adler and Adler describe how friendship groups shift and change as children move in and out. Over time a hierarchy develops, both between groups (the leading cliques have higher prestige) and within groups (some members have greater power and influence than others). Friendship cliques exercise their power by accepting some children and excluding others. Within each group, friends are expected to be loyal to the peer values, but 'weaker' members are often bullied and manipulated by the rest.

Mass media

Mass media consume an enormous amount of our time – just think of all those teenagers locked away for hours on end in their bedroom with their own music centre, TV, game console and computer. We seem in constant danger of being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of print

(newspapers, magazines, books) and electronic messages (TV, radio, the Internet). So it seems only reasonable to assume that the media have some effect on our attitudes, values and behaviour.

Admittedly, media seldom have a direct *hypodermic effect* – they do not inject their content into us and make us immediately accept what they tell us. But they help to create the cultural climate within which we live. They give us a sense of what values and behaviour are acceptable in the modern world. They provide us with role models – they hold up certain sports stars or showbiz celebrities for us to admire and copy.

Magazines and gender stereotypes The view of the world we get from the media is often highly stereotyped. For example, magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* seem to project an image of women as obsessed with sex and fashion. Likewise, men's magazines such as *Maxim* have been criticised for celebrating a crude 'lad culture' of lager louts, football and 'babes'. However, some people say these magazines are just escapist fun, and most people have little difficulty in separating media stereotypes from the 'real' world.

Bollywood Mass media can play an important role in socialisation. Marie Gillespie (1993) demonstrates this in her study of Sikhs in Southall. She shows how the videos produced by the Indian film industry (known as 'Bollywood') are enormously popular in this community. Whole families watch them together. Gillespie found that these videos have important socialising functions – they create links between Asian communities throughout the world, they socialise younger children into Asian cultures and languages and they help to reinforce a sense of Asian identity. But Gillespie adds that Sikhs are not just a passive audience for these films. Family members respond to them in different ways: older people watch them for nostalgic reasons while younger people are more critical – they sometimes mock the films and complain that they portray India as a backward country.

Religion

Although religions deal with spiritual matters, they also have an influence on social attitudes and behaviour. The major world religions – Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism – have had a deep impact on the societies in which they are dominant. This influence operates at a number of levels.

First, each religion offers a set of moral values. Over time these become part of the culture of a society. People are exposed to these values even if they do not personally attend a place of worship. Second, the rituals and ceremonies of religion have traditionally been seen as a force for social unity. Collective acts of worship such as marriages, baptisms and funerals bring people together and remind them of their common bonds and shared values. Third, religions provide a moral code (eg, the Ten Commandments) which guides our earthly behaviour. We

can see this when people undergo a religious conversion – it usually means far-reaching changes in their behaviour and lifestyles.

Secularisation? The long-term decline in church attendance in Britain suggests the country is becoming more secular – non-religious. Does this mean that the influence of religion is on the decline? Not necessarily. A decline in churchgoing does not automatically mean that people have abandoned religious ideas and beliefs. Over 70% of the population still say they believe in God, while a minority are turning to New Age beliefs and practices such as the use of crystals, Tarot cards, astrology and feng shui. Religion also plays a significant role among many of Britain's minority ethnic communities.

Muslim girls Charlotte Butler's study (1995) of a group of teenage Muslim girls in the East Midlands shows how religious beliefs can be adapted to fit changing circumstances. These young women, born in Britain, were moving away from the traditions of their parents. They remained firmly committed to their Muslim identity but they were modifying it in certain ways. Their experience of living in Britain had led them to regard certain Pakistani and Bangladeshi customs as irrelevant to their lives. Consequently, they were rejecting customs such as arranged marriages which were not regarded as essential features of Islam.

So these young women were developing more independent lifestyles to fit more easily into the British way of life, while at the same time maintaining their commitment to Islam.

Work

When we enter the workforce we have to be introduced to the skills, norms and values attached to the job. *Occupational socialisation* is a form of secondary socialisation as it occurs later in life, when we already have considerable cultural knowledge and skills.

It may well involve different forms of learning.

Anticipatory socialisation We may have learned a bit about the job beforehand, possibly by talking to people about it or taking a course in preparation.

Re-socialisation When we start work we have to learn new ways of behaving, such as submitting to workplace discipline (things like regular work hours and obeying the boss). This also applies when we move jobs because organisations vary in their styles and traditions.

Agents of workplace socialisation include bosses, colleagues, even customers. Some of these agents socialise us in formal ways, while others socialise us in a more informal fashion.

Formal socialisation The management of a firm takes formal responsibility for socialising employees. For example, they may provide training courses to develop the necessary work skills. In addition, they usually lay down norms about appearance, attitudes and behaviour. Some

activity10 McJobs

Item A *May I help you?*

Young people often get their first experience of work in 'McJobs' – unskilled, low paid, part-time jobs in fast-food restaurants. They are trained to perform simple tasks in a predictable manner, doing each action in exactly the same way. They have little scope for using their initiative.

Workers are even restricted in what they can *say* on the job. Every interaction with customers is tightly scripted – 'May I help you?', 'Would you like a dessert to go with your meal?', 'Have a nice day!' They are given scripts for any situations that may arise. Workers are no longer trusted to say the right thing.

Source: Ritzer, 2002

Item B *Have a nice day*

questions

1 What are the key features of socialisation into McJobs?
2 Why might these skills be less useful in other kinds of jobs?

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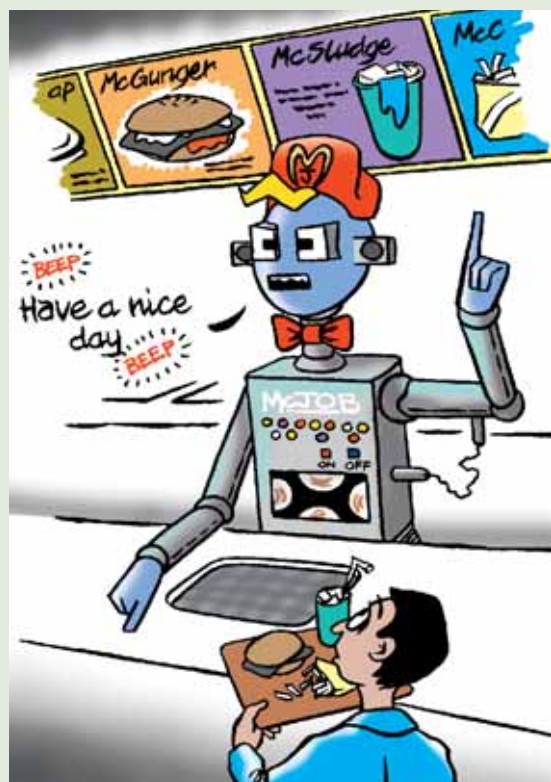
workplaces impose strict dress codes (eg, collar and tie for men). Behaviour may be controlled by official codes of conduct (eg, rules against private telephone calls and emails). Many firms also try to win the loyalty and motivation of their staff by encouraging them to identify with the company – some Japanese firms even have their own company song!

Informal socialisation This is the socialisation provided by peer groups at work. They introduce us to the informal culture of the workplace. They have their own rituals, such as playing jokes on newcomers (eg, sending them to the stores to fetch a tin of 'tartan paint'). They also have their own norms, many of which may not be approved by management. For example, they may ignore the official rules and do things their own way. Or they may try to slow down the pace of work – any colleague who works too hard may be bullied or mocked.

Canteen culture Canteen culture is the term given to describe the informal culture of police officers as they hang around the station or spend their off-duty hours together. Waddington's research (1999) shows how canteen culture can help socialise police officers. They learn from listening to other officers telling their 'war stories' – how they overcame tricky situations – and pick up practical advice such as 'you can't always play it by the book'.

Waddington argues that this canteen chat actually helps police officers deal with their stressful job. It boosts their occupational self-esteem by giving them a 'heroic' identity (they are out there on the front-line bravely facing 'trouble'). It reinforces their sense of 'mission' (they are doing a valuable job by fighting crime). It also celebrates certain values that are useful in police work (such as a 'macho' emphasis on physical strength and courage).

key terms

Primary socialisation Intimate and influential socialisation (usually from parents) in the early years of life.
Secondary socialisation Socialisation that comes later in life, from various sources.
Agents of socialisation The individuals, groups and institutions which play a part in the socialisation process.
Sanctions Rewards and punishments.
Role models People we use to give us ideas about how to play particular social roles.
Peer group A friendship group formed by people in the same social situation.
Secularisation The view that religion is declining in importance in society.
Occupational socialisation A form of secondary socialisation by which people learn the skills, norms and values of the workplace.

Socialisation – conclusion

Socialisation is an essential element in any society. There are a variety of agents who perform socialisation tasks, but experts disagree on which ones exercise the most influence. Traditionally it was thought that parents, and perhaps the church, had the greatest effect. In modern society the school, peer group and mass media seem to have growing influence.

There is also disagreement about whether these agents have a sufficiently 'responsible' attitude to their socialisation tasks. For example, parents are sometimes accused of simply putting their kids in front of the TV rather than talking to them. Peer groups offer us friendship but they also introduce us to dangerous temptations. Mass media inform us about the world, but sometimes they distort that world.

summary

1. Socialisation is a key feature of any society – it transmits the cultural heritage from one generation to the next. It is the way in which people learn social norms, roles and values.

2. Socialisation is not a one-way street in which people passively accept society's norms and values. They participate in internalising, modifying or rejecting these norms and values.

3. There are different forms of socialisation. Primary socialisation is often thought of as the most important and influential. But secondary socialisation is increasingly significant in fast-changing modern societies.

4. Socialisation is performed by different agents – parents, school, peer group, mass media, religion and work. These agents come into play at different stages of our life, and they have different effects.

Unit 3 Self, identity and difference

keyissues

1 What is identity?

2 How are social identities formed?

3 What is distinctive about postmodern and late modern society?

3.1 Defining identity

Identity refers to the way we see ourselves in relation to other people – what makes us similar to some people   and different from others. Identity operates at different levels.

The inner self At one level identity refers to the inner self, that 'little voice' inside our heads. Susan Blackmore (1999) describes this as the 'real you', the bit of yourself that feels those deep emotions like falling in love or feeling sad. It is the bit of you that thinks, dreams and has memories. It is something which seems to persist throughout your life, giving it some kind of continuity.

Personal identity This kind of identity is public and visible – it can be recorded in things like birth certificates, passports, medical files and career records. Each of us is unique on account of our special combination of personal details – our date and place of birth, name, personal biography, family background and by our history of personal relationships and life experiences.

Social identity Social identities are based on our membership of, or identification with, particular social groups. Sometimes these identities are given to us at birth – we are born male or female or with a white or black skin for example. But some social identities involve a greater degree of choice. We may actively choose to identify with some groups such as New Age Travellers or surfers.

We become more sharply aware of our group identities when we can contrast them with groups who are not like us. Social identities are often framed in terms of contrasts – eg, young/old.

This contrast is illustrated by Cecil's (1993) study of Protestants and Catholics in 'Glengow', a small town in Northern Ireland. In Glengow a person's religion was regarded as the most significant way of separating 'us' from 'them'. Both sides relied heavily on stereotypes. Protestants saw themselves as hard-working, thrifty, independent, clean and tidy, but they accused Catholics of being lazy, dominated by priests, untidy and untrustworthy. Catholics saw themselves as easy-going, friendly, generous, intelligent and educated, but saw Protestants as dour, bigoted, mean and lacking in refinement.

3.2 Constructing identities

All identities, even our 'inner' ones, are social to some extent. We would have little sense of identity unless we had a language to reflect on it. And we would have little sense of group differences and similarities if we did not participate in social life. For sociologists, our identity is not something we are born with, but something that is formed by interaction with others in social settings.

Symbolic interactionism and identity

One of the best ways to understand the social character of identity is to look at the ideas of *symbolic interactionism.* This approach to identity was pioneered by George Herbert Mead (1863-1931).

The self Mead argued that a basic feature of human beings is our possession of a sense of self or identity. At an early age we slowly become aware that there are people who are 'not me', in other words that each of us has a separate existence. As we grow up we also begin to form an impression of our own personal qualities and characteristics. Language enables us to reflect on ourselves ('what sort of a person am I?') and to hold little internal 'conversations' (eg, we get angry with ourselves).

Social interaction Interactionists argue that our identity has social origins – it emerges in the course of social interaction. We depend on other people for vital clues about who we are. Charles Cooley coined the term *looking glass self* to convey the idea that we 'see' ourselves reflected in the attitudes and behaviour of other people towards us. For example, we may be uncertain about our new haircut until we see the responses of people around us. Of course, we do not always accept what others think of us, but their opinions are hard to ignore!

Sometimes we take the initiative rather than waiting for others to form an opinion of us. Goffman (1969) calls this the *presentation of self*, a process where we deliberately arrange our appearance (clothes, hairstyle etc) and adopt certain mannerisms in order to make a public statement about ourselves.

The changing self Interactionists challenge the idea that each of us has a fixed, stable self. Identity can change with the passage of time. The 'me' I am now is different in certain ways from the 'me' I was ten years ago. An identity may change slowly, or it may be transformed by a dramatic life event such as bereavement, mutilation, redundancy or being labelled a criminal, which forces a re-examination of one's self.

Social identities – conclusion

Some might argue that we are 'blank sheets' and society simply writes its message on us. For example, if other people look down on us, we develop low self-esteem. If they like us, we think of ourselves as popular. A more realistic approach is that we do not always accept the opinions of others – we interpret them and judge their value according to that interpretation.

The interactionist model certainly alerts us to the social character of identity – it is not something fixed at birth. Our identity can develop and change as we interact with others.

activity11 changes

Item A No longer me

The following passage was written by a journalist who had horrific operations on his tongue which altered his facial appearance and left him with severe difficulties in speech and eating.

'I found myself having depressing thoughts about who this made me. Would the people I love have loved me if this is how I was when they first met me? Would my friends have become my friends if when we first met I'd been a wounded, honking mute, unable to respond to the simplest questions without dribbling? I also knew the answer was almost certainly no. It had to be. I was not now the person my friends befriended, my wife married. The fact remained: I was not me any more. My friends seemed willing to do almost anything for me but they were responding to who I was before the operation rather than who I had become after it.'

Source: Diamond, 1998

Item B Bar mitzvah

A bar mitzvah is a Jewish ceremony marking the transition of 13 year-old boys to adulthood. The picture shows three boys in a bar mitzvah ceremony.

questions

1 How would symbolic interactionists explain the experience of the journalist in Item A?

2 In what ways are the identities of the boys in Item B likely to change?

3.3 Identity in postmodern society and late modern society

A number of sociologists argue that societies like the UK have moved from the *modern* era to the *postmodern* era during the last quarter of the 20th century. Other sociologists see this change as less dramatic, arguing that we have entered *late modernity*, an extension of the modern era. However, both groups agree that the changes they identify have important effects on identity.

Postmodern culture and identity

Postmodern culture is seen to have the following features.

Images and styles The mass media increasingly bombard us with images, logos and brands. Websites, TV and magazines pump out ads for constantly changing fashions – D&G, Giorgio Armani, Gucci, Yves Saint Laurent, Paco Rabanne, Kenzo, DKNY and Longchamp are just a few of the brands in ads in the January 2008 issues of *Grazia* magazine. They provide a range of images and styles which we can choose from to reflect our chosen identities.

Diversity of lifestyles The dominant mainstream culture is being steadily replaced by a wide variety of 'taste groups' and an increasing diversity of lifestyles. People choose from the lifestyles on offer, selecting those which allow them to express and act out their identities.

Choice Identities in postmodern society are increasingly chosen rather than being imposed by birth or tradition. As Hobsbawn (1996) notes, most identities are now like 'shirts' that we choose to wear rather than the 'skin' we are born with.

Postmodern culture has manipulated the number of identities available. People can choose to combine a variety of identities. For example, one person can combine the identities of a forceful business executive *and* a caring mother *and* a Sikh *and* a British patriot *and* an enthusiastic hang-glider.

Rapid social change Society in the postmodern era changes rapidly. For example, new forms of electronic communication are constantly appearing, from iPhones to new types of interaction on social networking websites. Identities are more fluid and shifting, reflecting the rapid changes in society. The self is no longer fixed as people increasingly try out a wide range of loosely-held identities. The self is there to be invented and re-invented.

Postmodernist sociologists also suggest that identities are becoming more unstable and fragile. Older identities have been seriously undermined by rapid social change. But the new identities which are replacing them are fragile and precarious – they do not always provide a firm sense of 'roots'.

Evaluation Critics have argued that postmodernists have overstated their case. For example, are people as free as the postmodernists claim to choose their identities? Critics argue that there are many factors which limit people's choices and prevent them from choosing and acting out certain identities. For example, being born black or white, rich or poor, male or female still have important influences on people's identities and lifestyles. Being poor, for instance, can prevent people from adopting expensive lifestyles and buying the products which express those lifestyles.

Late modernity and identity

Sociologists who argue that society has entered the phase of late modernity accept some of the claims made by postmodernists. This can be seen from the following features of late modernity which they identify.

Choice and individualisation According to the German sociologist Ulrick Beck, a process of *individualisation* is occurring. This process reduces the control of traditional roles and social structures over people's behaviour (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). As a result, people have greater freedom to select and construct their own identities and design their own lifestyles. For example, they have greater freedom to choose and design their relationships – to marry, to cohabit, to divorce, to live in a heterosexual or a gay or lesbian relationship and so on. People are less likely to be forced to conform to traditional marital, family and gender roles.

Social reflexivity This term is used by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991, 2001). In earlier phases of modernity, people were more likely to follow traditional norms and to take those norms for granted. Now they are more likely to be *reflexive* – to reflect on what they are doing, to assess and question their behaviour, to examine what was previously taken for granted. As a result, people are more likely to reflect on their identity, on who they are. This leads many people to turn their identity into a project to be worked on.

Identity politics *Identity politics* is the term used to describe conflicts and struggles over identity. In society today it seems that more and more groups are defining themselves in terms of their identity or 'difference'. Bauman (2001) suggests that the collapse of traditional communities has led people to search desperately for other sources of meaning and security. Many hope to find this meaning in some form of collective identity.

These identity groups often feel they are treated as second class citizens and deprived of their human rights. Examples include ethnic minorities, people with disabilities (eg, wheelchair-users) and groups based on sexual preferences (eg, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals). Powerful groups sometimes discriminate against them and treat them as inferior. For example, society may be seen as sexist (men oppressing women)

activity12 Changing identities

Item A Identity Kits

Item B Images and styles
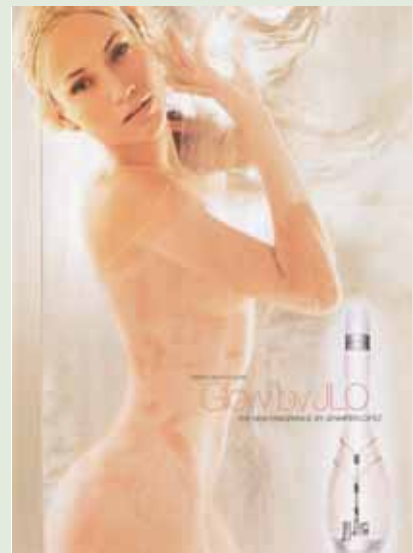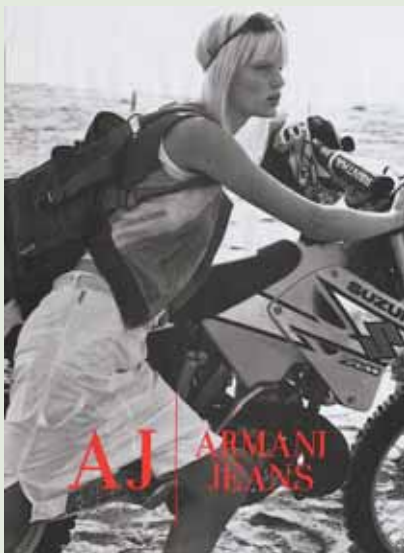
Item C Identity cards

SUPERMODEL

SCRATCH HERE
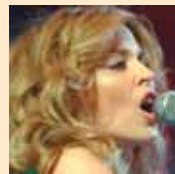
POP STAR

SPORTS STAR

Dream Identity Card

FILM STAR

Will it ever come to this? The Government is planning to sell Identity Scratch Cards. Scratch off the special square and you may win a year's worth of free identity. The winner gets to chose a dream identity, for example, a pop star or a major sports personality.

Source: Iannucci, 1995

question

What do Items A, B and C suggest about identity in postmodern and late society?

activity13 identity politics

Item A Bikers for Jesus

Attending a Bikers for Jesus rally.

Item B Goths

Attending a gothic festival in Leipzig, Germany.

Item C Europride

Europride lesbian and gay pride march, London.

questions

1 What identities are being projected in these photos?

2 Explain why these photos represent identity politics.

or racist (Whites discriminating against ethnic minorities).

Identity politics is new in the sense that it is not just about winning a fair share of wealth and resources for the group concerned. It is also about claiming the 'right to be different'. Identity groups want 'recognition' from the rest of society that they have equal worth, in spite of their cultural differences from others. The struggle is about winning respect, promoting tolerance and challenging negative stereotypes

key terms

Postmodern era A new era seen to follow the modern era.

Late modernity A new phase seen to be an extension of the modern era.

Individualisation A reduction in the control of traditional roles and social structures over people's behaviour.

Social reflexivity People reflecting on what they are doing, and assessing and questioning their behaviour.

Identity politics The conflicts and struggles over group identities in society.

summary

1. Identity can refer to the inner self, personal identity or social identity.

2. All identities are social in the sense that they depend on language and social experience. It is impossible to imagine a society where people have no sense of who they are or what makes them different from others.

3. Social identities express our similarities with others in the same social group. But they also create a divide between 'us' and 'them'.

4. Interactionists claim that the self has social origins – it emerges in the course of social interaction. Our identities may change as we move from group to group, or as a result of important changes in our lives.

5. Sometimes we have social identities imposed on us, at other times we have freedom to choose the groups with whom we identify. The 'presentation of self' is a device we use to create our own identity.

6. Postmodern culture is said to have the following features.
   - An emphasis on image and style
   - Diversity of lifestyles
   - Identities increasingly chosen
   - An increase in the number and importance of identities
   - Rapid social change
   - Identities more fluid and fragile

7. Critics of postmodernist views argue that there are factors which prevent many people from choosing and acting out certain identities.

8. Features of late modernity include individualisation, social reflexivity and a focus on the construction of identity.

9. Identity politics is not just about winning a fair share of resources, it is also about claiming the 'right to be different', winning respect and promoting a favourable image of the group.

Unit 4 Age and identity

keyissues

1 How do cultural identities vary according to age?

2 What is happening to youth cultures in postmodern society?

3 Is ageism a problem for older people?

Age and identity

Our lives sometimes seem to be mapped out in terms of different ages which are linked to certain identities and lifestyles. For example, we expect people to be restless and moody in their teens, mature and confident in their forties, but 'slow' and set in their ways in their sixties.

These differences are often explained in terms of the 'biological clock' ageing is seen as a biological process which brings about inevitable changes in outlook and behaviour. But age is also *socially* constructed – it is shaped by culture and society. For example, people in pre-industrial societies were often divided into separate age groups with distinct rights and characteristics. However, in society today there is a more flexible attitude to age – people often try to resist age-related expectations.

4.1 Youth in search of identity

Confused youth Young people in modern industrial societies are frequently described as confused about their identities. There is a lack of public *rites of passage* (rituals, ceremonies) to announce that they have successfully reached adulthood. Neither fully children nor fully adults, they often seem to be experimenting with many different roles and styles in an attempt to find their 'true' selves.

The functionalist perspective in sociology suggests that *youth culture* helps to ease the passage towards stable identities and personalities. Youth culture – the shared tastes, activities and styles of young people – offers young people the collective support of a peer group while they try to 'find themselves'. In the course of trying out different experiences and lifestyles, they gradually mature and 'grow up'.

On the other hand, some sociologists argue that young people are no more confused than adults about their identities. And youth culture may be enjoyed purely for the pleasures it offers, rather than because it offers a solution to any identity crisis.

Rebellious youth Another popular image of young people is that of unruly rebels. Pearson (1983) suggests there is a long history of seeing young people as 'trouble'. Social commentators down the years have expressed similar fears and concerns about youthful troublemakers, viewing them in terms of social breakdown and moral decline.

This image of youth was reinforced over the past fifty years by the emergence of exotic youth subcultures – such as teddy boys, mods and rockers, skinheads, punks and goths. Some sociologists (eg, Jefferson, 1975) offered a 'conflict' explanation of these subcultures. The subcultures were seen as a protest against exploitation and injustice in a class-divided society. One of the striking things about this resistance was that it was largely *symbolic*. It was mainly through their subcultural *styles* that these youths expressed their protest – it was 'resistance through rituals'. By creating new subcultures with their own meanings, rituals and identities, working-class youth refused to accept other people's low opinion of them.

This theory perhaps exaggerates the rebellious streak in young people. A simpler explanation for these subcultures is that they were *fun*. Also, the exotic subcultures which alarmed observers were hardly representative of the mass of ordinary, largely 'conformist' youth.

Postmodern youth Postmodern sociologists draw attention to the increasing diversity of youth identities. They claim that the old-style youth subcultures – stable groups with clear boundaries between them – are fading away. Instead, young people now follow lifestyles based on their *individual* tastes. We now have a 'supermarket of style' (Polhemus, 1997), where young people are faced with an abundance of choices.

Postmodernists admit there are still certain *neo-tribes* with recognisable subcultural styles (eg, goths). Young people often seek out those who share their tastes and enthusiasms. But these groupings tend to be short-lived and superficial. Few young people are totally committed – they are more likely to adopt a casual pick'n'mix approach to style. They play with different looks and styles, sampling and mixing them in all sorts of unexpected and imaginative ways (eg, gay skinheads, bikers for Jesus).

activity14 *youth today*

Item A *Feral gangs*

A top policeman painted a horrifying picture yesterday of gangs of 'feral youths'. He said drunken and abusive yobs intimidated entire neighbourhoods, forcing law-abiding families to live in fear. 'It is part of life for these people. These people are feral (wild) by nature, having little control over their behaviour and having little responsibility for their actions and having little parental control over the way they live their lives. I have spoken to parents who are unconcerned that their 14-year-old child has been arrested for a serious assault or robbery.'

Source: *Daily Mail*, 18.5.2005

Item B *Typical young people*

A nationally representative survey reveals what 13-18 year-olds are really like today.

- They want to enjoy life.
- They have a strong set of values (very family-oriented).
- Their role models are parents and teachers rather than 'celebrities'.
- They have a strong social conscience.
- They are ambitious and hard-working.
- They are much more confident, respectful and caring than adults imagine.

Source: Scout Association, 2007

Item C *Pictures of youth*

Attacking a police landrover in Northern Ireland.

Calling for measures to help young people break the cycle of violence.

Item D *Cosmetic surgery*

A survey has found that three quarters of girls aged between 12 and 14 say they would like cosmetic surgery (plastic surgery, breast implants, operations to remove excess fat etc.). It would make them feel happier about the way they look and stop teasing by friends.

Source: *Daily Mail*, 11.11.2000

question

What 'identity' of youths is suggested by each of these items?

4.2 Older identities

The population of Britain is ageing – there are more old people now and they form a larger proportion of the population. Between 1971 and 2005 the numbers of people aged 65 and over rose from 7.4 million (13% of the total population) to 9.6 million (16%). (*Social Trends*, 2007)

This is a welcome sign that people are living longer. At the same time, many people seem to fear old age. They view it as a time when they will decline *physically* (less energy, poorer health), *psychologically* (fading powers of concentration) and *socially* (social participation may drop off).

It is difficult to deny that biological ageing takes its toll – for example, a large majority of disabled adults in Britain are aged 60 and over. Nevertheless, sociologists challenge the notion that ageing has fixed social effects. They argue that old age is something which is socially constructed and varies between groups and over time. The experience of old age is not the same for everyone.

Ageism The problem for many older people is not so much biological age as the discriminatory attitudes of others. They can become victims of *ageism* – insensitive attitudes and assumptions which treat them as if they were less important or less capable than everyone else. Employers may be reluctant to hire them, on the assumption that they are somehow 'past it'. Young people may call them offensive names such as 'senile', 'crumbly', 'wrinklie' and 'geriatric'. Ageism stigmatises older people – it attaches negative labels to them.

In Western societies some older people are now starting to fight against ageism. Grey Power groups are campaigning for better pensions and a better public image. Older people are using their spending and voting power to persuade politicians, retailers and organisations to treat them with dignity and respect.

The cult of youth Society teaches us to celebrate youth. We admire youthful strength and beauty. There is a huge market of products and treatments to help us stay young – such as cosmetic surgery (eg, face lifts, Botox), vitamins and lotions (eg, anti-ageing creams) and fitness regimes (eg, yoga, Pilates).

Old age, by contrast, is often pictured as something to be pitied or feared rather than envied. The mass media circulate images of elderly people as physically unattractive, sexually inactive and chronically ill. No wonder middle-aged people often search anxiously for the dreaded signs of ageing – tell-tale wrinkles, thinning hair, sagging muscles.

activity15 being old and young

Fauja Singh, aged 93, running in the London marathon.

Members of The Zimmers rock band whose record 'My Generation' reached the Top 40. The lead singer Alf Carretta (wearing glasses) is 90 years old.

question

What do these items suggest about how the people in the pictures see old age?

On the other hand, Berger (1971) questions the assumption that 'being young' is a matter of biological age. For Berger, youthfulness is a set of personal qualities – being impulsive, spontaneous, energetic, playful and passionate. These qualities can be found in people of all ages. Not all young people are youthful by any means, and not all youthful people are young!

The mask of old age Featherstone and Hepworth (1989) note that many older people are forced to wear the 'mask of old age' – they are expected to act in terms of ageist stereotypes. For example, even middle-aged grandparents may be under pressure to act the role of an 'elderly' Granny or Granpa. Yet older people sometimes feel just the same way they always did – they still feel young at heart.

Featherstone and Hepworth suggest that increasing numbers of older people are refusing to conform to the stereotypes. They express their identities in lively and imaginative ways – such as exotic foreign holidays, wind-surfing, and salsa dancing. Many of these adventurous attitudes have been pioneered by the 'baby boomer' generation (those raised in the 1960s). This generation is extending the length of what used to be regarded as 'middle age'. And they are carrying their vigorous and active pursuits into the later years of life.

Two nations Older people are individuals, and so their lifestyles and identities vary according to the particular choices they make. But these choices are also shaped by social characteristics such as social class. Britain's pensioners are split into 'two nations'. The retired middle class generally have substantial pensions and savings which enable them to enjoy a comfortable standard of living. But not everyone is lucky enough to grow old gracefully. For many working-class people, old age spells poverty – as many as half of all pensioners live in poverty or on its margins.

key terms

Rites of passage Rituals which mark the movement from one social status or position to another.
Youth culture The subcultures – tastes, activities and lifestyles – of particular groups of young people.
Neo-tribes Loose groupings around shared styles and tastes, with flexible and often fleeting membership.
Stigmatise Attaching negative labels to a group.
Ageism Viewing and/or treating people in a negative way simply because of their age.
Cult of youth 'Worshipping' youthfulness.

summary

1. According to functionalists, youth culture helps young people to establish stable identities and make the transition to adulthood.

2. Some sociologists see working-class youth subcultures as a form of resistance against the inequalities of society. This protest takes the form of style rather than direct action.

3. Postmodernists argue that distinct youth subcultures have splintered and weakened. Young people now move freely between individually-chosen styles.

4. The ageing process involves certain changes in people's lives. But many of the negative effects are a result of social attitudes rather than biological processes.

5. Ageism and the cult of youth mean that older people tend to be stigmatised. However, there are signs that they are adopting more positive and flexible identities and rejecting negative stereotypes.

6. Social class affects the experience of ageing. For many working-class people, old age means poverty.

Unit 5 *Disability and identity*

keyissues

1 What is disability?
2 What are the aims of the disability rights movement?
3 How do people with disabilities combat stigma?

Our bodies have a physical existence which cannot be ignored. This is especially true for people with disabilities. Disabilities arise from various sources – some are the result of genetic disorders, some are caused by illness or serious accident, and others emerge from the degenerative processes of ageing.

Estimates of the numbers of disabled people in Britain range from six million to twelve million. It all depends on how strictly we define disability. Many conditions are a matter of degree, varying from mild to severe. For example, the Royal Institute for the Deaf estimates that around nine million people in Britain have some degree of hearing loss, from slightly hard of hearing to profoundly deaf (Atkinson, 2006). Similarly, the term 'blindness' covers a wide range of visual impairment.

The 2007 British Social Attitudes Survey revealed that the general public defines disability narrowly. Most of the sample agreed that it includes wheelchair users, but they were less likely to describe arthritis or heart disease as a disability. More worryingly, the survey revealed a great deal of prejudice towards groups such as mentally ill people or those with HIV (O'Hara, 2007).

5.1 Disability rights

Disability is often regarded as a personal misfortune that happens to unlucky people. It is seen mainly as a medical problem. This view has been challenged by the disability rights movement which puts the emphasis on civil rights. The movement makes a fundamental distinction between *impairment* and *disability*.

Impairment This refers to the limitations the physical or mental condition places upon a person's ability to function effectively. For example, people with severe arthritis may find it difficult to wash or dress themselves.

Disability This refers to the restrictions society places on impaired people. Society is seen as dis-abling them through its prejudices – for example, employers may reject job-seekers with a history of mental illness. It also restricts their full social participation by putting barriers in their way – for example, wheelchair users may find it difficult to get access to shops or offices.

So there has been a move towards understanding disability in terms of 'structural oppression'. It is not just a matter of impairment (although that is still a painful reality for many people) but also a battle for social and political rights. Some progress has been made, and the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) now aims to protect people with disabilities from discrimination.

Identity politics

The disability rights movement is also trying to build a more positive identity for disabled people. Disabled people sometimes internalise the negative stereotypes directed at them, resulting in low self-esteem and spoiled identities. But some groups have been set up to promote a prouder image. For example, there are more than 300 deaf social clubs across Britain. One deaf DJ organises raves that fill large venues with thousands of deaf partygoers from all over the world (Atkinson, 2006).

5.2 Spoiled identities

Goffman (1968) describes how people deal with imperfections of the body such as amputated limbs, unsightly scars, ugly facial blemishes and physical disabilities. These imperfections create a gap between the *virtual social identity* (what the person's bodily characteristics should be) and the *actual social identity* (what they really are). This gap can be deeply discrediting – the person's identity becomes *spoiled*.

activity16 Images of disability

Item A 'I hoped our baby would be deaf'

When Polly Garfield and her partner – both deaf – found that their baby was profoundly deaf it was a cause for joy rather than sadness. 'Being deaf is about being part of a cultural minority. We're proud of the language we use and the community we live in. We're delighted that this is something our daughter can share as she grows up.'

For the couple, deafness is not something that needs to be fixed, but an expression of a cultural identity. 'If only people knew about the deaf community, our rich culture and history, our parties and the closeness and pride that we feel in our shared identity. Our language is so colourful, so alive. That's our sound, that's our music.'

Source: Atkinson, 2006.

Item C Kissing gates

The law requires public services to make reasonable adjustments to allow disabled access. Some local authorities feel this means that kissing gates and stiles should be removed from the countryside, as they are almost impossible to use if you are in a wheelchair.

This has dismayed farmers, who argue that they provide a cheap and practical solution for access through fields. But the UK Disabled People's Council says it fully supports the move – disabled people have as much right to go into the countryside as non-disabled people.

Source: Levy, 2007

Item B

Arriving at the House of Commons by hearse to protest against the lack of access for many disabled people to trains and stations.

questions

1　How can Items A and B be seen as an example of identity politics?

2　In what way is Item C an example of disability rights?

Goffman insists that it is not the bodily characteristic in itself that is the problem. Rather, it is the stigma which is created when people attach discrediting labels to others. This presents a problem of *stigma management* for those who are given these labels. Goffman identifies two main situations which arise.

Discredited In this situation people are *discredited* in the sense that their imperfection is already visible or widely known. This may create *interaction uneasiness* when others react in an embarrassed or clumsy fashion (eg, people sometimes speak too loudly to a blind person).

The main strategy for discredited individuals is one of *tension management*. They develop social skills to put people at their ease (eg, joking about their stigma to show that it is okay to talk about it). They may try to correct the imperfection (eg, by means of surgery) or resort to *compensation* (eg, the amputee may take up dangerous sports). Others may simply avoid strangers and associate mainly with people who are more understanding.

Discreditable In this situation the person's imperfection is not immediately obvious to others. Examples include HIV, colostomy bags and epilepsy. Here the main strategy is one of *information control* where the individual tries to manage the flow of information so that stigma is avoided. They may try to 'pass' the imperfection as something else (eg, passing off early stages of Alzheimer's as simple absent-mindedness). Or conceal it (eg, wearing a special bra to conceal a mastectomy). Or 'cover' it by passing it off as something less damaging (eg, infertile people may pretend they just don't want children).

However, Goffman points out that those who attempt to conceal their condition risk exposure from people who 'know' about them. There is a constant danger that their secret will be revealed. So some may simply decide that voluntary disclosure of their condition is the best solution.

key terms

Impairment A physical or mental condition which limits a person's capacity to function effectively.

Disability Disadvantage which results from society's failure to allow people with impairments to participate fully in social life.

Spoiled identity A discredited identity resulting from negative labels attached by others.

summary

1. Physical and mental impairments make it harder for people to function effectively. Prejudice and discrimination against people with impairments add to their difficulties.

2. The disability rights movement is creating a more positive view of disabled people and fighting against discrimination

3. Disabled people who are discredited often use tension management techniques. Those who are discreditable often use information management techniques.

Unit 6 *Ethnic identities*

keyissues

1 What is an ethnic group?

2 What are the main ethnic identities in Britain?

3 In what ways are ethnic identities changing?

6.1 Ethnic groups and identities

In the 1950s and 1960s many thousands of people migrated from New Commonwealth countries such as Jamaica, India, Pakistan and Kenya to Britain. They brought with them the traditional customs, values, religions, diets and languages of their homelands. These cultural features set them apart from one another and from the mainstream cultures of Britain. In other words, they formed distinctive *ethnic groups* – groups with their own cultures based on a sense of shared origin.

Table 2 shows the range of ethnic groups in Britain in 2001.

Table 2 The UK population by ethnic group

	% of total population	% of minority ethnic population
White	92.1	n/a
Mixed	1.2	14.6
Asian or Asian British		
Indian	1.8	22.7
Pakistani	1.3	16.1
Bangladeshi	0.5	6.1
Other Asian	0.4	5.3
Black or Black British		
Black Caribbean	1.0	12.2
Black African	0.8	10.5
Black Other	0.2	2.1
Chinese	0.4	5.3
Other	0.4	5.0
All minority ethnic population	*7.9*	*100*

Source: National Statistics Online (based on April 2001 Census data)

Ethnic identities

The members of an ethnic group may have varying degrees of commitment to the group's values and identities. Nevertheless, a shared cultural tradition does tend to create common identities.

African-Caribbean identities

The identities of African-Caribbean people in Britain are shaped by many things including their age and social class. They may follow lifestyles which are not much different from those of White people. However, a black skin colour is significant in a country like Britain where *racism* has not yet been eradicated. Black people may see themselves as the victims or survivors of racism.

African-Caribbean culture and customs have some impact on identities. For example, the use of African-Caribbean ways of speaking or dialects (patois) reinforces their sense of having a distinctive cultural identity.

Black expressive cultures The richness of African-Caribbean culture is celebrated every year in the Notting Hill Carnival. Paul Gilroy (1987) also notes the dazzling contributions Black people have made to mainstream popular culture in Britain – in dance, music and dress (Black youth are often seen as the cutting edge of street fashion). Gilroy believes there is no single Black culture or Black identity but he argues that there are certain common themes that run through all Black cultures. One of these is awareness of the historical experience of slavery, a bitter experience that still has an effect on the outlook of Black people.

activity17 Black culture

Item A Slavery in Trinidad

Item C Notting Hill Carnival

Item B Say it loud

James Brown lying in state at the Apollo Theatre, Harlem, New York.

The funeral of James Brown, the 'Godfather of Soul', has been held in Harlem, New York. Thousands turned out to pay tribute to the singer and showman whose music inspired hip hop, funk, disco and rap. But Brown was also a Black icon who coined the phrase 'Say it Loud – I'm Black and I'm Proud'. This was regarded as a powerful 'wake-up call' for Black pride and black consciousness.

Source: *The Guardian*, 29.12.2006

questions

1 How might awareness of the history of slavery influence the identity and ethnic awareness of Black Britons?
2 How can Items B and C be seen as examples of Black identity and culture?

activity18 Muslim women in Britain

Item A Burkinis

Schools have been told they should allow Muslim girls taking swimming lessons to cover themselves from head to toe in special outfits called burkinis. An increasing number of pupils are insisting that conventional swimming costumes are 'immodest'.

Source: *The Mail on Sunday*, 24.6.2007

Burkini designer (in black) and Muslim lifeguard wearing burkinis in Sydney, Australia.

Item B Meet the Islamic Barbie

There is a new must-have toy on the Muslim child's wish list – the Razanne doll. The doll, whose name translates as 'shyness and modesty' is demurely dressed and has an air of humility. Her creators see her as more acceptable than the skimpily dressed Barbie doll. She comes in a range of guises, including 'Dr Razanne' and 'Teacher Razanne' – to show that Muslim women, too, can have careers.

As the mother of one girl puts it, 'What is good about the doll is that it's Razanne's character that counts, not whether she's a perfect 10 in her day-glo summer bikini'.

There are no plans to have a male version – it wouldn't fit with Razanne to have a boyfriend.

Source: *The Guardian*, 30.9.2004

question

How do these items illustrate that Muslim identities in Britain include aspects of the old and the new?

The art of being Black Clare Alexander (1996) made a close study of a group of Black youths in London. She concluded that there are many different ways of being Black. Constructing a Black identity is an 'art' that needs a great deal of work and effort. The youths she studied felt there were 'symbolic markers' of being Black. They felt there is something about certain styles of dress, music, even walking and talking, that make them instantly recognisable as 'Black'.

In a later work, Alexander (2002) notes that the 'cool' styles of Black youth have enjoyed enormous popularity in Britain. Black youth are widely seen as the cutting edge of street-oriented youth culture. They often lead the way in fashion and music (eg, hip hop, rap).

Asian identities

The term Asian masks some important differences. Most of Britain's Asians have origins in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. The first two are predominantly Muslim but India contains Sikh and Muslim minorities as well as the Hindu majority. Within these main groups there are further sub-divisions.

Britain's Muslim population is split between the Sunni and Shiah traditions and it is further broken down into various sects and territorial and language groups. However, their shared faith and identity as one nation *(ummah)* creates some bonds between these Muslim communities.

Asian lifestyles Each religion has its own place of worship (the Hindu temple, the Muslim mosque, the Sikh gurdwara). Also, each religious group tends to follow its own calendar of fasts (eg, the Muslim *Ramadan*) and feasts (eg, the Hindu *Diwali*). Religion affects dress codes (the Muslim veil, the Sikh turban), diet (Hindus avoid beef, Muslims avoid pork) and moral attitudes (divorce is more acceptable to Muslims than other Asian religious groups).

But there are similarities in the cultural practices of Britain's Asian populations. One example is the custom of arranged marriages where parents play a large part in choosing partners for their children. Another is the stress laid on the extended family (the wider kin group beyond the mother, father and children). Family honour is extremely important and the kin group is always anxious to protect its reputation. This is one of the reasons why the behaviour of young women is closely monitored by relatives.

Until quite recently, many people were unaware of an Asian youth culture in Britain. But that is changing. Bennett

(2001) describes the rising popularity of bhangra (a blend of Indian folk music with Western pop) among Asians in Britain. Another popular form is ragga (a blend of bhangra with rap and reggae). According to Bennett, these 'cross-over' developments have played a major part in the formation of new Asian youth identities.

White identities

It is a mistake to think that ethnicity is something found only among minority groups. Every group has a culture and so even the White majority can be called an ethnic group. Of course, there are many different ways of being White, so it does not mean the same thing to everyone.

Invisible culture? Young Whites sometimes feel they inhabit an invisible culture. This was certainly true of the group studied by Roger Hewitt (1996) in a deprived working-class area of London. They felt a deep sense of unfairness because every culture seemed to be celebrated except their own. They were constantly frustrated whenever they tried to adopt symbols and emblems of White or English cultural identity. For example, the Union flag and the flag of St

George were regarded with suspicion because of their association with far-right racist groups. Hewitt argues that ways must be found of allowing White people to be proud of their own cultural traditions. But this should not be done in a racist manner that excludes people from ethnic minorities from claiming an English identity too.

Ethnic groups and identities – conclusion

Britain is a multicultural society. It contains a number of distinctive ethnic groups, each with their own identity, values and customs. People in Asian or African-Caribbean minority groups often have a keen awareness of their cultural traditions. Of course, some people born into these groups will drift away from them, while others will remain deeply committed to their particular ethnic lifestyles. Some will regard themselves as British but British with a difference – Black British or British Asian.

Identity is not based solely on ethnicity, however. For example, a Black person is not just Black but also a particular gender, age, social class – all of these will have an effect on that person's identity.

activity19 White England

Item A *Celebration*

England has much to celebrate: Shakespeare, Dickens, parliamentary democracy, architecture, political philosophers, a philanthropic tradition, the welfare state, scientific developments, the sixties cultural revolution, football, brilliant humourists and much more. Why is it wrong for White English children to take pride in these achievements?

Source: Y.Alibhai-Brown, 1997

Henley Regatta

Item B *Images of White England*

Royal Ascot

Hunting

question

Using these items, suggest why some people might be reluctant to adopt a White English identity.

6.2 Changing ethnic identities

Some experts confidently predicted that ethnic minorities would slowly become *assimilated* – they would gradually abandon their ethnic cultures and adopt the culture of mainstream Britain. It was expected that this trend would affect mainly the second and third generations (those born in Britain). This has happened to some extent – the life of a Sikh is not the same in Britain as it is in the Punjab. Many male Sikhs no longer wear a turban. Yet it is equally clear that minority cultures have not vanished. This suggests that Britain might become a truly *multicultural* society in which different ethnic traditions co-exist peacefully and share certain customs.

Black generations

Modood et al. (1994) interviewed a sample of African-Caribbean people living in Birmingham in order to chart changes in their culture over time. The researchers did not discover one single Black identity, but they detected the general and continuing influence of Caribbean cultural traditions. At the same time, there were some differences between the generations. Religious faith (mainly Christian, and especially Pentecostal) still played an important role for the first generation but it had declined among their children. Patois was not used so much by the first generation but it had enjoyed a resurgence among some of the second generation who saw it as a powerful way of asserting their cultural identity. The main identity among the Caribbeans in the survey was Black – although the first generation sometimes described themselves as West Indian, and their children sometimes called themselves Afro-Caribbean. Young Blacks sometimes put on a defiant display of their ethnic identities as a way of expressing their resistance to racism.

Asians between two cultures

Second or third generation Asians, born or raised in this country, are sometimes portrayed as torn between two cultures – the ethnic traditions of their parents, and British mainstream culture. Sometimes compromises are struck. For example, parents may consult their children over arranged marriages and this helps to prevent conflicts. Others may find that their attempts to balance the two cultures are frustrated by racism in the wider society. They may feel they are never going to be accepted by White society and so they may turn back to their ethnic minority traditions.

Cultural navigation Roger Ballard (1994) believes the supposed conflict between Asian teenagers and their parents has been exaggerated. Ballard recognises that there are some major differences between Asian and mainstream cultures but he found that young Asians manage to navigate between them with relative ease. They simply switch codes – in their parents' home they fit in to Asian cultural expectations, but outside the home they blend into mainstream lifestyles. Of course, being teenagers, sometimes there is friction with their parents. But for the most part young Asians handle the two cultures with few problems.

Living apart together Mirza et al. (2007) conducted a large survey among Muslims living in Britain. They found that the majority of Muslims are well integrated into British society – they live 'together' with non-Muslims. Most of them want to live under British law rather than Islamic (Sharia) law. Generally they prefer mixed state schools rather than faith schools. Many of them feel British and have strong relationships with non-Muslims. Also, many declare that religion plays little part in their lives – many indulge in secular habits such as drinking and pre-marital sexual relationships.

On the other hand, they also live 'apart' to some extent, and this applies especially to young Muslims. Those aged 16-24 were more likely than their parents to say religion was the most important thing in their lives, and more likely to support Sharia law and Islamic schools. Among young Muslims, 74% supported the wearing of veils, compared with only 28% of their parents' generation. Mirza et al. point out the irony – although young Muslims are integrated into British society and have grown up in its culture, they are more conscious than their parents of their difference and separateness.

Hybrid identities

It is difficult to map where one culture ends and another begins. Ethnic cultures change over time and they borrow from one another. So their boundaries are always shifting. One possibility is that people combine different ethnic styles in novel ways. When they do this they create *hybrid* (mixed) lifestyles and identities.

Youth Les Back (1996) found that new hybrid identities were emerging among young people (Whites, Asians, Blacks) in two council estates in South London. These young people are in a transitional stage where they have a great deal of freedom and opportunity to construct new identities. Their cultures are not fixed traditions which they slavishly follow. Rather, they try out new cultural 'masks', experiment with new roles, and play with different styles, meanings and symbols in all sorts of unexpected ways. Back found a great deal of inter-racial friendship and interaction and a great deal of cultural borrowing from other groups (eg, 'cool' language and interest in reggae, soul, hip hop, rap and house). The new identities which were being forged brought Black and White people closer together and helped to blur the divisive lines of race.

Changing ethnic identities – conclusion

When members of ethnic minorities start changing their habits and values, it is not always easy to decide what this means. It may be a step towards assimilation – becoming

activity20 *hybrid identities*

Item A *Joined up cultures*

Panjabi MC. His music is a fusion of bhangra and hip hop.

question

In what way do these items represent 'hybrid' identities?

Item B *I am me*

Salima Dhalla: I don't know how to start to describe myself. I feel identity-less but very unique. On paper I'm 'Asian' but in my head I'm a cocky little person with lots of hopes and ambitions.

My parents are East African, their parents are Indian, I was born in Wales. I went to a White middle-class girls' private school and I have brown skin, short Western hair, Western clothes, Eastern name, Western friends. So I guess I'm in an identity wasteland. Now I will only agree to being *me.*

Source: Kassam, 1997

Item C *Blinglish*

Surveys have revealed that an increasing number of White youths now talk with a Jamaican patois or hybrid language – 'Blinglish' (a term which suggests the marriage of English to Black street culture's love of displays of wealth, known as 'bling'). The days when popular culture was controlled by White artists have faded. Black youth have a huge influence on mainstream culture.

One of the main reasons White youth follow Black culture is an absence of any credible alternative subculture.

Source: Doward, 2004

part of mainstream culture and society. On the other hand, it may just be a normal development of that ethnic culture (cultures are always changing, however slowly).

The only thing that is clear at the moment is that there is a mixture of continuity and change. There is continuity in the sense that ethnic traditions still mean something to second and third generation members of minority groups. But there are also signs of change. One example is arranged marriages – now subject to much greater consultation with young people.

It is young people who are at the forefront of these changes. And it is among this group that new hybrid forms are most likely to emerge.

key terms

Assimilation The process by which ethnic minorities adopt the mainstream culture and become part of mainstream society.
Black A term sometimes applied to people of African-Caribbean descent, and more generally to people seen to be of 'Black' African origin.
Ethnic group A group with a shared culture based on a sense of common origin.
Hybrid identities Identities which draw on two or more ethnic traditions.
Multicultural society The co-existence of two or more distinctive ethnic groups within one society.
Racism Negative attitudes and discriminatory behaviour towards people of other racial or ethnic groups.

summary

1. Minority ethnic groups in Britain were initially formed through migration from the New Commonwealth. But growing numbers (second and third generation) have been born in Britain.

2. Minority ethnic groups share many values and lifestyles with the White majority. There is a great deal of overlap. But they also have their own distinctive traditions.

3. Not everyone within an ethnic group expresses that ethnicity in exactly the same way. Besides, their identity is based not only on their ethnicity but also on other factors such as gender, age and social class.

4. Ethnic minority cultures and identities are slowly changing. This may represent a normal development of the culture rather than a step towards assimilation. Nevertheless, the divisions between cultures seem to be getting more blurred.

5. Some young people seem to be skilled at navigation between two cultures. But others find it a strain and prefer to give priority to one culture. Yet another possibility is the development of hybrid forms that mix cultural traditions in novel ways.

Unit 7 *National and global identities*

keyissues

1 What are nation states?

2 How are national identities formed?

3 What forms does nationalism take?

4 How is globalisation affecting national identity?

7.1 Creating nations

Nation states

The world is divided into a number of countries such as Britain, France, Nigeria and Mexico. Most of these countries can also be referred to as *nation states*. A state is an independent self-governing geographical area. The term nation state suggests that the people living within the state are a single 'nation', united by a common identity and a common culture.

However, this is not always the case. A single state might contain a number of nations (eg, the British state governs the nations of Wales, Scotland and England). On the other hand, a single nation might be scattered across different states (eg, Kurds in Iran, Iraq and Turkey). Nevertheless, states usually attempt to create an overall sense of national identity in order to secure the loyalty of their populations.

Many people assume that nation states have existed throughout history. However, Michael Mann (1986) shows that it was only in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that maps started to represent the world in terms of separate territories with clearly marked borders. Before then, maps of medieval Europe had only fuzzy and shifting frontiers and it was not always easy to identify a single power in control of a clear-cut territory.

National identity

People become aware of their national identity in lots of ways. Stuart Hall (1992) points out that every nation has a collection of stories about its shared experiences, sorrows, triumphs and disasters. These stories are told in the nation's proud boasts (its democratic traditions, traditions of independence and freedom), its collective memories (the World Wars, 1966 World Cup victory) and its favourite images (England's 'green and pleasant land', cream teas). People draw on these stories in order to construct their sense of national identity.

People are constantly reminded of their national identity by symbols and rituals. Symbols include flags, coins, anthems, uniforms, monuments and ceremonies. The national flag is a powerful symbol of the identity of a nation – it separates those who belong (the 'nation') from outsiders ('foreigners'). Public rituals like Remembrance Day and royal ceremonies are occasions when people are invited to reflect on their shared history and collective identity.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to describe a particular national identity with any confidence. People may disagree on what qualifies someone for membership of the nation (see Table 3). They also disagree on the nation's chief features. Besides, a national identity will alter as the nation itself changes over time.

Table 3 *What is the basis of national identity?*

Born in country	79
Have citizenship	86
Lived most of life there	76
Able to speak language	88
Religion	34
Respect political institutions and laws	87
Feels British	78

(% of sample saying 'very' or 'fairly' important)

Source: McCrone & Surridge, 1998

Britishness

Identity and belonging became major issues in Britain in the early part of this century. One reason for this was the terrorist threat and the July 2005 bombings in London. There were added fears that the security threat within Britain may have led to a rise in Islamophobia - hostility towards Muslims. The British government responded to these tensions by reviewing its multicultural policies

Sleepwalking into segregation? In a speech in 2005, Trevor Phillips, head of the Commission for Racial Equality, warned that Britain was in danger of 'sleepwalking into segregation'. He feared that Britain's various ethnic groups were drifting further apart – for example, young people from ethnic minorities were less integrated than their parents. A similar view was expressed by Ted Cantle (2005) who described Asians and Whites as leading 'parallel lives' – separate existences. Cantle saw this as a major cause of the violence which broke out in some towns in the north of England in 2001.

Community cohesion Policies are being developed in an attempt to create a more cohesive British identity. This does not mean that ethnic minority groups are expected to abandon all their cultural traditions. But the state is trying to create some over-arching loyalties and shared identities – a social 'glue' to bind Britain's diverse groups together (a 'community of communities'). For example, it has introduced 'citizenship education' in schools, and 'citizenship tests' for those applying to become British citizens.

activity21 flying the flag

Item B Ing-land

Nash Patel flies the St George's Cross flag in his shop and refers proudly to the England football team as 'we'. Yet he is not the stereotypical English football fan. His background is Asian, and England is his adopted country, not his homeland. He refers to the team as 'Ing-land', not the more belligerent terrace chant of 'Ing-er-land'. For Patel, the St George's Cross is now his flag and an expression of pride. He explains 'It's my way of saying thank you to England for making me and my family welcome, giving us an education and letting us make a new life here. I'm a British-Asian now'.

Yet elsewhere a battle is going on for 'ownership' of the flag. Is it a positive statement of identity? Or a reflection of an English nationalism stuck somewhere in the bad old days of racism and violence?

Source: *The Observer*, 28.05.2006

Item B Celebrating

Christine Ohuruogu celebrates with the English flag after winning the women's 400 metres title at the Commonwealth Games in 2006.

question

What do these items suggest about community cohesion?

This attempt to build a sense of pride in Britishness is highly controversial. How do we define Britishness? By its customs (eating fish and chips, watching football)? By its social institutions (Parliament, monarchy, the rule of law)? By a set of values (tolerance, democracy, freedom of speech)? Or is it a matter of full citizenship (eg human rights, equality of men and women)? However we define it, some critics argue that it is not something which can be imposed on people – the sense of belonging needs to grow naturally over time.

National cultures

Each nation tends to be associated with a distinctive culture. The Japanese, for example, have a reputation for politeness and group conformity. But descriptions of national cultures are often based on crude stereotypes which seize on a few characteristics and then exaggerate them. They not only ignore the cultural similarities *between* countries, they also conceal the cultural variations which nearly always exist *within* every country.

For example, Bowie (1993) notes that outsiders generally view Wales in terms of broad stereotypes – the Eisteddfod, Welsh hats and shawls, rugby, male voice choirs. To the outsider, Wales may appear to have a firm sense of identity and a uniform culture. But in actual fact there are major cultural divisions between Welsh and non-Welsh speakers, between north and south, and between industrial and rural

activity22 Englishness

Unspoken rules

Englishness consists of a set of values, outlooks and unspoken rules (when these are broken, it provokes comment).

- Incompetence and lack of ease in social encounters.
- The high value we attach to humour (we joke about everything).
- Desire for order (queuing etc).
- Over-politeness and courtesy (we're always saying sorry!)
- A down-to-earth and matter-of-fact attitude.
- We enjoy moaning and grumbling (this creates social bonding).
- Our class-consciousness.
- A sense of fair play.
- A sense of modesty and self-mockery (we dislike boasting).

Source: Fox, 2005

question

To what extent do you think this list successfully defines Englishness?

areas. Most so-called nations are actually cultural 'hybrids' that contain a mixture of ethnic and cultural groups.

Traditional images National cultures change over time. For example, the traditional image of Scotland is one of Rabbie Burns, whisky, the kilt and bagpipes. But a more up-to-date version might include oil rigs, the new Scottish Parliament, 'silicon glens' (hi-tech computer industries), and Billy Connolly. So the past is not always a reliable guide to the present. Nevertheless, the traditional images and symbols often remain real and meaningful to many people.

Creating nations – conclusion

Most nation states actually contain a mix of cultural groups. This is true of Britain, with the Celtic nations (Scotland, Wales) claiming a different identity from the English one.

Describing a national culture or national identity is a difficult task – there are so many things to choose from, and people will have differing views on the best 'markers'. Besides, national cultures change over time and so the declared identity will be a blend of the past and the present.

Politicians agree that Britain is a multicultural society but they also wish to integrate Britain's ethnic minorities within an over-arching 'British' identity. However, there is little agreement on what defines 'Britishness'.

7.2 Nationalism

Nationalism is a political doctrine that claims the right of every nation to have its own historical homeland and an independent state to run its own affairs. In today's world, nationalism has gained a rather nasty reputation. It can be a divisive force which pitches nations against each other, leading to conflict and violence. One example is the long and violent struggle over land between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. But nationalism can also take less dramatic 'everyday' forms.

Everyday nationalism Nationalism penetrates into the everyday life and outlook of people in societies such as Britain. Billig (1995) calls this *banal nationalism*. It is a set of taken-for-granted assumptions (eg, that nations should be independent, that loyalty to the nation is a good thing). People are constantly reminded of their national identity in lots of subtle ways. Billig lists as examples such things as weather reports (focusing on the nation's weather) and sports coverage (the nation competing against other nations). We are gently reminded of our national identity even by minor details such as the Union flag fluttering in the forecourt of a petrol station. Politicians constantly talk about 'us', 'the nation' in their speeches.

Nationalism and Britain

Over the last decade or so, nationalist parties have enjoyed increasing popularity in Scotland and Wales. This resurgence of nationalist feelings has led to some devolution of powers (a Parliament in Scotland, an Assembly in Wales). Some commentators fear this is a step towards the eventual break-up of Britain. However, others have welcomed the opportunity this presents for a fuller expression of purely English nationalism. For example, the flag of St George is now rivalling the Union flag in popularity at international football matches.

Another possible threat to British national identity comes from membership of the European Union. Some politicians are glad that Britain is shaking off its island mentality and reaching out to other parts of Europe. But others are fearful that Britain will lose its sense of national identity as well as its powers to make its own political and economic decisions.

Nationalist attitudes

A survey by Dowds and Young (1996) revealed interesting variations in nationalist sentiments. The majority of their sample (English, Scots, Welsh) had a fairly well-developed attachment to a British identity. These people declared their patriotic pride in Britain's cultural heritage and national institutions and they expressed confidence in the future of the nation. But a smaller number of people seemed relatively unmoved by the symbols of nation and these were classified as having 'low' nationalist sentiments.

The survey also identified a further division between two kinds of orientation – *inclusive nationalism* and *exclusive nationalism*.

Inclusive nationalism People in this category had no wish to draw tight boundaries around membership of the British nation. They show a generous willingness to include certain 'marginal' groups (eg, immigrants, ethnic minorities) as part of the national community and grant them full civic rights.

Exclusive nationalism In contrast, people in this group place stronger emphasis on maintaining tight national boundaries by excluding immigrants and ethnic minorities. They displayed a rather mean-minded hatred of 'foreigners' and an intense dislike for European 'interference' in British political and economic affairs. Dowds and Young's findings suggest this is a minority view.

Nationalism – conclusion

It is difficult to escape pressures to adopt nationalist sentiments. As Billig points out, they constantly intrude into our everyday lives. In many ways this is legitimate and innocent. After all, every state is entitled to expect the loyalty of its citizens. Also, it is easy to understand why many of us develop a sense of patriotism and an affection for our country and fellow citizens.

More intense forms of nationalism – the 'exclusive' kind – are another matter. They can involve an irrational hatred of external 'foreigners' and an intense resentment of ethnic minorities living in Britain. But the research by Dowds and Young suggests only a small proportion of people take this view.

*activity*23 *views of nationalism*

Item A *Fanfare for Britain*

We are blessed that we are an island. In the past the sea has protected us from rabid dogs, foreign dictatorship and our Continental neighbours, who are very different from us. We have a long and mature tradition of freedom and democracy.

Sadly, the Channel no longer protects us from Brussels' bureaucrats. The European Union is trying to merge us into a Continental culture. Even our heritage of country sports is being threatened. Also, our gentle nationalism has been threatened by large waves of immigrants who resist absorption and try to superimpose their cultures and laws upon us.

But nationality is deeply rooted in ties of blood, family, language and religion. It is time we learned to be an island again.

Source: N.Tebbit, 1990

Christchurch Infants School

questions

1 State why the view expressed in Item A is an example of exclusive nationalism.
2 Explain why Item B seems to display a spirit of inclusive nationalism.

In recent years, nationalist sentiments have been re-awakened by two major developments – devolution within Britain itself (the so-called 'break-up' of Britain) and moves towards a more integrated European Union. Some commentators claim that one result of this is the strengthening of English identity. Nevertheless, in surveys many people still claim a British identity.

7.3 Globalisation

National identity may be under threat from *globalisation*. Globalisation is the term used to describe the process whereby nations are coming closer together culturally and economically. Interaction between nations becomes more frequent and intense as goods, capital, people, knowledge, culture, fashions and beliefs flow across territorial boundaries.

The process of globalisation has speeded up in recent decades with the spread of markets and the growth of global communications networks. The nation states of the world seem to be losing their independence as they become locked into global networks (eg, the world trading system) and over-arching political units (eg, the European Union).

National cultures Globalisation is a complex process and its impact can vary. Most nations have a long history of cultural exchange, and this has not yet wiped out national differences.

In some cases there may be a trend to cultural uniformity. Much of this is due to the United States which has popularised such things as Coca Cola, baseball hats, trainers and jeans. Global influences also spread from the East – examples include Indian food, Chinese martial arts and Buddhist spiritualism.

In other cases, hybrid forms may emerge from the mixing of cultures. This is called *glocalisation* – the process by which 'local' and 'global' cultures interact to produce new forms. For example, Giulianotti and Robertson (2006) describe the ways in which Scots who emigrate to North America hold on to many 'local' Scottish traditions and identities. At the same time, their new 'global' situation means they have to adapt these local customs to suit their new context. For instance, Celtic and Rangers supporters become much more friendly towards each other!

Sometimes there is a resistance to global influences – a French farmer won fame by bulldozing a branch of McDonald's in protest at the introduction of 'fast food' chains into French society. But resistance is not always successful – Paris EuroDisney was built in spite of fierce protests about the 'Hollywoodisation' of French life.

Globalisation – conclusion

If some globalisation theorists are correct, a spreading global culture (with a heavy United States influence) may replace national cultures. Instead of national identities, people may become 'citizens of the world'.

activity24 a small world

Item A McDonald's

The world's largest McDonald's - Beijing, China

Jakarta, Indonesia

Item B The American dream

My children dress like Americans, talk like Americans, behave like Americans. In their imaginations, their dreams and their souls, America is where they think they are. This is strange, because all three of my children were born in England and have lived here all their lives. Yet they dress like Harlem Blacks, with baseball caps worn backward, baggy jeans and hooded tops. They ghetto-blast rap music, breakdance, moonwalk. They watch American TV shows end-to-end and are fluent in American slang.

When we go to the local cinema, everybody in the audience seems to wear US gear and queue for popcorn, Coke, hamburgers and 26 flavours of ice cream. Afterwards we have a Big Mac with french fries.

Source: Hill, 1995

question

In what ways do Items A and B reflect the influence of globalisation?

However, globalisation theorists have been accused of exaggeration. Nation states are still important, even if they are increasingly locked into larger units such as the European Union. Most people still have a sense of national identity, even if there is greater movement between countries. Eating Chinese food is not the same thing as being Chinese.

Most experts recognise that globalisation is a complex process and it does not lead inevitably to a single world culture or identity. Differences in national cultures and identities are still clearly visible in the present-day world. But globalisation theorists are right to point out that many of these differences have been shrinking.

key terms

Nation A population assumed to have a shared identity and culture based on their common descent and historical homeland.
Nation state A territory run by a sovereign government and based mainly (but not solely) on a single nation.
Nationalism A movement or doctrine which stresses the rights to freedom and territory of a nation.
State Public institutions with legal powers over a given territory and a monopoly of the legitimate use of force.
Globalisation The process by which the various countries and cultures of the world become more closely intertwined.
Glocalisation The process by which local and global cultures interact to produce new forms.

summary

1. Nation states have become an established part of the world order. Some of these so-called nation states are actually 'hybrids' and contain a mix of cultural groups within the frontiers of the state.

2. National cultures have some broad distinguishing characteristics. But they usually have a number of internal divisions (they contain different subcultures). They also have many similarities with other national cultures (eg, nations frequently exchange customs, food and dress fashions with one another). Moreover, they change over time (there are differences between the 'traditional' culture and the present-day culture).

3. National identities are created through 'official' channels (eg, flags, ceremonies) and unofficial channels (eg, stories people tell about their nation).

4. 'Britishness' can be defined in many different ways. However, it is clear that politicians are keen to integrate Britain's diverse communities within an overall British identity.

5. Nationalism as a political doctrine attempts to achieve sovereignty for the nation. In Britain, this has led to some devolution for Wales and Scotland.

6. In an everyday sense, nationalism expresses itself in attachment to the nation and its citizens. For many people this takes the form of inclusive nationalism but for a smaller number it leads to exclusive nationalism.

7. Globalisation theorists claim we are moving towards a more interconnected world. National cultures are not sealed off to the same extent, and ideas, values and lifestyles freely flow across frontiers.

8. Globalisation has implications for national identities. The distinctiveness of these identities is becoming eroded under the impact of global exchanges.

Unit 8 *Gender identities*

keyissues

1 What is the difference between sex and gender?

2 How are gender identities formed?

3 Are gender identities changing?

8.1 Sex and gender

As soon as a baby is born the first question we ask is whether it is a boy or a girl. We do this because we see males and females as having different 'natures' and so we assume they will have different identities and destinies. However, sociologists challenge these commonsense assumptions. They claim that many of the differences between men and women are not natural but created by society. We can see this more clearly if we make a distinction between sex and gender.

Sex This refers to the physical and biological differences between males and females. They have different genes, hormones, genitals and secondary sexual characteristics (breasts, hairiness of body and so on). Because sex is a matter of biology, it is usually regarded as something that is more or less fixed.

Gender This refers to the cultural expectations attached to a person's sex. In modern Britain, for example, women are seen as sensitive and caring and therefore more suited to the supposedly feminine tasks of childcare. Many of these gender assumptions are highly exaggerated and stereotypical – see Table 4. But they do have an influence on our expectations and perceptions.

Sexuality Sexual behaviour offers clear examples of different cultural expectations of males and females. It is commonly assumed that males and females have different sexual personalities (women more interested in love, men more interested in sex). Also, men and women are given different sexual 'scripts' to act out – the man does the chasing, the woman is the passive sex-object. There is also a sexual double-standard – sexual promiscuity can enhance a man's reputation but it may earn a woman an undesirable reputation as a 'slag' (Lees, 1986).

Table 4 Gender stereotypes

Feminine	Masculine
affectionate	undemonstrative
tender	aggressive
childlike	ambitious
soft spoken	assertive
shy	confident
cooperative	competitive
gentle	dominant

Source: Archer & Lloyd, 1985

Biology or society?

Where do gender differences come from? Are they the result of biological differences – the biological determinist view? Or are they created by society – the social constructionist view?

Biological determinism This approach believes gender is based on nature. The genetic differences between males and females create natural differences in their attitudes and abilities and this explains why they end up in different social roles. For example, Steven Goldberg (1977) argues that males have an inbuilt 'dominance tendency' and this is why they tend to occupy the top roles in society.

Social constructionism This approach argues that gender is based on 'nurture' – socialisation and social environment. Each society creates its own set of gender expectations and steers men and women in the chosen directions. Gender differences cannot be genetically programmed since there are wide variations in masculine and feminine behaviour between societies and over time.

Margaret Mead (1935) showed the cultural flexibility of gender in her famous study of three New Guinea tribes (New Guinea is a set of islands in the Pacific Ocean). Among the Arapesh both sexes were gentle and submissive ('feminine'). Among the Mundugamor both sexes were aggressive, rough and competitive ('masculine'). And among the Tchambuli the gender roles seemed the reverse of Western stereotypes (women made the sexual advances, and men enjoyed a good gossip!).

Mead perhaps over-stated her case – no other study has produced such startling results – but she certainly showed that gender differences are at least to some extent a matter of cultural *choice*.

Sex and gender – conclusion

Reasons for the differences between men and women are a matter of dispute. It is not easy to specify the relative importance of biology and society in accounting for differences in the behaviour of men and women.

Nevertheless, the distinction between sex and gender helps us to see that biological differences do not have a direct effect on social roles. Societies have a wide degree of freedom to choose gender characteristics and gender roles. Variations from society to society show that these differences are, at least to some degree, a matter of socialisation.

8.2 Gender socialisation

Agents of socialisation

Males and females learn their gender identities and roles from a variety of agents of socialisation.

Parents Children are steered towards gender roles and identities by their parents. Parents use different terms of endearment for boys and girls ('my brave soldier', 'my little princess'). They dress boys and girls differently (blue for boys, pink for girls). They *channel* their children's energies in particular directions by giving them different toys – guns for boys, dolls for girls. They *manipulate* their children by encouraging different types of activity – boys can be boisterous but girls should be sweet (Oakley, 1972). Young

activity25 gender, biology and culture

Item A The Tchambuli

The women go around with shaven heads, unadorned, determinedly busy about their affairs. Adult males in Tchambuli society are skittish (highly strung and fickle), wary of each other, interested in art, in the theatre, in a thousand petty bits of insult and gossip. The men wear lovely ornaments, they do the shopping, they carve and paint and dance. Men whose hair is long enough wear curls, and the others make false curls out of rattan rings.

Source: Mead, 1962

Item B Looking good

Men from New Guinea in traditional dress

question

What do these items tell us about the nature/nurture debate?

children also observe gender differences inside the home (mother tends to do most of the housework and cooking).

School Studies suggest that by the time children start school they have already picked up gender stereotypes from home, peer groups and mass media. Even at this early age, they may be keenly aware of gender differences between boys and girls. Sometimes they protest when they see other children behaving out of 'character' – they will laugh at a boy who plays with dolls, or get angry when girls play with 'boys' toys'.

Some of these attitudes may be reinforced by their experiences in school. Certainly this is the view of Christine Skelton (2002), based on her study of Benwood Primary School. She describes the various ways in which gender stereotypes were created and maintained in Benwood.

At school assembly it was the men teachers who would be called upon by the headteacher to move equipment or lead the singing. Teachers who could not recall a boy's name would refer to 'you' or 'that boy', or if it was a girl, 'darling' or 'sweetheart'. Posters and artwork on the walls of the school showed boys being active and naughty but girls being passive and good. Also, teachers read stories that encouraged boys to be 'masculine' heroes. In the school football team, boys were taught how to be 'manly' and how to use an 'acceptable' level of physical violence.

Masculinity and femininity

Hegemonic masculinity Boys tend to be socialised into a style of masculinity which stresses toughness, competition, hierarchy and aggression. This style is called *hegemonic* (dominant) because it crowds out other masculine styles such as artistic and gay masculine identities (Connell, 1995). Young men are put under great pressure to present themselves as hard, strong and independent. So they soon learn to conceal any 'girly' signs of gentleness, kindness and vulnerability.

Swots Emma Renold (2001) demonstrated the power of hegemonic masculinity in her study of boys in their final year of primary school. She argues that some boys construct alternative masculinities – gentle, academic, artistic and non-sporting. But boys who are studious or academic find out very quickly that this conflicts with the hegemonic form of masculinity. They risk being teased and ridiculed for being swots, geeks, nerds and squares rather than 'real' boys. So, although they continue to study hard, they learn to adopt strategies to avoid being seen as feminine. For example, they play down their academic success, they join in the teasing and bullying of other studious boys, and they sometimes behave badly in order to disguise their positive attitude towards study. They also ridicule girls who are seen as too academic, and boys with poor sporting skills.

activity26 girls and boys

Item A Dating advice

The following advice was provided in the *Tatler* magazine:

It is important to remember that girls and boys are not remotely alike. So here are some dating do's and don'ts to guide you:

For girls:

Never pretend to know anything about football, even if you do. Balls are strictly boys' territory.

Boys are shy little creatures. Laughing at their jokes is sure to bring them out of their shells. Laughing at their dancing will not.

Remember that girls cannot drink as much as boys. So don't try to keep up with them (it's part of their game plan).
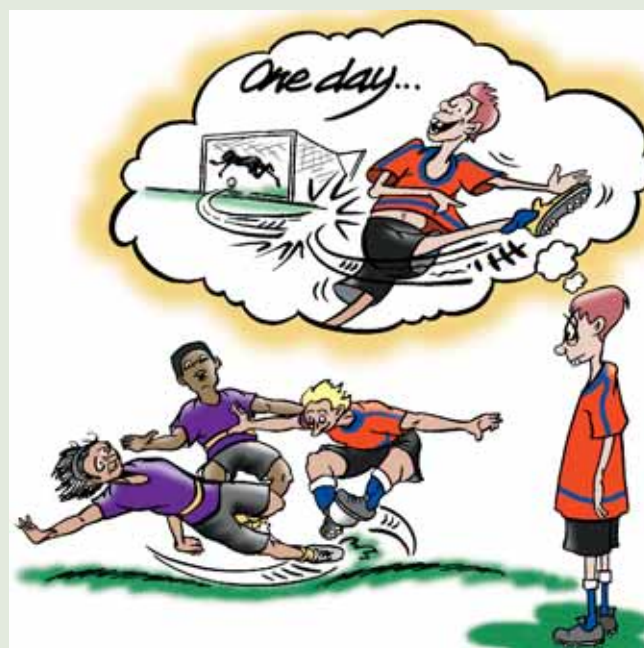
For boys:

Learn to listen to girls. They're invariably much brighter than boys.

The words 'I love you' are taken very seriously by girls. Avoid bandying them about.

Very few girls are funny. They probably know this, so huge guffaws every time she opens her mouth will only annoy her.

Item B The football match

question

How do the items illustrate the process of gender socialisation?

Looking right One of the ways a girl expresses her feminine identity is through her appearance. The importance of appearance is described by Sue Lees (1993) in her study of female teenagers in London schools. These girls put great stress on looking right. Lees argues that this is not a natural feminine thing, neither is it a sign of vanity. Rather, it is something girls are forced into in order to show they are 'good' girls rather than 'slags'. The girls she spoke to feared that if they dressed in too 'loose' or 'sexy' a fashion their reputations would be destroyed. So they learn to dress and move in an 'appropriate' way.

According to Lees, a girl is taught that her appearance is crucial to her identity. She learns that her body must be controlled and disciplined. Girls must act modestly, sit with their legs firmly together rather than spread out, and avoid eye contact with any man they meet in the street. They are taught that they should not take up too much space or talk too much.

Feminism The basic assumption shared by feminists is that the gender divisions in society operate to the disadvantage of women. The process of gender socialisation usually encourages traditional gender roles which reinforce and justify male dominance.

But if gender differences are socially constructed then they can be changed. Feminists have shown that many of the so-called natural differences between men and women are simply not true. Women are perfectly capable of building a successful career, and men are perfectly capable of housework – if they try. Therefore feminists have helped transform many of our assumptions about gender. For example, young women nowadays are no longer socialised into thinking that their future consists solely of marriage and children.

Gender socialisation – conclusion

Some experts say that gender differences are so natural that they are bound to emerge in any society. That may or may not be the case. But we can see clearly that most societies help them on their way – they encourage gender differences. They do this through the process of socialisation.

Boys and girls are participants in this learning process and they take an active part in constructing their particular

activity27 real women

Item A Snow White

Item B Changing attitudes

Percentages disagreeing with the statement: 'A husband's job is to earn the money; a wife's job is to look after the home and the children'.

	1984	1994
Men	34	57
Women	41	61
Employed women	59	77

Adapted from British Social Attitudes surveys

question

What do the items tell us about changes in attitudes to gender?

identities. But they have to do this against a background where certain forms of masculinity and femininity are dominant and others are subordinate. Hegemonic masculinity makes it difficult for boys to forge alternative masculine identities.

Feminists believe that men have greater power and arrange society in a way that suits them. But feminists have challenged this male power in recent decades.

8.3 Changing identities

Gender roles and identities change over time. For example, in the past a woman's place was thought to be firmly in the home. But nowadays more and more women are building careers. This inevitably has an effect on how they see themselves and how they are seen by others. It also reminds us that gender identities can overlap, with men and women adopting similar attitudes and lifestyles. Nowadays, for example, young women are sometimes accused of behaving just as 'badly' as young men.

Behaving badly

One sign that the gender divide may be slowly disappearing is the similarity in the behaviour of 'lads' and 'ladettes'.

Lads Masculinity is something which varies over time. In the 1980s, for example, some claimed that 'New Men' were appearing in Britain. The New Man was a non-sexist, non-aggressive male who was sensitive and considerate, sharing and caring. But in the 1990s this sensitive type was upstaged by the rising popularity of yobbish 'lads'. It became fashionable once again for young men to have a good time through sex, lager, football and loutish behaviour. Some journalists dubbed this new style 'lad culture'. It was celebrated in television programmes such as *Men Behaving Badly* and in men's magazines such as *Loaded*. Its heroes (role models) were football stars or rock stars who behaved in outrageous ways.

Ladettes Today, there is a female counterpart to the lad – the 'ladette'. Following in the wake of the lads, the ladette seems equally willing to booze, swear and indulge her sexual appetites. As ladette culture has spread, new female role models have appeared in the media and they attract a huge following. They are admired for their sassy, don't-give-a-damn attitude and their readiness to compete on equal terms with the lads. Their cultural values are celebrated in magazines like *Cosmopolitan*. Judging by the similar values of lads and ladettes, the gender gap seems to be closing.

However, the extent to which lads and ladettes represent an accurate picture of young people today is open to question. Many see these terms as being used by the media to attract interest rather than accurate descriptions of social change.

Fashion victims

Another area where gender differences seem to be converging is fashion. Traditionally, concern with fashion and personal appearance was seen as the province of women. 'Real' men, by contrast, were careless about how they looked or simply followed convention. However, this is changing.

New masculinities David Abbott (2000) provides a useful overview of men's growing interest in fashion and grooming. Drawing on the work of writers like Frank Mort and Sean Nixon, he describes big shifts in the fashion styles of young men over recent decades. It seems they are taking a keener interest in their clothes, hair and personal appearance. They are growing more confident about expressing themselves through the way they dress and groom (eg, use of aftershave, male perfumes, hair gel, even make-up). Nowadays, they are learning to get pleasure from what was traditionally seen as a feminine preoccupation with personal image. Their identities increasingly revolve around their dress sense, their body image and the right look.

Crisis of masculinity

Not all men are motivated by fashion and style. Heavy manual work such as mining or shipbuilding provided some working-class men with a strong sense of male pride. Now these sorts of jobs are disappearing. New jobs tend to be based around computers and telecommunications and are often taken by women. In education, they see girls' achievement outpacing boys at every age. Mac an Ghaill (1994) describes the insecurity faced by these men as a 'crisis of masculinity'. Their traditional masculine identity is no longer relevant yet they are not comfortable with alternative male identities. Men may respond to this 'crisis' in a number of ways including becoming depressed, fatalistic (giving up), turning to crime, or by adopting new identities.

'The Full Monty': redundant steelworkers practising for their new career as strippers – an unusual way of responding to the crisis of masculinity!

Freedom's children

Helen Wilkinson (1997) refers to research she conducted on a national sample of 18-34 year-olds. This research suggests that the values of this young generation ('freedom's children') are markedly different from those of their parents. There has been a huge shift in values between the generations. Young people nowadays tend to be much more confident and assertive. Although they have to make many difficult decisions, they take it for granted that they can control their own lives and choose their own lifestyles.

Wilkinson was particularly struck by the rising power and confidence of women. They are more willing to take risks, live life 'on the edge', and seek pleasure and fun. Many of them reject the notion of separate spheres for men and women. They have discarded the stereotypes of 'male breadwinners' and 'female homemakers'. Most of them have grown up assuming that sexual equality is their birthright.

Wilkinson believes there has been a growing convergence – coming together – of the values of young men and women. Men's values are becoming more 'feminine' and women's are becoming more 'masculine'. According to her findings, young people are moving away from the old gender stereotypes and roles. Instead, they want to flirt with both their masculine and feminine sides. They value their freedom to choose and their right to express their own individuality.

Changing gender identities – conclusion

Gender differences are becoming blurred as gender identities and lifestyles slowly converge. Many of the differences have been eroded by the impact of feminism, social change and equal opportunities legislation.

There are signs that some gender stereotypes are declining in today's British society. For example, teachers are encouraging young women to plan for a career, not just for marriage and having children.

There is greater flexibility in gender behaviour and both men and women are experimenting with a wider range of gender roles.

However, there is still a long way to go as many gender stereotypes are proving very resistant to change.

key terms

Hegemonic masculinity The dominant style of masculinity which stresses toughness, competition, hierarchy and aggression.
Gender A set of cultural expectations about how males and females should behave.
Sex A classification of males and females according to their biological characteristics.
Sexuality The emotions, desires, attitudes and direction of our sex drive.

activity28 gender games

Norman on Tuesdays　　*Norma on Wednesdays*

Item A Line dancing

Norman Horton enjoyed his new hobby of line dancing so much that he decided to go twice a week – once as a man and once as a woman. Mr Horton, aged 58, would set off on Tuesday nights in open-neck shirt, trousers and stetson. But on Wednesdays he transformed himself into Norma, with a frilly blouse, short skirt, gold tights and high heels. A former paratrooper and military policeman, he has been cross-dressing since the age of 12. 'My wife doesn't mind me cross-dressing as long as I don't do it too often and keep it under control.'

Source: *The Guardian*, 17.4.1998

Item B Bodybuilders

The top three in the women's bodybuilding world championship, 2002

question

What do the items tell us about changing gender identities?

summary

1. In every society, men and women are expected to behave differently from each other. Biological determinists say this is inevitable because of the biological differences between the sexes. They say men and women have different aptitudes and abilities and so they are suited for different social roles.

2. Social constructionists point out that gender expectations differ from society to society. It is hardly likely, then, that these expectations are rooted in biological differences. Rather, they are the result of socialisation. Societies have considerable choice in deciding which cultural roles they will allocate to men and women.

3. Gender socialisation operates at many levels in society. Parents and schools socialise young children into gender roles, and mass media often reinforce these distinctions.

4. Feminists believe that men benefit from the widespread view that certain tasks (like child-rearing or housework) are naturally the responsibility of women.

5. There are signs that old gender identities are breaking down. They have not vanished altogether but there is some evidence of convergence in male and female identities. At the same time, there is a new flexibility and freedom in the way people express their gender identities.

Unit 9 *Class identities*

keyissues

1 What is social class?

2 How do classes differ in their identities and culture?

3 How is class identity changing?

9.1 Living in a class society

Social class

Income and wealth are unequally distributed across the population of Britain – see Tables 5 and 6. Some groups enjoy high incomes and considerable wealth while others are condemned to poverty. Moreover, this is not a totally random lottery. Your chances of 'winning' or 'losing' depend to a large extent on your social class – your position in the social and economic structure.

Occupation Most sociologists find it convenient to use occupation as a measure of a person's social class. So a *social class* can be viewed as a cluster of occupations which share a similar economic position. Over the years sociologists have used a variety of occupational classifications to identify social classes. The latest version is the Office of National Statistics (ONS) Social Class Scheme – see Table 7.

Table 6 *Marketable wealth, United Kingdom, 2003*

(stocks and shares, land, homes, savings, possessions etc)

Top 1% of population own 21% of total wealth

Top 5% of population own 72% of total wealth

Top 50% of population own 93% of total wealth

Source: *Social Trends*, 2007, Office for National Statistics

Table 7 *Office of National Statistics (ONS) Social Class Scheme*

Class 1	Higher managerial and professional (eg, company directors, lawyers, doctors)
Class 2	Lower managerial/professional (eg, junior managers, social workers, nurses, police sergeants)
Class 3	Intermediate (eg, clerical workers, secretaries, computer operators)
Class 4	Small employers and self-employed (eg, taxi drivers, window cleaners, shopkeepers)
Class 5	Supervisors, craft and related (eg, printers, plumbers, train drivers)
Class 6	Semi-routine (eg, shop assistants, hairdressers, cooks)
Class 7	Routine (eg, waiters, cleaners, labourers)
Class 8	Never worked/long-term unemployed

Source: Office for National Statistics, 2007

Table 5 *Average weekly pay, Great Britain, 2002*

Highest paid

Treasurers and financial managers	£ 1,234
Medical practitioners	£ 1,159
Solicitors	£ 899

Lowest paid

Waiters, waitresses	£ 211
Petrol pump attendants	£ 211
Check-out operators	£ 205

Source: Adapted from the *New Earnings Survey*, 2002, Office for National Statistics

activity29 classes apart

Item A Class acts

Opera singer

Greyhound racing at Wimbledon Stadium

Item B Class divisions

A bitter struggle has broken out in Gloucestershire where home owners on a private estate are objecting to an unemployed family of ten moving into a housing association property. Some residents argue they would lower the tone of the neighbourhood. They have signed a petition demanding that the local authority erect a wall to divide the private properties from the rest.

Mrs Monks flicked cigarette ash on the carpet as she said, 'It's bloody snobbery. Those people signing petitions think they're better than us because we ain't working and can't afford to buy a house.'

Mrs Smith, a home-owner, says her objection to the Monks is not personal, just business (it will affect the value of her house). 'Yes, it sounds snooty', she says, 'but I challenge anyone in our position to say they would feel differently.' She added, 'The Monks and us are different types of people. I know some people will think I'm a stuck-up cow, but I've paid for the right to live the way I want to live.'

Source: *The Guardian*, 22.9.1995

Tina Smith

The Monk family

Item C Chav hunt

A YouTube video shows students at Glenalmond College (an expensive public school) on horseback chasing youths clad in tracksuits and trainers and Burberry caps. Victims are picked off by a shotgun as they run across a field, one of the 'dead' chavs is prodded by a smug-looking aristocrat. In another scene, a cap-wearing chav is hauled from a river like he is a salmon while his hunter pretends to thrash him with a rod. Although the video was probably intended as humour and irony, critics said it came across as brash, crass and arrogant.

Source: Independent Television News, 14.8.2007

question

What do Items A, B and C suggest about class identities and differences?

Class cultures and identities

The narrow view of class is that it is solely a matter of occupation, income and wealth. But class is much wider than money and possessions. When we think of social class we also think of social and cultural features. We see each social class as having its own special identity, its own set of values, its own lifestyles and habits.

Class cultures The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) suggests that social classes have their own cultural values, tastes and preferences. This expresses itself in things like their choice of food, music, newspapers and leisure pursuits. Social classes even develop their own ways of walking, talking and eating. They have different attitudes towards the body. For example, working-class people tend to be more tolerant of 'middle-age spread' (putting on weight as they get older) but middle-class professionals are more likely to join fitness programmes in order to keep their bodies trim.

Class identities From an early age we are socialised into the lifestyles and values of the class of our parents. The upbringing of a child in a wealthy detached house in a desirable suburb of London will be very different from that of the child of an unemployed single parent in the council flat half a mile away.

We learn to identify with members of our own social class ('us') and become aware of the differences that separate us from other social classes ('them'). In other words, we become *class conscious.*

9.2   The upper class

The upper class is not listed separately in the ONS scheme. This is partly because it is relatively small – less than 1% of the population according to Kenneth Roberts (2001). But it is also because it is defined by its enormous wealth rather than by the occupations of its members. Britain's upper class enjoys tremendous privileges of wealth and prestige.

The upper class consists of a number of interlocking groups.

- **Landowning aristocrats** These are the 'old' titled families and large landowners. The Duke of Northumberland, for example, owns about 120,000 acres of land as well as a Thames-side mansion and a medieval castle.
- **Entrepreneurs** Nowadays the 'idle rich' are a rare breed. Many of the upper class have gained their wealth from owning or running businesses. Some, such as Richard Branson, are 'self-made' rather than having inherited their wealth.
- **Jet set** The upper class includes a number of people who have made their money in the fields of sport and entertainment. It includes pop stars such as Mick Jagger and Elton John who have knighthoods and mix with aristocracy and royalty.

Upper-class culture and identity

The upper classes share a strong sense of identity. This is because the upper class is 'closed' – its members tend to be the children of upper-class parents. Social closure in the upper class is the result of a shared culture that creates a web of links and contacts. These connections make it difficult for non-members to penetrate the upper class.

The key elements of upper-class culture involve education, family ties and social and leisure activities. According to John Scott (1982), the upper class 'is characterised by a high degree of social cohesion, the main supports of this cohesion being its system of kinship and educational experience'.

Education The children of upper-class families are usually educated in top public schools such as Eton and Harrow and many go on to the most prestigious universities – Oxford and Cambridge. Throughout their education, valuable social contacts are made with each other and with other young people likely to end up in positions of power and influence. These contacts can prove to be extremely helpful later in life – the 'old boy network'. Public schools also socialise their pupils into high levels of self-confidence and an acute sense of their social superiority.

Family, marriage and kinship The exclusive lifestyle and experiences of the upper class mean that its young members tend to socialise with other members of the same class. The result is a tendency for the upper class to intermarry. As time goes on, more and more kinship connections develop between upper-class families.

Social and leisure activities During their socialisation, young members of the upper class are introduced to the exclusive social events that provide a distinctive upper-class lifestyle. Often these are based on old aristocratic traditions and provide a sense of 'real class'. They also provide a circuit where further connections and contacts can be made.

These events include hunting, shooting, Wimbledon (tennis), the Henley Regatta (rowing), Cowes week (sailing), Royal Ascot (horse racing), Glyndebourne (opera) and the Chelsea Flower Show. Together, they provide a clear picture of a distinctive upper-class lifestyle (Roberts, 2001).

However, by no means all of the upper class live a life of glamorous leisure. Chris Rojek (2000) used statistics and biographical data to study the lives of three of the richest men in the world, Bill Gates (owner of Microsoft), Warren Buffett (investor in stocks and shares) and Richard Branson (owner of Virgin). He found that their lives were centred around their work. They worked long hours and, if they did attend exclusive social occasions, used them mainly to make and develop business connections.

Upper-class values

The values of the entrepreneurial upper class centre on their work. Rojek argues that, at least for the seriously wealthy individuals he studied, work is valued as a source

of pleasure, fun and excitement.

However, the values of the old aristocratic upper class are based more on the importance of tradition, authority and breeding.

Tradition The old upper class are conservative in their values and politics. They wish to preserve the historical traditions and customs of British society.

Authority A belief in social hierarchy. They think society works best when it is organised into different levels or ranks. People should show proper respect to those in positions of authority.

Breeding and background A 'good' background is seen as a guarantee that someone will have the appropriate attitudes, manners and values.

activity30 upper-class lifestyles

Item A The social circuit

Strawberries and champagne at Royal Ascot

A grouse shoot in Scotland

Item B Richard Branson

Richard Branson in a hot-air balloon over Marrakech

Richard Branson is said to need eight hours sleep but works for the rest of the time. He is well-known for dressing casually and has no expensive tastes in food or drink. He enjoys the excitement of potentially rewarding but risky ventures, as in air and rail transport. He owns a Caribbean island and homes in Oxfordshire and London. Branson is best known for his world record attempts at water-borne trans-Atlantic crossing and long-distance hot-air ballooning. These are extremely expensive and therefore exclusive leisure activities. For Branson, they are brief interruptions in his normal way of life.

Source: Roberts, 2001

questions

1 How is attendance at the sort of events shown in Item A connected to social closure?

2 Compare the lifestyle and values of Richard Branson (Item B) with those of more traditional members of the upper class.

9.3   The middle classes

The term middle classes refers mainly to ONS classes 1 and 2. Sometimes the term is used in a broader way to include all non-manual workers including routine (semi-skilled) white collar workers such as secretaries and office workers. This wider definition would include ONS classes 3 and 4 although the ONS scheme now describes these classes as an 'intermediate' group (presumably somewhere between middle class and working class).

It is very difficult to make general statements about the culture and identity of the middle classes. There are two reasons for this.

The middle class come from diverse backgrounds There has been a spectacular growth in the middle classes – from 30% of the population in 1951 to an estimated 60% by the year 2000. The 'old' middle classes (the established professions and self-employed business people) have been joined by the expanding ranks of public sector professionals (social workers, teachers, civil servants). There has also been a growth in the number of people in office work, sales and personal services.

Many members of today's middle classes have come from working-class backgrounds and many are women. The middle classes – unlike the upper class – are thus very open to 'outsiders' who merely have to achieve reasonably well at school to join their swelling ranks. This means that the social backgrounds of the middle classes are very mixed. They may have little in common with each other, so a shared culture and identity may not be immediately visible.

The middle class includes a wide range of jobs There are large differences in the pay and status of the middle classes. A part-time office worker in a small engineering business has little in common with a top solicitor. A solicitor may earn up to five or six times as much. Yet, if a broad definition of social class is used, both can be placed in the middle classes as both are non-manual occupations.

The diversity of the middle classes means that people in these groups may have little in common, thus making it less likely they will develop a shared culture or identity.

Middle-class culture and lifestyles

Most sociologists have avoided general statements about middle-class culture for the reasons given above. Roberts (2001) is an example, 'The present-day middle classes are distinguished by the fact that there are so many lifestyle variations among them, some related to age, gender, ethnicity and education'.

However, he does argue that the middle classes are characterised by a more active and diverse range of leisure activities than the working class. 'They take more holidays, play more sports, make more visits to theatres and the countryside, and eat out more frequently' (Roberts, 2001).

Fragmentation of middle-class lifestyles Most sociologists suggest that the middle class is broken up or 'fragmented' into different lifestyle groups.

Mike Savage et al. (1992) noted that the middle class is traditionally regarded as respectable and deeply conformist. Yet nowadays, they are often the pioneers of new cultural styles. Savage et al. used survey data to identify three distinctive (but overlapping) middle-class lifestyles.

Postmodern This lifestyle is adopted mainly by artists, advertising executives and 'yuppies'. It combines rather contradictory and diverse interests. They like opera and skiing as well as stock car racing and 'street culture'. They have extravagant, self-indulgent tastes (champagne, expensive restaurants, drug use), but they also follow health and fitness cults (dieting, rigorous exercise).

Ascetic This lifestyle is found mainly among those employed in education, health and welfare. Typically they have high cultural capital – they are confident, well-read and articulate – but modest economic capital – money, wealth, property. They are ascetic in their tastes (their consumption of alcohol is low). Their leisure pursuits tend to be intellectual (classical music) and individualistic (hill walking).

Managerial Managers and government officials tend to be the least distinctive group as far as cultural tastes are concerned. They follow more conventional middle-class activities such as golf or fishing. They are also keen on the countryside and on heritage (they visit National Trust houses and museums).

Middle-class values

Again, these vary according to particular groupings in the middle classes.

Professionals The higher level of this group is made up of doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants and business executives. Nearly all have been to university and place a high value on education, training and independence. Most of the sons of higher professionals end up in similar jobs, suggesting that parents have been successful in passing on the values of hard work and educational achievement (McDonough, 1997).

Teachers, social workers and local government officers are among those who fit into the lower levels of the professions. Those that work in the public sector (employed by local or central government) have shown themselves willing to join with others in collective action (joining trade unions and taking strike action) to defend the welfare state or pursue a pay claim – actions typically associated with the working class.

Roberts (2001) identifies three main values (what he calls 'preoccupations') associated with the professional middle classes.

1 **Service** The middle classes expect a 'service' relationship with their employer. They value trust and responsibility in their work and want to be able to exercise discretion when and where they see fit.

2 **Career** They value the opportunity to gain promotion or to advance a career by changing job. There is a linked concern for the education of their children. The middle classes expect their children to succeed at school and are willing to take any steps necessary to make this happen (private tutors, changing schools, private education).

3 **Meritocracy** This is a belief that positions should be achieved by ability and effort. They are against any form of discrimination and believe that qualifications are very important.

Routine white-collar workers This group are involved in office work but have little freedom and responsibility. The work may involve sitting in front of a computer screen or using a phone all day. Many women work in these jobs and much of the work is part time. Nearly all of it is poorly paid. Some sociologists have gone so far as to suggest these workers should be in the working class and the ONS scale describes them as 'intermediate' (between the middle and working classes).

However, there is little sign that this group hold typical working-class values. Many are not in unions and they do not hold an 'us and them' view of their relationship with their bosses. They see work as a way of improving their quality of life, allowing them to take foreign holidays and buy more consumer goods (McDonough, 1997).

Self-employed and small business owners The middle classes also include entrepreneurs – employers with small and medium sized businesses, and the self-employed. Roberts argues that this group has a distinctive set of values. They are individualistic and proud of it. They believe that people should be independent and stand on their own feet rather than rely on the welfare state. They also place great faith in hard work and discipline – they firmly believe that success in life is a result of effort and application rather than luck.

9.4   The working class

The working class is composed of manual workers (ONS classes 5, 6 and 7). In 1951 this accounted for about 70% of the working population but over the years it has shrunk to under half. Like the middle class, the working class contains a range of occupations which differ in pay, status and power.

Traditional working class

This was the dominant working class type from around the end of the nineteenth century until the 1950s or 1960s. Its culture and values have been lovingly described by writers such as Hoggart (1957) and Young and Willmott (1957). These are some of its key features.

Male breadwinners Men were regarded as the main breadwinners in the family. Many of them worked in heavy and dangerous industries such as mining, steel, shipbuilding and the docks. This bred a form of 'rugged

masculinity' where physical strength and courage were highly valued. Bonds between men were strong and they frequently socialised outside work.

Home The home was often crowded and noisy but it held a special place in people's affections. The burden of housework, cooking and childcare usually fell to women. Many women were full-time housewives, unless poverty forced them to take on part-time jobs.

Family The traditional working class felt marriage was for life and so they disapproved of divorce. The members of the extended family often lived close to one another and there was a lot of visiting, especially among the women.

Community The traditional working class formed close-knit communities where they had large circles of friends and acquaintances. They valued these community bonds. They met one another frequently on the street, in shops and in the local pub, and they took a keen interest in local gossip and affairs.

Class consciousness The traditional working class had a strong class identity. Their identity was sharpened by the experience of working together to improve wages and working conditions. They made a distinction between 'us' (the working class) and 'them' (bosses, the middle class, anyone in authority). They sided with trade unions and the Labour Party.

The 'new' working class

A shift away from 'smokestacks' (large factories employing lots of manual workers) towards 'high-tech' units (employing skilled technicians rather than assembly line workers) has meant that the traditional working class has declined. Sociologists have mapped the resulting changes in working-class culture over the years.

Privatism The working class now live a more private, home-centred life. The old ties of community have been weakened. People increasingly base their life around the home and family activities.

Changing gender roles Britain is hardly a 'unisex' society but the differences in gender roles are now less pronounced among the working class. The old breadwinner/home-minder distinction has largely broken down. Women are much more likely to have jobs and men are much more likely to accept at least some responsibility for housework and childcare tasks.

Materialism Britain's working class has benefited from the general rise in living standards over the past fifty or so years. They are more likely to own homes and cars, spend a lot on consumer goods and enjoy foreign holidays. For many it is no longer a matter of just 'getting by' – they save, plan and invest, just like the middle class.

Social mobility The changing occupational structure of Britain has created greater opportunities for upward mobility into the middle class. So today's working class are less likely to resign themselves or their children to their humble station in life – there is more emphasis on 'getting on' and 'getting

activity31 *spot the difference*

question

Use the cartoons to spot the differences between the 'traditional' and 'new' working class.

ahead'. Social horizons have widened and they are more ambitious. One effect of this 'ladder of opportunity' may be to weaken class consciousness and class solidarity.

Leisure In the past working-class identity was based around work – the men in the factories or mines, the women in the home. Nowadays, they are more likely to define themselves by their hobbies and recreational activities. Leisure has become a central life interest.

9.5 The underclass

The underclass (ONS class 8) is located at the very bottom of the class pyramid. Its members are so poor and disadvantaged that they are 'under' the normal class structure. They suffer poverty, unemployment, bad housing, ill health and poor educational opportunities. Some sociologists see them as more or less permanently trapped at the bottom. They say children are socialised into this way of life and so the values and lifestyles of the underclass are passed on from one generation to the next (Murray, 1994).

Underclass values Some social scientists claim the underclass are poor or unemployed because of their values and morals – they are often seen as lazy, workshy scroungers. Charles Murray, an American writer, calls them the 'new rabble'. He claims they prefer to live off crime or welfare benefits rather than work. He also accuses them of irresponsible attitudes to parenthood – young women carelessly get pregnant and young men become 'absent fathers' and poor role models for their children. Children who grow up in a household where no-one works are likely to settle into the same lifestyle.

Blaming the victim Many sociologists accuse Murray of unfairly 'blaming the victim'. They say the underclass are not to blame for their social disadvantage. Rather, they have been 'socially excluded' by more powerful groups in society. These powerful groups have adopted policies that create poverty and unemployment. As a result, the underclass has been cut off from the prosperity and opportunities enjoyed by the general population.

The critics of Murray also challenge the idea that the values of the underclass are really so different from the rest of society. They say that most members of the underclass share the same mainstream social values as everyone else (Dean and Taylor-Gooby 1992).

Cause or effect? Even if the underclass has different values, it is not clear what this means. It is possible that their values are the cause of their problems (eg, laziness may lead to unemployment). But it is equally possible that their values are the effect of their disadvantage – if they are constantly denied employment opportunities then they may become apathetic and demoralised. Peter Saunders (1990) indicates how this might happen: 'Inactivity breeds apathy. Empty hours are filled with sleep, and days go by in a dull haze of television programmes and signing on. Sooner or later the unemployed become unemployable.'

Living in a class society – conclusion

Class is a *complex* matter. There is no simple link between class and values. For example, we have seen how certain values (eg, hard work, education) are shared by most social classes. We have also seen how there are different values and lifestyles within each class.

Class is also a *contested* matter – sociologists disagree about it. For example, some sociologists think that routine

activity32 the underclass?

Item A The 'new rabble'

- Low skilled and poorly educated
- Single parent families are the norm
- Depend on welfare benefits and 'moonlighting'
- High levels of crime, child abuse and drug abuse
- Unwilling to get a job
- Children have truancy and discipline problems

Source: Murray, 1994

Item B Murray's view of the underclass

Item C A single parent

Judith Gardam, age 28, single mother who lives on state benefits.

I'm sure if the Government sat down and spoke to me and had a cup of tea with me they'd get to like me. I have learnt about life. I know how to love, I have got compassion, I have feelings for people. But do they have feelings for anybody but themselves? I want something better for the kids and I am attending college part time. But at the moment I feel I am lower than lower class.

Source: Cockburn, 1993

questions

1 Argue the case that the behaviour in Item B is:
   a) caused by the culture and values described in Item A,
   b) creates the culture and values described in Item A.

2 Use Item C to argue that the poorest do not have separate values from the rest of society.

white-collar workers belong to the middle class while others think they are part of the working class. Some believe a distinct underclass exists while others argue that this group is simply the lowest level of the working class.

Also, class culture and values *change* over time. For example, the values of the 'traditional' working class are not the same as those of the 'new' working class.

9.6 A classless society?

A number of sociologists now reject the idea that class is still the dominant force in shaping people's identities. They claim that what matters in contemporary society is no longer class and occupation. Identities are increasingly based on *lifestyle* and *consumption* (Saunders, 1990).

Lifestyles According to Pakulski and Waters (1996), lifestyles are becoming a central organising feature of people's lives and a major source of social and personal identity. These lifestyles are less and less likely to be based on social class.

At one time people tended to follow traditional class-based leisure pursuits. The middle class may have enjoyed golf while the working class were more likely to spend their evening greyhound racing. Nowadays, lifestyles and identities are much more diverse and flexible. They are based on individual choice rather than class background. For example, we might find it difficult to guess the class background of hang-gliders, ballroom dancers or football supporters.

Consumption Another threat to class identities comes from the rise of consumer culture. People may once have built their identities around work and production but nowadays their lives are more likely to be centred on their leisure and the things they spend their money on – their consumption. So identities may no longer be based on how people *earn* their money – a matter of occupation and class – but on how they *spend it* – a matter of consumer lifestyles (Clarke & Saunders, 1991).

Consumer goods are important not so much for themselves as for what they say about the tastes and style of the consumers. People are usually aware that they are making a statement about themselves through their consumption habits. They signal their lifestyles by what they choose to wear, eat, drink, listen to or collect. These consumption choices express and establish their identity.

Answering back

Is it really true that class has become so insignificant? A number of sociologists insist that class is still an important factor in contemporary society. For example, there are still striking inequalities between classes in many areas of life – see Table 8. And these inequalities do not appear to be declining.

> ### Table 8 Class inequalities
>
> **Life expectancy** People in the top two classes live five years (men) or three years (women) longer than those in the bottom two classes.
>
> **Health** Among professionals, 17% (men) and 25% (women) report a long-standing illness. Among unskilled workers, the figures are 48% (men) and 45% (women).
>
> **Unemployment** Unemployment rates are about four times higher among unskilled workers than among professional groups.
>
> **Victims of crime** In 1995, 4% of affluent (well-off) suburban families were burgled, compared with 10% of families living in council and low-income estates.
>
> **Suicide** In 1993 in England and Wales, suicide for men was four times greater in the bottom class than in the top class.
>
> Source: Acheson, 1998

Class identity Is it really true that class identities have declined? A survey by Gordon Marshall et al. (1989) found that about 60% of the sample thought of themselves as belonging to a particular social class, and over 90% could place themselves in a class if prompted. These figures suggest that class identities manage to survive in spite of competition from lifestyle and consumer identities. Indeed, Marshall et al. argue that class is the most common and powerful source of social identity. Other identities may have grown in importance but they have not displaced class identities from their central position.

This view is supported by Fiona Devine (1997). After reviewing a wide range of research, she concludes that class is still the most common and significant social identity in Britain. Class identities remain much stronger than identities based on things like shopping tastes or leisure pursuits.

Researching class identity

A survey by Mike Savage et al. (2001) presents a rather more complicated picture. They suggest that class is still an important influence on people's lives and living standards. At the same time, class identities seem to have weakened.

Class out there Savage et al. investigated the class identities of 178 people in the Manchester area. They found that very few of their sample believed Britain was a classless society. Most of them were quite comfortable talking about class 'out there' in society – they were familiar with class terminology and they recognised the social and political importance of class. Also, they talked freely about their own life histories in class terms (eg, some of them described how they had moved from a working-class background into the middle class).

Personal identity However, Savage et al. found that most of the people they interviewed were rather hesitant about identifying *themselves* as members of any class. Most saw themselves as 'outside' classes. They preferred to describe themselves as 'ordinary' or as 'individuals' rather than see themselves as products of some class background. They felt their own individuality was under threat if they were 'labelled' in class terms.

Savage et al. conclude that class identities are generally weak. Most people recognise the relevance of class in the wider society but are not keen to express their own personal identities in class terms. So the typical attitude towards class identity is one of ambivalence – mixed feelings.

A classless society? – conclusion

The recent emphasis on consumption and lifestyles is a response to changes in society. The old class divisions seem to be breaking down and it is not so easy to predict someone's lifestyle purely on the basis of their social class. Lifestyles appear to involve more choice than in the past.

Some sociologists say we should not be deceived by the appearance of diversity and choice in modern society. Many of the differences in lifestyles are rather superficial. When it comes to the important things – life chances, opportunities, power – class is still the most important factor governing our lives. The lone parent on the bleak housing estate has limited freedom to experiment with different lifestyles.

Nevertheless, a distinction has to be drawn between class influences and class identities. Our position in the class structure certainly has an impact on our opportunities and living conditions. But this does not necessarily mean that we are always conscious of class, or that it is our central identity. Savage et al. show that people often have mixed feelings and are hesitant about defining themselves in class terms.

> ## key terms
>
> **Social class** A group which occupies a particular social and economic position in society.
>
> **Class consciousness** Awareness of being in a particular social class.
>
> **Lifestyle** A distinctive set of tastes, attitudes and behaviour.
>
> **Underclass** The poorest and most under-privileged section of society.

summary

1. Sociologists allocate people to social classes according to their economic position in society. Occupation is usually selected as the most convenient indicator of class.

2. Class seems to affect many other aspects of our lives. Not just the job we do and the money we earn, but also our attitudes, lifestyles and values. You can predict quite a lot about a person's values, behaviour and identity from their social class.

3. Society can be broken down into four major classes: upper, middle, working and underclass. There are some overlaps between these classes in their values, lifestyles and identities. But there are also some broad class differences.

4. The upper class is made up of those who possess great wealth. Members of the upper class share a strong sense of identity based on public school education and family connections.

5. The middle class is made up of people in non-manual jobs. It is difficult to generalise about middle-class culture and identity as the people and jobs making up the expanding middle class are so diverse. Professionals value education highly and take part in a wide range of leisure activities. The self-employed value independence and hard work.

6. The working class consists of those in manual jobs. Traditional working-class culture emphasised class consciousness, community and the extended family. 'New' working-class culture focuses on leisure and the home.

7. Some sociologists believe that an underclass exists consisting of the unemployed and those dependent on welfare benefits. This group has developed its own norms and values. Others dispute this view and see the underclass as sharing similar values to the rest of society.

8. Some sociologists argue that lifestyles and consumption are now more important than class as sources of identity.

9. It would be foolish to think that class has faded into insignificance. People's lives are still greatly affected by their class position. But class identities do seem to be weaker now than in the past.

Unit 10 Leisure, consumption and identity

keyissues

1 What are the main patterns of leisure?

2 Does leisure play a significant role in identity formation?

3 How meaningful are virtual identities?

4 What role does consumption play in identity formation?

5 What are the main explanations of consumer lifestyles?

10.1 Leisure

Leisure can be defined in terms of time – as the time left over after work, or as the time left over after work and free from all non-work obligations (eg, sleeping, shopping, cooking). Alternatively, it may be seen in terms of particular activities and attitudes – the enjoyable things people choose to do with their free hours.

Historical changes

Pre-industrial Britain In pre-industrial Britain there were special occasions for feasts, fairs and fun. However, in daily life there was seldom a clear dividing line between work and leisure. Work was part of everyday life, and most people just stopped for rest or recreation according to the rhythms of the working day and changing seasons.

The industrial revolution Leisure patterns were transformed by urbanisation and industrialisation. For most people, the nineteenth century demanded long hours of toil, under strict supervision, in factories, mines and workshops. As a result, work and leisure became sharply separated.

Walvin (1978) describes how the Victorians cracked down on the 'sinful recreations' of earlier times – such as cock-fighting, violent sports, and heavy gambling and drinking. Employers and the state encouraged 'wholesome recreation' such as mass sports (eg, football, rugby and athletics) which were organised in leagues and closely regulated. The expansion of parks, museums and libraries offered further opportunities for healthy exercise and cultural improvement.

Mass leisure The twentieth century ushered in an age of mass leisure and a wider range of cultural and leisure activities. This was partly due to a long-term reduction in working hours and the appearance of a more leisurely 'weekend'. Another factor was increased spending power which put leisure activities within the reach of ordinary people. Improved transport (eg, railways) created better opportunities for outings such as trips to the seaside.

The newly-emerging leisure industries spotted the chance to make a profit from these developments. Sports such as football became more commercialised (eg, by charging for admission). Also, the 'communications revolution' – the spread of magazines and newspapers, followed by radio, cinema, television and the internet – resulted in massive shifts in cultural pastimes, entertainments and lifestyles (Walvin, 1978).

Patterns of leisure

People in Britain follow a wide range of leisure pursuits. This includes tourism and holidays - there were 43 million holiday trips abroad in 2004. But a great deal of leisure time is spent in the home. For example, it is estimated that the average household views television for about 26 hours per week. Nine out of ten adults watch it every day, and one in ten watches it for over 7 hours a day (*Social Trends*, 2006).

Every year about three quarters of adults take part in a sport, game or physical activity of some sort. The most popular exercise is walking (46%), followed by swimming (35%), keep fit/yoga/dance (22%) and cycling (19%).

As for cultural pursuits, millions of people in Britain visit libraries, the theatre, museums and craft exhibitions every year. Over twelve million people attended plays in London's West End in 2005, and four and a half million visited the British Museum (*Social Trends*, 2007).

Group differences Leisure is not equally distributed across the British population. For some professional groups, hours at work may actually have increased – so they are work-rich but time-poor. In contrast, some groups may be time-rich but lack the money or good health to fully enjoy their leisure.

Alan Warde (2006) uses survey evidence to identify some group differences in sport. Predictably, participation in sport is higher among younger people. Better educated people also have higher participation rates, partly because they feel they have a duty to look after their body. But the particular choice of sport is not strongly class-based (with a few exceptions, such as middle-class preference for golf and squash).

Gender patterns Gender makes a difference to leisure styles. Women tend to carry major responsibilities for housework and childcare, and so they have less time and energy for leisure. Also, their leisure activities may be restricted because of fears for their safety outside the home, especially at night. Sometimes they are faced with a limited range of leisure provisions, or they may find that leisure centres are dominated by males.

There is a problem of 'image' when it comes to sport. A report in 2007 by the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation found that young women were discouraged from taking exercise because of cultural pressures. Sport is often seen as 'unfeminine', and many young women stop after they leave school. Among 16-24 year-olds, women are half as active in sports as men, and this is especially true for low income and minority ethnic women. Women who remain active tend to choose certain activities – they are over-represented in swimming, keep-fit, walking, horse riding and gymnastics.

Work and leisure It is not always easy to identify clear links between work and leisure. But Stanley Parker (1976) suggests three main types of relationship.

In the *extension* or *spillover* pattern, the experience of work carries over into leisure. People who are stimulated by their work (eg, middle-class professionals) may adopt a lively and energetic attitude to leisure. On the other hand, those who find work uninspiring may adopt lazy or apathetic leisure habits.

In the *opposition* pattern, people deliberately create a contrast between their work and leisure. Those who find work frustrating or exhausting may escape from it by seeking 'explosive compensation' in their leisure (eg, deep-sea fishermen indulging in heavy drinking sessions when ashore).

In the *neutrality* pattern there is no strong link between work and leisure. People divide their lives into separate compartments and they cultivate leisure pursuits as they see fit.

Leisure as a central life interest

The ancient Greeks thought humans express themselves most fully in leisure – it allows them to develop their mind, body and spirit to the highest level. People today may not have such lofty ambitions, but there is growing evidence that leisure is a major source of identity and meaning. Some sociologists believe leisure is replacing work as a 'central life interest' – the sphere of life where we seek fulfilment and a sense of purpose.

Is leisure really capable of providing people with satisfying identities? Kenneth Roberts (1978) presents three sociological models – class, mass and pluralist – which take different views on this issue.

Class domination This is the Marxist model (see page 9). It argues that self-fulfilment is not really possible in a capitalist society. The ruling class exploit workers not only in the workplace but also in their leisure. They derive economic profits from leisure – they brainwash people into buying the latest products or crazes (eg, 'home cinema', Pilates classes). The ruling class also benefit politically – entertainment and leisure are mindless time-fillers which distract people's attention from the way they are being exploited and manipulated.

Mass society This model argues that people today lead rather empty and superficial lives. Unlike the class domination model, it does not see this as a ruling class conspiracy. Rather, it is a result of the poor quality of popular culture. The leisure and entertainment industries try to appeal to the largest (mass) audience and so their standards are low and unchallenging. The mass audiences are seduced into the role of passive consumers in front of an endless stream of trivia (see page 9).

Pluralist model This approach disagrees with the previous two models – it argues that leisure offers rich opportunities for creating lifestyles and identities. For example, popular culture is popular precisely because of its attractive features. Society today is diverse (pluralistic) and people have greater choice and freedom. Some enthusiasts dedicate themselves to their chosen hobbies and recreations – this is 'connoisseur leisure' (Roberts, 1995). Others may be quite content to dabble in a series of

'casual' leisure pursuits.

Postmodern model The pluralist model is similar to some postmodernist accounts of leisure. For example, Taylor and Cohen (1992) suggest that people in postmodern society increasingly seek choice, novelty and diversity. In society today there are 'identity sites' which give them the freedom to create new meanings and identities in a playful way. These identity sites include 'activity enclaves' (hobbies, sex), 'new landscapes' (holidays, adventure) and 'mindscapes' (internal voyages via drugs or therapy).

Leisure – conclusion

Leisure patterns vary across social groups. Nevertheless, leisure fills an important part in people's lives, and for some it is a major source of meaning and identity.

Sociologists take different views on the significance of leisure. Some see it as yet another example of capitalist exploitation. Some condemn it on the grounds of its passive or trivial features. But others defend it as an arena where people can stretch themselves, find genuine pleasure, and establish new and meaningful identities.

activity33 a bit of fun?

Item A A Global sport

Oil-rich sheikhs from the Gulf States are pumping billions of dollars into racing, football, cricket, tennis, rugby, motor sport, athletics and even ocean racing. They host lavish tournaments (eg, Dubai Desert Classic golf tournament, the Bahrein Motorsport grand prix). For Dubai's ruler, sport forms part of a multi-million dollar charm offensive. Through sport, he reasons, he can improve the region's image, drive tourism and reduce its economic dependency on oil and natural gas.

But it comes at a price. A huge army of workers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have toiled for long shifts and low wages in Dubai, most living in squalid conditions.

Source: *The Observer*, 11.11.2007

Jockey Frankie Dettori presented with a trophy for winning the Dubai World Cup, the world's richest horse race.

Item B Reality TV

Brian celebrates winning Big Brother with Davina McCall.

Item C Exotic holidays

Western tourists mob a tribal elder in Papua New Guinea.

questions

1 How would the class domination Marxist model explain Item A?

2 How would a) mass society and b) pluralist models explain Item B?

3 How would the postmodern model explain Item C?

10.2 Virtual worlds

One of the fastest growing leisure areas is the use of 'new media' – advanced digital media such as mobile phones, electronic games and the internet. These media are increasingly portable and inter-connected (eg, phone, camera, email and internet can be combined in one gadget). Boyle (2007) suggests that what makes the new media different is their greater accessibility and the expanded choice they offer their users.

The internet is often seen as dominated by young males. An Ofcom report in 2007 confirmed that 16-24 year-olds generally spend more time online and send more text messages. But it also describes the emergence of 'silver surfers' – pensioners who sometimes spend far more time online than younger people. The report also notes the *feminisation* of the internet – among 25-34 year-olds, women spend more leisure time online than men.

Virtual communities These are social relationships which are created in cyberspace. The new media have established social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Bebo. These popular websites are used for entertainment and for friendships. Some users of Facebook even send 'virtual flowers' to their friends.

Are these virtual communities really capable of creating deep and lasting social relationships? A survey by Curtice and Norris (2007) suggests it is unlikely that the internet changes social lives dramatically. Rather, people integrate internet use according to their pre-existing attitudes and social skills. For example, some of the keenest users of internet sites are sociable people who already have lots of friends they meet face to face.

Virtual identities People have new opportunities to express their personal and collective identities online. There are websites and chat rooms devoted to all sorts of tastes and lifestyles – fan clubs, support groups, special interests and so on.

The anonymity of the web allows people to invent new identities – they can give themselves a different name, gender or biography. They can create *avatars* – virtual replicas of themselves – in fantasy worlds. For example, *Second Life* is a popular online world with 3.5 million inhabitants where you can design your own avatar. You can choose the appearance, characteristics and behaviour of this avatar as it moves around an imaginary world. In this world you can even buy a house, shop, travel, marry and so on.

Virtual worlds – conclusion Technology has created fresh opportunities for establishing online communities and identities. The boundary between virtual and real worlds is becoming more blurred.

*activity*34 *life on the net*

Item A Cybersex

A man in New York has become the first to sue for divorce on the grounds that his wife committed adultery in cyberspace. He discovered her trail of email messages on his computer screen. His wife never met the PC lover with whom she flirted electronically for months.

Source: *The Guardian*, 3.2.1996

Item B The portfolio personality

The internet will transform our sense of self. You can be anyone on the internet. You can develop an infinite number of personalities in discussion groups and chat rooms. You can change sex, age, tastes, opinions, values, even beliefs – endlessly. This process – the development, discovery and expression of your identity – has become the purpose and meaning of life, your life project. We are only beginning to understand how flexible and diverse our selves can be – the portfolio personality.

Source: *The Guardian*, 15.1.1999

Item C Second Life

A beach scene from Second Life. You can buy a great body for a few dollars or pick up an average one for nothing. A couple who married in Second Life went on to marry in real life.

question

Show how these items suggest that the distinction between 'real' and 'virtual' worlds is becoming blurred?

10.3 Consumption

Some sociologists believe consumer lifestyles are an important source of identity in a leisure-based society. They argue that people no longer build their identities around work and production – how they *earn* their money. Rather, they are more likely to base their identities on their lifestyles and consumption patterns – the things they *spend* their money on.

Consumer society Consumption is an essential feature of every society. People need to consume food and drink in order to survive. In pre-industrial societies, people grew their own food, made their own clothes, or bartered goods with others. In capitalist society, however, consumption revolves around *commodities* – goods or services which are sold in the marketplace.

Living standards have risen dramatically, and consumption is no longer solely about physical survival. People can afford to buy consumer goods which are not strictly necessary – for example, dishwashers, new furniture, the latest fashions. The emergence of the department store in the mid-nineteenth century marked a shift in consumer attitudes. Shopping was no longer just about buying the bare essentials of life. The stores encouraged shoppers to browse at their leisure among the wide range of goods on display. It also helped to create the image of shopping as something done mainly by women.

Consumer culture Consumer goods are important not just for their practical use. Consumption is also a *cultural* act – it has symbolic meaning. It tells us things about the tastes and style of the consumers. People are usually aware that they are making a statement about themselves through their consumption habits – what they choose to wear, eat, drink, listen to or collect. These consumption choices express and establish their identities.

Lifestyles Graham Day (2006) points out that there is more to lifestyle than the mere act of consuming. The term also suggests a 'design for living', a characteristic way of acting in the world. To follow a particular lifestyle is to take up a pattern of activity and consumption which indicates the sort of person you are – your identity.

Theories of consumer culture

Mike Featherstone (1991) identifies three broad accounts of consumer culture. These can be called the radical, sociological and postmodern models.

Radical model This is similar to the Marxist class domination model. It sees the expansion of consumer culture as driven by capitalism's search for profits. Clever marketing and advertising create consumer desires – people believe their lives will be happier if they buy the latest goods and services. But this happiness is likely to be

activity35 consumer rites

Item A Distinctions

The newly appointed chairman of the Royal Opera was asked by press reporters what sort of person he wished to attract to opera. He replied, 'I don't want to sit next to somebody in a tee shirt, a pair of shorts and a smelly pair of trainers. I'm a relaxed individual but I am passionate about standards of behaviour'.

Source: *The Guardian*, 16.1.1998

Item B The spirit of shopping

Shopping has become the new religion.

- We have 'cathedrals of shopping' (shopping malls).
- Shoppers follow rituals – scrutinising the goods, selecting items, queuing and paying.
- Shoppers are offered paradise on earth in the form of desirable goods.
- Shopping is the opium of the masses – its addictive quality reconciles people to capitalism.

But there are differences between shopping and true religion – no Ten Commandments and no nourishment for the soul.

Source: Bartholomew, 1998

The Trafford Centre, Manchester, the UK's biggest shopping shopping mall.

Item C What to wear

From 'Trinny and Susannah Undress'. They have given fashion advice to the men in the John Lewis Department Store window.

Item D Expressing the individual

People imagine they are expressing their creativity and individuality in their choice of home furnishing. But their ideas probably came from magazines and television, and many people have made the same choices.

Source: Inglis, 2005

questions

1 Explain why Item A is an example of a status distinction.
2 Why is Item B so critical of shopping?
3 What do Items C and D tell us about creativity and individuality in consumer culture?

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fleeting and shallow, since capitalism is based on exploitation which damages social relationships.

In spite of its failure to deliver real happiness, capitalism seduces and manipulates people with material goods. This has an ideological effect – people are more likely to accept and support the capitalist system. So consumption masks the ruthless and exploitative nature of capitalism. People who buy fashionable jeans in the West are often unaware that these have been manufactured in Third World countries where sweatshop workers are paid pitifully low wages.

Sociological model This model views consumption as a way of creating social distinctions. For example, Bourdieu (1984) argues that social classes develop distinctive lifestyles as a way of establishing their cultural identity and superiority. One way of doing this is by *conspicuous consumption.* Thorstein Veblen (1899) described how wealthy leisure elites make a public show of their supposedly refined tastes and interests. For example, the

ability to speak a classical language (Latin or Greek), or having a good 'nose' for fine wines, sends the message that they are superior people.

Status symbols are used to signal a group's status and social position. For example, wealthy footballers are associated with flash cars, Rolex watches and 'trophy' wives and girlfriends ('WAGS'). These symbols play a part in the 'presentation of self', where people project an identity which they hope others will admire.

Postmodern model Postmodern sociologists argue that lifestyles are no longer determined by social class or occupation. Rather, they are shaped by individual consumer choices – what we choose to wear, eat and drink, where we shop, the goods we buy, our leisure pursuits and interests. Individuals self-consciously arrange these things into a recognisable lifestyle. Unlike the 1950s era of conformity (mass consumption), the postmodern era places value on diversity.

The postmodern model is more likely than the other models to celebrate the pleasures, desires and anticipation which are generated by consumption. It views these as genuine pleasures rather than 'false' desires invented by capitalists. The construction of identity is seen as an active and creative process.

Consumption – conclusion

A great deal of consumer behaviour is still largely a matter of routine shopping for basic needs. Nevertheless, consumption is increasingly a form of cultural expression.

Perhaps only a killjoy would deny that consumption brings genuine pleasures But consumerism can create anxiety and discontent – materialism can breed envy and frustration. Powerful groups sometimes manipulate consumer tastes and engage in exploitative practices.

It is not really clear whether consumer identities are more important than identities based on work. And work still has an influence on consumption – spending power varies across the social classes and this can shape identities and lifestyles.

Nor is it clear to what extent the construction of identity is an individual and a creative process. Lifestyle magazines and TV programmes are constantly telling us what to be and how to live.

key terms

Leisure The time left over from work, or time left over from work and from all non-work obligations, or the enjoyable things that people decide to do in their free time.
Consumption The purchase, use and/or enjoyment of goods and services.
Consumer culture A set of attitudes which encourages and finds meaning and pleasure in consumption.
Conspicuous consumption The public consumption of goods and services in order to gain prestige.
Status symbols Things which are used to signal a group's social standing and to gain prestige.

summary

1. Leisure patterns have changed over the centuries. People today have more leisure time and a wider range of leisure activities. It is possible that leisure has become a central life interest for many people – they find meaning and identity in leisure rather than work.

2. Many leisure activities are shared by most of the population – television viewing is the best example. But social groups have different rates of participation in particular leisure pursuits. Women tend to engage in a narrower range of physical exercise activities.

3. Class domination theorists believe that powerful groups control leisure for material gain (it creates profits) and political gain (it distracts attention from the basic injustices of the capitalist system). They believe that true fulfilment is impossible in a society based on exploitation.

4. Mass society theorists condemn the poor quality of mass culture and mass leisure. Rather than stimulating or enriching people, leisure activities lull them into a state of apathy and passivity.

5. The pluralist model argues that leisure offers choice and provides opportunities for creating different lifestyles.

6. New electronic media allow people to extend or invent identities in virtual worlds. However, they do not always transform people's lives or establish deep and lasting identities. Rather, they are superimposed on people's existing lifestyles and relationships.

7. Consumption has symbolic meaning, and consumer lifestyles are used to express identities. Some sociologists argue that consumer lifestyles are now more important than class as sources of identity.

8. Lifestyles are much more diverse nowadays as people pursue their individual interests. Postmodern theorists argue that lifestyles are freely chosen rather than dictated by class positions.

9. Radical theorists question whether a consumer culture is capable of making people happy. Effective advertising depends on making people discontented and envious..

10. Consumption styles and status symbols can be used to create social distinctions between groups.