

AS Sociology For AQA
[2nd Edition]



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The background of the page is a photograph of a gallery wall. The wall is covered with numerous framed abstract paintings in various colors and styles, including some with bold patterns and others with more organic, flowing forms. The lighting is soft, and the perspective is from a slightly low angle, looking down the length of the gallery.

Unit 1: Culture and Identity

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1. Different conceptions of culture, including subculture, mass culture, high and low culture, popular culture, global culture.

Culture: Introduction

Culture is a significant concept for sociologists because it both identifies a fundamental set of ideas about what sociologists' study and suggests a major reason for the existence of Sociology itself – that human social behaviour can be explained in the context of the social groups into which people are born and within which they live their lives.

In this Chapter we're going to explore a range of ideas relating to both **culture** and its counterpart, **identity** and to do this we need to develop both a working definition of culture and an understanding of its different dimensions.

Concepts of Culture: Observations

Defining Culture

In the **Introductory Chapter** we offered a general definition of culture by representing it as a distinctive "way of life". We also noted that culture involves teaching and learning (a **socialisation** process). However, in this Section we need to think a little more clearly about what we mean by "culture" and we can do this by noting that the concept encompasses a range of ideas and meanings relating to *roles*, *values* and *norms* as well as *institutional structures* (such as types of family, work, educational and political systems), *beliefs* and the variety of "arts and artifacts" produced by different cultures.

In addition, we can add to this mix both **Dahl's** (2001) argument that culture is "a collectively held set of attributes, which is dynamic and changing over time" and the idea that societies develop *mechanisms* for the transmission of cultural *signs*, *symbols* and *meanings* (ideas we'll develop throughout this Chapter) from one generation to the next.

Cultural artifacts (also known as "books").



Secondly, we can note a basic distinction between two *dimensions* of culture:

Material culture consists of the *physical objects* ("artifacts"), such as cars, mobile phones and books, a society produces and which reflect cultural knowledge, skills, interests and preoccupations.

Non-Material culture, on the other hand, consists of the knowledge and beliefs that influence people's behaviour. In our culture, for example, behaviour may be influenced by *religious beliefs* (such as Christianity, Islam or Buddhism) and / or *scientific beliefs* – your view of human evolution, for example, has probably been influenced by **Darwin's** (1859) theories.

This distinction, while necessary, is not hard-and-fast because physical artifacts (such as mobile phones) have cultural *meanings* for the people who produce and use them. A *house*, for example, is not simply somewhere to live (although that, of course, is its primary or intended purpose). Houses also have cultural meanings – for both those who own them and those who don't. The type of house someone owns, for example, says something about them and this illustrates a significant idea about the *symbolic nature* of both cultures as a whole and the artifacts they produce.



Some types of housing may mean more to people than others...

There is, for example, nothing inherent in "a house" that tells us its *meaning*, as opposed to its purpose (or *function*). It can mean different things to different individuals and groups within a particular culture, just as it could

conceivably mean different things to different cultures.

In this respect **Merton** (1957) argued the purpose of something can always be considered on two levels:

A manifest function that relates to an apparent or obvious purpose (the manifest function of a mobile 'phone, for example, is to communicate with people).

A latent function involving the idea something may have a hidden or obscured purpose (one that may or may not be intended).

One way to illustrate this idea is through the concept of **social status**, in the sense that cultural artifacts such as cars, mobile 'phones or whatever can be:

Status symbols –the idea that owning something people feel is desirable (or, indeed, undesirable) says something about you to others (think, for example, about how you react to seeing someone using a sadly-outdated mobile phone).

Identity

In general terms questions of identity refer to three basic ideas:

1. **Who am I?** – how, for example, do I define myself?
2. **Who are you?** – how do "I" define other people?
3. **How** are my beliefs about *my* identity affected by my beliefs about *your* identity?

These are, of course, complex questions to resolve, but we can simplify them by thinking about how you would respond to the question "Who are you?" – a response that will probably include references to:

Social characteristics involving things like:

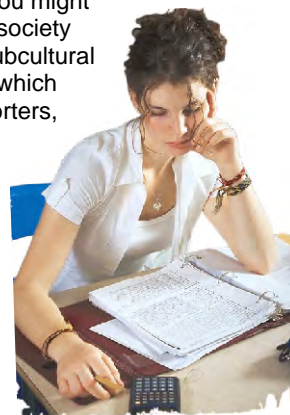
- **Family** (name and general background).
- **Age** (whether you are, for example, young or old).
- **Nationality** (such as English or Scottish).
- **Gender** (whether you are male or female).
- **Sexuality** (whether you are heterosexual or homosexual for example).

In other words answers to this question will, by and large, be expressed in explicitly social terms and this illustrates two ideas. Firstly, to describe (or *identify*) ourselves we draw on a range of *sources of identity* (others we will consider in this chapter include *class*, *ethnicity* and *disability*) and secondly, in order to define ourselves as *individuals* we draw on a wide range of *cultural* ideas and beliefs – something that illustrates the central importance of culture in our lives.

Subculture

Thus far we've looked generally at the concept of culture in terms of a society having certain beliefs, values and norms that apply to the majority, if not all, of its members. While this is initially useful as a way of understanding culture, we can develop these ideas by thinking about groups within a society (or culture) who, while belonging to that culture, also develop quite distinctive roles, values and norms *not* shared by the culture as a whole.

Subculture refers to the idea of smaller groups sharing a particular way of life. As you might expect, in a relatively large society like the UK a multitude of subcultural groups exist, examples of which might include football supporters, train-spotters, Orthodox Jews, Travellers, A-Level students and so forth. We can use the last example to illustrate the relationship between cultural and subcultural groups.



A student doing the sort of things students do (it's not subtle, but it is effective...)

A student is part of a subcultural group with its own particular "way of life"

(such as attending classes and doing all the things students are supposed to do.). However, just because someone belongs to a "student subculture" doesn't, of course, mean they can't belong to other subcultural groups or, indeed, the culture of society as a whole.

While some of the *values* of a student subculture (wanting to get an A-level qualification, for example) and the *norms* associated with these values (such as gaining a qualification by passing examinations) may be different to the values and norms of other subcultures, these don't necessarily exclude "students" from membership of the wider culture of society. Indeed, the reason someone might value an educational qualification is precisely because it has a value in wider society. An employer, for example, might offer a job on the basis of educational qualifications.

Tried and Tested

- (a) Identify **two** ways in which material culture differs from non-material culture apart from those suggested in the text. (4 marks)
- (b) Suggest **two** ways that social characteristics shape our sense of identity (4 marks)

Module Link

Crime and Deviance

The above describes one aspect of subculture and an examination of different types and theories of subculture can be found in this Chapter.

Concepts of Culture: Explanations

We can develop the ideas we've just outlined by applying the **Structure** and **Action** approaches outlined in the **Introductory** chapter to an understanding of the nature and significance of cultural ideas and products.

Structuralism

Consensus theories of culture (such as those elaborated by **Functionalist** sociologists) focus on the role played by **cultural institutions** (the *media* and *education* system, for example) in the creation and distribution of “moral and cultural values” throughout a *social system*.

The focus, therefore, is on the teaching and learning (through the *secondary socialisation process*) of the rules that make meaningful social interaction possible. Cultural rules provide a *structure* for people’s behaviour, channelling that behaviour in some ways but not others and, as befits a *Structuralist* perspective, the stress is on how our behaviour is *constrained* by the rules of the society in which we live. We can express this idea more clearly in the following way:

1. Social structures: Cultural rules structure individual behaviour by specifying broad guidelines for our behaviour, laying down the boundaries of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in various situations, backed-up by a range of **positive** (*rewards*) and **negative** (*punishments*) **sanctions** to encourage conformity and discourage deviance. This process allows for the development of a broad:

2. Consensus in any society about behavioural boundaries and in turn encourages the development of:

3. Order and stability in our relationships, because we understand how we’re *expected* to behave in given social situations (such as a school, workplace or bus stop). From this general position culture, as **Fisher** (1997) notes, “... is shared behaviour” that “systematises the way people do things, thus avoiding confusion and allowing cooperation so that groups of people can accomplish what no single individual could do alone” – an idea that suggests cultures performs a range of *functions* for both societies and individuals. **Mazrui** (1996) has, in this respect, identified *seven functions of culture*:

Seven Functions of Culture

Communication: Culture provides the context for the development of human communication systems such as *language* - both verbal and non-verbal (gestures, for example).

Perception: **Matsumoto** (2007) argues that culture gives “meaning to social situations, generating social roles and normative behaviours”; in other words it shapes the way we look at and understand the social and natural worlds. **Offe** (2001), for example, argues that Western cultures generally operate under the belief that “the future” is not predetermined, whereas “Some African societies” are characterised by “the notion of a predetermined future not controllable by individuals”.

Identity: Culture influences how people see themselves and others (in terms of things like gender, age and ethnicity). **Durkheim** (1912), for example, suggested societies have a *functional requirement* to develop two things:

Module Link

Health

Offe suggests differences in “concepts of time and future” have contributed to the relative failure of Western-led health policy programs in the treatment of HIV / AIDS in some African countries. If people believe the future is predetermined then health intervention programs are unlikely to be successful.

1. Social solidarity - the belief we are connected into a larger network of people who share certain beliefs, identities and commitments to each other. For such feelings of *solidarity* to develop, however, societies must create mechanisms of:

2. Social integration: A feeling of commitment to others (such as family and friends) is needed to create a sense of individual and cultural purpose and cohesion. In a general sense, *collective ceremonies* (such as royal weddings and funerals in which we can “all share”) and *collective identifications*



Cool Britannia: When Brit Pop waived the rules?

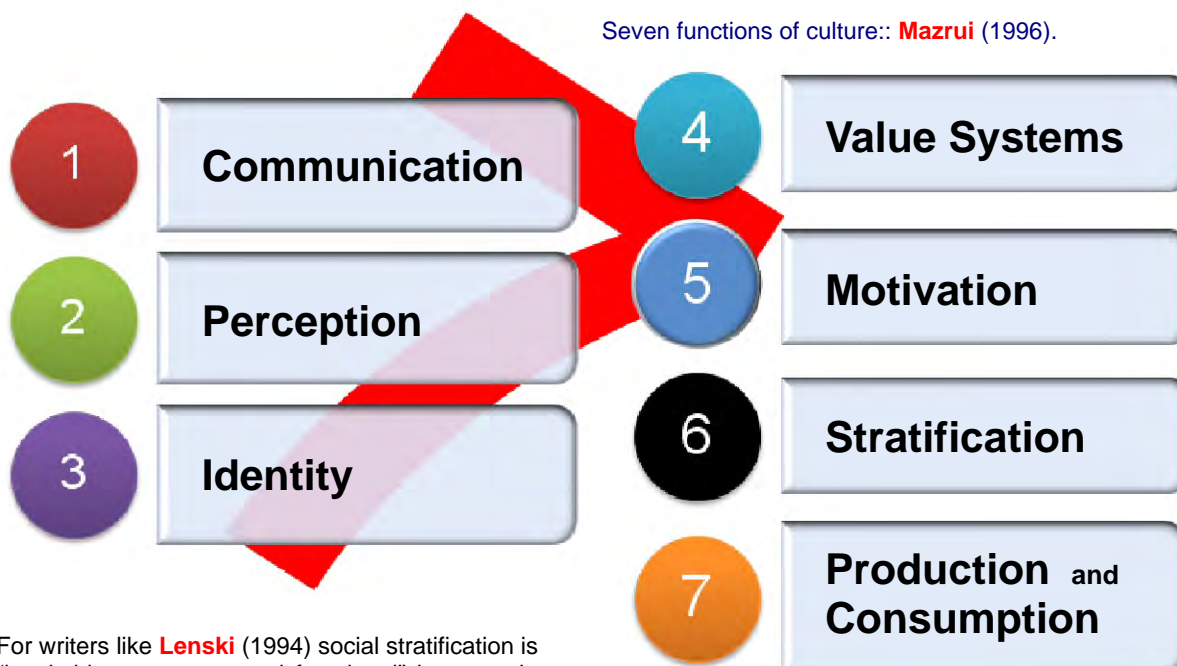
(notions of Brit Pop and Brit Art, for example) represent integrating mechanisms. More specifically, perhaps, schools try to integrate students through things like uniforms and competitive sports against other schools as a way of promoting solidarity through individual identification with the school. Identities are also shaped through things like an understanding of a society’s history, traditions, customs and the like. In **Hostede’s** (1991) evocative phrase, culture involves the “collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group...from another”.

Value systems: Cultural institutions are a source of values and people’s behaviour is, to some extent, conditioned by the cultural values they receive through the *socialisation* process.

Motivation relates to the idea that cultural values and norms involve *sanctions* (*rewards* and *punishments*) for particular behaviours. Cultural values also “set the behavioural boundaries” in terms of maintaining certain standards of behaviour (laws, for example, specify behaviour that is right or wrong, acceptable and unacceptable). A development of this idea relates to Functionalist concepts of:

Stratification: All cultures develop ways of differentiating between social groups on the basis of things like *social class* (economic divisions), *social rank* (political divisions involving ideas like an aristocracy and peasantry), *gender*, *age* and the like.

Seven functions of culture:: **Mazrui** (1996).



For writers like **Lenski** (1994) social stratification is “inevitable, necessary and functional” because it generates the “incentive systems” required to motivate and reward the “best qualified people” for occupying the “most important positions” within a cultural system – an idea that leads to the final function of:

Production and consumption: Culture defines what people “need, use and value” as part of the overall survival mechanism in any society. People need, for example, to be organised and motivated to work (hence the need for a stratification system that offers rewards to those who occupy social roles that, in the words of **Davis and Moore** (1945), are “more functionally important than others”) and encouraged to consume the products of the workplace.

Module Link Stratification and Differentiation

The work of various Functionalist writers (such as **Lenski** and **Davis and Moore**) is analysed and criticised in the section “Different Theories of Stratification”.

Conflict theories of culture come in different versions but we can look briefly at a couple of these:

Elite Theories

These generally focus on the idea that contemporary societies are characterised by competing cultural groups, each with its own particular affiliations, products and consumption patterns. Within these societies (even those characterised by democratic elections) elite groups emerge to take power because, as **Fisher** (2003) notes the “Masses need leaders to organize them”. The idea of cultural leadership (or hegemony) is significant because as **Cooney** (1994) suggests “Elite theories maintain that elites... determine what happens in society”. From this we can note that explanations for the role of culture focus on a number of key ideas:

Identity: The cultural identity of competing social groups is not only reflected in the things they produce and consume, it is also bound-up in questions of leadership. Elite theorists, for example, attempt to identify those aspects of a culture that are “the best in thought and deed” and to separate them from the worthless, the mass produced and the artificial.

In his *satirical* take on this type of “cultural division of taste” **Lynes**’ (1949) identified three broad categories that help us understand this idea a little more easily:

1. **Highbrow:** the *superior* and refined, containing the best qualities of a society. These represent the highest cultural forms to which a society should aspire.
2. **Middlebrow (upper and lower):** the *mediocre* that aspires to be highbrow but which lacks originality, subtlety or depth.
3. **Lowbrow:** the brutal and worthless aspects of a culture that lack any pretence at sophistication, insight or refinement. These lowest cultural forms are characteristic of “the masses”.

Elite cultural theories, therefore, are built around the idea that cultural products and tastes are a cornerstone of:

Stratification systems in modern societies because, as **Katz-Gerro et al** (2007) suggest, elite theories see contemporary societies as “culturally stratified” in terms of a basic division between a small, cultured, *elite* and a large, *acultured mass* (literally “without culture” or, in this sense, a culture that is shallow and worthless in terms of the things it values).

High and Low Culture

This idea of social divisions based around the production and consumption of cultural products finds its expression in the distinction made between “high” and “low” culture:

High culture refers to the idea that some artistic and literary products in our society are superior in scope and form to others. An example here might be that classical music is held in higher cultural esteem than “popular music” producers such as David Bowie or the Arctic Monkeys.

Low culture, therefore, refers to cultural products and pursuits characterised by their production for, and consumption by, “the masses”. At various times, low cultural forms have included films, comics, television, magazines such as *Heat* and newspapers like *The Sun* and so forth.

In this respect, high cultural products and pursuits correlate with the cultural interests of the rich and powerful whereas low cultural products and pursuits are associated with the relatively poorer and less powerful.

Marxism

This theory is based around the idea that an upper class (or *bourgeoisie*) represents a ruling group in Capitalist societies such as the UK – one whose power and influence is based on their ownership of the means of *economic* production, ability to control and influence *political* and legal processes (the passing and application of laws, for example) and their ability to use cultural institutions to reinforce their overall domination of other social classes.

Cultural institutions, therefore, are seen as *ideological institutions*; they represent the means through which a ruling class impose their view of the world on other groups and, by so doing, influence and shape the behaviour of these groups. In this respect we can look briefly at two ways Marxist sociologists have explained the role of culture in society.

1. **Traditional Marxism** has generally focused on cultural institutions as *instruments* (this type is sometimes called **Instrumental Marxism**) or *tools* used by a ruling class to consolidate their control over the rest of society.

One influential version of this position involves the work of the **Frankfurt School** in the 1930’s - a group of Marxists who developed ideas about the nature and role of cultural institutions (such as the media) using the concepts of *mass society* and *mass culture*.



Mass Culture

The concept of *mass culture* is linked to the idea of **mass society**, a type of society, **Ross** (1995) suggests, where “the masses” (as opposed to the ruling elite) are characterised as being:

Social Isolated: People have little or no meaningful daily face-to-face contact and social interaction is largely *instrumental* – we deal with people on the basis of what we can get from them. The strong “cultural and community ties” of “the past” (sometimes called *folk culture* to distinguish it from its modern counterpart *popular culture*) that once bound people together are destroyed by the development of mass cultural ideas and products.

Anonymous: Socially-isolated individuals are bound together by cultural forms *manufactured* by a ruling class that give the *illusion* of a common culture. An example here might be the contemporary (media and public) obsession with the lives and loves of celebrities which creates the impression that we “know” and “care” about such people (when in reality we are never likely to actually meet with or talk to them). Rather than being *active*

producers of folk culture - a supposedly vibrant lower class culture (involving music, dance, medicine, oral traditions and so forth) expressed through popular gatherings such as festivals, fairs, carnivals and the like – the masses are *passive consumers* of an artificial, disposable, *junk culture* that has two main characteristics:

Mass Production: **Fiske** (1995), argues: “The cultural commodities of mass culture - films, TV shows, CDs, etc. are produced and distributed by an industrialized system whose aim is to maximize profit for the producers and distributors by appealing to as many consumers as possible” - an idea related to the concept of a:

Lowest Common Denominator (LCD): To appeal to “the masses”, cultural products have to be safe, intellectually undemanding and predictable;

The media, religion and schools are all examples of cultural institutions.



in other words, bland, inoffensive and relatively simple to understand. **Davis** (2000), for example, notes that **elite** (or *high*) **culture** is “the preserve of very few in society” that it involves “art, literature, music and intellectual thought which few can create or even appreciate. **Mass culture**, by contrast, is regarded as the mediocre, dull, mundane entertainment to be enjoyed by uneducated and uncritical ‘low-brow’ hoards”.

From this perspective, therefore, mass culture is a way of distracting the working classes from the real causes of their problems in Capitalist society (such as low wages, exploitation, lack of power and status). In simple terms, the development of a mass culture that encourages *passive consumption* of the pre-packaged products of big business not only destroyed vital, communal, aspects of folk culture, it also provides the lower classes with an illusory sense of happiness, togetherness and well-being that prevents them understanding how they are economically exploited by a ruling class.

2. Neo (or Humanistic) Marxism: A contemporary version of Marxism, associated with writers such as **Gramsci** (1930). **Poulantzas** (1975) or **Urry et al** (1975), sees cultures as ways of “doing and thinking”, in the sense that they are *integrating mechanisms* in society. In other words, cultural beliefs, behaviours and products bind people together by giving them things in common and helps people to establish cultural identities, expressed through a range of *popular cultural* pursuits and products.

Popular Culture

Giddens (2006) defines this concept as “Entertainment created for large audiences, such as popular films, shows, music, videos and TV programmes” and is, as he notes, “often contrasted to ‘high’ or ‘elite’ culture” – something that suggests different social classes develop different identities based on their different cultural experiences. Cultures, as a “design for living”, therefore, develop to reflect these experiences precisely because they equip people for living and coping in society. For *Neo-Marxists*, popular culture largely defines modern societies – it is the dominant cultural form and, as such, plays a significant role in two areas:

Firstly, it is the “culture of the masses” (as **Meyersohn** (1977) suggests “Popular culture consists of all elements of human activity and life style, including knowledge, belief, art, and customs that are common to a large group”).

Secondly it is the means through which a ruling class exercises what **Gramsci** terms:

Cultural hegemony - the right to political leadership in modern democratic societies based on the consent



Who needs a PS3 when you can dance around the Maypole with your mates? Just look at their happy, smiling, little faces!

(willing or manufactured) of those who are led. Unlike in the past when a ruling class could establish its leadership through force, repression or terror, in modern societies leadership has to be *earned*. Members of this class must, in short, convince both themselves and others that they have the “right to rule” – something achieved, for Neo-

Marxists, through control of *cultural institutions*.

Rather than a ruling class simply imposing its culture on society, therefore, the process is more complex. This class, for example, must propagate its values throughout society (through the media and education system) since if people can be convinced of certain values this will influence how they behave. The concept of *hegemony* is useful here because it provides a sense of *cultural diversity* and conflict. It can be used to explain, for example, how and why cultural forms (classical music, football, punk rock and so forth) are adopted, used and changed by people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Examples of the *hegemonic role* of cultural institutions can be found in three areas:

Continuous exposure to familiar ideas that reflect ruling class views about the nature of the social world (competitiveness, private ownership, low taxation for the rich and so forth). As **Bocock** (1986) argues, the effectiveness of *hegemonic power* lies in the way people from *all classes* are encouraged to “buy into” ideas ultimately favourable to the interests of a ruling class - a simple, but effective, example being the UK National lottery. Each week millions of people buy a lottery ticket, even though the odds of being struck by lightning (1 in 3 million) are better than their chances of winning the jackpot (1 in 10 million). The point, of course, is that people *want* to be rich (and someone, after all, *will* become rich each week).



Big Brother - Popular culture at its very best or very worst? You Choose! You Decide! (written in dodgy Geordie accent).

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Marginalisation and criticism: Alternative views are “pushed to the edges” in the sense that world views critical of Capitalism are rarely featured across the education system or mass media.

Reflexivity: Cultural institutions don't simply propagate a single repetitive message along the lines that “Capitalism Is Great”; they are sufficiently *flexible* and *adaptable* to incorporate new ideas and explanations without ever losing sight of the fundamental values of Capitalist society (and, of course, the basic interests of a ruling class).

Social Action

“**Action perspectives**” cover a wide range of writers and theoretical positions that, for our current purpose and convenience, we can consider in terms of three “sub-perspectives”, namely **Pluralism**, **Interactionism** and **Postmodernism**.

Pluralism

Pluralist perspectives, like their (Marxist and Feminist) Structuralist counterparts emphasise the idea of **competition** between different groups in society, something that, in turn, reflects a broad concept of:

Cultural diversity: Pluralists see modern societies (such as contemporary Britain) as consisting of a variety (or *plurality*) of different groups, each with their own particular interests and agendas. These groups develop their own cultural values and norms, some of which they have in common with other cultural groups but others of which they do not. As you might expect from this general characterisation, Pluralists *reject* the idea modern societies are characterised by a:

Mass culture in the form put forward by some Elite theorists. For Pluralists cultural forms can't be understood in simple “good or bad” terms – such as the idea that “lower class folk culture” in pre-industrial society was somehow superior to lower class culture in industrial society. **Trowler** (1996), for example, dismisses this general idea as both a gross over-simplification and the product of a romanticised view of lower class life in the past when he argues: “The reality is that for working men and women in pre-industrial society life was usually nasty, brutish and short. Modern society has made most people literate and this has enabled them to be discerning consumers of an ever-expanding cultural output. This includes not only literature in the conventional sense, but also TV and radio output, films, journalism and so on. People are also far more politically literate and aware of the world around them than was the case in the past. This allows them to appreciate and choose from a wide range of options. Class distinctions have become

Culture and Identity

The Apple iPhone - Isn't Capitalism Great?

less and less important in influencing the

choices made by individuals in this respect. Members of the working class are as likely to be watching *Panorama* as anybody else, while soap operas are now appealing to the middle class as well as the working class.”.

One of the main features of Pluralism therefore (something they share, albeit in slightly different ways, with Interactionist and Postmodern positions) is the idea of:

Choice: The general focus here is on the choices people are increasingly able to make from a range of possible cultural forms – something that impacts not just

on areas like cultural values and norms but, increasingly on things like lifestyle and identity choices (in areas like sexuality and age, for example). One feature of Pluralism that tends to mark it apart from other forms of social action theory is that such choices are always made in a structural context; that is, against the background of the individual's personal and social circumstances (their cultural socialisation). They reject, however, the idea that cultural activities are simply *passive* forms of *consumption* (in the way put-forward by mass culture theorists). Rather, the choices people make reflect a complex, changing world in which cultural activities develop or die-out on the basis of their relevance to peoples' lives.

Mass Culture - myth or reality?



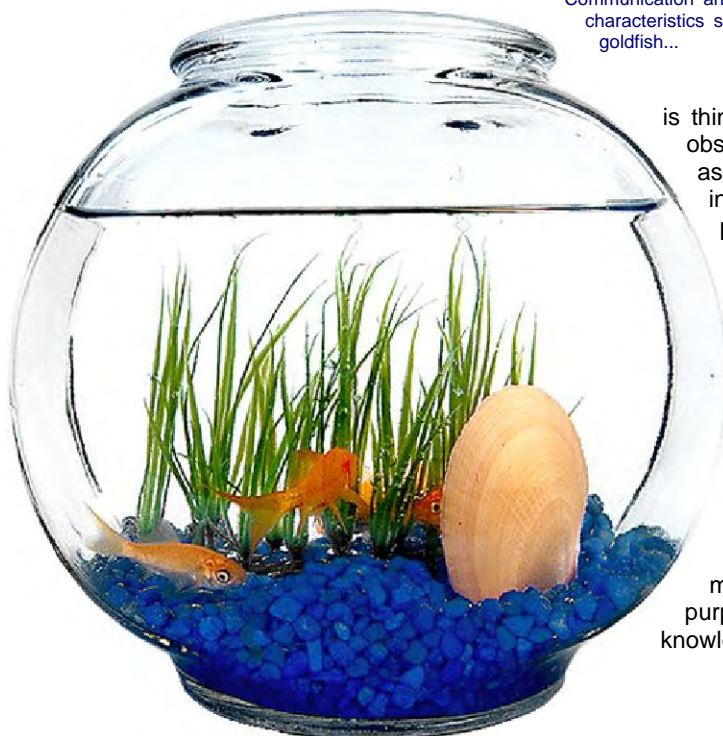
Interactionism

Interactionist perspectives generally focus on relatively small-scale levels of social interaction (between individuals, small social groups and so forth) and their theoretical position on culture is informed by the identification of a number of basic characteristics of human cultures.

Interaction: Culture is, first and foremost, a product of social interaction. Broad cultures and specific cultural forms develop out of the way people act towards one another in ways that involves two related ideas:

1. Purpose: A teacher and their students, for example, interact educationally in a way that has some purpose – both social, in the sense that the education system is officially designed to do certain things (teach children literacy and numeracy, for example, or pass examinations and gain qualifications) and individual in the sense that each actor in the educational drama will hold or develop particular reasons for their behaviour. A teacher, for example, may see their main purpose as “changing minds” or “helping children develop their full potential”; alternatively they may see their main purpose as earning the money they need to maintain a certain lifestyle (brown corduroy jackets with leather patches don’t come cheap, believe me).

2. Meaning: If interaction always has a purpose, it also has meaning for those involved. At its broadest,



Communication and Memory - two characteristics sadly lacking in goldfish...

the teacher- student interaction is *probably* interpreted as having some form of educational meaning (as opposed to other forms of meaning that could exist between adults and young people). However, when we dig down to specific individual meanings for the interaction that takes place “in the school” there can, once again, be a wide variety of meanings for those involved. For the teacher, for example, these can range



The education system involves a wide range of different purposes and meanings...

from “education” being a vocation – their mission is to influence and change lives for the better – to the idea that education is “just a job”; something that is to be endured because it pays the bills.

We’ve used the word “probably” in the above because it illustrates the idea that we can never be certain of the

purpose and meaning of any form of social interaction. This is because we are unable to know what someone else

is thinking. The most we can do, therefore, is observe the behaviour of others and make assumptions (or educated guesses – pun intended) about what they are thinking (their **purpose and meaning**) when they do something.

Interactionist theories of culture are built around an understanding of two basic human abilities:

- 1. Communication** through language (perhaps the ultimate system of shared meaning). This allows us to develop meaning in our behaviour.
- 2. Memory:** The ability to store and recall meanings gives people the ability to act purposefully on the basis of their stored cultural knowledge.

These abilities mean we can develop **cultural systems** that can be learned through a **socialisation process**. Thus, our ability to communicate **symbolically** (through words, gestures, looks and so forth) gives us the ability to develop very rich cultures that may be unlimited in scope. This gives us the ability to control and shape our environment (both social and physical) in ways that are unimaginable for animals. Cultures, in this respect, can be said to represent:

Symbolic universes of meaning – a long-winded way of saying that the ability to communicate symbolically is a hugely-significant feature of human culture. In particular, symbols are significant for two reasons:

Connections: They don't need to have a direct relationship to the thing they symbolise. For example, the symbol "elephant" only means "a large animal with four legs, big ears and a long nose" because that is how we have learned to interpret the meaning of this word / concept. Logically, therefore, the word "elephant" could equally mean "a small furry animal with two legs" or "a flat surface with four legs on which you serve food".

Complexity: Symbols can be related to one another to create very complex ideas and meanings.

An example of the way we both communicate symbolically and use this ability to create very complex cultural rules and meaning might be to imagine you were standing at traffic lights waiting to cross the road. If you see a car go through a red light you may interpret that behaviour as "wrong" (because it is dangerous) and "illegal" (because it breaks the law). If, however, the car has a flashing blue light and a wailing



An Elephant

(did you honestly expect anything more sophisticated?).

siren you may interpret that behaviour as "understandable", because you assume the police officers in the car have a very good reason for acting both dangerously and illegally.

This also illustrates the idea of symbolic meanings, since there is no absolute relationship between a "red light" and the action "stop"; it is only because we have been **socialised** to make an association between the two that a red light means "stop" to us.

Someone from a society where cars do not exist would not associate red traffic lights with "stop" because that *symbolic association* between the two would not be a part of their "*symbolic system of meaning*" (or culture as it's probably better known).

The ability to develop shared meanings is the key to understanding human interaction. Our ability to think (our consciousness) is both the problem and the solution, since what we effectively do, according to Interactionists, is to create a sense of society and culture in our minds. We behave "as if" these things physically exist. Thus, the world humans inhabit is a:

Social construction, something that involves the idea that society is a product of our ability to think and express our thoughts symbolically. The things that we recognise as being "part of our society" or "part of our culture" are simply products of our mind.

Interestingly (presupposing you find train-spotting interesting) many cultures around the world associate the colour red with "danger".

Except the Chinese who associate it with luck and happiness.

This just goes to prove it's a funny old world.

Or something.



Postmodernism

A starting-point for a discussion of **postmodern** approaches to culture is the idea of:

Cultural globalisation: On a basic level this relates to the free and rapid movement around the globe of different cultural ideas, styles and products that can be picked-up, discarded and, most importantly, adapted to fit the needs of different cultural groups. The variety of cultural products (both material and non-material) available from which to choose are vast and people are no-longer restricted to local or national cultural choices. Cultural products are, in this respect:

Malleable (open to manipulation and change): In situations where people are exposed to a wide range of cultural influences and choices it is possible to develop a “pick and mix” approach to culture; choosing elements of one cultural tradition, for example, and mixing them with elements of another (or several) cultures to create something new, different and unique that postmodernists term:

Cultural hybrids: Examples here might include new forms of music (such as *Bhangra* -Asian (*Punjabi*) music transformed in the UK into dance music that combines traditional rhythms and beats with Western electric guitars and keyboards) and film (*Bollywood* films, for example, combine traditional Asian stories and themes with the western (Hollywood) musical tradition).

These ideas highlight a fundamental difference between Structuralist and Postmodern approaches to understanding the nature and role of culture.

Structuralist explanations suggest the role and purpose of culture is akin to a warm blanket that covers and protects us, in the sense that we gather “our culture” tightly around us as a form of “protection against the elements” (the influence of other cultures, subcultures and the like).

Postmodern explanations, while they allow that cultures may perform such a role for *some* people, suggest culture is much looser and more fluid in that it involves the fundamental notion of *choice* – and choice implies *diversity* and *difference*. Postmodern ideas suggest it is that globalisation has resulted in a change in the way people both see and use cultural ideas and products. **Clothier** (2006), for example, suggests that the significance of cultural hybrids lies in the fact that they represent a rejection of the idea of culture as:

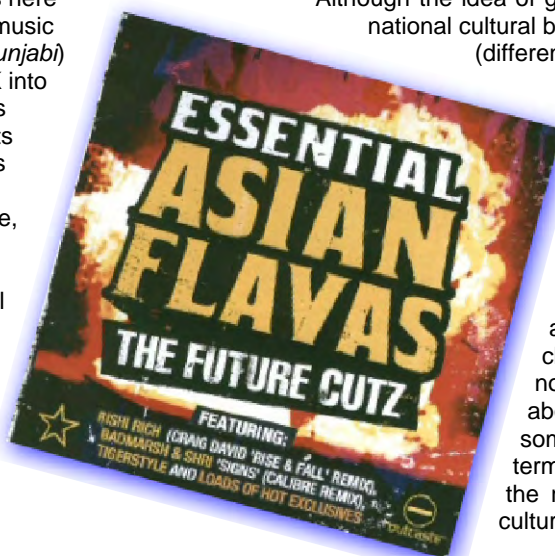
Tradition – ways of thinking and behaving passed down from generation to generation as if they were a “fixed tablet”, an idea **Clothier** illustrates by the following example: “If a local school is having an ‘ethnic day’ those referring to the fixed tablet simply

reference standing authority on the most appropriate dress. In contrast the hybrid must make a choice”. In such situations, therefore, “traditions are loosened, and the capacity to make choices allowed. Cultural hybridity therefore, represents a zone of cultural dynamism... found on the borders, in the overlaps, and the in-between places between two or more cultures”.



Global Culture

Although the idea of global influences on local and national cultural behaviours is not necessarily new (different cultural practices and products have influenced “British culture” for many hundreds of years) what is new, perhaps, is the scope and speed of cultural diversity and change (a process hastened by technological developments such as cheap air travel and the Internet). While postmodernists are generally agreed that such changes are accelerating, there is not a similar level of agreement about the direction of change – something we can briefly outline in terms of three general views about the nature and extent of global culture.



Areas of UK social life like music, food and fashion have probably been most influenced by cultural hybrids.

1. Convergence and Homogenisation: This strand argues the general trend is for cultural

differences to gradually disappear as all societies start to adopt ideas and attitudes that are broadly similar in style and content – the main cause of this being the behaviour and influence of global corporations, media and advertising. **Plumb** (1995), in this respect, suggests that culture has become a:

Commodity where “Knowledge, ideas and other cultural elements are no longer generated to meet broadly shared human interests, but for a multitude of specific purchasers to buy”. In terms of the *commodification of culture* **Lechner** (2001) suggests the economic behaviour and power of global companies (like Coca-Cola, Nike and McDonalds) creates a:

Consumer culture where standard commodities are promoted by global marketing campaigns” to “create similar lifestyles” - “**Coca-Colonisation**” as **Lechner** terms it. This idea is related to something like **Ritzer's** (1996) concept of:

McDonaldisation - the idea contemporary corporate cultural products are *standardised, homogenised and formulaic*; everyone who buys a McDonald's hamburger for example - whether in London or Singapore - gets the same basic product made to the same standard formula. Cultural products are therefore, increasingly predictable, safe and unthreatening. Along similar lines, **Berger** (1997) characterises this strand as:

McWorld Culture, a reference to the idea that global (popular) culture is increasingly Americanised – “Young people throughout the world dance to American music...wearing T-shirts with messages...about American universities and other consumer items. Older people watch American sitcoms on



television and go to American movies. Everyone, young and old, grows taller and fatter on American fast foods”.

2. Diversity and Heterogeneity: This strand emphasises more or less the opposite ideas about

global cultural developments; the ebb-and-flow of different cultural ideas and influences creates hybrid cultural forms that represent “new forms of difference”. From this position “culture” is not simply something that’s “given” to people (either in the sense of *folk, mass or consumer culture*) but something that is actively constructed and reconstructed. Globalised culture, therefore, refers to the way local or national cultural developments can spread across the globe – picked-up, shaped and changed to suit the needs of different groups across and within different societies – and to how something like the Internet has changed the nature of cultural movements. A good example to illustrate this idea is:

Social networking: Internet sites such as *YouTube* (youtube.com), *MySpace* (myspace.com) or *flickr* (flickr.com) represent **social spaces** and

communities actively constructed and reconstructed by the people who use them (to share videos, pictures or simply information). An interesting aspect of this development is the way the idea of *culture as a commodity* fits with the idea of freeing individuals to both produce and consume cultural ideas and products. While global commercial enterprises may provide the *tools* through which cultural ideas and products can be exchanged, it is the millions of individuals around the world who use these tools to provide the *content* that makes such virtual spaces vibrant and attractive (to both users and advertisers).

3. Homogeneity and Diversity: The third stand is one that, in some ways, combines the previous two in that it argues for both convergence and homogeneity *within*

global cultural groups but diversity and heterogeneity *between* such groups. In other words, groups of like-minded individuals share certain cultural similarities across national boundaries, but these groups are potentially many and varied. **Berger** (1997), for example, illustrates this idea by noting two distinct “faces of global culture”:

Business cultures in which “Participants...know how to deal with computers, cellular phones, airline schedules, currency exchange, and the like. But they also dress alike, exhibit the same amicable informality, relieve tensions by similar attempts at humor (sic), and of course most of them interact in English”

Academic cultures involving, for example, Western intellectuals, their “values and ideologies”. As **Berger** puts it, if business cultures try “to sell computer systems in India”, academic cultures try “to promote feminism or environmentalism there”.

This strand, therefore, argues for a range of points and spaces where the local and global meet - **Sklair** (1999), for example, suggests understanding global cultures involves thinking about two processes:

The Particularization of Universalism - the idea that some forms of globalised cultural features are adapted and changed by particular (local) cultural behaviours. **Regev** (2003) cites the example of “rock music” – a global product of Anglo-American construction consumed and filtered through many different cultures and cultural influences. As **Rumford** (2003) puts it, rock music “is easily domesticated into ‘authentic’ local musical forms. Consequently, when we hear rock music produced from within other cultures it can appear both strange and familiar at the same time”.

The Universalisation of Particularism - the idea that the features of local cultures (their uniqueness, individuality and so forth) become a feature of globalised cultures; rather than seeing the globalisation of culture as an homogenising process we should see it in reverse - globalisation involves the spread of diverse cultural beliefs and practices across the globe in ways that create new and diverse cultural forms.

However we choose to view the concept of culture, a fundamental sociological principle involves the idea that it is taught and learned and in the next section we can look at some of the basic building-blocks of this process in addition to the various agencies that attempt to influence it.

Share your photos.
Watch the world.



Tried and Tested

- (c) Suggest two ways that mass culture differs from global culture (4 marks).
- (d) Examine sociological explanations of the concept of culture (24 marks).
- (e) Asses the view that Action, rather than Structuralist, perspectives provide more convincing accounts of cultural relationships in modern Britain (24 marks).

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2. The Socialisation Process and the Role of Agencies of Socialisation.

Socialisation: Observations

We can begin by noting **Podder and Bergvall's** (2004) observation that culture "isn't something we're born with, it is taught to us. The human being is a social creature and we need rules for interaction with one another". The idea that social life requires rules of behaviour that have to be taught and learned leads us into a consideration of the *socialisation process* - learning how to behave in ways that accord with the general expectations of others.

Types

Primary socialisation occurs, according to **Cooley** (1909), within *primary groups* containing relationships that involve "intimate face-to-face association and cooperation... fundamental in forming the social nature and ideals of the individual". For most of us the first primary relationship we form is with our parent(s), followed by primary attachments to people of our own general age (our *peers*) and, subsequently with other adults (such as someone we marry).

Secondary socialisation occurs within *secondary groups* where socialisation is characterised, as **Berger and Luckmann** (1967) note, by "a sense of detachment...from the ones teaching socialisation"; in other words, situations where the individual doesn't necessarily have close, personal and / or face-to-face contacts with the people responsible for doing the socialising. Secondary socialisation reflects the idea that we have to learn to deal with people who are not emotionally close to us.

Both types involve:

Agents of socialisation - people responsible for teaching us "the rules" of social behaviour and interaction. The first *agency* of primary socialisation is usually our *family* and the main agents are *parents* (although immediate

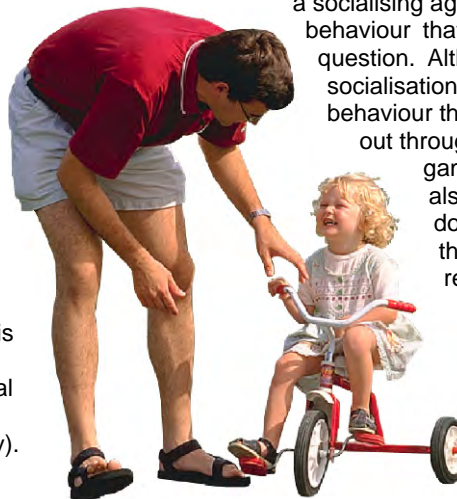
relations such as brothers and sisters and wider relations such as grandparents may also be involved). In most societies the family group initially takes responsibility for teaching the basic things we need to learn as part of growing-up, such as how to walk, talk and use culture-appropriate tools (such as knives and forks). Parents are also influential in teaching basic values, such as right and wrong behaviour, how to relate appropriately to other people such as family, friends, strangers and so forth.

Socialisation, however, isn't simply a process whereby a socialising agent, such as a parent, teaches behaviour that is then copied without question. Although part of a child's socialisation does involve copying the behaviour they see around them (acted out through various forms of play and games, for example), the child is also *actively* involved - they don't, for example, always obey their parents. Children may also receive *contradictory socialisation* messages from differing agents - a kindly relative may reward behaviour that a parent would punish. Many of the things we learn during our initial, family-based, socialisation stay with us for life, mainly because we learn *basic behavioural rules* that can be applied to new and different situations (such as how to behave towards adults - teachers or strangers for example - who are not personally related to us).

Secondary socialising *agencies* may include schools, religious organisations, the media and so forth and the agents include people like teachers, priests,

television personalities and pop stars. In some cases, such as in

school, we are in daily, face-to-face contact with the people socialising us, without ever developing a primary attachment to them. In other cases, such as admiring a particular film or music performer, we may never meet them, yet we can still be influenced by what they look like, what they do and how they do it.



While parents are major agents of **primary socialisation** in our society, schools are major agencies of **secondary**



Purpose

Primary socialisation is necessary because human infants require the assistance of other members of society to develop as both people (the walking, talking, bit) and as members of a culture (the learning roles, norms and values bit).

Secondary socialisation is also necessary because, for **Parsons** (1951), one of its main purposes (or *functions*) is to: "Liberate the individual from a dependence upon the primary attachments and relationships formed within the family group". In other words, in modern societies the majority of people we meet are *strangers* and it would be impossible to relate to them in the same way we relate to people we love or know well. This means we need to learn:

Instrumental relationships - how to deal with people in terms of what they can do for us and what we can do for them in particular situations (the opposite of the **affective relationships** we find in primary groups). **Berger and Luckmann** (1967), for example, suggest that while primary socialisation involves "emotionally charged identification" with people like our parents, secondary socialisation is characterised by "formality and anonymity" – you don't, for example, treat a total stranger who stops you in the street to ask directions as your dearest friend in the world.

Order and Control

The ideas we've examined so far have been largely concerned with the ways people try to bring *order, stability and predictability* to behaviour through the *control* of that behaviour, something that affects not just the things people do or do not do, but also the way they *think* about the nature of the world in which they live.

Social Control, therefore, involves all of the things we do or have done to us that are designed to maintain or change behaviour. Primary socialisation, for example, attempts to shape the way a child is raised; when we develop certain values and adopt particular norms this too is a form of control since we are placing limits on what we consider to be acceptable ("*normal*") and unacceptable ("*deviant*") behaviour. *Role play* is another a form of control because we are acting in ways people consider appropriate in certain situations. In this respect, social control involves:

Rules: Social life is a life-long process of *rule-learning*. We may not always agree with those rules (nor do we always obey them) but we have to take note of their existence – mainly



because rules, whether **informal** (*norms*) or **formal** (*laws*), are supported by:

Sanctions - things we do to make people conform to our expectations and which can be one of two types:

1. Positive sanctions (or rewards) are the nice things we do to make people behave in routine, predictable, ways. Examples range from a smile, through words of praise and encouragement to gifts and such like.

2. Negative sanctions (or punishments) are the nasty things we do to make people conform. There are a vast range of negative sanctions in our society, from not talking to people if they annoy us to putting them in prison. The ultimate negative sanction, perhaps, is to kill someone.

As with rules / norms we can identify two basic types of social control:

Formal controls generally involve *written rules of behaviour* that, theoretically, apply equally to everyone in a society (*laws*) or particular social group (*rules*). In contemporary societies we usually find people (employed by the government) whose job involves *law enforcement*; the main agencies of formal social control in Britain, for example, are the police and the judiciary (the legal system). Where *non-legal rules* are involved, such as in the school or workplace, enforcement may be the responsibility of those in a position of authority (such as a teacher or employer). Generally, therefore, formal rules and controls exist to tell everyone within a social group *exactly* what is - and is not - acceptable behaviour.

Tried and Tested

- Identify and explain two ways in which primary socialisation differs from secondary socialisation (4 marks).
- Identify and explain one way instrumental relationships differ from affective relationships (4 marks).
- Suggest one positive and one negative sanction teachers use to control the behaviour of their students (4 marks).

Socialisation: Explanations

Informal controls similarly exist to reward or punish people for acceptable or unacceptable behaviour and cover a vast array of possible sanctions that may differ from individual to individual, group to group and society to society. Such controls apply to informal norms and include things like ridicule, sarcasm, disapproving looks, punching people in the face and so forth.

As we've suggested, socialisation involves learning the roles, values and norms (amongst other things) characteristic of a particular culture (or subculture) and in this section we can explain the role of some of the major **agencies of socialisation** in this general process.

Primary

Family

For most people the family group is one of the most influential socialising agencies in their life, although it's arguably in our early years that it has the most important socialising influence on us, in terms of things like:

Roles: The relatively limited number of roles to learn within the family (both for adults and children) hides a complexity of *role development* (how roles change depending on the way a group develops). Adults, for example, may learn roles ranging from husband or wife to parent or step-parent while for children there is a complex learning process as they come to terms with being a baby, infant, child, teenager and, eventually perhaps, an adult with children of their own.

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



Norms: Although these differ between families, basic norms such as how to address family members (*Mum, Dad*), when, where and how to eat and sleep, the meaning of “good” and “bad” behaviour and the like are normally part of the primary socialisation process.

Sanctions: Within the family these are mainly *informal* (although it's possible for formal rules to apply - setting times by which children have to be home, for example). *Positive* sanctions range from things like *facial expressions* (smiling...), through *verbal approval / reinforcement* (“You are such a good boy / girl”) to *physical rewards* (such as gifts). *Negative* sanctions are similarly wide-ranging – from showing disapproval through language (SHOUTING for example) to things like physical punishment.

Peers

A “peer group” involves people of a similar age who may or may not know each other - “teenagers”, for example, are a generally-recognised peer group in our society but not every teenager knows every other teenager, of course. We can, for the sake of convenience, include **friends** in this general category although we should, perhaps, consider them a special type of peer group. Such people exert an important influence on our behaviour in a range of ways:

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



A group of peers...

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

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

Norms relating to peer group behaviour might involve ideas about age-appropriate behaviour; young children, for example, are not allowed to smoke or buy alcohol. Conversely, it's generally not considered age-appropriate for the elderly to take-part in extreme sports or wear clothes considered more-appropriate to younger age groups.

Sanctions within a peer group are rarely formal and the norms of different groups may differ widely. The same behaviour – in different situations – may also produce different responses. Swearing at your grandmother, for example, will probably be met with disapproval, whereas swearing in the company of friends may actually be a norm. Approving gestures and language, laughing at your “jokes” and seeking out your company may represent positive sanctions; refusing to speak to you, rejecting your friendship and physical violence are negative sanctions.



Extreme cooking - all toolled up and with no place to hide

Secondary

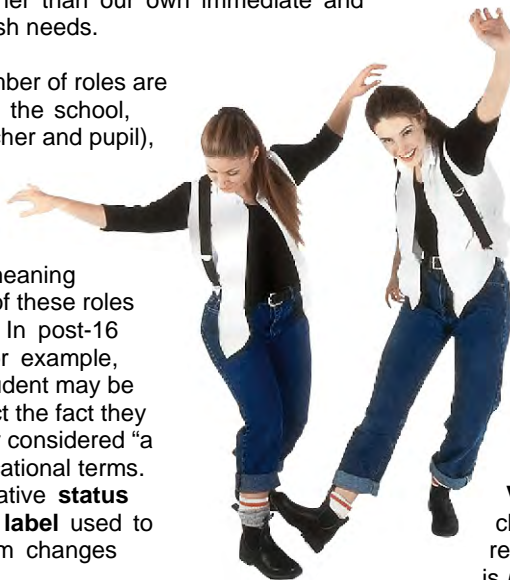
Education

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

Behaviour: One function of the education system is to teach the skills and knowledge required for adult life. This includes specific *knowledge* (such as history, giving us a sense of our society’s past and geography, which confers a knowledge of our own and other societies) and particular *skills*, such as learning to read and write or solve mathematical problems. This **manifest function** of education, however, is counterbalanced by certain **latent functions**, such as learning how to deal with strangers, the need for punctuality, attendance and the like that will be taken into areas like the workplace in adult life.

The school is also a place where we “learn to limit our individual desires” – to think about the possible needs of others rather than our own immediate and perhaps selfish needs.

Roles: A number of roles are played within the school, (such as teacher and pupil), although at different stages the names, perception, meaning and content of these roles can change. In post-16 education, for example, labels like student may be used to reflect the fact they are no-longer considered “a child” in educational terms. As their relative **status** changes the **label** used to describe them changes accordingly.



Students behaving like children...

Values: Schools project a range of values, some *technical* (pupils should work hard to achieve qualifications) and some *social* - teaching things like *individual competition* for academic rewards, *teamwork* (especially in sports), *conformity* to authority (not questioning what is being learned and why it is necessary to learn it) and *achievement* on the basis of your *merits* – educationally you “get what you deserve”. Historically our education system generally values “academic ability” (a talent for writing essays, for example) more highly than “practical ability” (such as being good at sport).

Norms: A range of norms apply specifically within the school and classroom, although as **Bowles and Gintis** (1976) suggest, there is a *correspondence* between school norms and workplace norms. As they argue (2002) “schools prepare people for adult work rules by socialising people to function well, and without

complaint, in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation”. This **Correspondence Principle**, they argue, is evidenced through schooling in areas like the daily need to attend and register and the right of those in authority to give orders they expect will be obeyed.

Module Link

Education

The work of **Bowles and Gintis** (1976, 2002) in relation to how schools “replicate the environment of the workplace” is discussed in more detail in the Section “**The Role of Education**”.

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

Work

The workplace is often one of the first places we, as adults, start to interact with other adults and although, as we’ve noted, the workplace has primary socialising elements it also has numerous secondary characteristics.

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

Values: One clear work-related value is *payment* – we believe we should get money in exchange for working. Less-obvious values include things like competition and the belief hard work and competence should be rewarded by promotion, increased responsibility and control over the working environment and so forth.



Another bumper pay day for yours truly as sales of this book go through the roof...

Norms: We expect to be paid for working (although some types of work, like housework and voluntary work, don't involve money). As we've seen in relation to the education system, similar norms (attendance, punctuality, obedience and the like) apply here.

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

The Media This is a slightly-unusual secondary agency in that our relationship with it is *impersonal*; we may never actually meet those doing the socialising.

Behaviour: Surprisingly, perhaps, there's very little evidence the media have a *direct*, long-term, affect on our behaviour (although there may be limited short-term effects), but there does seem to be a number of *indirect* long-term effects. Examples of the way our behaviour is affected by exposure to the

media might include areas like *sexuality* - magazines aimed at teenagers arguably perform a socialising role in terms of understanding sexual relationships.

The **Glasgow Media Group** (1982) have argued that the media have an:

Agenda-setting role - it determines how something will be debated (for example, "immigration" is currently framed and discussed in terms of "numbers of immigrants" and Islam is frequently discussed in the context of "terrorism"). As the **Glasgow Media Group**

express it: "...television... has a profound effect, because it has the power to tell people the order in which to think about events and issues. In other words it 'sets the agenda', decides what is important and what will be featured. More crucially it very largely decides what people will think with; television controls the crucial information with which we make up our minds about the world".

Values: The extent to which the media can impose its values on our behaviour is uncertain, but it does represent a potentially powerful force in terms of supporting or marginalising certain values. For example, the media have a (loud) voice in debates over nationality (what it means to be "English", for example). It also has the ability to promote certain values and devalue others – think about the way many English newspapers take an "anti-European Community" stance, for example.

Norms: The media have what **Durkheim** (1912) called a *boundary marking* function; it publicises acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour to reinforce perceptions of expected behaviours. This idea does, of course, work both ways – it can act as a way of trying to *preserve* particular ways of behaving and as a way of *promoting changes* in behaviour:

Sanctions: The most obvious way the media exercises social control is through the publicity given to behaviour of which it approves or disapproves. Positive sanctions may involve the use of positive language, praise and so forth, whereas negative sanctions may involve being pictured in an unflattering pose or being harshly criticised. The England goalkeeper David **James**, for example, was the target for a reader's poll in *The Sun* newspaper (2004) asking whether they would "...prefer a donkey or James in goal after his error had presented Austria with the equaliser in Saturday's 2-2 draw" (in case you're interested, **James** came second...).



The media tries to set the boundaries for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in a variety of ways...

Preserving traditional behaviour?



Anti-paedophile and anti-immigration campaigns

Promoting social change?



Positive attitudes to homosexuality

Religion

Whether or not we particularly see ourselves as “religious”, institutions such as the Church of England have played – and continue to play – a significant role in the general socialisation process in our society.

Behaviour: Unless we're a member of a religious group (*subculture*), religion generally plays a *peripheral* role in most people's life (religious beliefs are not central to their personal value system). Indirectly, however, religions play an important socialising role in terms of both influencing general social values and performing certain ceremonial functions (such as marriages, christenings and funerals).

Values: Many of our most important moral values (fundamental beliefs about right and wrong) have been influenced in some way by religious values – think, for example, about how many of the 10 Commandments in Christian religions are reflected through our legal system. In terms of moral beliefs, few people would argue you should be allowed to kill people or that theft is desirable.

Sanctions: The power of positive and negative sanctions for religions probably turns on the extent to which you are a believer in the god – or gods – being promoted.

Hinduism, for example, involves a belief in *reincarnation* - the idea that once you die you are reborn into a new life – based on how well you observed religious laws in your previous life; the reward for good behaviour in one lifetime is being reborn into a higher social position, with the reverse being the case for bad behaviour.



Tried and Tested

(d) Examine sociological accounts of the process of socialisation. (24 marks)

(e) Using material from the text and elsewhere, assess the view that primary socialisation is more significant than secondary socialisation for human development (24 marks)

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3. Sources and Different Conceptions of the Self, Identity and Difference

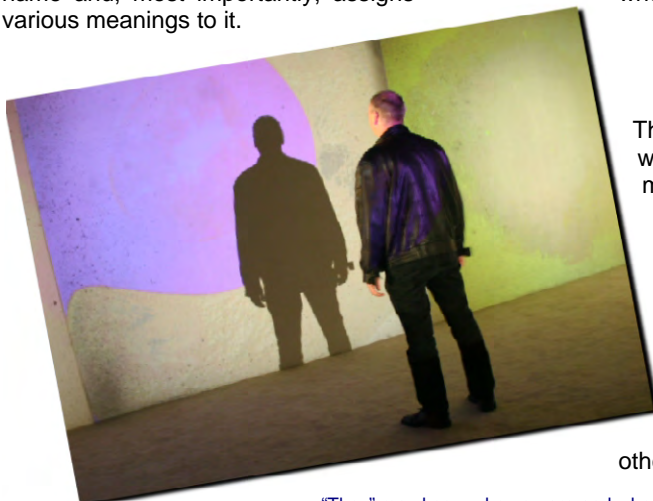
Identity: Observations

We can start to examine questions of identity in more detail by thinking, firstly, about how it can be defined and, secondly about how different sociological perspectives understand its significance in contemporary societies.

Earlier we suggested the concept of identity revolves around how we answer the question "Who are you?" – to which my response would be something like "I'm a 30 year old, white, married, British male". In other words, to tell you something about myself I draw on a set of ready-made social categories (such as gender and age). You could, of course, dig deeper by asking me about things like my *sexuality* (heterosexual, since you ask), the football team I support (rather not say – too embarrassing), my family name, background and life or whatever. *Identity* in this respect, involves understanding the things that are "important to me" and which I use to express a sense of **Self** (who I believe myself to be). On this basis, therefore, we can initially talk about two *dimensions of identity*:

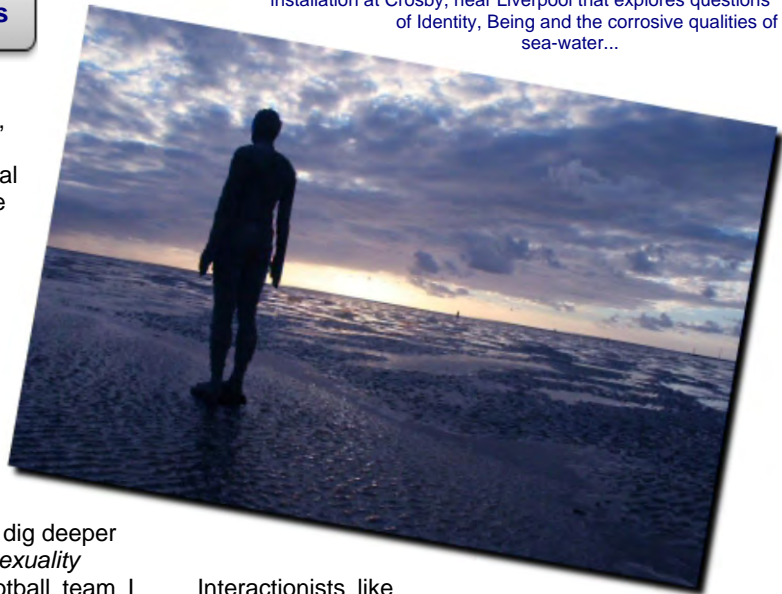
Social Identities

Every culture classifies behaviour in some way; it groups similar types of behaviour under a particular name and, most importantly, assigns various meanings to it.



"They" may know who you are and where you live - but do you know "who you are"? (you probably do know where you live, to be fair).

"Another Place" - artist Anthony Gormley's haunting installation at Crosby, near Liverpool that explores questions of Identity, Being and the corrosive qualities of sea-water...



Interactionists like **Becker** (1963) or **Hayes** (1997) call this a process of *labelling* and an example here is the concept of *gender*. Our culture generally recognises two *biological sexes* (male and female) and assigns to each a set of social characteristics we call *gender* (and these, being cultural in origin, may change over time or differ from society to society). Thus, on the basis of my biological sex (male) a social identity for this gender category is created for me (think about the way our culture "sees" men and women – what general characteristics are each supposed to have?). *Social identities*, therefore, relate to the attributes we are given when we play different (*achieved* or *ascribed*) roles.

Personal Identities

This type of identity, on the other hand, relates to what we each believe ourselves to be, considered in two main ways:

Firstly, in terms of how I *interpret* the particular role I'm playing at any given time. "Being male", for example, can *mean* something different (or *personal*) to me than to some other men, just as the concept of *masculinity* can have different interpretations and meanings – for some men (and women) it involves traits of toughness, ruggedness, aggression and so forth, whereas for others it has a completely different meaning.

Secondly in terms of what **Marshall** (2003) defines as "A unique core or essence - the 'real me'- which is coherent and remains more or less the same throughout life".

The Self

Identity construction is a process that involves establishing the *credentials* we use to create a sense of our personal identity; in other words, identity formation involves the interplay between social and personal identities. I know, for example, that I am "a man" by comparing myself to others (men and women) and by so doing, I construct and sustain my own sense of male identity. As **Lawson and Garrod** (2003) express it "The construction of a sexual identity such as masculinity is carried out in terms of relationships with females and current notions of what it is to be a man".

Marshall's observation concerning the idea of a "core" or "real" identity is important in this context because it suggests that the two aspects of identity (personal and social) can be separated (at least in our own mind) – that there is, in short, a possible distinction we can make between the:

- **Social Me** – the façade we present to the world as we go about our everyday lives. This plays on the idea of "people as actors" we encountered earlier; when we socially interact we take on and play roles that involve *acting* – we think about the role we're going to play, prepare a script we present to others and, in a general sense at least, "become someone we are not".

- **Real Me:** This idea involves thinking about the fact that if we are acting in our relationships with others, whereby we can happily be "different people" at different times in different situations (you probably behave differently when you're out with friends than when you are work – which of these people is the "real you"?), then somewhere deep within us is the "real me" - the essence of "who I am".

These two ideas are intimately bound-up in what Interactionist writers such as **Mead** (1934) and **Goffman** (1959) term "*The Self*".

Weber (1922) argued human beings have two major attributes; the ability to behave (to *react* to their social and physical environment) and the capacity for *social action*; that is, to act in ways that, firstly, have a *meaning* to the individual concerned and, secondly, take account of how others react to our actions. *Social action*, therefore, involves directing our behaviour towards others with the *intention* of influencing their behaviour. The ability to act meaningfully comes about because of two human attributes:

1. Consciousness - the ability to *think*, have an *awareness* of the world around us and *understand* how our behaviour impacts on others.

2. Self-consciousness - which involves an *awareness* of ourselves as unique individuals.

These attributes give us the ability to think about and reflect on the nature of the social world and our position in that world, something that, in turn, allows us to develop values and norms that characterise the culture of a society. However, the fact we are able to do this means that the cultural values and norms we create reflect back upon us. That is, we are forced to recognise their existence and this, in turn, shapes the way we think and act (through the general socialisation process in society). Although people have the *capacity* for *self-consciousness* and *self-awareness*, we do not develop this ability automatically – as evidenced by:

Feral children: There have been many cases of children either "raised in the wild" by animals (such as **Saturday Mifune** discovered, aged 5, in 1987 living in a pack of monkeys in a province of South Africa) or mistreated and locked away from human contact (the most well-documented recent example perhaps being "Genie", a 13-year old girl discovered in 1970 in California who had, according to **Pines** (1997), "been isolated in a small room and had not been spoken to by her parents since infancy"). Such children do not undergo the usual process of human development in the absence of human contact and socialisation.

As **Pines** notes, Genie who "seems to have been a normal baby... was malnourished, abused, unloved, bereft of any toys or companionship...she could not stand erect...she was unable to speak: she could only whimper".

Feral children provide, in this respect, further evidence of the crucial importance of primary socialisation.



Max Weber [1864 -1920]



Do we create "masks" behind which our "real self" hides?



One of the most famous recent cases of feral children is Genie, a 13 year old girl discovered in Temple City, California in 1970.

The "I" and the "Me"

We can take these basic ideas and use them to define two related aspects of The Self.

Mead (1934) argued that our behaviour as individuals is conditioned by two aspects of our *self-awareness* (the ability to "see ourselves" as others see us).

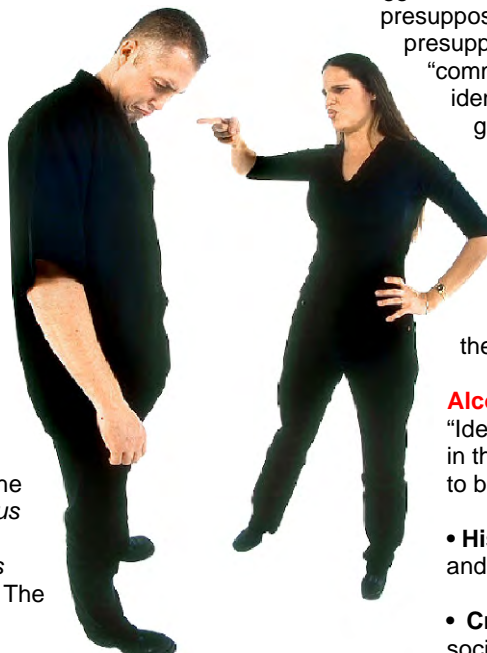
- The "I" aspect (what **Mead** (1934) calls the *unsocialised self*) relates to automatic (reflex) reactions. For most animals this is the dominant aspect of the self in that their behaviour (such as a dog growling when it meets another dog) is an unconscious reaction.
- The "Me" aspect consists of an *awareness* of how other people *expect* us to behave at any given moment and any given, specific, situation. Before you act, therefore, you take account of a variety of *situational variables* (such as where you are and who you are with) that govern how you behave.

If you accidentally put your hand on something hot, the "I" aspect of the Self is expressed in the way you react to the pain that you feel (a reflex that will probably involve quickly removing your hand). The "Me" aspect, however, specifically conditions how you *choose* to react to the pain you feel – and this will be conditioned by a range of different factors. For example, if an adult male burns himself he may feel it inappropriate to cry – especially if he is with a group of friends who all find his discomfort funny. A young child, on the other hand, may react with tears because they focus on their own feelings (rather than taking into account the feelings of others).

Self and Identity

This example further demonstrates the idea that the "Me" aspect represents what **Mead** calls the *socialised* part of The Self; we *think*, in other words, about how our actions (such as a grown man crying) will impact on others (such as friends who may be embarrassed) and, in turn, on ourselves (an awareness of how our "hard man" image may be compromised by tears). The combination of *unconscious* (*unthinking* or *reflex* behaviour) and *conscious* behaviour that constitutes The Self relates to the idea of:

Self-concept (who and what we believe ourselves to be) and this relates to identity in the sense that to



Big boys don't cry
(their bottom lip just goes a bit wobbly).



George Herbert **Mead** [1863 - 1931]

realise "our Self" (to define and understand who we are) we draw on a range of social resources (*credentials*) rooted in social identities (such as gender or ethnicity). Although we can only really have "one Self", there are many ways our Self can be expressed since it's possible to take-on many different social identities (often at the same time).

Tried and Tested

- Identify **two** ways in which social identities differ from personal identities (4 marks).
- Suggest **two** sources of identity in modern societies, other than those noted in the text (4 marks).
- Suggest **three** reasons for the view that the example of feral children demonstrates the importance of socialisation to identity (6 marks).

Identity: Explanations

Concepts of culture and identity are, as we've suggested, linked in the sense that the one presupposes the other. Culture, for example, presupposes what **Smith** (1996) terms "communities of identity" – the idea that social identities based around age, ethnicity, gender and the like represent sets of culturally-developed ideas about how to "behave appropriately" when we assume particular identities. Personal identities, on the other hand, can only develop in a cultural context as people "express their individuality" by drawing on a selection of identity sources which they then shape in particular ways.

Alcoff (2000), in this respect, suggests "Identity categories are cultural negotiations" in the sense that what it means, for example, to be young or female differs both:

- **Historically**, in the same society over time, and
- **Cross-culturally**, between different societies.

Differences in the way societies interpret the meaning of “being female”, for example, suggest that such meanings are neither inherent (we are not born knowing how to behave “as a man or woman” – something that once again relates to *socialisation*) nor unchanging. The general idea that identity is “culturally negotiated”, however, hides a range of sociological arguments about the nature and purpose of identity that we can explore in terms of the two broad approaches outlined in the Introductory chapter, namely **Structure** and **Action**.

Social Structures

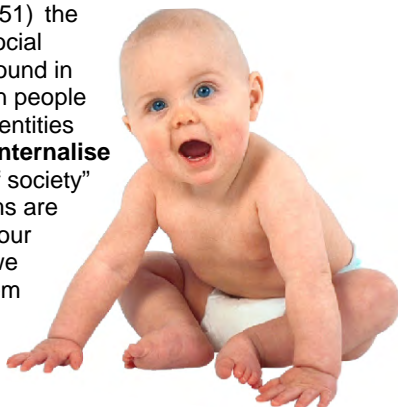
Although there are differences of interpretation between, for example, *Functionalists* and *Marxists*, this general approach argues that *structural forces*, such as the socialisation process, shape identities in ways that push people into behaving in an orderly and broadly predictable fashion. Socialisation, therefore, is viewed as a powerful guiding force in terms of the way people are made into self-aware beings and categorised into particular forms of cultural identity.

Consensus

Functionalist sociology focuses on the way people are socialised into the norms of pre-existing social identities because it is only by learning *cultural rules* that *social interaction* becomes both possible and manageable. Social identities (such as class) *structure* people’s behaviour, channelling it in some ways but not others and the emphasis here is on the way individual identities and behaviours are *constrained* and *controlled* by the rules governing the performance of *social* identities. Identities, therefore, *function* at an **institutional level** of society and ultimately identities such as age or gender develop as a means of:

- Establishing a sense of **order** in an unpredictable (individualistic) world.
- Providing the means by which broadly **predictable** behaviour can take place (through role play, for example)..
- Limiting conflict in our relationships by specifying clear behavioural boundaries.

For **Parsons** (1951) the significance of social identities is also found in the idea that when people take-on certain identities they necessarily **internalise** the basic “rules of society” (behavioural norms are incorporated into our *personality* and we don’t question them because they appear self-evident and natural). Thus, once the label



Here’s one we made earlier...

“male” or “female” is applied to a child they are subjected to a socialisation process that reflects how a culture interprets and applies the meaning of these categories. Individual identities, therefore, are shaped by the socialisation process in that people are a product of their cultural upbringing. Our socialisation tells us, for example, how to behave as “a man” or as “a woman”.

Five Functions of Identity

We can put these general ideas into context by looking at a contemporary application of the idea that identity serves a number of functions for the individual and society. **Adams and Marshall** (1996), for example, have suggested *5 functions of identity* that, as **Serafini et al** (2006) note, focus on what identity *does* “rather than how identity is constructed”:

1. **Structure:** Identities function, as **Serafini et al** note, to provide individuals with a structured context for social actions – a “framework of rules” used to guide behaviour when playing certain roles and to understand our relationship to others (as **Adams and Marshall** put it, a “structure for understanding who one is”,).

2. **Goals:** Identities provide a sense of *purpose* by setting goals for our behaviour. A “student identity” for example, involves the desire to achieve goals like educational qualifications or a sense of personal achievement.



Not this type of goal. The other type. Obviously.

3. **Personal Control:** Identities provide a measure of “**active self-regulation**” in terms of deciding what we want and how we plan to achieve it. Where people are faced with a variety of choices in their everyday lives a clear sense of identity enables us to select and process information relevant to particular roles and identities (an A-level student, for example, understands the need to record information to help them remember the things they might be tested on in an exam).

4. **Harmony:** We need to establish “consistency, coherence and harmony between values, beliefs and commitments”; in other words, when we adopt a particular identity (such as a teacher or student) we have to ensure the commitments we make (what others expect from us) are consistent with our personal values and beliefs. A teacher or student who sees “education as a waste of time” is unlikely to be able to successfully perform this particular role.

5. **Future:** As part of the general *goal setting* function identities allow us to “see where we are going” in the sense of likely or hoped-for outcomes. A student identity, for example, has a “future orientation” in the sense of wanting to perform the role successfully in order, perhaps, to achieve a certain type of job.

Conflict

Structure

Five functions of identity
Adams and Marshall, (1996),

This general approach focuses on the different ways identities are used as the basis for social action; in other words they outline and examine the way *primary forms* of identity (such as **social class** in **Marxist** sociology and **gender** in **Feminist** sociology) form the basis for both personal and social change – an idea we can illustrate by looking briefly at the implications of these two approaches.

Personal Control

Goals



Future

Harmony

Conflict: Both approaches focus on particular forms of *antagonism* as the basis for *primary identities* (a source of identity that is so powerful that all other forms of identity are *secondary* to, or dependent on it). Identities, therefore, are both formed and given meaning through relationships based around ideas like exploitation, domination and subordination.

Marxism

Marxist approaches, for example, see identity formation in terms of the fundamental antagonism

This approach, therefore, argues social classes involve people who have:

between:

1. Particular roles to play in the way goods and services are *produced* (**Marxism** is sometimes characterised as involving a *production class* theory of social organisation).
2. A particular relationship to other classes in society.
3. Class interests they are organised to pursue.

Social Classes, defined in *economic* terms (the various ways people create the means to physically survive). The formation of social classes – and their attendant class identities – is seen in terms of how economic production is organised to produce distinctive social groups based on their relationship to the:

In this respect **Wood** (1995) argues two things: firstly "Is it possible to imagine class differences without exploitation and domination?" and secondly "The 'difference' that constitutes class as an 'identity' is, by definition, a relationship of inequality and power, in a way that sexual or cultural 'difference' need not be" – an idea that is disputed by:

Means of Production - the social process whereby goods and services are created. A familiar expression of this relationship might be the existence of three great classes:

- **Upper or Ruling** – the class of people (sometimes called the *Bourgeoisie*) who own and control the means of production (such as factories and businesses).
- **Middle class** - professional workers who help to run or control businesses on a day-to-day basis.
- **Working or Lower class** - those with no economic ownership (sometimes called the *Proletariat*) who sell their *labour power* (the ability to work) to the highest bidder.

Gendered approaches: Whereas for Marxists social class is the key (or defining) *marker* of identity, for both **feminists** and **masculinists** (in their different ways) *gender* is the key source of identity in contemporary societies.

Feminism

Feminist approaches to identity and difference start from the assumption of female inequality

being the fundamental form from which all other inequalities flow. Where women are generally considered (for whatever reason) inferior to men, this lowered relative status is translated into areas like *family life* (where women perform the majority of household tasks) and the *workplace*, where women, on average, earn less than men and the latter occupy many of the higher status positions of power and influence.

Fraser (1998) notes this situation produces what is traditionally called the distinction between the:

Class-in-itself – the idea we can identify distinctive classes in any society based on their relationship to the means of production (as above).

Class-for-itself – the idea that the members of different social classes may develop a sense of their common group identity and interests.

While different feminist approaches put forward different explanations about the way gender differences are exploited by men, writers such as **de Beauvoir** (1949) have argued that *inferior female statuses* stem from the fact that, historically, men have been able to use their *power* (both physical and social) to define female identities in *opposition* to male identities. As she puts it: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man...He is the Subject...she is the Other". Gender differences are, from this general position, exploited by men for their benefit in a variety of ways:

Liberal

Liberal feminists, for example, see female inequality enshrined in general day-to-day male behaviours and practices – an example here might be **Hammer's** (1997) argument that "gendered language... symbolically excludes women" from male-dominated spheres (think, for example, about how the masculine pronoun "He" is often used in the media to symbolise both men and women). Women, in this respect, routinely suffer **sexual discrimination** in areas like the family and the workplace. From this position biological differences do not automatically translate into gender differences – male domination and exploitation can, for example, be curtailed through the legal system (in the UK, for example, the **Sex Discrimination Act** (1975) made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of sex).

Marxist

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

Patriarchal Ideologies - ideas that support male domination of women. Examples here might be the belief that "a woman's place is in the home", men are "natural breadwinners" and women "natural carers" and the like. The development of distinctive masculine and feminine identities is reinforced through primary and secondary socialisation processes that encourage men to exploit women in all areas of society.

Radical

Radical feminists similarly view female identities in terms of *patriarchal* ideas and practices, but a major difference here is the emphasis placed on gender identities being based around fundamental *psychological* differences - women have qualities of co-operation, caring (nurturing) and so forth that sets them apart from men as a:

Sex class: Female identity develops out of the experiences and interests women share (such



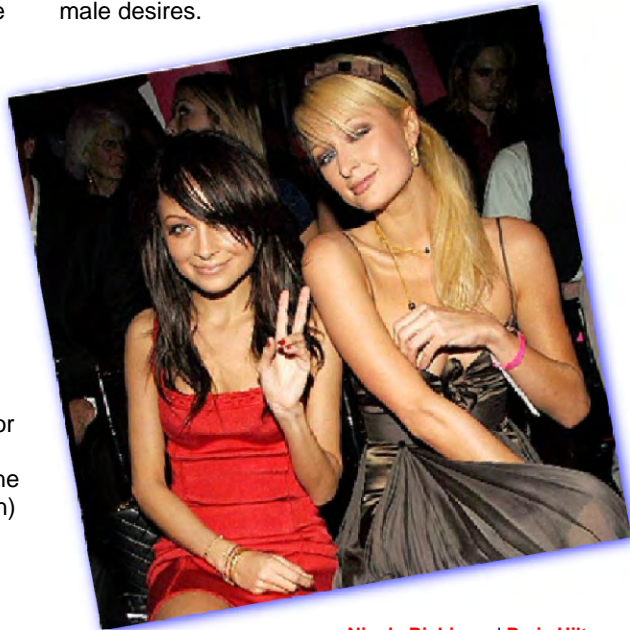
It may still be a "man's world" - but for how much longer?

as the common experience of sexual discrimination) and is forged through the experience of patriarchal practices in both the *private sphere* of the home and the *public sphere* of the workplace.– a dual form of exploitation not experienced by men.

Post-Feminism

Post-feminism has a couple of strands, the first of which "refers to a belief that gender equality has been successfully achieved, while simultaneously castigating the feminist movement for making women frustrated and unhappy" (www.difference-feminism.com). Critics of this view point to ideas like:

Complicit sexualities in which young women, for example, are encouraged to develop identities (such as "Girl Power!") that while *appearing* to challenge male power actually pander to male desires.



Nicole Richie and Paris Hilton - post-feminist icons of complicit sexuality...

Dent (2007) expresses this idea quite neatly when she says: "We've bred this new genre of post-post-feminists (*sic*) who play on acting vacuous and say women should never buy drinks and how their top film is *Legally Blonde* and **Paris Hilton** is "proper aspirational" and that they know that some big stwong (*sic*) man will look after them one day and make everything all right. Hint: he won't. Put your clothes on and bloody grow up".

A second strand is elaborated by **Butler** (1990) when she argues that gender is not a quality of something we *are* but rather something we *do*. In other words, gender identities involve notions of:

Performance – the things we do to create and express our identity, rather than something we "always are". Identities, therefore, involve:

Choice: Both sexes have a range of choices open to them in contemporary societies, one of which being how we define ourselves (our personal identity) - men and women have the

freedom to construct gender identity in any way they choose. For post-feminists this “personal construction of femininity” often involves what they see as “reclaiming femininity” in the sense women can be both “feminine” (whatever that may mean) and able to pursue their education, career and so forth independently of men.

Masculinism

Masculinist approaches:

Traditionally men have been able to draw on wider range of identities than women in our society for two main reasons:

1. **Power:** Men have, to greater or lesser extents, occupied the most powerful positions in society (in the economic and political system, for example).
2. **Spheres:** Where, traditionally, female roles have been centred on the private sphere of the family, men have had greater freedom in the public sphere and, consequently, have been better positioned to create a wider range of identities.

Male abilities to move easily between these spheres, coupled with higher levels of power within each sphere (as the traditional “head of the household”, occupying the higher positions in the workplace and so forth) has meant that men potentially have a wider range of economic, political and cultural sources of identity

Social Actions...

Interactionism

Interactionist approaches

focus on how people construct and make sense of the social world, something that involves using identities as a means of establishing a sense of order and predictability in potentially chaotic situations. “Identities”, in this respect, are developed for two main reasons:

Social: By adopting particular forms of identity people create a semblance of structure and order. A female identity, for example, keys into a general set of roles, values and norms that provide general guidelines for behaviour. Interactionists, however, take this idea of “structure” one step further by arguing that, firstly, social structures do not exist independently of the people who create them; a “woman”, for example, is not automatically a prisoner of whatever others associate with this identity. Secondly, therefore, Interactionists see social identities as *spaces* within which we have the scope to interpret and negotiate the actual, personal, meaning of any identity (someone can be “a woman” in a wide variety of ways).

Personal: Identity structures provide, in **Goffman’s** (1959) terms, a means for the presentation and expression of “Self”, an idea based around a:

Dramaturgical model of self and identity; social life is a series of connected and unconnected *dramatic episodes* and scenarios into which we fit and directly participate or which we observe from afar. People, in this respect, are *actors* – with all that this concept involves; we write and speak lines (our personal

Preparing for a performance...

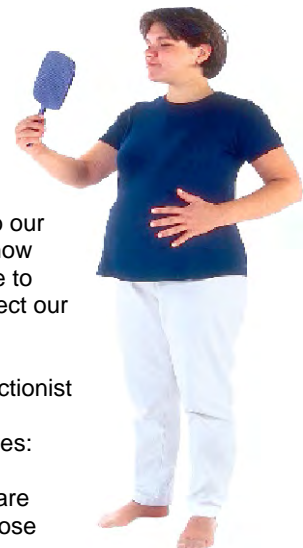


identity) or repeat lines written for us - the influence of social identities that tell us how we “should behave” in particular situations and roles. As **Barnhart** (1994) puts it: *Interaction is viewed as a “performance, shaped by environment and audience, constructed to provide others with impressions” that match “the desired goals of the actor”.*

Thus, when we adopt a particular role or identity we “perform” to others in ways that tell them something about who we are – we try, in **Goffman’s** words to “manage the impression others have of us”. Our performance, therefore, is directed at achieving desired ends (what we want from others). For example, when you want to create a favourable impression with someone you “act” in ways you believe they will like. Every social encounter, therefore, is just one more part of the act. This isn’t to say we simply “use people” for our own particular ends; we’re not always as cool and calculating as this might suggest. Rather, in the majority of our social encounters we use people, **Cooley** (1909) suggests, as a:

Looking-glass self:

People are like *mirrors* we use to “see our self as others see us”; when we “look into the mirror” we see reflected an image of the person *others* think we are by how they respond to our behaviour. Depending on how significant these people are to us, this may or may not affect our *self-concept*.



Seeing our self as others see us...

For **Goffman** (as for Interactionist sociology generally) the “presentation of self” involves:

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

Negotiation: Identities, because they are socially created, are open to discussion. What it *means* to be male, female, young, old and so forth is constantly changing in contemporary societies as people “push the negotiated boundaries” of these identities.

Postmodernism

Postmodern approaches lead quite neatly from the type of Interactionist ideas we've just noted, in the sense they take on-board the idea of "identity as performance" and develop it in relation to two ideas:

1. Centred identities: This relates to the idea that identities can be clear, relatively fixed and certain in terms of what is expected by others when we take-on particular identities.

In the past, for example, people had a much clearer (*centred*) idea about what it *meant* to be "a man" or "a woman" because there were relatively few *choices* available to them in terms of the *meaning* of these categories, for a range of reasons:

- Social groups and communities were much smaller and more closely-knit.
- Travel to and from other countries was only available to a select few.
- People were not exposed, as we are now through *media* like television and the Internet, to new and different ideas.

For these reasons, among others, *social identities* (whatever rules a culture developed governing how to play a particular identity) were incorporated wholesale into *personal identities*. In other words, the rules governing "how to be young or old", for example, were clear, consistent and rigidly enforced.

For postmodern writers a key change has been the development of *global* economic and cultural influences that have opened-up societies, communities and individuals to new and different experiences, behaviours and ideas. Just as we now eat food from America, wear clothes from China and listen to mp3 players from Japan, we have also imported a range of cultural ideas, styles and fashions from around the globe – a cultural trend that has resulted in:

Fragmented identities – something that relates to two main ideas: Firstly, *primary sources of identity* such as class, age and gender have become significantly less important as ways of defining "our Self" and others sources, such as *consumption* ("I shop therefore I am"), *Green* and *Cyber* identities, have become increasingly significant. Secondly, under the cultural onslaught of exposure to different ways of living, behaving and being, traditional identity sources like gender or class can no-longer be sustained as *monolithic* entities (the idea there is only "one" correct way to "be female" or "be elderly"); there are, in contemporary societies, such a wide variety of ways to be these things that relatively

simple, centred, social identities can no longer be supported, sustained, policed and controlled.

In consequence the rules governing the *correct* way to play-out these identities ("Real men don't cry", a woman's place is "in the home" and so forth.) are relaxed as people develop the freedom to both invent and adapt various sources of identity to their own,

personal, tastes and styles (to create, as we've previously seen, *hybrid identities*). In terms of sexuality, for example, where in the past a form of *compulsory heterosexuality* was the norm (with *homosexuality* driven "underground" and hidden from view) we now have a range of sexualities from which to choose - heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, trans-sexual, asexual...

2. Decentred identities: One outcome of fragmentation is that people become *less certain* (*decentred*) about how they are supposed to behave; if there are many ways to be "middle class", for example, which is the "right way"? Identity categories such as class, gender, age and ethnicity are easily combined to create a whole new range of identities (such as young British Asians defining themselves as *Brasian* – a mix of both British and Asian cultures and identities). The

downside to "almost unlimited choice" from which we *pick-and-mix* our identities is *uncertainty* and confusion about who we are and how we're supposed to behave. The "old certainties" of class, gender, age and ethnicity no longer have much currency in terms of telling us how to behave "appropriately".



Postmodern identity: I shop, therefore I am?

Tried and Tested

- Identify **two** ways that social interaction might be considered "a performance" (4 marks).
- Suggest **two** ways that social identities help to "establish a sense of order" (4 marks).
- Suggest **three** reasons why age or class identities in the past may have been more centred than in the present (6 marks).
- Examine sociological accounts of how and why we develop identities (24 marks).
- Using material from the text and elsewhere, compare Conflict and Postmodern accounts of identity formation in the contemporary UK (24 marks).

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4. The Relationship of Identity to Age, Disability, Ethnicity, Gender, Nationality, Sexuality and Social Class in Contemporary Society.

In the previous section we noted the existence of a range of different possible sources of identity in contemporary societies and in this section we can examine how these sources impact on the formation and development of identity.

Social Class

For the sake of illustration, we can discuss the relationship between identity and social class in terms of the earlier distinction we made between three basic class categories (working, middle and upper):

Working Class Identities: Observations

If, as **Crompton** (2003) notes “Employment position has long been used as a proxy for class” we can track developments in *working class* identities through changes in the nature of employment.

Traditional working class identities, in this respect, are fixed (or *centred*) around **manual** work and **manufacturing** industry – both of which, even into the latter part of the 20th century, were in reasonably plentiful supply. In **Willis’s** (1997) study of working class boys, for example, “the lads” looked forward to leaving school at the earliest opportunity to enter the adult world of paid work – a situation in which **Harris** (2005) suggests “The idea of gaining qualifications for work gets opposed, discredited and de-valued”.

Module Link Stratification and Differentiation

Traditional ways of **measuring social class** (such as the **Registrar General’s Scale**) are based around the relatively simple distinction between manual work (working class occupations) and non-manual work (middle class occupations).

A further dimension to class identity came from the *communities* within which the traditional working class lived; largely urban, relatively close-knit in terms of social relationships and further characterised, unlike their middle class peers, by a lack of home ownership. This “sense of community” – where people of a similar class, occupation and general social outlook could have their cultural identities and beliefs continually reinforced through personal experience and socialisation – represents an important source of class identity, whereby “**The Self**” (working class) could be contrasted with “**The Other**” (the middle classes who lived in “the suburbs” or the upper



A former mining village (Allenheads in Weardale) with the pub at the centre of the community...

classes who resided in the countryside). In the 1960’s, however, writers like **Goldthorpe et al** (1968) and **Lockwood** (1966) suggested the emergence of a:

New working class that, **Crompton** (2003) notes, contrasted a traditional working class identity – “**male, manual, and working in traditional industry (eg mining, manufacturing)**” - with a new form of class identity expressed most clearly in **Goldthorpe et al’s** (1968) study of *affluent* car workers. The study questioned the growing orthodoxy (among political parties, the media and public alike) that the class structure was “flattening”; in a new era of economic optimism (characterised by the then Conservative Prime Minister **Macmillan’s** (1957) claim that “most of our people have never had it so good”) there existed a belief that class identities were *converging* into a general “middleclassness” (expressed most forcefully by **Zweig’s** (1961) “*Embourgeoisement* thesis” – the idea that most people were “becoming middle class”).

Goldthorpe et al demonstrated that even those members of the working class who had good, well-paid, jobs were sufficiently different to their middle class peers in terms of attitudes, values and behaviours to make traditional class distinctions valid. They did, however, argue that “affluent manual workers” represented a new development in working class identity.



Manual labour - the traditional definer of working class occupations.

Module Link Stratification and Differentiation

The theory of embourgeoisement links to ideas about the changing nature of the class structure and relationships in the contemporary UK.

Working Class Identities: Explanations

While traditional working class culture and identity revolved around what **McKibbin** (2000) characterises as "...a fairly distinctive lifestyle and cultural life; industrial villages such as those around coal mining or the industrial areas of the big cities typified this lifestyle with their terraced housing, pubs and working men's clubs, keenness on sports and...a rigid sexual division of labour" (traditional working class female identities were largely constructed around marriage, child-rearing and the home), new working class identities underwent a radical change into what **Goldthorpe et al** (1968) argued was a::

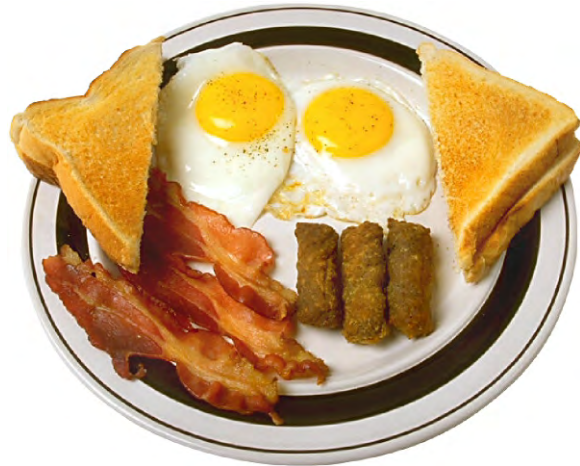
Privatised working class, centred around the *private sphere* of the home, family life and children. A further change, noted by **Peele** (2004), was the idea that "affluence had affected working-class attitudes, making workers more instrumental and less solidaristic"; in other words, new working class identities were less likely to form around "shared experiences" in Trade Union membership and close-knit communities and were more likely to involve expressions of the desire for personal and family advancement.

More-recent changes to working class identities have been attributed to two related developments, one economic and the other cultural. **Peele** (2004), for example, notes that "The shrinking of Britain's manufacturing base and the rise of the service economy created a different social environment even from that of the 1960s"; large numbers of manual, manufacturing-based, jobs have disappeared from the economy under the influence of global economic pressures and changes, to be replaced by a rise in service employment, both a low-skill, low-pay, low-prospects type of work (such as in shops and restaurants) and a more highly-skilled and well-paid type of work in areas like finance, investment, Information technology and the like – the latter reflecting traditional middle class areas of employment that, in consequence, has resulted, **Peele** argues, in "a blurring of traditional class identities".

Consumption

The second development relates to cultural changes in *taste* and *consumption* – the basic argument here being a general *convergence* of working and middle class tastes, such as to make clear-cut class distinctions increasingly difficult. **Fenster** (1989), for example, notes that "even into the 1980's class-based *taste cultures* (defined in terms of a recognisable group "of similar people making similar choices") could be relatively easily identified ". Working class identities were reflected in cultural *orientations* like a "concern with the *present*" and concepts like *immediate gratification* (leaving school at the earliest

opportunity to take paid employment, for example) and *tastes* like pop music, football, television, not "eating out" and the like; middle class identities were reflected in a "future orientation" (*deferred gratification* – staying in education to get qualifications that give entrance to professional careers, for example) and *tastes* that edge into "popular" classical music, theatre and "eating-out".



A nice greasy fry-up. Mmmmm. Luvverly.

In the latter part of the 20th century, however, "taste cultures" as indicative of distinctive boundary lines between working and middle class identities have changed dramatically (while, perhaps, not completely disappearing).

While **Prandy et al** (2004) suggest "there is a gradual shift amongst the population from seeing themselves as working class to middle class", **Savage** (2007) argues that although people generally still use class categories as a source of identity, the *meaning* of this identity has changed over the past 50 years – greater emphasis is placed on *individual*, rather than collective, experiences and, in consequence, working class identities have become many and varied (as **Savage** puts it, people talk about class "in ways which emphasise their hybrid class identities"), reflecting the idea that class is a fluid identity based on the "ability of people to make some kind of choice".

Canary Wharf - a modern financial centre built on the site of London's former West India docks



Middle Class Identities: Observations

In terms of occupational groupings, **Self and Zealey** (2007) note those employed in “middle class occupational positions” (both at the higher - managerial and professional – and lower - sales and customer service - levels) now account for around 2/3 (65%) of the UK employed workforce. Following **Crompton’s** (2003) lead about the relationship between occupation and class, middle class identities are shaped by economic factors and we can identify a range of “occupational identities” (at both “higher” and “lower” levels) for this general class. Examples here include:

Professionals such as doctors who combine high levels of educational achievement with personal *autonomy* (freedom of action) in the workplace, decision-making and so forth.

Managers involved in the day-to-day running of private and public companies; this role, as **Brooks** (2006) suggests, combines things like career progression, decision-making, power and control over others, the organisation of work routines and the like. This category is sometimes split into *senior* (managing directors for example), *intermediate* (such as marketing managers) and *lower* levels (routine supervisors, for example).

Intellectuals (such as university lecturers) reflect an academic stratum dealing with knowledge and information services (such as research).

Consultants: This grouping focuses on the selling of knowledge, information and skills across both national and global markets. They can be seen as a distinctive sub-grouping here for two reasons: firstly they may be *self-employed* (although this isn’t always the case), working on a contract-by-contract basis and secondly high financial rewards are offset by lower levels of job security (unlike their professional counterparts).

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

Self-employed: Although their inclusion here is debateable - this category may include *manual workers* (such as plumbers) through owners of small businesses and financial operatives to high-powered brand consultants, IT contract workers and the like – their ownership role puts them in a slightly different category to “simple employees”.



Middle Class Identities: Explanations

Although it’s possible, as **Brooks** (2006) argues, to push the idea of a “coherent, stable and unified” *middle class* identity a little too far (higher level professional workers may have little or nothing in common with lower level workers) it’s possible to identify three general cultural themes that contribute to middle class identity.

1. **Not working class:** This idea, firstly reflects the observation that “the middle classes” occupy an ambivalent and precarious class position – “above the working class” and wanting to maintain some sort of separation from them and “below the upper class” but aspiring to be like them. As **Brooks** (2006) puts it “The construction of middle class identities has primarily been related to the claim that one is ‘not working class’”. Secondly, in terms of taste cultures middle class identities involve the consumption of music, food, literature, film, clothing and so forth that are qualitatively different to those enjoyed by the working class (think, for example, about the difference between shopping in Asda and Harrods...).

2. **Disgusted subjects:** **Lawler** (2005) argues that “expressions of disgust at perceived violations of taste [and] white working-class existence” are a consistent – and possibly unifying - feature of middle class identities. She argues that the “ownership of taste” is one way that the middle classes aim to distinguish themselves from those below and, to some extent, those above (since the latter can be categorised in terms of things like “vulgar and tasteless shows of wealth”). As **Bourdieu** (1984) put it “Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, that which represents the greatest threat”.



The ownership of “taste” represents both a significant source of middle class identity (“the Self”) and as a way of differentiating them from other social classes (“the Other”).

3. **Social Capital** refers to the ways people are connected (or disconnected) from social networks (who you know) and the value these connections have for what **Putnam** (2000) calls 'norms of reciprocity' (what people are willing to do for each other). It represents what **Catts and Ozga** (2005) call the "social glue that holds people together in...communities and gives them a sense of belonging". The argument here is that the middle classes are better positioned than their working class counterparts to key into significant *social networks* (such as those found in schools or the workplace) that reinforce their sense of identity and difference – and one important aspect of this is what **Bourdieu** (1986) calls:

Cultural capital – the various (non-economic) *resources*, such as family and class background, educational qualifications, social skills, status and the like, that give people advantages and disadvantages over others.

Upper Class Identities: Observations

This relatively small - but immensely powerful – class consists of two *major* groupings:

Landed aristocracy: The traditional source of this group's power is their historic ownership of land and their political connections to the monarchy that, in the past, made them the most significant section of society. During the 20th century it's arguable that their economic power and influence has declined but they remain a not insignificant "upper class cultural rump" – although probably secondary in economic and political importance to the:

Business elite - a section of the upper class characterised by their ownership of significant national, international and global companies. This section is sometimes subdivided into a *financial elite* (those involved in the provision of banking, insurance and knowledge services) and an *industrial elite* focused around manufacturing. Of the two it's arguable that in a contemporary UK context where service industries predominate, the former is now the most significant *class fraction* in terms of its member's wealth, power and influence.

Self and Zealey (2007) provide evidence of the immense economic power of the upper class in the following table:

UK Wealth Distribution		Source: Self and Zealey (2007)				
Percentage of wealth owned by:	1991	1996	2001	2002	2003	
Most wealthy 1%	17	20	22	24	21	
Most wealthy 25%	71	74	72	75	72	
Most wealthy 50%	92	93	94	94	93	
Total marketable wealth (£Billion)	1,711	2,092	3,477	3,588	3,783	

Upper Class Identities: Explanations

Wealth alone doesn't necessarily define upper class identities (some members of the aristocracy are not particularly wealthy while working class National Lottery winners don't automatically become "upper class") and, as with other classes, we need to look at various forms of cultural behaviour "behind the economic definitions" as sources of identity. Such identities, whether based on aristocratic claims to status and title (the *nobility*) or simple economic wealth, are based around:

Privilege regimes whereby the upper classes key into top-level *social networks* that give access to the most powerful decision-makers, high-ranking politicians, top civil servants and so forth. From a *Marxist* perspective **Milliband** (1969) argues that upper class identities are based around common cultural backgrounds that develop out of family relationships and networks and continue through the secondary socialisation process of (private) education. **Heald** (1983) develops this idea to talk about:

Privileged networks and, in particular, the idea of **personal private networks** (an example of which might be the so-called **old boy network** – a range of relationships with wider members of the upper class forged through things like a common educational experience – that could be exploited for mutual benefit). For **Heald**, private personal networks originate within the family, since things like family name and connections give access to wider upper class social networks and, by extension, close these networks to other classes - **Heath and Payne** (1999), for example, argue upper class identities are maintained by restricting and closing access to "economic and political networks of mutual self-interest". Such networks develop through an education system that usually involves attending an expensive, high status, public school (such as Eton) and a high status university (such as Oxford or Cambridge). Alongside the idea of privilege networks we can note the idea of:

Privacy as a significant feature of upper class cultures and identities. As **Galbraith** (1977) puts it: "Of all classes the rich are the most noticed and the least studied". *Privacy* involves the idea upper class identities are cemented through *social distance*; members of this class live, work and socialise predominantly with members of their own class.

Privacy extends from private education and health care through employing professionals (such as tax lawyers and accountants) to shield their economic activities from close inspection to creating physical distance and privacy – gated communities, country estates, and mansions where access is tightly controlled, patrolled and regulated.

Finally we can note how concepts of privileged and private networks link to:

Social capital: **Cohen and Prusak's** (2001) observation that "...the trust, mutual understanding, shared values and behaviours that bind the members of human networks" involves a distinctive set of upper class identities that are continually reinforced by both mutual self-interest and cooperation.

Tried and Tested

- (a) Identify **two** ways that the "traditional working class" is different from the "new working class" (4 marks).
- (b) Suggest two ways in which technology and / or industrialisation have influenced class identities (4 marks)
- (c) Identify and explain **three** divisions within the middle classes(6 marks).
- (d) Examine the argument that "we are all middle class now" (24 marks).
- (e) Assess the view that social classes can be distinguished solely on the basis of "taste" (24 marks).

Gender Identities: Observations

Connell et al's (1987) observation that "**de Beauvoir's** insight "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" applies equally well to men: "one is not born, but rather becomes a man" is a useful starting point for the idea that gender identities are socially constructed. The historical relationship between gender and identity in our society has generally turned on the way each biological sex has been variously socialised into what **Connell** (1995) has suggested are two forms of *dominant* gender identities:

1. Hegemonic masculinity: In the past, for example, a "traditional" form of masculinity centred around a variety of physical and mental characteristics associated with men that **Gauntlett** (2002) expresses in terms of:

Role modelling – the idea that the general socialisation process defined a relatively clear set of roles for men and women (the former as paid workers and providers, the latter as homemakers and carers) from which an equally clear set of identity characteristics could be read: In terms of physical characteristics, for example, men were encouraged to adopt a particular body shape that,



ideally, emphasised physical strength and physique, while in terms of mental characteristics we find ideas about men as "leaders" and "providers" (a source of authority in society), a lack of emotion (men as rational, calm, cool and calculating beings) and so forth. As one of **Connell et al's** (1987) respondents ("Dean, a bus driver") put it: "I've always been brought up that the man is the breadwinner...She stayed at home and cooked" – an idea that leads into:

2. Emphasized femininity, whereby women were encouraged to orientate their personal identities towards "accommodating the interests and needs of men". In other words, the *dominant* female identity was one that "matched and complimented" hegemonic masculinity. This involved ideas about women being essentially passive, emotional, beings whose sense of identity finds its greatest expression in the service of others (such as men and children within the context of the family and, where work was involved, similar "caring-focused" roles – nursing, teaching, social work and the like). **Kitchen** (2006) suggests this is a type of *complicit femininity* – one that complies with male needs and desires.



Identities in contemporary Western societies can be fluid...

Although, as **Connell** (1995) acknowledges, *hegemonic masculinity* and *emphasised femininity* represent "ideals" (both in the past and, in a slightly different way, the present), **Connell and Messerschmidt** (2005) argue that even in a society where several different forms of masculinity exist there remains a particular type of hegemonic masculinity "**embodied in the currently most honoured way of being a man**". The idea that gender identities are related to the general division of labour in society also means that contemporary gender identities should, according to **Gauntlett**, exhibit qualities like:

Fluidity: The idea that a range of male and female identities are available in contemporary societies and that the meaning of these identities change over time (as evidenced, for example, by the development of feminist identities during the 1960's).

Non-conformity: Economic and social changes (on both a national and global level) weaken the hold of traditions

Hegemonic masculinity meets emphasised femininity and they both had a jolly good time down at the beach...

on people's behaviour. Without strong, traditional gender reference points it becomes possible for people to develop new and different forms of identity – an idea contained in the:

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

Risk and Uncertainty: One problem, here, however is that where identity structures are no-longer fixed reference points for people's behaviour it becomes more difficult (and *riskier*) to adopt different gendered identities. Thus, where there are no clear social rules governing the "right" or "wrong" way to "do gender" there is the potential for "crises of identity".

Masculine Identities: Explanations

If one form of masculinity is always the dominant form in any society it follows there must be other, alternative, forms and we can identify examples of what **Schauer** (2004) calls "multiple masculinities" in the following terms:

Subordinate masculinities generally relate to gay men in the sense of homosexuality being, at worst, proscribed and, at best, tolerated as an example of a "lower" form of masculinity – think, for example, about images of "effeminate men" perpetuated through some parts of the media. The basic idea here, therefore, is that even in societies where homosexual identities are allowed there is a general feeling that this type of identity is not an *authentic* representation of "all men".

Subversive: **Meuser** (2007), however, suggests gay identities can undermine "traditional" forms of masculinity in that "Certain groups of men are in complete opposition to the hegemonic form".

From this position expressions of "gay masculinity" (such as effeminacy, "campness" and the like) become knowing, mocking, expressions of opposition to hegemonic masculinity.



Subversive masculinity?

Complicit: **Connell** (1995) suggests that "as women have become more powerful, male identities have begun to change" and one form of change is reflected in the concept of the:

- **New Man** – an identity that developed during the 1980's (especially in advertising circles) based around men who, according to **Lewis** (1999), are

willing to combine paid work outside the family with their share of unpaid work within the home. Although **Lewis** (1999) wryly notes "There are few sightings of the 'new man'" **McMahon** (1999) goes further by arguing the new man is "fantasy - most men have little interest in changing the patterns of child care and housework". A contemporary elaboration of this idea (again, popular in some advertising circles) is the concept of the *new father* – an individual who,



Rare sighting of the "New Father" in action...

while displaying all the qualities of hegemonic masculinity also finds the time to be "a good, caring and responsible" father to their children. Sightings, outside advertisements, are however rare...

Marginalised: Some sociologists have argued that economic changes (such as the long-term decline in manufacturing and the rise of a service economy) have impacted on working class male identities as they struggle to cope with things like unemployment and an inability to play the traditional breadwinner role within the family. **Faludi** (2000), for example, documented American male feelings of disillusionment and despair that their "sense of masculinity" and self-worth was being eroded and that they were "becoming marginal" to the lives of women. In the UK **Willott and Griffin** (1996) discovered similar "marginalised masculinities" among the long-term unemployed working class as traditional beliefs about "the good family man" providing for wife and kids collided with the reality of a (current) inability to provide.



Partly as a result of these challenges to hegemonic masculinity (both structural - in terms of changing economic practices - and cultural, in terms of male - female relationships) writers such as **Mac an Ghail** (1994) and **Benyon** (2002) have suggested a **crisis of masculinity** in contemporary societies that has thrown into sharper relief a range of exaggerated male identities:

Retributive masculinities aim to "reclaim" (from their "emasculated peers") traditional forms of masculinity and a familiar example here might be the:

New Lad – someone whose (young) life centres around "birds, booze and football". In this instance the emphasis is on a late-20th century "reinvention" and reinterpretation of a more traditional form of masculine identity, whereas:

Hyper masculinity represents a version of *masculinity* that **Wolf-Light** (1994) characterises as "authoritarian



and autocratic, impersonal, contemptuous and violent. In short, the very image of patriarchy". **Robinson** (2006) characterises this, largely American, phenomenon as having "...a substantial following amongst white, middle-class and middle-aged men primarily because of its ability to provide a degree of certainty about what it means to be a man...a belief in an essential and unchanging 'deep masculinity'".



Normalised identities in which women play a secondary role, one where they are encouraged to inhabit *peripheral spaces* on the edge of male identities - as mothers, girlfriends, partners (both romantic and sexual) and the like. Female identities, therefore, take-on a supporting role for their "male leads" – one that continually struggles, as **Chambers et al** argue, with the problem of "producing a femininity that will secure male approval". At the other end we find a range of

sexualised identities, largely fashioned through male eyes and fantasies, such as prostitute, slag, slut, and so forth.

Feminine Identities: Explanations

Mirroring the experience of their male counterparts, there various ways for women to express their gendered identity in contemporary UK society; these range from traditional *private sphere* feminine identities – wife, mother and the like – to the less-traditional *public sphere* identities found in the workplace (career woman, for example). Reflecting these ideas, we can identify three main groupings by way of illustrating a selection of contemporary feminine identities.

Contingent

At the "traditional end" of the female identity spectrum we find **contingent femininities** based around what **Froyum** (2005) characterises as "acquiescence to male privilege"; in other words, these involve identities framed and shaped around male beliefs, behaviours and demands. **Chambers et al** (2003) argue that such femininities are contingent because they require "constant attention, renewal, concern, self surveillance...risk-prevention...and moral policing... pleasure is linked to "pampering" the body rather than testing it".

At one end of this particular scale we find:

Assertive

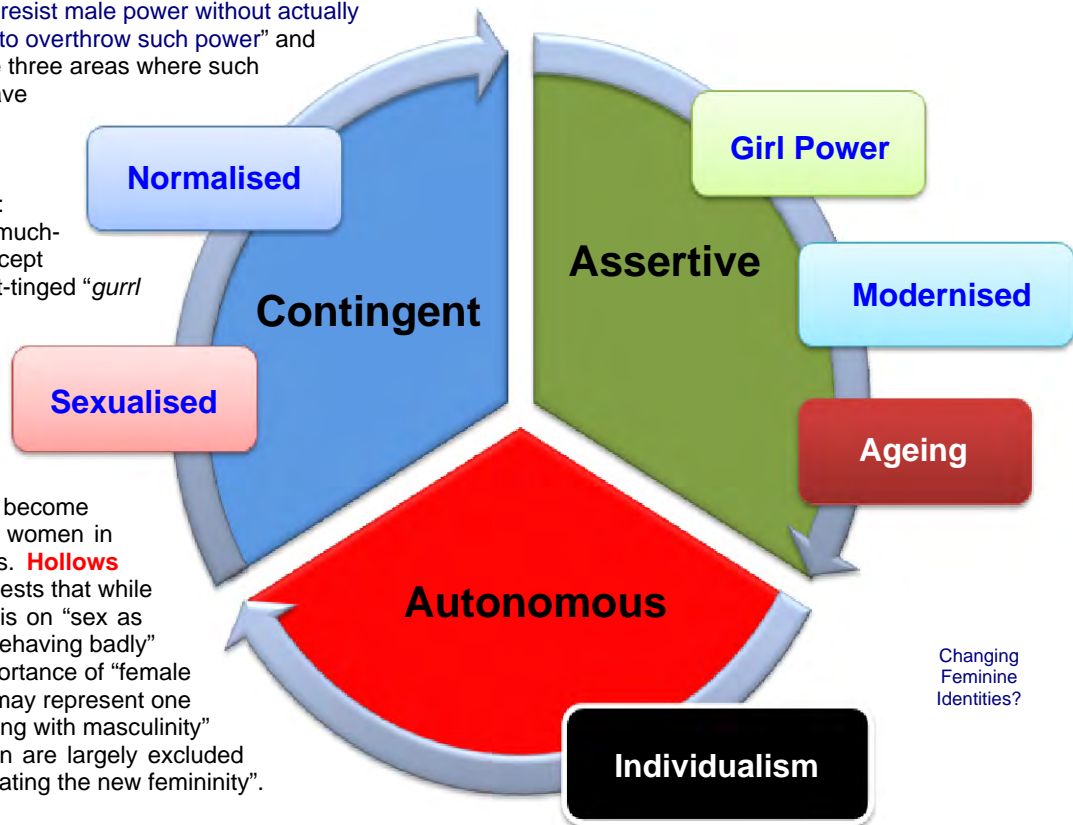
Identities in this category reflect the changing position of women in society, partly as a result of feminist political and cultural ideas and partly as a reflection of changing economic circumstances. Assertive identities involve the idea of women "breaking free" from traditional ideas about femininity while, at the same time, not completely setting themselves apart from their male counterparts. **Froyum** (2005) suggests assertive femininities are



adopted to “resist male power without actually threatening to overthrow such power” and we can note three areas where such identities have been made manifest:

Girl Power:

Although a much-derided concept (the feminist-tinged “*grrrl power*” seems to have more currency in the 21st century), this identity has become available to women in recent times. **Hollows** (2000) suggests that while the emphasis on “sex as fun”, “girls behaving badly” and the importance of “female friendship” may represent one way of “coping with masculinity” older women are largely excluded from “articulating the new femininity”.



Modernised femininities relate to a slightly older age (and *class*) group, as they seek to locate new-found female economic, political and cultural “rights” within a relatively traditional context of family responsibilities (the *assertive* aspect here being a desire for personal freedom and expression within the context of traditional gender relationships). For **McRobbie** (1996), modernised femininities involve attributes like the pursuit of a career, “individualism, liberty, and the entitlement to sexual self-expression”.

Ageing femininities: Older female identities in our society have generally been *stigmatised* as objects of pity, charity, social work and the medical profession. Elderly women as fashionable, active and, indeed, *sexual beings* is a more-recent possibility and reflects, in some ways, both the general ageing of the UK population structure and higher levels of disposable income in this age group.

Autonomous

This final grouping, **Froyum** (2005) suggests, is one characterised by female attempts to “establish power by negotiating within their heterosexual relationships”.



Autonomous femininities don’t involve women living “*separate from and without regard to men*”; rather they involve establishing gendered relationships in competition with men, on female terms.

A combination of economic, political and cultural developments (service industries, legal freedoms and educational achievements, for example) have given women greater freedom of choice over how to both live their lives and express their femininity.

Thus **Evans** (2006) points to the idea of **female individualism** as part of a “new gender regime that frees them from traditional constraints” (such as pregnancy, child care and so forth); *autonomous women* are likely to be highly-educated, successful, professional women focused on their work and career (areas traditionally seen as male preserves). In terms of their relationships **Evans** suggests they tend to form non-committal heterosexual attachments that may involve marriage, but is unlikely to involve children.

Age Identities: Observations

Like gender, age is an interesting category because it illustrates the sociological relationship between an objective characteristic (biological ageing) and the meanings different cultures attach to this process. Different age groups, for example, reflect different *cultural assumptions* about how it is appropriate for people of a particular age to behave and these assumptions reflect back onto individual identities in two main ways:

Firstly, through a process of *identification* with people of a similar biological age (involving group identities such as “child, youth, adult and elderly”). This creates a sense of belonging (*social solidarity*) to a specific grouping with its own particular values, norms and forms of behaviour.



I ask you, is this any way for a grown man to spend his Sunday afternoons?

Secondly, through pressure to *conform* to an *ascribed* age grouping. Children, for example, are denied some of the opportunities open to adults in our culture while the elderly are similarly denied opportunities to behave in “age inappropriate” ways (involving sporting activities, sexuality and so forth). We can use the concept of:

Life-course – the idea we can identify four different phases in our biological development associated with different cultural meanings and identities – to illustrate age-related identities.

Childhood

For **Woodson** (2000), childhood “... is the manner in which we understand and articulate the physical reality of biological immaturity” and, as such, is arguably the first social identity consciously experienced by “immature humans”; it is during this period we are first exposed to *primary socialising* influences from adults (mainly parents) and, increasingly, *secondary sources* such as the media. In our society “childhood” is associated with a variety of meanings (something that supports **Jenks’** (1996) argument that “childhood is not a natural but a social construct”), from the idea of “innocence” to children being in need of adult care, supervision and protection.

Childhood also involves socially constructed ideas about *permissions* (children are “allowed” to exhibit behaviours – such as play - discouraged in adults) and *denials* (children are not allowed to do a range of things – such as marry – open to adults).

Module Link Families and Households

For a more detailed discussion of childhood see “**The Nature of Childhood**” Section.

Youth

Like childhood, **youth** reflects a range of identities – such as pre-teens (“teenies”), teens and young adults – that have come into recent existence to reflect social changes in areas like education, work, and consumption patterns. **Hine** (2000), for example, argues “teenagers” didn’t make much of an appearance in Britain until the mid-to-late 1950’s” and their development reflects things like the extension of education into the teenage years and the development of consumer goods (music and fashion in particular) aimed at a specific post-child, pre-adult market. **Baron et al** (1999) note that (Functionalist) writers such as **Parsons** (1964) and **Eisenstadt** (1956) have argued *youth cultures* and *subcultures* (spectacular versions of which include Skinheads, Punks and Goths) function to provide a “*period of transition*” between childhood (the narrow family) and adulthood (the wider workplace). In other words, societies create concepts of “youth” as a way of allowing young people to move gradually away from childhood identities and into adult identities.

Module Link

Crime and Deviance

A variety of **subcultural theories** (especially those related to the concept of youth) are linked to explanations of crime - mainly because this general age group is statistically most-likely to be involved in crime. The link between age and crime is explored in the Section “**Different Explanations of Crime and Deviance**”.

Adulthood

Adult identities are generally constructed around a range of rights and responsibilities that mark them apart from child and youth identities. Adults are allowed to do certain things (marry, work full-time, drink and smoke etc.) while also taking on roles (family and work, for example) that involve care and responsibility for others. In this respect adult identities avoid many of the:

Age discrimination ideas and practices aimed at both children and the elderly (the concept of **ageism** whereby “the old” suffer

discrimination based solely on the fact of their age). For **Magolda** (1999), adulthood represents a general identity defined in terms of how individuals start to construct fully-formed personal identities separate from the controlling identities of their youth and childhood.

Adulthood, in other words, represents a shift in individual identity focus – away from the various forces that shape children and young adults and

towards a sense of themselves of the society

of “what to make of within the context around them”.





Old Age

Longer life expectancy has resulted in changing consumption and leisure patterns among the elderly.

In contemporary societies “old age” can be considered as being both separated from general notions of adulthood (although the old do, of course, retain certain adult identities) and an identity in its own right – one that is becoming increasingly significant in the UK, for example, with the twin trends of an **ageing society** – one in which the number of elderly far outnumber the young – and longer life expectancy, itself a product of improved medical treatment, care and a greater understanding of the importance of diet, exercise and so forth (an **Affluence Dividend** - as societies become generally richer life expectancy increases). Conventional notions of old age as a:

Diminished identity – one resulting from the loss of status that occurs when retirement is enforced, family members either die or have significantly less personal contact and so forth – still retain some currency (even though the elderly may gain increased family status as *patriarchs* or *matriarchs* within some family structures). **Mutran and Burke** (1979), for example, note that “old persons have identities which, while different from middle-aged persons, are similar to young adults: they see themselves as less useful and less powerful than middle-age individuals”. In addition, elderly identities can be:

Stigmatised in terms of seeing old age as an inevitable process of decline, senility, helplessness, withdrawal from society and loneliness. The elderly, in other words, are reconceptualised as a *deviant minority group*. **Gianoulis** (2005) argues that the **medicalisation** of old age contributes to this process: “Medicine defines and manages individuals deemed undesirable by the broader culture...and instead of viewing the disorientations of older people as being the result of personal and social change, they are viewed as symptoms of ‘senility’”. Conversely, we could note the contemporary:

Reinvention of elderly identities based around longer life expectancy and more affluent lifestyles. This involves the *fragmentation* of elderly identities (distinguishing between the old and the very old, for example), changing patterns of consumption and leisure (especially among the middle classes) and different interpretations of the meaning of “being old”, whereby the elderly refuse to conform to conventional stereotypes and social identities. **Barrett et al** (2003), for example, argue different societies produce different subjective experiences of aging. Americans and Germans, for example, “tend to feel younger than their actual age...but the bias toward youthful identities is stronger at older ages, particularly among Americans”.

Age Identities: Explanations

The social construction of age can be evidenced by the fact that there is no clear *historical* or *cross-cultural* agreement about the age at which the individual loses one identity and takes on another (when, for example, does adulthood begin?).

The fuzziness of boundary marking notwithstanding, **Settersten** (2006) suggests age identities are significant in contemporary societies for three reasons:

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

2. Anchorage: The passage of *biological time* is a way of fixing the passage of *social time* in that we give certain age-related events (an 18th or 21st birthday, retirement from work and so forth) a social significance as:

3. Markers – something that denotes the transition from one phase in the life course to another (such as from child to adult), a process sometimes termed a **rite of passage**. These rites take different forms in different cultures – for Aborigines this transition is marked by “Walkabout” – at 13 the child spends six months in the Australian Bush and on their return they are accepted into adulthood.

For Jews, on the other hand, the transition from childhood to adulthood can be marked by the *Bar mitvah* ceremony for boys (at age 13) and the *Bat mitvah* ceremony for girls (at age 12).



A traditional form of Bar mitvah ceremony.

There are a range of rites we could note in the contemporary UK – from things like christenings through marriage ceremonies to funerals (with birthdays also being part and parcel of the ritual of age).

Significantly, **Settersten** suggests biological age itself is relatively unimportant here: “What matters is what the age indexes - the important experiences that happen at those times”.

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

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

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

Tried and Tested

- Identify **two** ways that old age is a stigmatised identity (4 marks).
- Suggest **two** ways that the “affluence dividend” has resulted in changing leisure and consumption patterns (4 marks).
- Suggest **three** reasons for changing male and / or female identities (6 marks).
- Examine sociological explanations for changing gender identities (24 marks).
- Assess the view that gender identities are closely related to both class and age identities (24 marks).

National Identities: Observations

Nationality involves thinking about the various ways people come to identify themselves as belonging to a wider social group (the Welsh, the Somali and so forth) – a process that involves a combination of two things, one *physical* the other *sociological*.

1. Territoriality: Although “a nation” involves identifying a certain *physical space* (such as the British Isles), this alone isn’t sufficient to create a “national identity” since people occupying a particular territory have to feel they have things in common not shared by other nationalities - a sense of uniqueness that comes from:

2. Common culture: National identities relate to things like the attitudes, attributes and ideas that are part-and-parcel of belonging to what **Anderson** (1983) calls an “imagined community” – the initial basis of which is a shared:



Language, both in the *literal* sense (speaking English for example) and the *metaphorical* sense (understanding the “language” through which national identities are culturally constructed and transmitted).

Anderson argues, for example, that the media play an important role in “representing the nation” as a community of “like-minded individuals” who have things in common although, as the **Commission for Racial Equality** (2005) suggest, the construction and maintenance of national identities involve a range of social processes:

Ceremonies, Symbols and Rituals reinforce a sense of national identity through *ceremonies* such as royal weddings, *symbols* such as anthems, flags and *rituals* involving things like support for national sports teams or voting for governments.

Values and attitudes: When **Sotheacheath** (1997) notes that “National identity is the transmission of each generation’s legacy to the next” one aspect of this is the belief there are certain values (such as “upholding human rights and freedoms, or respect for the rule of law”) and *attitudes* (a sense of fair play, tolerance and so forth) that characterise “a nation”. In addition, national identities involve:

Traditions, habits and customs – such as celebrating Christmas or other religious festivals, sending Birthday cards, “coming of age” ceremonies and the like. These are frequently related to:

Consumption patterns: A preference for a particular type of food (such as “fish and chips”, pizza, curry or hamburgers) may be incorporated into a national identity as might certain sporting practices (cricket and football) and:



Achievements: Part of the “national legacy” involves transmitting a sense of history based around:

- **Politics** (“parliamentary democracy”, for example, or the 2nd world war).
- **Technology and science** (such as the industrial revolution or the World Wide Web).
- **Sport** (the invention of cricket, winning the football World Cup).
- **Culture** (popular music, fashion, literature...).

National Identities: Explanations

If national identities are constructed around the kind of *socialising mechanisms* we’ve just noted it follows that they represent what **Durkheim** (1897) called:

Integrating mechanisms: Things like participation in national ceremonies, observance of national rituals and socialisation into national cultures all contribute to the creation and recreation of national identities – the overriding purpose of which is:

Social solidarity – the general belief that people share a bond uniting them as “a people” and, in consequence, provides a sense of social cohesion and purpose. *Solidarity* can involve ideas of *loyalty* (to a country, for example) as well as finding its expression in:



Nationalism – a general belief in the *superiority* of one’s nation as against the perceived *inferiority* of other nations – and this makes national identity something of a double-edged sword; on the one hand it can invoke feelings of community and cohesion, while on the other it can provoke feelings of difference and antagonism towards “Others” - whether these be other nations or groups within a nation (such as *ethnic minorities*).

Terzis (2001) suggests the media plays a significant role here in terms of how it may “produce and reinforce the relational oppositions of ‘Us’ and the ‘Others’”. In other words, how the media helps to construct and transmit notions of national identity on the basis of real or imagined differences between people and nations.

Integrating mechanisms do, of course, require a vehicle for their delivery and in contemporary societies this role is performed by **cultural institutions** such as the *education* system (involving subjects like history, geography and citizenship) and the *media*.

Terzis (2001) for example, suggests the media play a significant role as:

- **“Tellers** of national myths (in times of crisis, rapid change or external threat).
- **Engravers** of national symbols on the nation’s memory and
- **Presenters** of national rituals (such as elections and celebrations)”.

The concept of “nationalism” raises some significant questions for identities in the contemporary world in the context of changing:



Defining concepts like “Britishness” or “Englishness” isn’t as easy as you may think - try it and see...

Global economic, political and cultural processes. We experience (and incorporate into our personal value systems) a huge range of “global cultural” influences – from the media we consume, through the food we eat to the fashions and styles we wear. The problem, here, is that the meaning of nationality is no-longer clear, straightforward and relatively fixed; rather, “national identities” are increasingly fuzzy, imprecise and fluid.

For example, “Englishness”, **Dolan** (2006) suggests, is “Seemingly a readily recognisable ‘fact of life’ embedded in understandings of British culture... Yet, once held up for close scrutiny... eludes definition... rather than having a fixed and knowable formulation of ‘Englishness’ that can be readily described and categorised, we are left with fluid conceptions that shift in relation to historical and political circumstances”.

Along similar lines, **Dahl** (2001) argues that the idea of a “national culture”...shared across the individuals that live in a ‘national state or territory’ has diminished in importance as “nations” experience the “break up of society into...various ethnic, religious and racial groups”. The implication here is that both the content and meaning of national identity has changed under what **Rex** (1996) characterises as two main challenges posed by **globalisation**:

1. Political unions (such as the European Community); such *supra-national* associations (political and economic groupings that involve many nations) have the potential to create a new layer of identity that supersedes notions of national identity.

2. Immigration “by minority groups with their own forms of culture and social organization”. If national identities are rooted in a separation between The Self and The Other it becomes more difficult now than in the past to maintain the clear cultural separation between different “nationalities” essential to the concept of identity. This, it can be argued, results in three distinct outcomes:

Hybrid identities based on a combination of different “national” (and ethnic) influences, such as the aforementioned *Brasian identities* – a combination of British and Asian cultural influences.

Soft nationalism - a vague and fairly general sense of national identity that sits “in the background”; while people may, when questioned, identify themselves with a specific nation this has little or no specific meaning to them in their day-to-day life, although it may come to the fore at times of national crisis or celebration (such as when England beat Australia at cricket in 2005).

Hard nationalism that involves a retreat into beliefs about the essential basis of “national culture” (the fundamental attributes that make “the English” different – and superior – to other nations) and finds its expression in an aggressive and sometimes violent opposition to “foreigners”.



Ethnic Identities: Observations

Ethnicity refers to **cultural differences** between social groups in areas like religion, family structures, beliefs, values and norms and ethnicity and identity join, **Winston** (2005) suggests, when people “see themselves as being distinctive in some way from others” because of a shared cultural background and history, expressed in terms of:

Markers: **Song** (2003) argues that an “ethnic group” is a group within a larger society that has a “common ancestry” and “memories of a shared past”; the group, in this respect, has a sense of shared identity based around: a variety of “symbolic elements...such as family and kinship, religion, language, territory, nationality or physical appearance”.

When thinking about ethnic groups, we need to avoid two significant misconceptions:

Firstly, although the concepts of “**race**” and “ethnicity” are often confused, the former conventionally refers to the belief we can distinguish between people on the basis of things like physical characteristics (such as skin colour).

Although race is an important idea (mainly because people refer to “racial groups” as if they were real and substantial) it is a crude biological concept (developed in the 18th and 19th centuries) that, **Ossorio** (2003) argues, is no-longer sustainable: “We have a notion of race as being simple divisions of people...that are deep, essential, somehow biological or even genetic, and that are unchanging, that these are clear-cut,



Ethnicity refers to the idea of cultural **differences** between social groups and cultural **similarities** within such groups.

distinct categories of people. And that is not the case. We can't find any genetic markers that are in everybody of a particular race, and in nobody of some other race...the simple biological notion of race is wrong”.

Furthermore there are, as **Winston** (2005) points-out, many (ethnic) groups in our society “defined mainly in terms of religion (i.e. Jewish people or Muslim people) or nationality (i.e. Scottish or Irish people)”.

Secondly, we need to avoid thinking about ethnicity in terms of “minority groups” or practices (such as “ethnic” art or food). As the **Center (sic) for Social Welfare Research** (1999) argues, “For all of us, identity is in some sense “ethnic” in that we have diverse origins...related to how we are perceived and treated by others... we are all to some degree members of ethnic groups...The issue... is not who is ethnic and who is not. It is the role ethnicity plays in personal identity”. Thus, although we can distinguish between majority and minority ethnic groups we all have an “ethnic identity”. As **Winston** suggests “because White people are the majority in Britain their ethnic identity is often simply taken for granted and regarded as ‘the norm’ and thus is rarely questioned” – an idea confirmed by **Savage et al** (2005) whose research revealed “White respondents were remarkably reluctant to identify themselves in any kind of ethnic terms”.

Examples

We can note some examples of ethnic groups in the contemporary UK in terms of:

Ethnic majority: **Self and Zealey** (2007) note that “Historically the population of Great Britain has predominantly consisted of people from a White British ethnic background” - the 2001 Census, for example, showed 88% of the population (around 50 million people) were classified as “White British”.

This figure could, of course, be broken down into its constituent parts (English, Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish) although the question then arises as to whether ethnic groups such as the Irish are minorities

or part of the “British majority” – an important idea when thinking about cultural backgrounds and traditions since “British” is a notoriously difficult ethnicity to define.

Ethnic minorities: **Self and Zealey** (2007) further note that “The pattern of migration since the 1950s has produced a number of distinct ethnic minority groups” – the main categories in descending order of size being identified in the following table :

UK Ethnic Minorities	
Source: Self and Zealey (2007)	
Minority Group	Percentage
Other White	2.5
Indians	1.8
Pakistanis	1.3
Mixed ethnic backgrounds	1.2
Black Caribbean	1.0
Black Africans	0.8
Bangladeshis	0.5

This pattern of ethnic diversity is further complicated by “other ethnicities” (such as Chinese) and people (such as Europeans – the French in particular) who live and work in the UK but are resident elsewhere. **Favell** (2006), for example, estimates around 200,000 French live and work in London and the South East (“London is now the fourth largest French city after Paris, Lyon and Marseilles”).

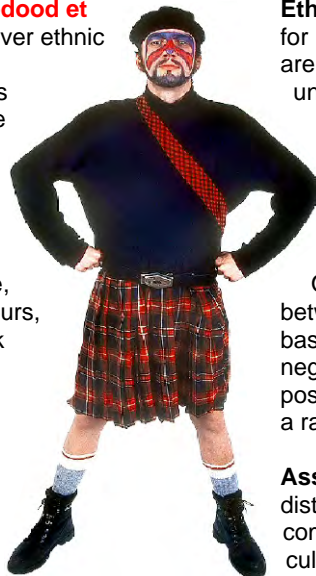
Ethnic Identities: Explanations

The discussion of ethnic group markers, types and boundaries (what **Modood et al** (1997) calls the “confusion” over ethnic identification) highlights a key sociological problem; while it is possible to identify a wide range of ethnic groups and identities it is extremely difficult, in many instances, to actually pin-down the “cultural differences” that mark one ethnic group apart from another; what, for example, are the specific cultural behaviours, beliefs and practices that mark “English ethnicity” apart from “Scottish ethnicity” or “Afro-Caribbean ethnicity”?

We can limit the “problem of specific markers” by approaching ethnicity from a

As a part of what we generally consider to be traditional dress, the kilt might be seen as a significant part of Scottish cultural identity stretching back into the myths (sic) of time.

It was, however, invented in the 18th century (circa 1725) by Thomas **Rawlinson** (an *Englishman*).



slightly different angle; rather than “from the outside looking in” (as observers trying to identify the various cultural elements that mark one ethnic group apart from another) we could consider it from the “inside, looking out”.

Thus, **Song** (2003) suggests ethnic identity doesn’t necessarily relate to “any actual evidence of cultural distinctiveness as a group”; rather, what is important is whether people are “conscious of belonging to the group” or as **Self and Zealey** (2007) suggest: “Membership of an ethnic group is something that is subjectively meaningful to the person concerned”. This solution is not, however, without a couple of *methodological* problems:

Firstly, **Self and Zealey** (2007) point-out that asking people to self-classify in terms of ethnicity “means the information collected is not based on objective, quantifiable information like age or sex”.

Secondly, it leads to confusion between *objective* ethnicity and *subjective* ethnicity.

Module Link

Theory and Methods

These observations can be related to questions concerning the **reliability** and **validity** of different forms of data.

For example, **Modood et al** (1997) point-out that in the contemporary UK “Many people identify more readily with their ethnic group than with being British” – although substantial numbers do not (for example, some Asians – especially 2nd and 3rd generation individuals - see their ethnicity in terms of being British rather than “Indian” or “Pakistani” and some groups see their ethnicity in hybrid terms, as a combination of their parents ethnic background and their British ethnicity).

We can develop the above ideas by thinking about:

Ethnic boundaries and the consequences they have for identity. On one level, for example, if ethnic groups are “culturally different” we need to establish and understand the nature of the *boundaries* between them – where, for example does a majority / minority ethnic group begin and end? (that is, what are the specific characteristics of one ethnic group that clearly differentiate them from another, possibly similar, group?).

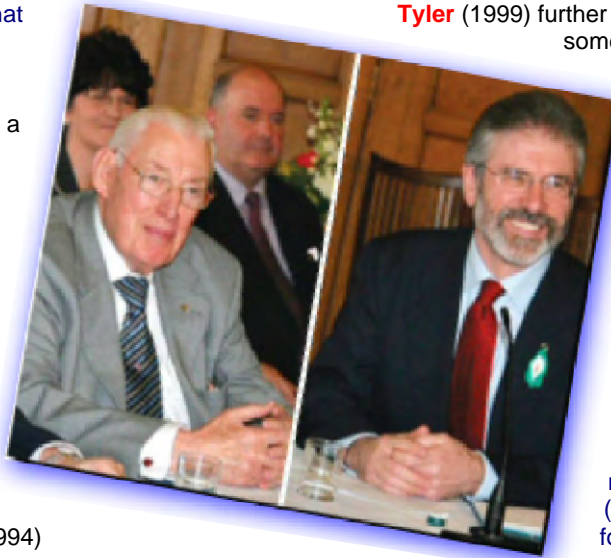
On another level we can understand the relationship between different majority / minority ethnicities on the basis that, if ethnicities are socially constructed and negotiated (since they are inherently *subjective*), it’s possible for boundaries to be established or removed in a range of ways:

Assimilation, for example, involves the idea that the distinctive cultural identity of one ethnic group is completely absorbed into that of another – without the cultural beliefs and practices of the latter being significantly changed. In other words, *assimilation* involves the complete removal of ethnic boundaries through the effective “cultural destruction” of an ethnic identity.

Integration on the other hand involves the blurring of ethnic boundaries in the sense that different ethnicities *merge*, such that a new (*hybrid*) identity is created. Although total integration is rarely, if ever, complete, it is possible to see evidence in UK society of **cultural diffusion** – a process whereby cultural exchanges take place between ethnic groups in different areas like food - the spread of Asian cuisine, for example – fashion, language and so forth. As **Phillips** (2005) puts it “Integration is a two-way street, in which the settled communities accept that new people will bring change with them”, while “newcomers realise that they too will have to change”.

Segregation involves a clear fixing of ethnic group boundaries, such that little or no cultural exchange takes place between groups. We can briefly note two levels of segregation:

Firstly, systems such as **Apartheid** (“separation”) in South Africa (between 1948 and 1994) involved the complete physical, economic, political and cultural separation of different groups (in this instance those designated “White”, “Black” and “Coloured”). The system was governed by legal rules and punishments that worked predominantly in favour of the White ruling minority.



Northern Ireland - an example of ethnic segregation based on religious differences between Protestants and Catholics?

Secondly, **Phillips** (2006) has argued that in some areas of the UK there is effective ethnic segregation in schools (“Faith schools”, for example, whose intake is restricted to a particular religion, such as Christian or Muslim) and residential districts that are “on their way to becoming fully-fledged ghettos”.

He also argues that a form of “soft segregation” exists whereby “outside work, people confine their social and cultural lives to people of their own background, and seldom make friendships across ethnic boundaries”.

Tyler (1999) further suggests that ethnic segregation sometimes occurs in urban fringe areas (such as in and around Leicester where she based her research) with the maintenance of “white enclaves” (areas that were exclusively white) in the context of black and Asian settlement.

She argues “White dominance is maintained through the production of stereotypes” that polarise differences between “the White Self and the Asian Other” in terms of “Us” (“English, White, rural, normal food...”) and “Them” (“Asian, Black, urban, smelly food...”).

Disabled Identities: Observations



The concept of disability involves a unique combination of two ideas:

- 1. Ascription** - in the sense it is an identity given to those who fail to measure-up to socially constructed definitions of *normality*. One *is* – or *becomes* – “disabled” because of what you are *not* (physically and / or mentally “able”).
- 2. Damage** -- in the sense that “the disabled” inhabit a social space reserved for those who fail to match cultural ideas about what is *normal* and what is *abnormal* – they are, in other words, *stigmatised*.



Apartheid in South Africa involved the complete separation of “racial groups”

Disability, in this respect, is generally represented (in the media as much as in everyday conversation and practice) as a:

Problematic identity; that is, one that is difficult to place and manage – both for the disabled individual (who, it is generally assumed, stands outside “normal society” in terms of their ability to participate fully in that society) and the able-bodied knowing how to deal with people who are “not normal”. **Davis** (1997) brings these ideas together when he argues that the “problem of disability” is “the way that normalcy is constructed to create the ‘problem’ of the disabled person” – an idea reflected in **Morris’s** (1991) argument that disability is frequently used (especially in the media) *stereotypically* “as a metaphor for evil, or just to induce a sense of unease... a character with a humped back, with a missing leg, with facial scars, will evoke certain feelings in the reader or audience”.

Module Link

Mass Media

These ideas link into the way “disability” is represented in the mass media.

Disability is a **contested concept** in the sense that it’s actually very difficult to define exactly what we mean by “disabled”. **Roper** (2003), for example, distinguishes between *impairment* - reflecting a real physical or mental state involving limitations in some situations – and *disability* which she sees as a cultural construct implying notions of “damage” and inability. Contemporary sensitivity to definitions and *labelling* is important because it highlights how social identities surrounding disability have been dominated by disability as:

Handicap: This reflects – in brutal and disparaging terms – a form of *dependent identity* in that “handicapped” implies an “inability to cope unaided”, a perception that throws responsibility for stigma on the *victim* of the labelling process.

Gianoulis (2006), for example, argues that “handicapped identities” serve to obscure the reality of the situation in that the disabled individual’s “chief handicaps are the barriers an unresponsive society creates...both physical obstacles to accessibility and attitudes of prejudice, condescension and ignorance”.

Newell (2007) develops this general idea by suggesting that “the problem” here is not so much the fact of “difference” but that such difference is rooted in and supported by modern science and medicine; through these disciplines we have created “physical and psychological concepts of normal against which are contrasted the abnormal”.

Disabled Identities: Explanations

Although disability takes different forms, both between general categories like *physical* and *mental* disability and within such categories (blindness and paraplegia for example) **Barnes** (1992) outlines a range of:

Imposed identities within the general “disability” category that reflect public perceptions of disabled identities. Examples here include:

- **Objects of ridicule** – people who are seen as pitiable and pathetic, sometimes sinister and evil but invariably objects of curiosity. This general type of identity focuses on a mixture of helplessness and compassion in that while the disabled may not be fully responsible for their condition they do little or nothing to alleviate it.

- **Super cripples** on the other hand represent a group that, as **Roper** (2003) puts it, has struggled to overcome their “handicap” and become “more ‘normal’ in a heroic way”. The function of this group, she suggests, is to show that if some individuals can overcome their disability then so can others – once again illustrating the idea that disability is not so much a problem for the society that produces it, but rather a problem of the individual.

- **Incapables**: This category is both an extension of the first and confirmation of the second in that disabled identities are couched in both notions of dependency / incapacity and also in terms of the disabled as “burdens” on society and individual carers.



World-renowned physicist Professor Steven Hawking.

Roper (2003) suggests that contemporary notions of the relationship between disability and identity reflect two main models:

1. **The individual** model (the “dominant notion of disability”) sees disability as “inherent in the individual, whose responsibility it is to ‘overcome’ her or his ‘tragic’ disability”. This approach has three functions. Firstly it places “responsibility” for disability on the individual. Secondly it defines certain “boundaries of normality” by labelling some people as “abnormal” and, thirdly, it reinforces the latter because it “aims for the normalisation of disabled people, often through the medicalisation of their condition”.

2. **The social** model reverses this picture by suggesting that “disability” is a problem for society, rather than the individual. That is, in any society where large numbers of people have physical and mental impairments the onus is on that society to adjust to this situation (the reverse of the individual model). For example, if the design of the built environment makes access for people with mobility problems an issue the solution is not to exclude them; rather it is to change the environment to enable their inclusion.



Sexual Identities: Observations

Although *gender* and *sexual* identities are closely related (through concepts, displays and practices of masculinity and femininity), sexual identities relate specifically to how individuals define themselves in terms of sexual and romantic (non-sexual) attraction. In this respect we can note *four* general types of sexuality in the contemporary UK:

1. Heterosexuality (attraction to someone of the opposite biological sex) is sometimes characterised as *conventional* or *hegemonic* sexuality on the basis that in both everyday practice and through institutions such as the legal system, schools and the media it is generally represented as the *dominant* form of sexuality – an idea reinforced by the concept of:

Homophobia (a fear of homosexuality): Until 1967, for example, homosexuality was illegal in the UK and from 1988 to 2003 it was illegal (although no-one was ever prosecuted) for teachers to “promote the teaching of homosexuality”. While **McLean** (2002) notes that some of the more blatant examples of media homophobia (*The Sun*, for example, once described Aids as a “gay blood plague” and referred to gay men as “poofers”) are no longer acceptable, undercurrents still remain - although the language tends to be more guarded.

2. Homosexuality (attraction to someone of the same biological sex) is usually categorised in two main ways: *gay* (male-to-male) and *lesbian* (female-to-female). Homosexuality is sometimes termed a:

Marginalised sexuality to reflect the idea that, historically, it has been represented as a form of



A satirical response to Homophobia



minority practice existing “at the edge” of conventional sexuality. In this respect homosexuality has been a:

Stigmatised identity – one where concepts of “normal” (hetero)sexuality are contrasted unfavourably with “abnormal” (homo)sexuality. The persecution of gay and lesbian sexualities is reflected by the idea of being “in the closet”; one’s sexuality is hidden from wider view and is something practiced “in secret” for fear of exposure. *Closeting* – and the decision about whether to “leave the closet” - is not, **Dreschler** (2004) argues, simply a matter of legality: “In the developmental histories of gay men and women, periods of difficulty in acknowledging their homosexuality, either to themselves or to others, are often reported”, mainly because of the *stigma* attached to such identities. “Children who grow up to be gay rarely receive family support in dealing with anti-homosexual prejudices... beginning in childhood - and distinguishing them from ethnic minorities - gay people are often subjected to the anti-homosexual attitudes of their own families and communities”.

3. Bisexuality (attraction to both the same and opposite biological sex) involves debates about the actual status of this form of identity – whether, for example, it represents a distinctive sexual identity in its own right. **Kitzinger and Wilkinson** (1995) noted a greater fluidity of sexual identity amongst women who, while labelling themselves as homosexual “maintain occasional sexual encounters with men even after ‘coming out’ as gay”. The point here, perhaps, is not to question the nature of sexuality but rather to attempt to pin-down “bisexual identities” – the “problem” being, as **Bleiberg et al** (2005) suggest, that bisexuality “encompasses elements of both heterosexual and homosexual identities” that make simple categorisation difficult. In their categorisation, “bisexual identity development” follows a relatively complex socialisation process involving several distinctive stages (or layers):

“Layer Cake Model of Bisexual Identity Development”: **Bleiberg et al** (2005)

Layer 1

Socialization into a heterosexual world;
Development of heterosexual identity

Layer 2

Experience homosexual feelings,
thoughts and / or behaviours

Layer 3

Accepting of homosexual attraction
while maintaining heterosexual identity

Layer 4

Integration and assimilation of
heterosexual and homosexual identities

Layer 5

Identify as bisexual

4. **Transgender**, as defined by **Whittle et al** (2007), “is an umbrella term used to include people whose lifestyles appear to conflict with the gender norms of society” and conventionally includes three broad types:

- **Transvestite** – someone who adopts the conventional clothing of the opposite sex.
- **Transgender** – someone who adopts the lifestyle of the opposite sex (to live “cross-gendered”) while not undergoing surgery to change their biological sex.
- **Transsexual** – someone who, through surgery, changes their biological sex (from male to female, for example) to live as a member of their chosen sex.

Sexual Identities: Explanations

Although debates over the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality are nothing new, a recent development has served to frame the overall debate between sexuality and identity and opened up the debate about whether sexuality is a “lifestyle choice” or something determined by our genes (*Transsexualism*, for example, raises interesting questions here about sex, gender and sexual identities since it encompasses the idea that an individual born as one biological sex believes themselves to be of the other sex – is this a “lifestyle choice” or does it relate to some deeper form of genetic programming?).

Genetics

Research by **Hamer et al** (1993) “suggested the possibility” that genetic factors influenced the likelihood of *male* (but not female) offspring being “born homosexual” and while they denied their research demonstrated that “homosexuality was rooted solely in biology”, subsequent *media amplification* focused on the idea of a “gay gene”; **Conrad and Markens** (2001), for example, note how the UK media sensationalised the research as ‘the perils of the gay gene’.

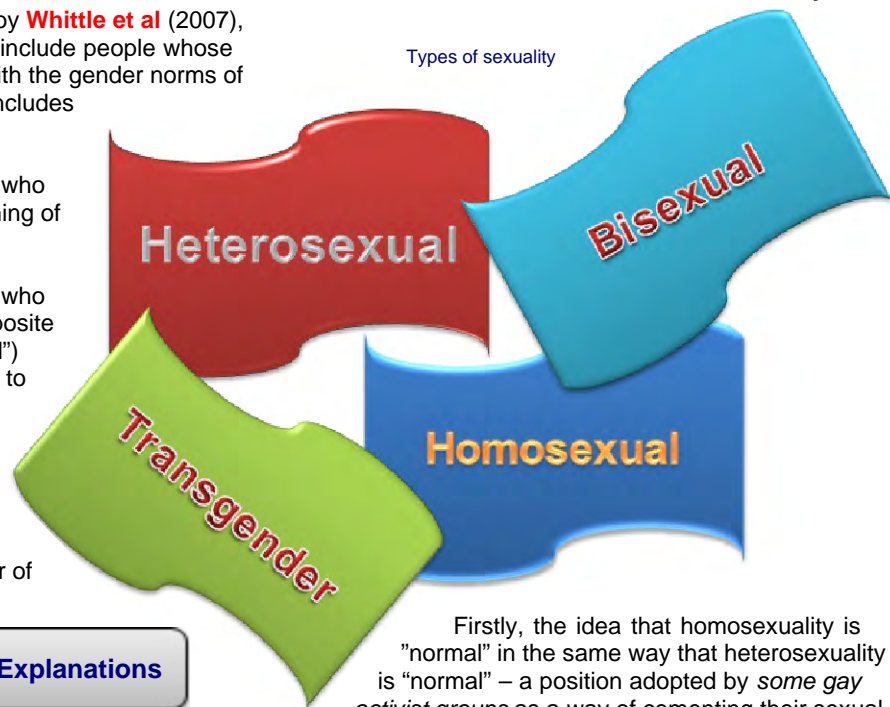
Module Link

Crime and Deviance

The concepts of **deviancy amplification** and **moral panics** can be applied to socially constructed ideas about “normal” and “abnormal” sexualities.

Although **Bailey et al** (2000) argue there is no evidence that “recurrent patterns of homosexuality within families” could be attributed to specific genes, the idea of a “significant” genetic component to homosexuality has a couple of important implications for sexual identities:

Types of sexuality



Firstly, the idea that homosexuality is “normal” in the same way that heterosexuality is “normal” – a position adopted by *some gay activist groups* as a way of cementing their sexual identity.

Secondly, the idea that homosexuality is a “genetic mutation” from the norm of heterosexuality – a position adopted by *some anti-homosexual activists* to cement their argument that homosexuality is a deviant identity that can be “cured”.

Identity

Although such debates are significant, sexual identities in contemporary UK society are largely constructed around the idea that cultural factors (such as socialisation) play a dominant role in the creation and sustenance of distinctive sexual identities, in two areas:

1. Submerged identities, an idea that has two basic meanings. Firstly, heterosexual identities are generally *submerged* in the sense that “conventional sexuality” is the norm in our society; consequently it is less important to people as a source of identity because it has, until recently perhaps, been a relatively unchallenged identity.

To what extent are male and female identities still submerged in our society?



Secondly, homosexual identities have, until very recently perhaps, been submerged in the sense they were largely hidden away from public view.

One aspect of this particular argument is that it illustrates the idea (common to all forms of identity perhaps) that sexual identities only become significant to individuals and groups in situations of opposition, oppression and exploitation.

Katz (1995), for example, argues that "Heterosexuality is a modern invention" (the concept first appeared in America in 1893), whose function was to both define "normal" sexuality and identity and, by extension, "identify and name various deviations from the procreative norm".

Katz's argument is not that heterosexual behaviour didn't exist before the 19th century; rather it's that sexual identities are defined and given currency in terms of both their cultural opposition and the idea that one form of sexuality is socially constructed as superior to another.

2. Emerged identities: Homosexual identities, in an era of greater personal freedom and choice, *emerge* "from the shadows of illegality" as a means of both coping with and fighting sexual oppression. Homosexuality, for example, emerges as a form of *hypersexuality* – significant both in terms of its *practice* (love, affection etc.) and its *political* impact.

Overt demonstrations of sexuality (such as "coming out of the closet") represent a political statement that asserts the individual's right to assume whatever form of sexuality they choose. In some respects, therefore, these ideas reflect the notion of:

Negotiated identities – the idea that sexuality in both *general* (the particular form of sexuality one chooses and the sexual identity one adopts) and *specific* terms (how one chooses to play heterosexual or homosexual



For sociologists sexual identities are not "in the genes"...

roles - in terms of exaggerated masculinities and femininities for example) is not something fixed and unchanging but rather flexible and fluid. As **Kinnish et al** (2005) put it "Sexual orientation is inherently flexible, evolving continuously over the lifespan... out of an individual's sexual and emotional experiences, social interactions, and the influence of the cultural context".

Tried and Tested

- Identify two ways in which national identity impacts on our behaviour (4 marks).
- Suggest **two** ways disability may be a contested concept (4 marks).
- Identify and explain three ways national identities may differ from ethnic identities (6 marks).
- Examine the argument that there is such a thing as "normal sexuality" (24 marks).
- Assess the view that ethnicity is the most significant form of identity in contemporary European society (24 marks).



Are contemporary forms of sexual identity more likely to be negotiated than in the past?

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5. Leisure, consumption and identity.

Consumption and Leisure: Observations

Taking an initial lead from **Boden et al** (2005), consumption involves ideas about "...how we shop, where our purchasing 'needs' come from, how we treat the products we buy and how consuming shapes our lives" – a general characterisation we can relate to concepts of *culture* and *identity* in two main ways:

1. Culture

The distinction between *material* and *non-material* culture can be applied here in the sense that what we consume has both a *material* and *symbolic* element:

Material, in the sense that consumption involves buying "things" – a car, a washing machine and so forth that have some sort of practical use and value.

Non-material (symbolic) in two senses. Firstly, the material things we buy say something about us (both intended and unintended) in that they can be used as *status symbols*; that is, they *symbolise* something about how we both see ourselves and how others see us.

Secondly, however, consumption doesn't simply involve material culture and social status; a non-material aspect here is that when we construct personal identities we select from and "buy into" a range of cultural ideas about identity – such as beliefs about how to be male and young. Consumption, therefore, always takes place in a cultural context that involves the interplay between material and symbolic "products".

2. Identity

Leading from the above, we can think about how *consumption patterns* shape both lifestyles and social / personal identities. We can, for example, note how the creation of particular lifestyles involves ideas about *social solidarity*, friendship and the creation of what **Triandis** (1995) calls *ingroups* (people "like us" and about "whose welfare a person is concerned") and *outgroups* (people "not like us" and who are "in competition with the ingroup or are in some way endangering its existence"). In general, therefore, our concern here is with examining consumption in terms of how both the physical and symbolic things we consume relate to, support and project our sense of identity – something we can begin to examine in terms of:



Shop 'til you drop...

Consumer Culture

One way to express this idea is through the phrase "*I shop, therefore I am*" since this allows us to capture the relationship between consumption, culture and identity in a relatively simple, straightforward, way: Consumption (in the form of shopping) is a culturally-significant form of behaviour that has the added bonus of defining "who we are". The significance of "consumer culture" is, in this respect, two-fold:

Firstly, it suggests a change in the nature of consumption, away from shopping as a "chore" (something that, while necessary, is simply a routine and mundane part of the daily grind) and towards the idea of shopping as something we do for pleasure - a leisure and lifestyle choice.

Secondly, it expresses the idea that, in contemporary Western societies, we literally "shop for identities" in the sense that as "identity consumers" we are faced with an expanding range of choices about "who to be" and how to express our sense of self and

identity.

Phillips (2003) summarises these ideas when she argues: "Consumption is changing...It is now just as important to buy things for what they mean as what they do. Consciously or unconsciously, consumers make decisions about their purchases based upon their identity or the identity they wish to project or communicate to others".



We can develop these ideas further by both identifying what **Sanghera** (2006) calls some *key features* of consumer culture and relating them to concepts of identity:

Culture of consumption: This involves the idea that consumption is the most important organising principle of contemporary societies; everything, from work, through education to family life is related to the desire to consume.

Module Link

Mass Media

The media play a significant role in any **culture of consumption** - both in terms of creating *consumption desires* (through advertising, for example) and maintaining *consumption practices* through things like their portrayal of desirable lifestyles, fashions and the like.

Market society: The values of “the market” (everything is a commodity, has a price and can be bought or sold) become the dominant values in contemporary societies. Identities too, become commodities that can be worn, altered and discarded in favour of something new and different.

Universal and impersonal: Where culture is defined in terms of consumption it follows that there are few, if any, rules to follow. In our ability to consume “We are all formally free and equal, unconstrained in our choices by legally fixed status or cultural prohibitions”. In this respect, the “old cultural prohibitions” relating to identity (how to be a man or a woman, for example) no-longer hold and these identities become whatever we can or want to make of them.



Choice: Consumer culture involves the exercising of choice, not just over what to buy but also over “who to be”. In this respect, identity construction represents a “private choice” over which others have no control or input – “society”, in the shape of social identities, can no-longer tell you “your place” in the great identity scheme of things and expect to be obeyed. The consumer (or individual) is sovereign.

Never-ending needs: A consumer society continually involves change because consumption feeds itself (pun intended); if people are to continue consuming they must continually recreate needs (both physical products and different identities - the things that make individuals feel different, unique and special).

Negotiation: The emphasis on the individual and the satisfaction of their needs “sweeps away any possibility” of identities being imposed on people – a

situation where “Identity must be constructed by individuals because it is no longer given or ascribed”. In this respect the “regulation of identities” by tradition (the way things have always been done) is replaced by “the negotiation of status and identity”.

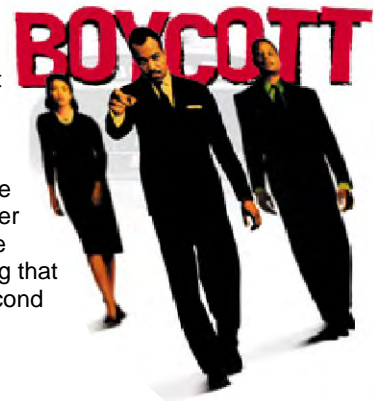
New Identities

The above suggests identities in contemporary society are changing; in previous sections we’ve examined some of these changes in relation to what we might term “traditional identities” (such as class and gender) as well as the changing nature of “newer identities” such as sexuality. In the next part we can outline two examples of “new forms of identity” that have arguably arisen as a consequence of consumer society.

1. Green identities have developed in recent years around the environmental movement and while they involve a range of levels (from full-on “eco-warrior” identities related to globalisation, environmental destruction and the like at the “harder (activist) end” to a more general awareness of and concern about things like organic produce, animal welfare and so forth at the “softer end”) they reflect an increasing concern about the relationship between consumption and the physical and social environments. In this respect we can talk about “ethnic consumption” – an example of what **Brusdal and Lavik** (2005) characterise as the:

Political consumer - someone who “tends to buy environmentally friendly products when possible, who will not buy products for political reasons and will boycott certain labels”. **Wray** (2007), for example notes that “Tesco faced an unprecedented revolt over the meagre wages it pays workers in the developing world to supply its supermarkets with everything from cheap clothing to fruit” and a range of other global companies have been subjected to consumer boycotts for the way they allegedly use child labour in the construction of products like trainers and footballs.

Micheletti (2003) has argued this type of consumer behaviour represents a new and different form of political behaviour because it involves “individualised collective action”; a large number of individuals who, though they have little or no physical connection, have a collective sense of (green) identity that enables them to “act together” to achieve a political aim. This type of behaviour is made possible by the existence of computer technology (and the Internet) – something that leads neatly to a second example, namely:



2. Cyber identities: The development of the Internet, involving things like the World Wide Web, email, blogging and peer-to-peer (file-sharing) communication (such as Napster, in the past, and BitTorrent) has opened-up possibilities for identity formation, development and change on an unprecedented scale. In particular we can note the adoption of *virtual identities* as illustrative of this idea in a range of ways:

Anonymity: The ability to connect and converse “anonymously” with a huge potential network of people across the globe provides interesting opportunities for identity experimentation in terms of the freedom to construct and deconstruct different (frequently multiple) identities. For theorists such as **Haraway** (1991), identity experimentation can be made manifest in such “extreme forms” as:

The Cyborg – a fusion between, in this instance, computer technology and human beings. A cyborg, as she puts it, is: “...a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”. In other words, in cyber space people don’t simply interact “as human beings” but rather as cybernetic beings whose identity is, at best, blurred; we can, in short, present ourselves in this virtual world in any way that takes our fancy and for any number of reasons – an idea that makes “real world” identities based around age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability or whatever largely redundant concepts. As **Carlson** (2001) argues, the Internet is a *hyperreal* world – it has no physical existence, as such, but is “more real” than the physical world we inhabit.

Less radically, perhaps, anonymity allows individuals to *play* with different identities in different situations, such as through online message boards or chatrooms. In this situation people maintain a certain separation between their “real world



The Terminator - Half man, Half machine (although in Arnie's case it's not altogether clear which half is which...).

identities” and those they develop in the virtual world – an idea related to:

Immersion: An example here might be the development of role-playing games (the most popular of which is currently (2007) “World of Warcraft” with around 4 – 5 million users) where the individual enters, in this instance, a fantasy virtual world, adopts a certain



World of Warcraft - the most popular role-playing game in the (known) universe?

class and type of player identity and interacts in that world on the basis of this identity. Recent developments here might include something like “Second Life” which currently claims around 7 million users and advertises itself as an “Online digital world imagined, created and owned by its residents”. Something like Second Life parallels the real world in that it represents a *cyber space* where people can

live, work, marry and so forth using whatever identity they wish to develop.

Networking: A recent cyber space development is the rise of “social networking” (through sites such as MySpace and Facebook) that provide the tools people can use to create an online presence and, by so doing, network with like-minded individuals. In terms of identity, social networking is a space where the real and virtual worlds intersect; people use them to present their real world, conventional, identities to as wide an audience as possible (largely consisting of people they will never meet outside of cyber space). Although this gives opportunities for *identity play*, the basic idea is to use social networking as a way of presenting your “real self” to others – although it could be argued that, as with interaction in the real world, people may attempt to *impression manage* (**Goffman**, 1959) by presenting an *ideal self* for public consumption.

Transformations

Although the virtual world is an obvious place for different forms of identity *transformation* (at least while you’re online), **Phillips** (2003) notes a number of ways personal identities are transformed through consumption in the real world. These include:

Surgical transformations where the body is altered for cosmetic (buying a new nose, for example) or medical reasons (such as to repair damaged limbs). Changing the appearance of one’s body can have symbolic significance for identity in that changes to our body-image impact on our self-concept – making us more comfortable in the identities we’ve already developed or allowing us to create a new identity, such as changing gender through surgery.

Landmark events such as childbirth or divorce encourage identity changes through changes in consumption practices. This might include, for example, discarding the clothing we associated with a past identity (when we were married, for example) and buying a new wardrobe to reflect our changing sense of identity.

Transition periods such as moving from childhood to youth where consumption patterns and preferences change to reflect our new-found sense of identity.

Leisure

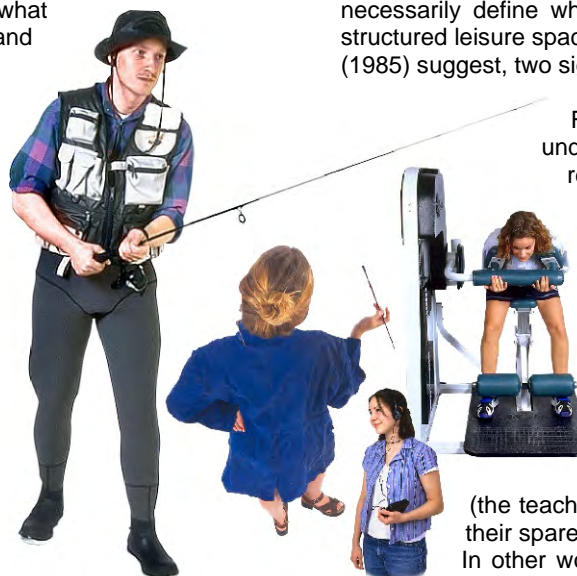
Definitions of leisure are many and varied, reflecting perhaps the difficulty of pinning-down exactly what the concept involves. However, for our purposes we can, following **Cushman and Laidler** (1990), define leisure in terms of two ideas:

- **Freedom to act**, in the sense of being able to spend “leisure time” as we choose.
- **Freedom from** “conditions imposed by necessity” – leisure involves the things we do because we *want* to do them, not because we *have* to do them.

These ideas reflect the argument that leisure is the individual’s “own time”, where they have the freedom, through the consumption of leisure activities (and products), to create their own sense of personal identity. In this respect, if leisure has numerous possible dimensions – from a stroll in the park, through watching TV or playing games and sports to hobbies and pastimes – one unifying feature it possesses is related to the idea of:

Leisure values that reflect our perception of the distinction between work, on the one hand, and leisure on the other. Such values, therefore, represent fundamental beliefs about what leisure is, what it involves and how it should be spent – general values that give rise to a range of more-specific values about leisure.

For **Downes’** (1966), the sense of estrangement (Durkheim, 1893) from work experienced by working class youths led them to develop *leisure values* that involved fun, excitement, danger and pleasure, while **Godbey et al** (1993) suggest middle class leisure values involve concepts like “freedom, creativity, learning, socialisation and self development” – ideas that suggest we can illustrate the relationship



“Leisure” in our society involves a diversity of different behaviours - from sports like fishing and football, through activities like painting and exercise, to listening to music or, indeed, doing nothing at all...



Both tattoos and body-piercing represent (non-surgical) ways of transforming the body - something that can result in identity changes or identity confirmations.

between leisure, consumption and identity through the concept of:

Leisure spaces: Whatever the specific nature of leisure values, they reflect the general idea that personal identities can be created and worked-through in arenas (*spaces*) of the individual’s own choosing. However, while leisure choice is clearly an important consideration - some people spend their leisure time *passively* (watching television for example) while others go for a more *active* involvement (such as playing sport or working out at the gym) - the thing that unites these different types is that leisure in our society is generally a *structured activity*; it takes place in sites and spaces that are designed, in some way, for leisure – whether this be the home (with its surround sound cinema), the pub, club, cinema, sports arena, beach or Mediterranean cruise.

The way we use structured leisure spaces and the things we consume (in the widest possible sense) while we occupy them contributes to both our “sense of self” and, by extension, our sense of personal identity – and while for the majority of us leisure in itself doesn’t necessarily define who we are the concept of structured leisure spaces has, as **Clarke and Critcher** (1985) suggest, two significant consequences.

Firstly, leisure needs to be understood in terms of the relationship between historical and cultural patterns of work and leisure.

Parker (1976), for example, argues work and leisure identities are intertwined in three main ways:

1. **Extension** patterns reflect the idea that leisure activities are closely related to work (the teacher, for example, who spends their spare time reading and researching). In other words leisure activities are an extension of an individual’s working life.

2. **Opposition** patterns, on the other hand, reflect the idea that leisure activities are unrelated to work; individual leisure choices, in this respect, bear no relationship to the work people do.

3. **Neutrality** patterns reflect the idea that leisure activities are largely unrelated to paid work and are more-likely to be focused around the family group.

Parker's observations are related to - and to some degree mirrored by - the concept of **job satisfaction** (in basic terms, how people feel about the type of work they do and how these feelings relate to their choices of leisure activity). For example:

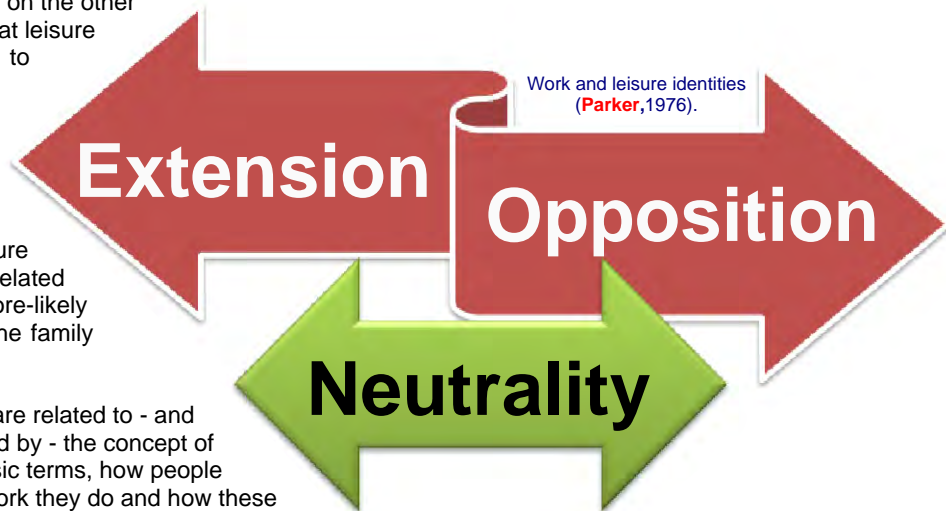
Intrinsic job satisfaction involves the idea that the individual gains a high level of personal satisfaction and fulfillment from their work and these feelings are carried-over into their leisure pursuits. Work, in this respect, becomes "an end in itself" and leisure activities are chosen as an *extension* of work. In the example noted above, a teacher with a high level of intrinsic job satisfaction would be inclined to choose leisure activities (such as reading, visiting museums and so forth) that extend their understanding of their work.

Extrinsic job satisfaction is the opposite of the above; it reflects the idea that the individual gains little or no personal satisfaction from work and hence work is viewed as a "means to an end" - as a way of earning money that can be used to fund leisure activities that are, in consequence, likely to be chosen "in opposition" to work; they provide the things (fun, excitement, personal fulfillment, social status and so forth) that the individual fails to find through their work.



One way to release those pent-up workplace frustrations...
(don't try this at home, kids)

Secondly, in contemporary societies leisure has become *commodified* - something to be bought and sold in the same way people buy and sell other types of consumer product.



Tried and Tested

- Identify **two** ways in which leisure differs from work (4 marks).
- Suggest and explain **two** ways material culture differs from non-material culture, other than those cited in the text (4 marks).
- Suggest two ways consumption based identities are "negotiated" (4 marks).
- Examine the relationship between work and non-work identities (24 marks).
- Assess the argument that identities in contemporary society are changing (24 marks).

Consumption and Leisure: Explanations

Structured leisure spaces relate, as we've suggested, to both the *private* and the *public spheres* and they are united, **Clarke and Critcher** argue, by *commodification* - an idea that has interesting consequences for the way leisure, consumption and identity are related through lifestyles in contemporary societies. In previous sections we've touched on the concept of *consumption* when we've looked at the relationship between *social identities* (the beliefs and behaviours a culture generally associates with a particular type of identity) and personal identities (the various ways people interpret and shape social identities to their own particular ends). Both, in their different ways, involve consumption, in the sense of "buying into" particular types and forms of lifestyle and identity and the distinction we've made allows us to think about consumption in two basic ways:

Off-The-Peg

Firstly, it can be considered in terms of taking-on (*consuming*) identities, such as male or female, that already exist; here, the role of "the consumer" (or individual) involves being socialised into the behaviours a culture associates with a particular identity (such as

learning age appropriate behaviour, gender norms or “your place” in the class structure). In other words, the concept of consumption is viewed as a secondary or subsidiary one to that of *production* (societies and cultures produce certain types of identity which are then consumed, relatively passively, by individuals).

Made-To-Measure

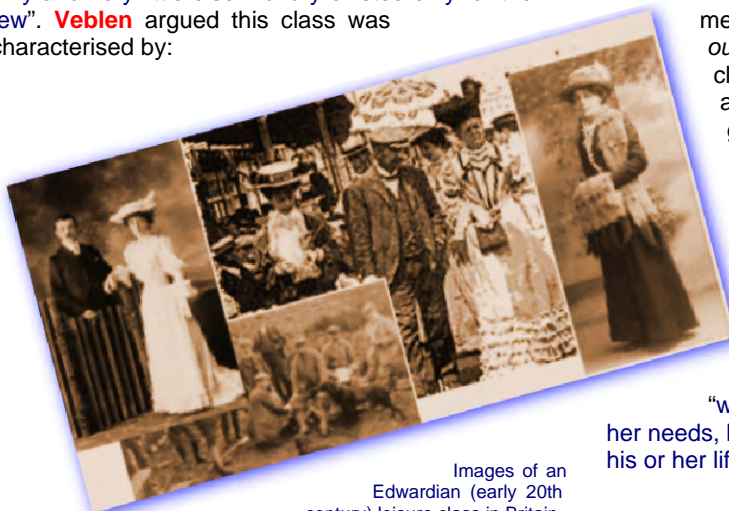
An alternative interpretation of consumption is one that involves thinking about the meaning of identities to individual consumers – how they take general forms of identity (such as gender) and shape their content in a particular way; to create, for example, different forms of masculinity and femininity, different forms of sexuality and so forth. The consumer role here is an *active* one; rather than simply consume “ready-made” identities the individual interprets and creates new and different forms of identity.

These two positions reflect a major theoretical split between two broad groups of sociologists, the first of which places the role of *social structures* at the centre of the relationship between leisure, consumption and identity and the second of which attempts to understand this relationship in terms of *social action*. While both view ideas like the commodification of leisure and the increasing significance of lifestyle practices and consumption patterns as important, they interpret these ideas in very different ways.

Structure and Lifestyle

This general perspective broadly argues that leisure choices and lifestyle patterns are determined, in the main, by *economic factors* (the type of work people perform, both paid and unpaid, their levels of income and wealth, the amount of leisure time they have available and so forth). At the start of the 20th century, for example, **Veblen** (1899) identified a:

Leisure Class – a group who, on the basis of their wealth and economic ownership, were “exempt from industrial labour”. As **Jensen et al** (2000) suggest “Describing the consumer of a hundred years ago is the same as describing the upper class at that time. Consumption among ordinary people was for survival only and very little else. Luxury existed only for the few”. **Veblen** argued this class was characterised by:



Images of an Edwardian (early 20th century) leisure class in Britain

Conspicuous consumption – what **Jensen et al** describe as “consumption that served the principal purpose of impressing on others who and what they were”. Identity was, therefore, expressed through the display (or non-display if you were poor) of wealth that emphasised “one’s position in life”. Consumption (conspicuous or otherwise) links into identity in that it represents a “background presentation” of the self; the consumption of products (both goods and services) comes with a “*substance of stories and experiences attached to them*” – what we buy, how we dress, where we spend our leisure time and so forth all tell others something about who and what we are. Thus, the lifestyle of a leisure class expressed both their position in the world and their sense of *collective* (how they differed from “the masses”) and *personal identity* (how they were individually different from members of their class).

Members of the modern leisure class captured in their natural habitat (a celebrity party, where else?).

Although it’s arguably still possible, in the 21st



century, to identify a “leisure class” (one whose modern equivalent might encompass the lifestyle and behaviour of “celebrities” such as **Paris Hilton**, as well as its more-conventional members) a significant change has occurred *outside* this class with the development of classes with varying levels of time and money available to spend on leisure. From this general position, however, this development simply “expands the consumption pool” in two senses:

Firstly, there is greater demand for consumer products, on the basis there are more people in a position to consume such products and, secondly, “the consumer” is still seen, as **Brusdal and Lavik** (2005) suggest, as someone “who is not only occupied with covering his or her needs, but with creating meaning and purpose in his or her life using consumer goods as a means”.

As **Wearing and Wearing** (2000) put it: "Conspicuous consumption... increasingly influences people's choices of leisure commodities, not for their use value but for their signification in terms of identity and status". In other words, even where consumption is extended down the class structure it is still used as a form of "background presentation" to people's sense of identity.

Thus, when **Aldridge** (2003) poses the question: "What is consumption about? Is it primarily concerned with the instrumental purchase of goods and services for practical purposes – the car as a means of transport? Or is it a symbolic realm in which people exchange messages about class, status and identity – the car as status or sex symbol?" the answer, from a structural position is that it is both; people are, firstly, compelled for good economic and political reasons to consume (in Capitalist societies profits need to be made, standards of living maintained and so forth) and secondly they are propelled into seeing consumption as a statement of identity – an idea that brings into focus the crucial role of the *mass media* in both creating and focusing people's perceptions of the relationship between consumption, leisure and identity.

Barker (2002), for example, personifies this general position when he argues: "As consumers, we seem to be creatures of free choice, able to express ourselves as we want - if only through what we buy... By choosing, we can make a partial statement about our individual "identity". We're encouraged to do this by the billions of pounds spent on advertising".

We can summarise this general position by noting that people are socialised into a set of pre-existing identity categories (such as gender, age and class) constructed around the prevailing system of economic, political and cultural values. Although the precise content and meaning of these identities may shift and change over time, the basic principle holds true in that patterns of consumption and leisure are used, in various ways, to bolster people's general perception of both their own and other's identities. In this respect, as **Rampton** (2002) suggests, the significance of social and personal identities is related to "their function in the social system"; something like age identities, for example, are constructed in ways that reflect the requirements of the social system as, for example, we've seen when we looked at ideas like *rites of passage*.

Postmodern sociologists argue that identity in contemporary societies is like a "Pick'n'Mix" arcade - people construct their own sense of identity by combining a wide range of identity options to create something personal and unique...

Action and Lifestyle

An alternative way of understanding identity construction is to "reverse the sociological gaze" – away from the influence of social structures and onto the influences of social actions. **Rampton**, for example, suggests this general position is based around the idea individuals "play a central role in shaping the habitats in which they live". In situations where societies are relatively closed to new economic, political and cultural influences, ideas and relationships, identity construction follows the kind the traditional paths we've previously outlined; however, in situations where economic, political and cultural changes constantly occur, two things happen:

Firstly, it becomes more difficult for individuals to sustain a sense of identity in the face of changes to the *anchors* on which such identities rest. For example, gender identities in our society in the past were relatively fixed (*anchored*) and stable because there was nothing to change the way they were constructed – there were few, if any, alternative ways to construct gender. People were either unaware of possible gender alternatives or were unable to enact such alternatives because of strong social pressures to conform to prevailing gender norms.

Gender relationships (and inequalities) were, in this respect, "taken for granted" (accepted as normal, natural and right). When different economic, political and cultural ideas about gender are introduced into a society things start to change as people pick-up, develop and incorporate such influences into their personal sense of gender identity (and this, in turn,

Although we're free to choose the products we consume, advertising is designed to ensure we buy "the right products" - is the same true for personal identities?



translates into changes in social identities relating to gender). Secondly, this leads to the idea of:

Decentred identities: The old “centres of identity” (traditional rules governing things like how to perform gender “correctly”, for example) can no-longer be sustained once the *anchors* of such identities are loosened (or untied completely) and identity *markers* (such as the way we dress or are expected to behave) become fluid and changeable. This leads to a range of “*identity contradictions*” where conventional beliefs about identity are twisted and turned until they are (arguably) unrecognisable. In recent times, for example, women have appropriated clothing and behaviour formerly associated with male identities; the elderly have adopted styles and fashions formerly associated with the young; “the masses” wear clothing that was once the exclusive preserve of the upper classes (such as copies of designer wear or, in some instances, affordable versions of designer collections themselves). **Peterson and Kern** (1996) use the term:

Omnivorousness (which they define as “an openness to appreciating everything”) to describe this condition in contemporary societies.

The implication here, therefore, is that in a *decentred* society people are increasingly open to and accepting of different forms of experience, something that encompasses both “the new”, in the literal sense of something not previously seen or done before and “the newly different” in the sense of changing how we relate to existing experiences – a good example here might be the experience of *shopping*.

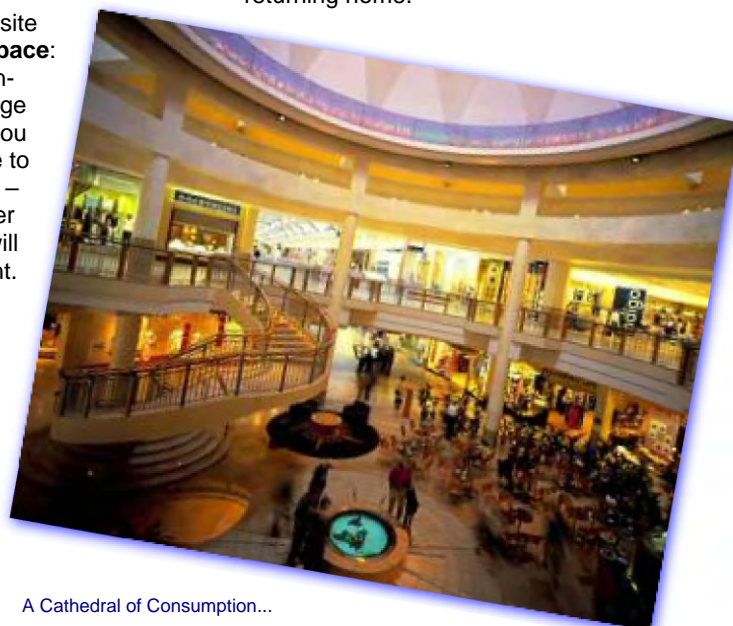
With the above in mind, **Rampton** (2002) suggests that identity construction in contemporary (*postmodern*) societies is “something that involves assembling, or piecing together a sense of identity from a plethora of changing options”. Identity, therefore, is something people personally create using a range of culturally available “tools”.

We can illustrate this idea by thinking about the difference between a conventional, non-interactive, web site (like **Sociology Central**: www.sociology.org.uk) and an interactive site (such as a social networking site like **MySpace**: www.myspace.com). When you visit a non-interactive site you’re presented with a range of content that has been pre-selected for you by whoever produces the site. You choose to use such content in whatever way you like – but you cannot change or adapt it. However many different people view the site, they will always be presented with the same content. On a social networking site, however, the producer makes available to you a range of tools (the ability to post your photographs, play music of your choice, invite people to become “your friends” and interact with them through notice boards and the like). In this respect the consumer becomes the *producer of content* – and since this content is unique to them, no two versions of the site are ever the same.

In terms of identities, therefore, the argument here is that in contemporary societies people are able to both select from a wide range of “identity tools” and use these tools to fashion whatever identities they choose. Each individual creates identities through

their consumption choices and practices – and we can bring the experience of shopping into the equation when we think about the difference between say, a corner shop in a small village and a vast shopping Mall situated on the edge of a town.

When we visit the corner shop we’re presented with a narrow range of goods from which to choose (as was the case with identities in the past); when we visit *The Mall* (what **Ritzer** (2001) calls “*Cathedrals of consumption*”) we are presented with an *experience* that personifies the relationship between consumption, leisure and identity in contemporary societies. We’re presented with (the appearance of) unlimited choice and freedom to browse huge spaces filled with consumer goods. “Shopping”, in this respect, is transformed from a *chore* into something akin to a *leisure experience* – we make plans to visit the Mall (perhaps as part of a family outing), stroll around taking in the sights and sounds, combine eating and drinking with shopping and perhaps even take in a film before returning home.



A Cathedral of Consumption...

The idea of “shopping for identities” (using the Mall as an analogy) reflects the idea that consumption, leisure and identity meet in a number of areas – something we can illustrate using the following examples:

Lifestyles

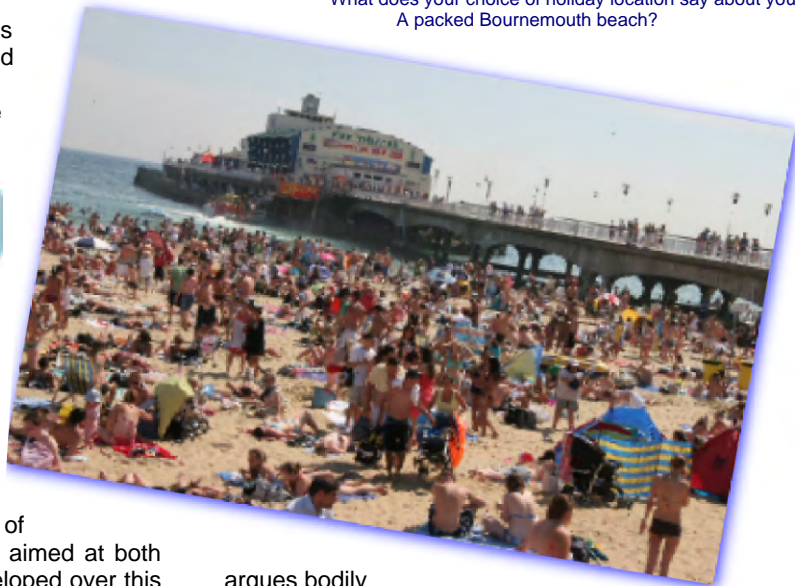
Jackson et al (1997) note the development of a “new generation of men's lifestyle magazines” (titles such as *Loaded*, *FHM*, *GQ* and *Arena*) that have emerged since the mid-1980s and while their research focused specifically on the development of different forms of masculinity we can note that a range of lifestyle and self-help publications – aimed at both males and females – have also developed over this period. The appearance of such publications suggests that in postmodern society the media becomes an important source of identity construction and stability in the context of potential “crises of identity” – the idea that we look, for example, to “experts” for help and advice about how to construct identities. The popularity of television “makeover” shows is also indicative of interest and concern about identities related to areas like *bodies* and *places*:

Bodies: Personal presentation and display has always been an important part of identity marking (in terms of things like clothing, perfume, make-up and toiletries) but recent developments focus on a variety of “pleasures located in the body” – not just in terms of physique (fitness regimes as a form of both leisure and identity for example) but also in terms of adornments such as tattoos and piercing. These, in the past, have been negatively associated with the lower classes but **Curry** (1993) argues tattooing now cuts across categories like age, gender and class as people come to see their skin as “a surface on to which I can... project that which is much more deeply me” – an idea **Sweetman** (1999) reflects when he



Or somewhere just a little more exotic and isolated?

What does your choice of holiday location say about you - A packed Bournemouth beach?



argues bodily adornment is increasingly a form of self-expression and identity construction.

Places are an interesting category to consider, in terms of both permanent places in which to live (*home*) and temporary living spaces (*holidays*). In the case of the former, patterns of both consumption and leisure are related to how we choose to decorate living spaces (including “personal areas” within these homes) and this both reflects and projects a sense of “who we are”. In the UK, for example, DIY is a multi-billion pound industry with around 10 million people each year carrying-out various types of “Do-It-Yourself” project around the home. In the case of the latter:

Tourism is an area where consumption and leisure meet identity. Where overseas travel (and the concept of “a holiday”) were once the exclusive preserve of the wealthy, the advent of cheap air travel, growing affluence and wider knowledge of the world has opened-up a wide vista of tourist access around the globe. Tourism is, by definition, a consumption process considered both in *abstract* terms (the consumption of leisure) and *concrete* terms (the things we buy). It is also bound-up in questions of identity. Holidays say something about us, to both ourselves and others, in terms of the places we choose to go (Bournemouth beach, the Arctic Circle, Outer Space?) and the things we do once we're there (from lying on the sand for a week, through pony trekking across the Himalayas to climbing Mount Everest and all things beyond).

In addition, by playing the role of the tourist we reinforce or change the identity of the places we visit. The development of the “seaside holiday” dramatically changed the nature of UK coastal resorts while in Spain cheap package holidays to places like Majorca led

to their reinvention as a “British spaces” – a place where the tourist could speak English, consume familiar food and drink and mix with people of their own nationality (and class). More recently, as **Diken and Laustsen** (2004) note, places like Ibiza have been “transformed from a “paradise island” of alternative holiday in the 1960’s, first into a bastion of package tourism and then into a clubbers’ Mecca of unchallenged hedonism”, while Faliraki “has become just another “Gomorra of the Med”, where wild life comes out to play in a hedonistic cocktail of sun, sea, music, cheap alcohol and drugs, sex, and expectation of excess”.

Sheller and Urry (2004) analyse the relationship between tourism, consumption and identity in terms of:

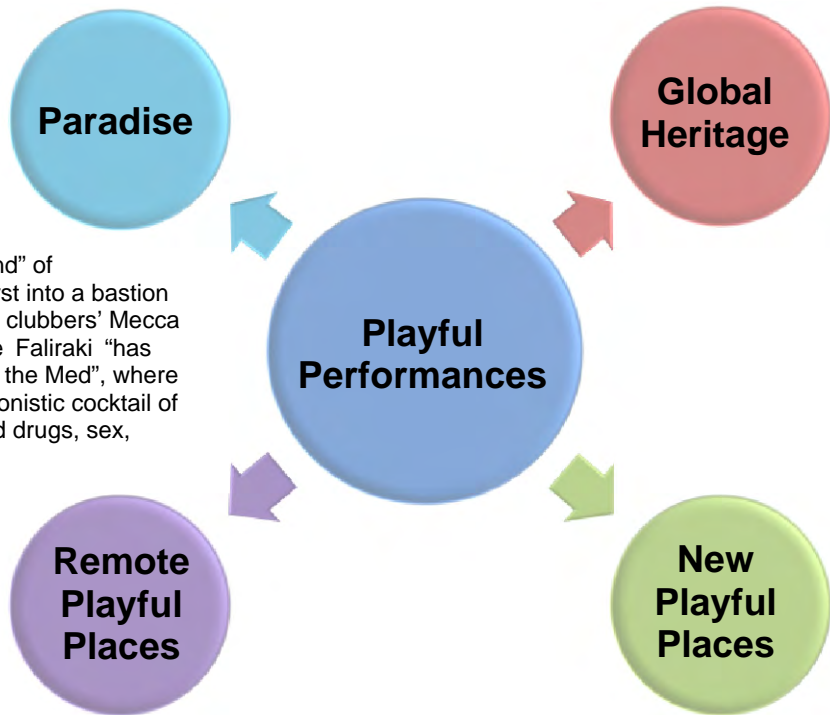
Playful performances – the idea that the tourist, in a variety of different ways (“walking, shopping, sunbathing, photographing, eating and clubbing”), “performs identity” through their leisure experiences in a variety of guises and places – a selection of which include performing:

- **Paradise** - exotic beaches and islands as “particular sites of play”.

- **Global Heritage** – the experience of “museums, World Heritage Sites, and ‘historic’ places”.

- **Remade Playful Places** – whereby global cities (such as London, Hong Kong and Barcelona) have “refashioned their built environments...to perform as ‘attractions’ on a highly competitive global stage of ‘world-class’ destinations”.

- **New Playful Places** which involve the exploration of “unexpected sites” (such as the slums and tenements of inner city urban landscapes across the world) – “places of danger and enthrallment, monotony, and awesomeness...the new places of play for a kind of ‘postmodern middle class’ both fascinated and repelled by their indescribable, indistinct, yet atmospheric post-apocalyptic urbanism”.



People and places combine, **Urry et al** (2004) suggest, through the way people see and use places to construct “leisure performances and identities” that are different from other types of performance and identity (such as family, work or education) because they focus on “play” (having a “good time” free from the normal constraints of life). “Tourist identities” both reflect conventional identities (our choice of leisure destination and type reflect our cultural tastes) and also shape them, in that our experience of tourism reflects back onto our sense of identity.



Slumming it in Kenya - a New Playful Place for rich Westerners?

To conclude, we can explore these ideas in a little more detail by focusing on a distinction **Urry** (2001) makes between two types of “tourist gaze”:

The collective gaze involves deriving leisure pleasure through its shared consumption; in other words, leisure identities are constructed around being and interacting with others as part of the tourist role. Examples here might range from the package holiday in Benidorm to the Theme Parks of Florida.

The romantic gaze, on the other hand, is more individualistic and focused on "solitary" personal pleasures. Examples here range from things like Adventure holidays (which may involve elements of both controlled and uncontrolled risk and danger) to more sedate (and risk free) pastimes like visiting museums and "places of historical interest".

An interesting aspect of the *romantic gaze* in contemporary societies is the idea that it reflects the development of postmodern identities because it involves the search for pleasure through:

Authentic experiences – the idea that what one experiences is somehow "real" and unique (and distinct from the *inauthentic experience* of the *collective gaze* that involves pre-packaged forms of leisure and consumption). The search for *authenticity* is a significant aspect of the *decentring* of identities in that it represents a search for "real experiences" around which identities can be constructed.

Interestingly perhaps, there is a class element to both romanticism and authenticity (one related to both the past – when, as we've suggested, travel was by-and-large restricted to a small minority of the leisure class – and the present as the middle classes (both young and old), in particular, seek-out new ways of distinguishing their sense of personal identity from other social classes, mainly through their ability to pay for the privilege of "authentic experiences").

In this respect the consumption of *authentic leisure experiences* is not simply an expression of new identities; rather, it represents an integral part of how these identities are constructed (authentic leisure consumption helps the individual, in effect, to construct and maintain their sense of self).



The Collective gaze?

Or something just a little more Romantic?



Tried and Tested

- Identify **one** aspect of conspicuous consumption in our society (2 marks).
- Suggest **two** ways private leisure spaces differ from public leisure spaces (4 marks).
- Identify and explain **two** reasons for believing consumption patterns are not simply the result of "individual choices" (6 marks).
- Examine the relationship between consumption practices and lifestyles (24 marks).
- Assess the view that contemporary identities are based around consumption and lifestyle (24 marks).

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