"A" Level Sociology

Teaching Notes
for Students

Culture and Identity
4. Cultural Diversity

Introduction

1. As we have seen, all societies develop *rules of behaviour* (a *culture*) that are used to *structure* the behaviour of their members (in basic terms, how people are expected to relate to each other). This, in turn, leads to the idea that all societies are *socially organised*. In this respect, it is impossible for a society to exist if it is not organised around a *framework of rules*.

2. This idea is as true of animal / insect societies as it is of human societies.

- Some animal and insect societies are very complex social structures (an ant hill, for example, involves a hugely complex organisation of many thousands of insects into an efficiently functioning social unit).

- Human societies also involve complex social structures. A society such as our own, for example, involves the organisation of some 60 million people.

3. Underlying both these forms of social organisation are rules that provide a structure for organisation and behaviour, although sociologists argue that the basic organising structures / frameworks are radically different in animal and human societies:

- In *animal societies*, behaviour is structured around the *framework* of *instinct*.

- In *human societies*, behaviour is structured around the *framework* of *culture*.

4. Social organisation, therefore, exists to help a society's members (whether human or non-human) to solve problems, the most basic of these being the *problem of existence* (how, in short, to socially organise a population to ensure their physical survival).

5. We have noted that the basic *problems of existence* that face all human societies if they are to survive and develop are:

a. The *economic problem* of how to produce the things needed for human survival.

b. The *political problem* of how to ensure that society is orderly and stable. The problem here, therefore, is one of government and control over people's behaviour. In short, the need is the need to enforce rules of acceptable behaviour.

c. The *family problem* of how to ensure that children are born and looked after in a way that allows them to grow into functioning adult members of society.

d. The *cultural problem* of how to make people feel they have things in common with others. How, in short, to make people feel they belong to a common culture / society.

6. From the above, we can initially note, therefore, that human cultures develop out of the various ways that people choose to solve these basic problems of existence. This idea of choice is significant because it reflects the idea that humans have *self consciousness* (an awareness of themselves and others as unique individuals).

* Most animals do not have *self consciousness*. Only the higher primates such as baboons and chimpanzees - the closest relations we have in the non-human world - seem to have a similar form of consciousness.

7. In addition, the concept of choice allows us to explain the fact that:

> a. The same species of insect, for example, always develops the same form of social organisation precisely because they have no choice. Bees of the same species develop the same basic hive organisation in Britain as they do in Germany.

> b. Human cultures vary widely in their organisation and content because humans are able to exercise choice in their range of behaviour.

8. Having noted the idea of a *problem of existence* that provides the basic human *need* for social organisation, we can now turn to look at the various similarities and differences in human cultures under the general heading of *cultural diversity*. In basic terms, our interest here is in trying to understand the *rules, routines* and *responsibilities* that structure peoples' lives within the same society and between different societies.

9. In this respect, therefore, there are two main aspects of *cultural diversity* that we need to analyse:

> a. Basic cultural similarities and differences that exist *between* different societies. This is called an *inter-cultural* form of analysis.

> b. Basic cultural similarities and differences that exist *within* the same society (including a special focus on the concept of *sub-cultures*). This is called an *intra-cultural* form of analysis*.

10. In addition, to help us do this we can structure our analysis around a number of basic ideas:

a. *Structural and Cultural Universals* - an examination of the organisational features that seem to exist in all societies.

b. The concepts of *ethnocentrism* and *cultural relativity*.

c. *Sub-Cultural Forms* - an outline of the different sub-cultural groups that exist within any society (using Britain as an example).

A. Structural and Cultural Universals.

1. A *structural universal* refers to issues that must be addressed if a society is to survive and evolve. We have referred to these earlier as the basic *problems of human existence*. In effect, we are talking here about the kinds of social tasks that people must accomplish for their survival as a society.

- Structural universals are not particularly difficult to find, given that all human societies have, at one time or another, to solve certain problems if their are to survive. In general therefore, we can note the following *examples* of *structural universals* (features common to all human societies).

a. Communication: People have to develop ways of communicating their ideas to each other. This usually takes the form of language, although it may also involve the use of writing. Writing is not a universal feature of societies, however. Many societies, especially in the past, had no way of communicating their beliefs through writing and these are called *pre-literate societies.*

b. A Family system: This relates to the structural problems of regulating relationships between members of a society, the socialisation of children and the like.

c. Religion: All known societies have, at some point, developed religions. A reason for this may be that the belief in a god or gods is a very effective means of bringing people together (*social integration*). Not only do religions give people a sense of having things in common (values, for example), but the fact that they involve the belief in a supra-human force or forces (something superior to, and more powerful than, the individual) means that they represent very effective sources of social control.

d. Social control systems: These vary from informal controls (values, norms, etc.) through to the highly-developed control systems we find in modern societies (police, courts, prisons, armies and so forth).

e. A division of labour / role allocation system: Even in very small societies there exists a variety of tasks to be performed if people are to survive. Societies have, therefore, to devise ways of sharing-out these tasks amongst their members (hence the idea of "allocating different roles", such as work and family roles).

f. Social stratification: This refers to the way different *roles* are *ranked* against each other in terms of *social importance*. During this course we will be looking at a variety of ways people are stratified in different societies on the basis of such things as:

- *Social class* - stratification based on work role.
- *Gender* and *age* - biological systems of stratification.
- *Ethnicity* - stratification based around the cultural background of different groups.

2. A *cultural universal* refers to possible similarities in the particular way a society (or social group) chooses to solve *structural problems of existence*. For example:

- A family system is a **structural universal** - it appears in all known human societies. However, in this example a **cultural universal** refers to the idea that a particular family type appears in all societies (for example, a family structure consisting of one or more children plus two adults of the opposite sex - the technical term for which is a **nuclear family structure**).

    - In this particular instance, it is debatable as to whether or not this type of cultural organisation does, strictly speaking, appear in all known societies. There is a wide range of *cultural variation* in family types not just between societies but also within the same society.

3. The problem we have, when looking at the idea of cultural universals is that of deciding how specific something has to be in order to count as a universal feature of human social organisation. In effect, how widely or narrowly we draw the *definition* of *universal* affects the *conclusion* we reach about cultural patterns.

- As in the example above, it is probable that the nuclear type of family arrangement is a fairly common feature in most if not all societies at some point in their development. In modern Britain, for example, we can find clear examples of just this type of family structure. However, we can also find a wide range of cultural variations (single parent families, step families, homosexual families and so forth).

- **The point to consider here is that do we define *universal* as simply meaning :**

    - *"being present at some point in every society's development"?*

- **Or do we define it as**

    - *"the only or dominant cultural form in a society"?*

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4. In some ways, this question appears rather academic since it refers to a very fine distinction. However, there are major two reasons for seeing it as important:

a. Firstly, in terms of sociological theory it is important because if we are to understand and explain the nature and process of human social development it is necessary to ensure that all theories of cultural development refer to the same thing.

- This is where definitions are significant. In basic terms, how you define something will affect the way you study it and this will affect the conclusions that you draw from your studies. This area of debate is called sociological *methodology* (arguments about how it is possible to study and measure human behaviour) and it is something to which we will return at various points in the course.

b. Of more immediate practical significance is the idea that if it is possible to identify universal cultural features, this can lead to the idea that one form of cultural organisation is *natural*, and by implication *right* and *better*, than another form of organisation. Thus, non-universal features can come to be seen as unnatural or *deviant* (and societies should, by implication, take steps to eradicate these practices).

- An obvious - and oversimplified - example might be sexual practice. If *heterosexual* behaviour (sexual relationships between two people of a different biological sex) can be defined as a cultural universal (and therefore natural) then it is a small political step from this to see any other form of sexual relationship (such as *homosexuality*) as unnatural and deviant.

5. This introduces the concept of *ideology*, which can initially be defined as:

> *"A systematic set of beliefs which serve the interests of some social group in society. Ideologies are associated with power and the ability to present ideas as right and natural for everyone in society. Perhaps the best way of describing ideology is as ideas that are out forward for a purpose - to fulfil the aims of a social group in society and which may or may not be true."*
> Lawson and Garrod ("The Complete A-Z Sociology Handbook", 1996.

- In this respect we have to be careful about how we try to understand the idea of cultural universals because of the way knowledge can be used to promote the political and ideological aims of various social groups. This is not to say that, as sociologists, we should suppress what we believe to be true for political convenience. Rather, we have to be careful about the information we present as true. This idea will be developed when we look at the ideas of *ethnocentric* and *culturally relative* approaches to the study of cultural development.

- Having noted this, the next question to address, therefore, is whether or not it is possible to identify customs and practices that are truly universal cultural features of human society.

6. One of the largest surveys of cultural life was undertaken by the Functionalist sociologist George Peter Murdock ("The Common Denominator of Culture", 1945).

- Murdock claimed to have identified approximately 70 cultural features that could be considered universal in all human societies. These included:

Age grading	Body adornment	Joking
Division of labour	Courtship	Magic / luck superstitions
Property rights	Music and dance	Hospitality
Family / kinship groups	Cooking	Greetings
Status differences	Personal names	
Incest taboos	Language	
Cleanliness training	Gestures	

7. Murdock's cultural universals are a mixture of what we have termed *structural* (family, division of labour, etc.) and *cultural* (gestures, joking, etc.) universals. Although these may or may not be regular practices that occur in all known societies (depending, as I've noted, on how we define and interpret the term "universal"), few societies address them in the same way. The "incest taboo" is a good case in point here.

- All societies attempt to prevent some forms of sexual relationship which are loosely defined as incestuous (mainly, but not necessarily a sexual relationship between close kin - mother and so, father and daughter, brother and sister, for example). We can speculate about the reasons for this universal taboo. For example, incest would lead to:

  - Tangled family relationships
  - Potential conflict over sexual relationships.
  - The contraction of the gene pool, leading to greater risk of inherited deformities and illnesses.
  - A greater probability of still-born or deformed children.

- However, while all societies develop an incest taboo, there is not a great deal of cultural evidence to show that this taboo is the same in all cultures. For example, Keesing's observations ("Cultural Anthropology", 1976) on the Lakker of Burma illustrate this point in comparison with a society such as our own.

"The Lakker do not see children as having any blood relationship to the mother. The mother is only a container in which the child grows. Children of the same mother and different fathers are not considered to be related to each other and sexual relationships between them are not considered incest".

Conclusion

1. The initial conclusion we can reach is that *cultural variation* is far more common than cultural similarity. Even where people are faced with the same types of problems or issues, there is a general tendency to see these solved in different ways by people of different cultures.

2. Perhaps the most startling cultural variations are found when we compare modern societies (such as Britain) with pre-modern societies (for example, the Lakker of Burma or Britain 1000 years ago).

3. Modern industrial societies (Britain, America, Germany and so forth) do tend to show less cultural variation and more similarity because of *cultural integration* - the fact that cultural influences are more easily passed from one modern society to another.

B. Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativity.

1. The level of cultural diversity that seems to exist amongst human societies means that it is important to avoid the trap of *ethnocentricity* when trying to understand the nature and scope of human cultures.

2. *Ethnocentrism* can be broadly defined as an attitude whereby you judge other societies by the standards that apply in your society. For example, classifying people who live in technologically-undeveloped societies as "primitive".

- Additionally, ethnocentrism can also refer to the way the lifestyles, experiences, values and norms of one group in a society are assumed to be common to everyone in society. For example, the assumption that everyone lives in a loving, two-parent family, is an example of ethnocentrism on a group level, as is the idea that because some women in our society are economically successful this applies to the experience of all women in society.

3. Ethnocentric attitudes of both kinds are not uncommon but, sociologically, we need to move away from thinking that there are universal cultural standards that somehow point to fundamental truths about "human nature".

- Sociology is not about making moral judgements, disguised as objective truth, about the worth or otherwise of people's lifestyles. Rather, it is about the attempt to understand and analyse the reasons for the development of cultural diversity. In this respect, it is more useful to adopt the idea of cultural relativity in this context.

4. *Cultural relativity* is an attempt to understand the cultural development of societies and social groups own their own terms; that is, without trying to impose absolute ideas of moral value and trying to measure different cultural variations in terms of some form of *absolute cultural standard*.

- In this sense, under specific circumstances, any form of human behaviour can appear to be good or bad. A good example here is our attitude to the killing of another human being. In peace time this may be considered to be murder or manslaughter (deviant), whereas in war time this may be considered a duty.

  - As this example suggests, what is significant is not the act itself (taking the life of another person) but the *social context* of the act (in this instance, the *moral background* against which the act is viewed).

5. However, the concept of cultural relativity does present problems, since if we apply it politically, not just sociologically, we have to accept any form of behaviour as acceptable as long as it conforms to the cultural expectations of the society in which it takes place. Thus, a common criticism of cultural relativity is that the behaviour of Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany in the 1930's should effectively be condoned since, in terms of that society at that time, the murder of Jews was a cultural norm.

6. To complete this section we can give a flavour of the type of problems that can occur in the study of cultures that are radically different to our own. The following is an edited anthropological account of a culture known as The Hsilgne. As you read this account, try to think about the possible problems involved in producing studies of cultures that are very different to your cultural experiences.

The Hsilnge.

"The Hsilnge were an interesting people who inhabited a small island in the Northern hemisphere. Traditionally, they clothed themselves in the skins of dead animals - mainly cows and sheep which were also reared for their meat. As the society evolved, however, shortages of these animal skins lead to the development of a variety of alternative, cheaper, forms of clothing which seemed to have the unfortunate side-effect of retaining and even magnifying natural body odours.

These odours appeared to be so great that an interesting cultural development was an almost obsessive preoccupation with coating the body in a wide variety of pastes and sprays kept for the purpose in specially constructed cabinets within the home. These cabinets also contained a wide variety of pills and potions that the Hsilgne used to ward-off all manner of ills and evil spirits.

From an early age - normally 11 or 12 - the female Hsilnge were given to face painting, with the colour red seeming to have a special significance, especially for the lips. Hsilgne females applied a thick red paste to their lips each morning using specially prepared colouring sticks. Red powder was also applied to the cheeks, although this seems to have been much finer than the mouth colourings. Special powders were also used to shade the area around the eyes, although somewhat confusingly these colours were traditionally blues and browns, rather than red. Hsilgne women were also much given to body piercing. Higher status females, for example, adorned their faces, in particular, with gold and diamond studs and rings.

Male Hsilgne do not seem to have been involved in this daily ritual of body painting, although evidence has been found of a male practice that seems to have been performed each morning. This involved the ritual scraping away of the previous day's facial hair with a sharpened blade specially created for this purpose.

In addition, many of the lower class males (and some females) seem to have adorned their body with permanent pictures engraved using needles and inks. This seemingly repugnant process involved a skilled practitioner puncturing the skin with the needle and allowing ink to flow under the skin. Many intricate designs could be created by the most skilled of these skin artists.

Although we do not know the precise purpose or reason for these rituals, anthropologists have speculated that they had something to do with the religious beliefs of the Hsilgne, since body painting was closely associated with elaborate tribal gatherings carried-out almost exclusively at night.

Dance seems to have played a central part in these religious rituals. Groups of males and females would gather at special places, usually outside the home, and indulge in rhythmic dancing to drums and stringed instruments. The spiritual element was evident here through the extensive use of powerful drugs designed, presumably, to allow the Hsilgne to transcend their everyday world and bring them closer to their gods.

These drugs were mainly taken orally, in the form of tablets and drinks, although some were also rolled-up into sticks which were then lit and the smoke was inhaled. Evidence of the communal nature of these gatherings has been found in the ritualistic passing of these mouth sticks between individuals, although strangely certain taboos seem to have surrounded the use of liquid drugs.

Young males, for example, would encourage each other to drink to excess by the practice of taking it in turns to buy liquid drugs for every member of their immediate tribal group. However, although these drinks were purchased communally, it seems to have been important that they were consumed individually. For example, it was not considered socially acceptable to drink from someone else's glass, especially someone who was not well-known to you.

The height of unacceptability, however, was for one male to cause another to spill his liquid drug. If this happened, a ritual chant (evidence suggests it was something like "You've just spilt my pint, you clumsy bastard") was used to signify that if immediate redress was not made, the victim would be justified in violently assaulting the wrongdoer. Acceptable forms of redress were ritual apologies ("Sorry mate but I was pushed") and the offer to buy the victim another liquid drug to compensate them. A failure to participate acceptably in the ritual exchange (for example, saying something like "You male offspring of a female dog, you've ruined my shirt" or, possibly worse, "Go away and have sex, you person who practices sex with themselves") seem to have represented a ritual challenge which would then result in a short, but violent, interlude known as a "fight, fight".

7. In the final section of this area of the course we are going to narrow the focus of attention somewhat, to look at the third idea noted at the beginning of the section, namely cultural variations that develop between social groups in the same society (sub-cultural variations).

- Since one of the developing themes of this both this section and the course as a whole is that of various ways social groups can be classified on the basis of common, defining, cultural characteristics, this final section will be divided into analysing the nature of sub-cultural groups based around the concepts of:

    - *Social class* (class sub-cultures).
    - *Age* (in particular, youth sub-cultures).
    - *Cultural background* (ethnic sub-cultures).

C. Sub-Cultures.

1. As we have seen, people develop cultures to provide a ***structured framework of rules*** for their behaviour. In turn, people's behaviour is influenced by their cultural background (***socialisation***) and setting (their personal experiences in society).

2. People do not just form cultures, however. They also form much smaller groups within society which we term sub-cultures. An initial definition of a sub-culture is provided by Farley ("Sociology", 1990) when he notes that,

> *"A subculture is defined as a set of cultural characteristics shared among a group within a society that are distinct in some ways from the larger culture within which the group exists, but also have features in common with the larger culture. Usually, a group that forms a subculture has some sense of identity, some recognition that people in the group share something among themselves that others in the larger society do not. A subculture can develop any time a group of people share some situation or experience that is different from that of others in their society.".*

3. As this definition suggests, a sub-cultural group can develop around any number of social activities (family, work, education, religion, geographic region and so forth). This makes the study of sub-cultures potentially difficult since we would have to produce theories of sub-culture that accounted for the behaviour of groups such as stamp collectors, football supporters, athletes, Government ministers and so forth.

- To make our task more manageable, therefore, we are going to restrict our observations to a number of major forms of sub-cultural groupings in our society. This will allow us to focus on some of the main theoretical accounts of the existence and development of various types of sub-cultural groups.

4. When we use the term sub-culture sociologically, we are referring to a group of people whose behaviour has features that set it apart from the wider (or ***dominant***) culture of the society in which it develops. Such groups are considered to be sub-cultures, rather than cultures in their own right, because they retain links to and features of, the wider culture.

- For example, one of the most frequent uses of the term sub-culture is used in relation to young people (***youth sub-cultures***). For example, in Britain we recognise the youth category ***teenager*** as a distinctive sub-cultural group. Although teenagers may develop interests and behaviour that are unique to this group (ways of dressing, the kind of music they enjoy, particular forms of language) and which set them apart as a sub-cultural grouping (or rather, as a number of different sub-cultural groupings - skinheads, punks, hippies, ravers and so forth), they nevertheless remain within the general cultural framework of society. Teenagers live in families, they go to schools, they work, hold religious beliefs and so forth.

5. Finally, we need to recognise that the relationship between the *dominant culture* and *sub-cultural groups* is not *static* (that is, unchanging). Social behaviour is always *dynamic*; people's behaviour constantly changes to take account of new situations and relationships (you only need to think about the differences between your behaviour now and at sometime in the past to realise the importance of this idea).

- Additionally, cultures and sub-cultures, although different, are not self-contained units in society; on the contrary, there is a continuous flow of influences from culture to sub-culture and vice versa (for example, think about forms of language and music developed by sub-cultural groups and how these forms are frequently adopted by mainstream cultures).

6. In the following, to help us understand the nature and differences between sub-cultural types we are going to *classify* sub-cultural groups in terms of two main *types*. These types should be considered as theoretical ideals, in the sense that sub-cultures do not necessarily belong to one type (they may be a mixture of types). As with most *typologies* (that is, classification systems) their main use is as a means of helping us (as students) get to grips with social phenomena that are frequently difficult to comprehend. You should bear this idea in mind at all times.

In addition, as we outline each sub-cultural type it will be useful to provide examples of groups that conform to these types. To help us, therefore, we can relate each type to some of the other major cultural influences on people's behaviour, such as:

> *Social class.*
> *Gender.*
> *Age.*
> *Religion* and
> *Ethnic background.*

Sub-Cultural Types

1. The first sub-cultural type we can note is that of a *reactive* or *oppositional* sub-culture.

- A *reactive sub-culture* is one in which the members of a particular sub-cultural group develop norms and values that are both a response to and opposition against the prevailing norms and values that exist in a wider, dominant, culture. In this respect, this form of sub-culture is sometimes called oppositional rather than reactive.

2. The central idea in the above is that a sub-cultural group forms as a *reaction* to what someone else (either the culture as a whole or some other sub-cultural group) is trying to do to them. By *reacting* to this pressure, the emergent sub-cultural group effectively tries to *oppose* the pressures being placed on them.

3. The second sub-cultural type we can note is that of an *independent* sub-culture:

- In this form of sub-cultural grouping the members of the group adopt a set of norms and values that are effectively self-contained and specific to the group. Where these values, in particular, differ from those of the wider culture in which the sub-culture exists, they may not necessarily (or consciously) be in opposition to such values. Such sub-cultural values represent is an *independent* product of - and solution to - the problems faced by people in their everyday lives.

4. The basic idea here is that a sub-cultural group develops around the interests and experiences of the people who come together to form such a group. In this respect, such groups are *independent* of other groups in the sense that they do not arise as a reaction to what some other group is doing.

- This does not mean that *independent sub-cultures* have no contact with other cultural or sub-cultural groups (although in some instances this may be the case when a sub-cultural group decides to cut itself off from contact with wider society - some *religious sub-cultures*, for example, chose to do this). For our purposes, however, the idea of *independence* relates to the reasons for the *formation* of such sub-cultural groups.

5. Having outlined these two basic types of sub-culture, the following section looks briefly at some examples of different types of sub-cultural groups and tries to suggest reasons for their development. As you may imagine, the vast number of cultural and sub-cultural groups in our society makes it difficult to do anything more than scratch the surface of sub-cultures; therefore, the discussion here will simply focus on some general examples. At various points in the course we will look in more detail at sub-cultural groups and their development when it is appropriate to do so (for example, the area of deviance involves looking at sub-cultural theories, youth sub-cultures and so forth).

Sub-Cultures and Social Class: Overview.

1. For the moment, we can think about *social class* as a category that relates to the type of *work* that people do. There are many ways of trying to measure class but a simple definition will suffice for the moment. In basic terms, therefore, we can identify three major social classes in Britain:

a. An upper class - people who own businesses and employ others to work for them.

b. A middle class - people employed in professional occupations and have responsibility for the day-to-day running of businesses.

c. The working class - people who neither own nor have any substantial control over the running of a business. The working class largely consists of people employed in non-professional work.

2. In strict terms, the above are known as *economic classes* because they are defined in terms of work (the economy). A *social class* takes into account all kinds of other factors that affect an individual and their relative position in society, but for the moment it is sufficient just to note this distinction.

- A class, therefore, consists of people who have similar economic interests and experiences. For example, a member of the upper class will have different economic interests and social experiences than a member of the working class. This leads to the idea that we can identify distinct *class cultures* along the lines already suggested. A class culture, therefore, represents a very large number of people who, because of their roughly similar class position in society develop a roughly similar form of culture.

- As an aside, you might like to note that the culture developed by an upper class is normally the *dominant culture* in any society, precisely because this class is the wealthiest, most politically powerful and influential class in society.

Examples of class sub-cultures:

1. We can identify a number of different class sub-cultures (groups who develop within each social class) in the following ways:

a. Reactive:

- Amongst the upper classes we can identify sub-cultural groups such as employer associations and organisations (the Confederation of British Industries and the Institute of Directors, for example).

- Middle class sub-cultural groups include those such as Professional Associations (organisations that are developed to regulate the activities of professional groups such as lawyers, doctors, accountants and so forth).

- The most obvious working class sub-cultural groups related to the above are Trade Unions.

- Each of the above is an example of a *reactive sub-culture* because the existence of one sub-cultural group is related to the existence of other sub-cultural groups. In this particular example, each of the sub-cultural groups noted is reacting against the activities of the other groups.

- In terms of the fact that each sub-cultural organisation has different aims and interests we can also note the theoretical *opposition* of each of these groups (although, in practice, co-operation between them is a feature of behaviour in this particular area).

b. Independent

Examples of sub-cultural groupings associated with social class that arise largely independent of other sub-cultures in our society are:

- Women's Institutes: These are largely dominated by middle class women (although not exclusively so). They exist to provide various sub-cultural interests and activities.

- Sporting sub-cultures: Historically, different sporting activities have produced associated sub-cultural groupings that have reflected class interests and preoccupation's. Football, for example, has thrown-up numerous examples of working class sub-cultures, whilst Rugby has developed two distinctive class-related sub-cultural groupings: Rugby Union (the amateur code until 1996) has traditionally involved upper and middle class males, while Rugby League (the only professional code until 1996) has traditionally involved working class males.

Examples of age-related sub-cultures.

1. The sub-cultural groups in this section generally refer to youth sub-cultures, mainly because these are the most obvious and numerous forms of age-related sub-cultural groups. Many sociological theories have been put-forward to explain this and in the following we will discuss some of these in addition to providing examples of of different types of youth sub-cultures.

- However, it is significant to note that in modern industrial societies where average life expectancy has increased and the majority of the population are forced to legally stop working at around sixty (the precise age limit varies across different societies), a relatively new phenomenon of elderly sub-cultural groups (for want of a better phrase) has emerged in recent years (especially in the USA).

a. Reactive sub-cultures.

1. In his study of American youth sib-cultures in the 1950's ("Delinquent Boys"), **Albert Cohen** argued that one reason for the development of reactive forms of youth sub-cultures was *status* or, more correctly, *status deprivation*.

- Cohen argued that *status* was a valued *social commodity* that everyone in society was *socialised* to want. However, for some people, status was effectively denied because they lacked the means to achieve it through socially-approved means (through such things as educational achievement, high-status work and so forth).

2. The main group identified by Cohen who suffered the most from *status deprivation* was young, working-class, males. To satisfy the socially-created desire for status, he argued, this group were most likely to develop alternative, sub-cultural, means.

- For example, in schools where this group are largely considered to be failures (deprived of the status that comes with success), status deprivation was resolved by the formation of *primary groups* (the most common form being gangs). Such sub-cultural groups represented an alternative setting for the achievement of status.

- In basic terms, therefore, these sub-cultural groups arose among young males as a reaction against their being denied status within the education system.

3. For Cohen, therefore, these types of sub-cultural groups satisfied two main needs:

> a. The personal needs of their members because they represent an alternative social setting for status achievement.

> b. The social or collective needs because they provide a means for both coping with and getting back at society (as represented by those in authority).

4. In Britain, various studies have applied similar ideas to youth sub-cultures. **David Hargreaves** ("Social Relations in a Secondary School", 1967) argued that the failure of the education system to provide *integrating mechanisms* (that is, ways of making them feel wanted and personally valued by school, society and so forth) for working class children resulted in the development of deviant sub-cultural responses.

- The boys in the study were labelled as failures on the basis of poor academic performance in school, yet like everyone else they desired status. Where it was denied officially, they developed *unofficial status groups* and, because they lacked any real power within the school, the only way to define and express status within the *deviant sub-culture* was through explicit opposition to school norms and values - disrespect to those in authority, disrupting the orderly flow of school life and lessons, explicit cheating (since they were not going to "succeed" there was little point in not cheating) and truancy.

5. In a more modern study **Paul Willis** ("Learning to Labour: How working class kids get working class jobs", 1979) argued that the creation of deviant sub-cultures amongst working class boys was not simply a *response* to such things as *status denial.*

- These sub-cultures also represented an organised, realistic, attempt to come to terms with a wider cultural world that had already, by the time they had entered secondary school, earmarked the boys in Willis' study as failures. Sub-cultural organisation was an attempt to develop a shared set of behavioural guidelines (norms) that stressed the importance of "having a laff", "mucking about" and so forth as way of making something that was largely intolerable a bit more tolerable.

6. A number of questions are raised by such studies, mainly relating to the idea that youth sub-cultures are a male, working class, phenomenon.

a. Why do young girls not develop sub-cultural groups?

- Cohen's explanation is that the *primary role* for women in adult life in our society is that of mother / child-rearer. Girls, therefore, will find status within the family. Career women, on the other hand, will find status through their work, thereby avoiding the need to create alternative forms of status.

- Feminist writers, on the other hand, have argued that girls do form sub-cultural groups, but these groups are different in form to those of males (reflecting the different experiences of women in our society).

  - For example*, McRobbie* and *Garber* ("Girls and Subculture" in "Resistance Through Rituals" by Hall and Jefferson (eds.), 1976) argue that female sub-cultures are not as socially-visible as male sub-cultures because of the different cultural attitudes and behaviour expected from girls. Female sub-cultures are more-likely to conform to the "culture of the bedroom - experiments with make-up, listening to records, sizing up boyfriends...".

b. It is not really clear, from Cohen's work, why some working class boys (but not others) see deviant sub-cultures as an alternative form of status.

c. There is a strong possibility that middle-class children also develop youth sub-cultures (and indulge in deviant activities) without seemingly attracting the kinds of delinquent or deviant labels that are attached to working class children (which makes these groups less socially-visible).

- One reason for this may be that, because of their outward show of basic conformity, deviance by middle-class children is more-likely to be *individualised* and *rationalised* as a "passing phase" or "falling-in with a bad lot" etc. That is, something that can be corrected if caught early enough. Working class delinquency, on the other hand, is much more likely to be seen as something to be punished.

7. A second form of reactive sub-cultural theory is represented by the work of *Cloward* and *Ohlin* ("Delinquency and Opportunity", 1961). Their basic idea is that in any society there are two main forms of *opportunity structure* (that is, a framework of rules to follow in order to achieve what society considers to be success).

> a. *Legitimate opportunity structures*. These are the various means a society develops to encourage people to achieve success (education, work, etc.).

> b. *Illegitimate opportunity structures.* These are the various illegal means to achieve success (crime, for example).

8. Thus, once again people are socialised to value "success" and

- Those who have the means to achieve success do so legitimately (they follow legitimate opportunity structures).

- Those who are denied legitimate means still desire success, so they pursue illegitimate means (illegitimate opportunity structures).

b. Independent Sub-Cultures.

1. An alternative form of explanation for the development of youth sub-cultures is provided by this interpretation. This involves the argument that we should see youth sub-cultures as developing independently of other groups. That is, out of the experiences and cultural needs of the people who form such groups.

- In this sense, the development of youth sub-cultural values and norms represent is an *independent* product of - and solution to - the specific problems faced by people in their everyday lives.

2. Writers such as **Parsons** ("Essays in Sociological Theory", 1964) and **Eisenstadt** ("From Generation to Generation", 1956), for example, argue that it is significant that youth sub-cultures are a modern phenomenon. They represent an attempt by young people to manage the transition from childhood to adulthood in modern societies.

- Thus, childhood involves one set of norms and adulthood involves a different set of norms. Modern societies lack the kinds of *rites of passage* and rituals common in pre-modern (traditional) societies for marking the passage from childhood to adulthood. Therefore, teenagers have to develop their own ways of managing this transition - hence the development of sub-cultural groups.

- In this respect, youth sub-cultures are functional for society (because they manage the transition period between child and adulthood) and the individuals involved because they provide group settings in which young people can gradually learn the norms of adulthood.

3. This idea explains why such sub-cultures are mainly developed by young people. They are a passing phase not because people get fed-up with them but because these groups are no-longer functional. As a teenager moves into adulthood (learns the norms associated with this new social status), they have completed the social transition from child to adult and simply do not need this type of sub-cultural organisation any longer.

- This also explains why youth sub-cultures appear and disappear with great rapidity. In simple terms, people grow out of them once such groups are no-longer relevant to the individuals involved.

4. Another example is provided by **Walter Miller** ("Lower Class Cultures", 1962). He the wanted to explain fact that youth sub-cultures seem to be mainly male groups and he argues that we should see delinquent sub-cultures as an independent cultural phenomenon that develop as an extension of lower - or working class - culture (as an American, Miller tends to use the term "lower class" rather than "working class"). In this respect, Miller is basically saying two things:

> a. Firstly, that it is possible to identify at least two distinct cultural groups; middle class and lower class. Each has its own specific and distinctive set of basic values, beliefs, norms of behaviour and so forth.

> b. Secondly, that lower class culture has certain values which do not exist within middle class culture. These he identifies as a number of focal concerns and it is from these that Miller argues the distinctive behaviour of lower class boys can be explained. Examples of these values that originate in the particular social experience of young working class males are things like:

- *Trouble*: Lower class life tends to involve individual acts of violence. The lower class boy, therefore, quickly learns to identify "trouble" and how to handle it. This, in turn, leads to a stress on the value of:

- *Toughness*: The ability to handle "trouble" (perhaps to see violence as a means of resolving problems) requires toughness - the ability to take care of both yourself and your mates. Miller argues that the everyday experience of trouble and the need to exhibit toughness in your dealings with people is a basic characteristic of the lower class male experience.

5. The idea of focal concerns is illustrated by the work of **Howard Parker** ("A View From The Boys", 1974), whose study highlights six basic concerns of young, working-class, males.

"In Parker's study of a Liverpool gang, the 'Boys' (as they call themselves) go for a night out. They aren't looking for a fight (*trouble)*, but should anyone hint that they aren't *tough*, or can't take their drink 'like men', then a fight ensues. On these nights out, the Boys' ability to pick up girls often depends on their wit and repartee (*smartness*) and they are always on the look-out for fun (*excitement*). They work hard to maintain some freedom in their daily lives (*autonomy*), beyond the control of teachers or foremen. Finally they are fatalistic about their lives in general and especially the economic and political influences on them, over which they believe they can have no control (*fate*)".

Note: *When we look in more detail at the concepts of deviance and youth sub-cultures we will pick up on and develop in more depth many of the above ideas. This has not been done here because we are not particularly concerned with explanations of why many forms of youth sub-culture involve crime and deviance.*

Youth Sub-Cultures: An Alternative View

1. Although we've looked at a number of different perspectives on youth sub-cultures, **Stan. Cohen** argues that youth sub-cultures should not be considered as sub-cultures at all. This view is worth noting because it provides an alternative sociological view to generally accepted ideas about sub-cultures.

> • It also provides an example of the way theories can be criticised not only by conducting studies that "prove them to be wrong" but also by questioning the basic *assumptions* on which the theory is built. In this case, none of the previous writers questioned the idea that youth sub-cultures are not really sub-cultures. If Cohen is right then it means that these writers have been trying to explain something that does not need explanation.

2. In Folk Devils and Moral Panics",1964, **Cohen** argues that what is significant about youth cultures is the idea that they are created by the *mass media*. Youth sub-cultures are not coherent social groupings that arise as a reaction to social forces. Rather, the mass media *manufacture* them by focusing attention upon possibly-unconnected forms of behaviour and giving them the appearance of coherence and structure.

• The media, in effect, provide a framework of "explanations that make sense" for something that may just be a relatively simple collection of individuals. In this respect, media *labelling* results in the creation of youth sub-cultures by giving a meaning to the behaviour of people. The media, therefore, provide a "meaning structure" ("mods, skinheads, punks", etc.) for behaviour that, prior to the *labelling process*, may well have not had any coherent meaning to the people involved.

3. By applying a meaningful label to behaviour, the media create something (a youth sub-culture) out of nothing. That is, they provide both society and the people involved with a framework in which to locate their behaviour (and live up to manufactured media myths concerning that behaviour). A classic recent example of this is acid house - groups of people who had nothing in common except a desire to party are manufactured by the media into some form of social collective (a youth sub-culture) with common interests, aims and beliefs.

4. The role of the mass media is that of a socialising agency. They react to some form of youth behaviour and write about that behaviour as if the behaviour was part of a wider, sub-cultural, phenomenon. By publicising the behaviour:

• The people involved start to see themselves as part of a wider social movement. They see themselves as having something in common and a "youth sub- culture" begins to take shape. The attention of wider society is focused not on a "few, relatively isolated, youths", but on a full-blown youth movement - a potentially troubling scenario, since it implies that the participants share certain values, beliefs, attitudes and so forth. Such groups are far more likely to be considered a threat about which "something must be done".

5. In this scenario, the media takes a role as mediator between wider society and the youths involved. Not only does the media "explain" behaviour for its audience, it also provides feedback about how members of the youth culture are expected to behave (and is, of course, suitably outraged when they exhibit such behaviour).

6. Writers such as **Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke** and **Roberts** ("Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order", 1978) have developed this basic idea and added an explanation of why the media should be involved in the manufacturing of youth sub-cultures.

- **Hall et al** argue that when crises occur in our society (widespread unemployment, for example), explanations are needed to account for why things are "going wrong". Since such explanations cannot involve questioning the nature of society itself (its economic and political structure), "folk devils" are required to distract people's attention away from what they see as the real causes of the crisis (in this instance, because they are Marxists, the inequality created by the economic system).

- In this way, "youth" can be targeted as a scapegoat for social problems. Opne example of this Hall et al discuss is the *moral panic* surrounding "black muggers. Relatively powerless individuals in society are used by the media to "take the blame" for social problems.

Examples of Ethnic Sub-cultures.

Note: *With ethnic groups the situation is slightly different because we are initially talking about people who have arrived in a new country. For this reason we will look at the idea of independent sub-cultural development first because this has a bearing on the development of reactive sub-cultures*.

a. Independent sub-cultures.

1. The issue of immigration is significant here because of the idea that immigrants bring with them a set of cultural traditions, values and norms from their home society. In this sense, therefore, any immigrant group will generally automatically form a sub-cultural group in the host society.

- Examples of these types of independent sub-cultural groups are many and varied. Jews, for example, form a distinctive sub-cultural grouping in Britain, whereas Italian and Irish immigrants initially formed (and many still retain) a distinct sub-cultural identity in America.

- An example of a cultural tradition might be the Hindu practice of arranged marriage. This is a norm in India, for example, but clearly not a cultural norm in a society such as our own.

b. Reactive sub-cultures.

1. These forms of sub-culture are also fairly commonplace amongst ethnic minority groups, mainly because of the presence of things like *racial discrimination*. Thus, the idea here is that groups who feel themselves to be unjustly persecuted develop sub-cultural responses to the situation.

- Discrimination alone, however, does not necessarily account for the development of black sub-cultural groups such as *Rastafarians* (a religion-based sub-culture), since women generally tend to suffer *sexual discrimination* in our society without seeming to form oppositional sub-cultural groups. A significant factor here is the sense of a *cultural identity* as an oppressed and exploited group, in addition to such things as overt discrimination.

- Other examples of ethnic sub-cultural groups developing around religious ideas are the experiences of black slaves in America in the 19th century, where a religious cult of *voodoo* developed as a means of opposing the appalling conditions under which such people found themselves.

Summary.

1. Sub-cultures take many different specific forms relating to such factors as *class, age, ethnic background* and so forth. This *diversity* makes sub-cultural forms difficult to classify.

2. Theoretically, it is useful to distinguish between *reactive* and *independent* sub-cultures, but in practice this is not always easy or useful to do.

- People belong to many different cultural and sub-cultural groups and the two forms are frequently interconnected (as we have seen with some youth and ethnic sub-cultures).

3. Discussion of cultures and sub-cultures leads us to the next set of ideas that we need to examine.

- This involves looking in more detail at the way the formation of cultural and sub-cultural groups reflects the development of individual and group *social identities*. This will necessarily involve an examination of the relationship between *culture, socialisation* and the development of *self-awareness* and *identity*.