

PART 1 CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Different societies have different ways of living, different ways of behaving and different views of the way the world works – they have different cultures. A **society** consists of a group of people who share the same culture, who live in the same area and who feel part of that group.

This part looks at **culture** – the learned, shared behaviour of members of society. It asks: What is culture? How do we learn culture? How do we share it? How does culture shape our behaviour? How does culture influence our identity? These are fundamental questions. Without culture, human society would not exist.

Culture

Most of the time we take our culture for granted. We are not aware of how much of our behaviour is learned and how much of it is shared with other members of our society. The following picture illustrates these points.

Activity



It takes meetings such as this to reveal how much of our behaviour is shaped by culture and how much is taken for granted.

1. Why do the two men feel uncomfortable about their conversation?
2. How might this affect their relationship?

The picture shows a man from the USA with his back to the wall. He has retreated backwards down a hall 40 feet long. He is talking to a man from Brazil who has pursued him all the way down the hall. For the American man, the Brazilian comes too close to him for a normal conversation. And for the Brazilian man, the American is too far away. Each of them is trying to establish the normal conversation distance defined by their culture (Hall, 1973).

Culture, norms and values

Culture is the learned, shared behaviour of members of society which is passed on from generation to generation. It consists of ways of behaving which are seen as normal. It is the way of life of a particular society.

Norms are an important part of culture. A **norm** defines appropriate and acceptable behaviour for particular people in particular situations. For example, there are norms of dress which state the type of clothing appropriate for each gender (male and female), age group and social situation – for the workplace, party, wedding or funeral.

As part of culture, norms are learned and shared and vary from society to society. This can be seen clearly by comparing the traditional norms of eating amongst the Bedouin of North Africa with those in the West. The Bedouin, which translates as 'desert people', eat with the fingers of their right hand from a shared tray of food while sitting on the ground. People eat from the section of the tray directly in front of them. It is bad manners to lick your fingers then continue eating. Men and women eat separately. Men are served first.

Norms provide order in society. Imagine a situation in which 'anything goes'. The result is likely to be confusion and disorder. Norms help to make social life predictable and comprehensible. If there were no norms stating how people should express pleasure or irritation, warmth or hostility, it would be difficult to understand how others felt, to predict their behaviour and respond in appropriate ways.

Values are much less specific than norms. They are general guides for behaviour. A **value** is a belief that something is important and worthwhile. A value states what is right and wrong. Values are translated into behaviour by a range of norms. Take the value placed on human life in our society. It is reflected in a thousand and one aspects of normative behaviour

Activity



Bedouin men in Egypt

1. How might this example differ from Western norms of eating?
2. How might a man from Western society feel if he joined them for a meal?

from highway regulations, to ways of settling an argument, to rules for the preservation of food. In each case the norms are designed to protect human life.

Some sociologists see shared values as essential for the wellbeing of society. They argue that shared values produce **social solidarity** – the cohesion and unity necessary for society to run smoothly. Without shared values people would be pulling in different directions. The result might be disruption and conflict.

Like norms, values vary from society to society. This can be seen from a comparison of some of the traditional values of the Cheyenne, a Native American tribe who lived on the Great Plains of the USA, with the values of today's Western society.

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

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

Status and role

Every society has a number of positions or **statuses** which people occupy. For instance, in Western society a person would usually have an occupational status, for example as a doctor or a bricklayer, and a family status, for example as a sister and/or a mother. Each status is accompanied by a **role** – a set of norms which outline appropriate and expected behaviour for a particular status.

Statuses and roles allow us to order our behaviour and predict the behaviour of others. For example, the statuses and roles of doctor and patient spell out their behaviour and direct their relationship.

Statuses and roles are culturally defined and vary from society to society. Take the example of gender statuses. In Western societies most people recognise only two gender statuses – male and female. Some other cultures identify three or more gender statuses. For example, some Native American tribes traditionally recognised a third gender – a 'two-spirit' person who is doubly blessed with the spirit of a man and a woman. The picture on page 4 shows We'wha, a two-spirited person from the Zuñi tribe of New Mexico (Williams, 1991).

Socialisation and social control

Socialisation is the process by which people learn the culture of their society. The most important part of this process probably takes place during a person's early years. Known as **primary socialisation** it usually takes place within the family. By responding to the approval and disapproval of family members and copying their example, the child learns the language and many of the basic behaviour patterns of their society.

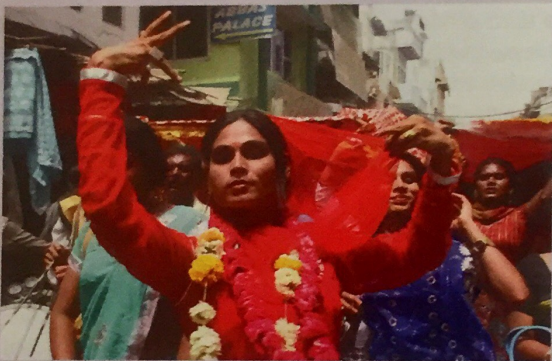
Secondary socialisation is the socialisation received in later life. In **peer groups** – groups whose members share similar circumstances and are often the same age – children play games and learn that social life is based on rules and norms of behaviour. At school they learn lessons for life and more specialised aspects of culture such as maths and science (see the next chapter). The mass media and social media can provide role models and ways of communicating which continue into later life. And in their adult occupations young people soon learn the rules of the game and the tricks of the trade.

Without socialisation, an individual would bear little resemblance to a human being defined as normal by the standards of their society. This can be seen from the example of Ssabunnya who spent part of his early life with a troupe of colobus monkeys, as described in the activity on page 5.

Contemporary issues: How many genders?

In 2011, Australian passports changed to three gender options – male, female and indeterminate. According to the Australian government this was to remove discrimination against transgender people and intersex people – those born with a sexual anatomy which does not fit the standard definitions of male and female. This was an important step for travellers at airports who are questioned or detained because their appearance does not seem to fit their gender status. The option of a third gender follows similar decisions in Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In 2014, the Hijras, India's transgender minority, finally achieved full legal recognition as a third gender. This means for the first time there are quotas of government jobs and college places for Hijras (*The Guardian*, 16.04.2014).



Members of the Hijra community in India.

In the UK Maria Miller, who chairs the Women and Equalities Committee, says that passports and driving licences should be gender neutral – they should not mention gender (*The Guardian*, 02.01.2016).



We'wha (1849–1896), a 'two-spirit' person

Questions

1. Should we legally recognise additional genders?
2. If so, why and how many more genders? If not, why not?
3. Two-spirit people were highly respected. Why do you think this was?

Culture and instinct

To what extent is the behaviour of living creatures directed by instinct and to what extent is it directed by learning?

The behaviour of some creatures is based on instinct – it is directed by their genes. Bees provide an example. The closer we get to human beings, the less important instincts are for directing behaviour and the more important learning becomes. For example,

studies of Japanese macaque monkeys show how they can learn brand new behaviours, for instance how to swim.

Sociologists see learned behaviour as the key to understanding human society. Culture – norms and values – is seen as directing human behaviour. And socialisation is seen as vital for learning culture. The importance of learned behaviour can be seen from the experience of John Ssabunnya outlined in the following activity.

Activity – An unusual socialisation

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

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

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

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



John, aged 14.

Based on an article in BBC News online, 06.10.1999

Questions

1. How does the example of John Ssabunnya indicate that human behaviour is learned rather than based on instinct?
2. Culture is not fixed, it can and does change. How does John’s experience support this statement?

Social control

Socialisation is closely linked to **social control** – the ways in which people’s behaviour is kept in line with the norms and values of society. Every society has various methods for ensuring that its members conform with – act in terms of – the accepted and approved ways of behaving. For example, in many traditional hunting societies such as the Inuit, the hunter has a moral duty to share his kill with other members of the community. If he does not, he is ostracised – shunned by and cut off from the group. Without some form of social control, it is difficult to see how the socialisation process could be effective and how standardised and predictable behaviour could be maintained. And without such behaviour human society could not operate.

In every society the family is a major agency of social control. Children are born helpless – they are totally dependent on adults. This gives parents enormous power both to teach and enforce what they teach. They are able to apply a battery of positive and

negative sanctions – rewards and punishments – to ensure conformity. These range from words and expressions of approval and disapproval through to physical violence.

In every area of social life there is a variety of mechanisms of social control – for example, the promise of promotion or the threat of dismissal in the workplace, and the encouraging smile or disapproving glance within a circle of friends. In many societies certain aspects of behaviour are defined as crimes. Officials are appointed to deal with such behaviour and apply punishment to those who have broken the law. However, most mechanisms of social control are much more subtle than the heavy hand of the law. For example, religion is a major instrument of social control in many societies. Religious beliefs often encourage people to conform to accepted ways of behaving. They may offer rewards such as an afterlife of everlasting happiness for those who follow the straight and narrow and punishments such as eternal damnation for those who do not.

PART 2 SOCIAL GROUPS AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

This chapter began by defining sociology as the study of people in social groups. This part looks briefly at three of the most important groups in Western society – social class, ethnic groups and gender groups. A theme running through sociological studies of these groups is inequality. For example, research has shown that the higher your social class position the more likely your chances of educational success, of obtaining a high status, well-paid job, and of living a long and healthy life.

Studies of the inequalities which divide social groups raise important questions. Do we live in a fair and just society? Should steps be taken to reduce social inequality?

Social class

Social class is a system of social inequality containing various levels in which people are grouped in terms of income and wealth, power and prestige. Occupation is often used as the main measure of people's class position. Table 1.1 shows the Office for National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) developed from sociological classifications. It shows a five class version of the class system in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2005).

Table 1.1 The NS-SEC class system

Class 1 Managerial and professional occupations – business executives, lawyers, doctors
Class 2 Intermediate occupations – clerical workers, secretaries
Class 3 Small employers and self-employed – shopkeepers, taxi drivers
Class 4 Lower supervisory and technical occupations – plumbers, train drivers
Class 5 Semi-routine and routine occupations – hairdressers, cleaners, labourers

Sociologists sometimes identify an 'upper class' which is not included in the Office for National Statistics classification. This is because it is very small – around 1 per cent of the population – and it is difficult to classify in terms occupation. For example, it includes

the aristocracy who sometimes own vast areas of land and enormous amounts of property. For instance, the Duke of Northumberland owns over 100,000 acres of land and the Duke of Westminster's property and land was valued at £9 billion in 2016 (*Independent*, 12.08.2016).

Sociologists focus on the middle class and the working class. The middle class refers to class 1 and 2 and part of class 3 and the working class to the other part of class 3 plus classes 4 and 5.

Social class inequalities

The social class structure tends to shape people's experiences and influence their behaviour. The lower people are in the class system the more likely their experiences are to be negative. For example, the more likely they are to suffer from physical and mental illness, to live in sub-standard housing, to be a victim of crime, to be unemployed, to be unable to afford a holiday, to lack educational qualifications and to have a relatively short life expectancy. Here are some instances of class inequalities.

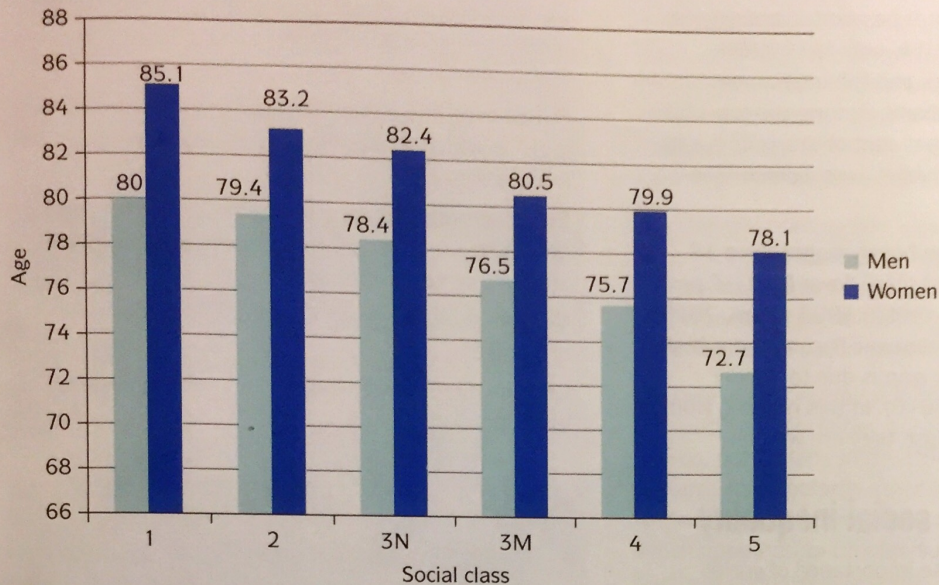
Income and wealth Income refers to money from wages, investments and rent, wealth refers to ownership of land, buildings, stocks and shares. In the financial year ending 2016, the average income of the richest fifth of UK households before taxes and benefits was £85,000. This was over 12 times greater than the poorest fifth who had an average income of £7,000 (Office for National Statistics, 10.01.2017). In terms of wealth, the top 1 per cent own about 20 per cent of household wealth, the top 5 per cent around 40 per cent and the top 10 per cent over 50 per cent (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 19.04.2016).

Life expectancy Figure 1 shows that life expectancy closely follows the social class gradient. Those in Class 1, professionals such as accountants and lawyers, can expect to live longer than those in Class 2 and so on down steadily to Class 5 which includes 'unskilled' workers such as labourers and cleaners.

Class 3 is divided into 3N skilled non-manual and 3M skilled manual.

Health As the figures on life expectancy suggest, the richer you are, the better your health is likely to be.

Figure 1.1: Life expectancy at birth for men and women by social class, 2002–2005 in England and Wales



Source: Office for National Statistics

There is a social class gradient in health. The lower a person is in the class system, the more likely they are to suffer from a variety of illnesses and, as they grow older, the more rapidly their hand grip tends to weaken and their memory declines (Marmot, 2015).

Education As the following chapter shows, social class is the most significant factor affecting educational attainment. Performance at every level of the educational system reflects social class position. In Key Stage tests, GCSEs, A-levels, university entrance and degree level, the higher a person's class position, the more likely they are to do well.

Social class inequalities The distribution of many of the things which people value – a long and healthy life, a decent house and educational success – mirror the distribution of income and wealth and reflect the class system. Clearly class has a significant influence on people's lives, but it does not determine them. For example, many people from Class 5 go to university, but members of this class are least likely to do so.

Ethnic groups

An **ethnic group** is a group within society who are seen by themselves and/or by others as culturally distinct, as having their own **subculture** – certain distinctive norms and values – and who have a common origin. They often have their own group identity. They may see themselves as White, Chinese, Pakistani, and so on.

Membership of an ethnic group may influence people's lives. For example, in terms of educational attainment at GCSE, the top two ethnic groups are Chinese and Indian and the bottom two are White British and Black Caribbean. Possible reasons for these differences are examined in Chapter 2 Education.

Members of ethnic groups may experience negative discrimination and disadvantages due to their ethnicity. For example, a study by the Institute for Social & Economic Research shows that ethnic minority British graduates are at a disadvantage in the labour market (Zwysen and Longhi, 2016). Compared to White graduates they are significantly less likely to be employed six months after graduation. And students who are unemployed after graduation can expect to earn 20 per cent to 25 per cent less in later life than those who find jobs soon after leaving university.

Gender groups

Gender groups refer to female and male groups. There are significant differences between these two groups. For example, at every level of the educational system from GCSE to degree level, girls and women outperform boys and men. However, this success is not transferred to the job market. Women do not have equal access to higher level jobs and the gender pay gap in favour of men, though narrowing, still exists. It appears that part of this inequality in the job market is due to discrimination against women.