“A” Level Sociology

Teaching Notes

Culture and Identity

5. Identity

Introduction.

1. As you might expect from even a fleeting glance at the syllabus area description on the cover of these notes, this particular section of the course is rather complex in terms of how we need to organise it.

a. We need to have a clear understanding (interpretation) of the concepts of:

Culture, Socialisation, Self and ***Identity***

b. We must relate these concepts (that is, apply them in various ways) to the concepts of:

Social class, Ethnicity, Gender, Region and ***Age***.

2.To begin, therefore, we need to define the first group of concepts, since we have to understand them before they can be related to the second group of concepts (which will be defined later).

- As you will be aware, we have already looked at the concepts of ***culture*** and ***socialisation*** in earlier sections of the course, so I do not intend to go over these areas again. We will, however, have to look at the concepts of ***self*** and ***identity*** and this is the initial focus of these notes.

A. The Self.

1. As we have seen, human behaviour is different to non-human behaviour (animals, insects, etc.) because it is guided by reference to ***values*** (ideas, beliefs, principles and so forth). In turn, the development of ***values*** that have ***meaning*** to people is dependent upon two ideas:

a. ***Consciousness***, which involves things like the ability to think and an awareness of the world around us, and

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

2. These ideas are crucial for the understanding of the basis of human social behaviour since it is only because we possess ***conscious and self-conscious*** abilities that we develop ***values*** that, in turn, provide us with a sense of ***culture***. Clear evidence of this is provided by:

a. The ***cultural differences*** that exist between different societies.

b. The ***sub-cultural differences*** that exist between groups in any society.

3. In the above we have identified two significant ideas:

a. Human beings have the ability to think about and reflect upon the nature of the social world and their position in that world. This ability allows us to develop values and norms that characterise the culture of a society.

- In a sense, therefore, this emphasises the ***creative dimension*** of human consciousness, since we are able to impose meaning and purpose on events.

b. However, the fact that 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).

4. The above produces a major ***theoretical dilemma*** for all social science since:

- On the one hand, our ***consciousness*** gives us the ability to ***create*** societies and, theoretically at least, to shape them in any way that we choose. In this respect, people clearly create society.

- On the other hand, the societies we create take on a life of their own that is separate from each individual (that is, we experience society as a ***force*** acting on our range and choice of behaviour).

    - If we have to be ***socialised*** into becoming a recognisable human being and this socialisation process reflects the ***values*** and ***norms*** of *cultures* and ***sub-cultures***, then effectively society is creating us, not the other way around.

5. In a simple sense, therefore, we are all products of our social environment (perhaps more than we think or may care to believe). However, this simple statement hides a multitude of controversies and interpretations over the precise relationship between us as individuals and the social groups to which we belong. This perhaps illustrates the tension between thinking, conscious, individuals and the society in which we live.

- At one extreme, we have ***Structuralist*** sociologists who argue that we are the product of society. ***Society shapes people in its own image***.

- At the other extreme are ***Interactionist*** sociologists who emphasise the creative aspects of human individuality. ***People shape society in their image***.

6. The majority of sociologists probably fall somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. On the one hand we recognise that people do have individual levels of ***consciousness, creativity*** and ***understanding***, whilst on the other it is evident that for all our supposed individuality we demonstrate very clear and broadly ***predictable patterns of behaviour*** that can only have been ***imposed*** on us in some way through our contacts with the social world.

B. The Development of Self.

1. Although it is clear that human beings have the capacity for ***self-consciousness*** and ***self-awareness***, the earlier work we've done on ***culture*** and ***socialisation*** demonstrates that we do not develop this ability automatically. Rather, sociologists argue that it has to be ***learnt***, just like any other social skill (the evidence from studies of children who have been reared with little or no human contact provides clear evidence in this respect).

2. In basic terms, therefore, through ***social interaction*** we are able to build on the ***biological capacity*** to "see ourselves as others see us" (in effect, to look at ourselves as we believe others see us).

- If we do not interact socially, we do not develop this capacity in any way that is recognisably human. Thus, people need society in order to develop as individuals and social interaction allows us to develop the capacities given to us by our human biology. This is called a ***symbiotic relationship***, which means that the one depends on the other (people need society and society cannot exist without people).

3. Through our ability to think we are able to create the ***context*** in which our individual capacities can be developed, but by creating this context (***society***) we automatically place ***limits*** upon our ability to act freely. This is because ***cultures*** involve ***shared meanings*** (***norms***, for example) that govern social interaction.

- A simple example here is the ***norm*** of time (what it means to us, for example, when I say "I will meet you at 1pm in the Library"). While I, as a thinking individual, am quite free to interpret this as meaning "I will meet you when it gets dark" we try to ***standardise*** our ***interpretation*** because social life would otherwise be very difficult. However, as soon as we consciously or unconsciously agree ***standards*** (norms) we place limits on our freedom to act.

4. It is here that we can start to develop the concept of ***identity***, which relates to ideas about who and what we and others believe us to be.

- A ***cultural identity***, therefore, involves a set of ***characteristics*** that define us as individuals, groups, societies and so forth. These characteristics can be almost anything, but it is evident that things such as gender, class, ethnic background, region and age are some of the most important sources of identity in any society.

5. Thus, in order to develop a sense of ***identity***, it is necessary to have ***self-awareness***. However, we develop this sense of ***self*** through the ***socialisation process*** when we learn how to ***interact socially*** on the basis of various ***cultural identities***. The one, in short, is dependent upon the other.

- We can perhaps understand this a little more easily if we think more specifically about how we learn self-awareness.

The "I" and the "Me"

1. We can see the relationship between the social context in which interaction takes place and the ability of people to behave in any way imaginable noting the work of the Interactionist **George Herbert Mead** ("Mind, Self and Society", 1933).

2. **Mead** argued that although we are each conscious, thinking, individuals, the ways we choose to behave are conditioned by the ***social context*** of that behaviour. Mead argued that our behaviour as individuals is conditioned by two aspects of our ***self-awareness*** (the ability to "see ourselves" as others see us and react accordingly).

a. An "***I***" aspect based around your opinion of yourself as a whole. You respond to the behaviour / attitudes of others as an "I".

b. A "***Me***" aspect which consists of an awareness of how other people expect us to behave at any given moment and any given, specific, situation.

3. The "I" and the "Me" are parallel parts of what **Mead** called "***The Self***" and it is the ability of human beings to develop a ***self-concept*** that makes us different to non-humans. An example should make things a little clearer.

If you accidentally put your hand in a fire, the "I" aspect of the Self is expressed in the way you react to the pain that you feel.

The "Me" aspect of the self, however, specifically conditions the choice of your response to the pain that you feel.

Your ***reaction*** will, therefore, be conditioned by such things as:

1. ***Who*** you are (social factors such as gender, age and so forth).

2. ***Where*** you are (at home, in public, etc.).

3. ***Who you are with*** (family, friends, people you don't know, alone, etc.).

Thus, if you are a young child, your reaction to being burnt may be to cry. If you are a young man, you may feel that crying is not a socially-acceptable reaction - so you may swear loudly instead. Swearing loudly may be acceptable if you are at home by yourself - or with someone who accepts the fact that you swear on occasions - but may not be acceptable if, for example, you are fixing a stranger's fire as part of your job.

Similarly, if you had been messing around with a group of friends when you burnt your hand, their reaction to your accident may be to laugh and make fun of your pain. Laughter would not be an appropriate reaction if it was your child that had burnt their hand...

4. As you may imagine, the list of possible responses to the act of "burning yourself" is many and varied and each will depend upon ***who*** you are and the ***social context*** in which the act takes place. How you respond will tell people something about you (it will be taken to reflect your ***personality***). In basic terms therefore, our ***personality*** consists of two related aspects:

> a. ***What I believe myself to be*** - the "I" who has built-up a particular self-image and who responds to the attitudes of others according to this self-image.
>
> b. ***Who other people think I am*** - the "me" who interprets the behaviour of others towards me and includes some / all of these attitudes in my self-image.

- The above also tells us something about the way Interactionists view the possibility of our being able to ***predict*** people's behaviour (in both a sociological and everyday sense). Prediction is going to be extremely difficult - if not impossible - because behaviour is not, according to Interactionists, a ***simple response*** to ***external stimulation***. People will react differently to the same social stimulation depending upon the circumstances (or social context) in which the act takes place.

- Thus, our behaviour is not simply a question of responding in predictably ways to given forms of external stimulation (such as the pain example used above).

5. For **Mead**, therefore, ***self-consciousness*** is something that is constructed and developed socially; in effect, it is a ***process*** that involves an "I" aspect and a "Me" aspect which cannot be separated from each other. If it helps, you might like to think of self-consciousness as being your ***personality*** - that which you see yourself as being and that which others see you as being.

- For writers such as **Mead**, therefore, people are not born with any particular personality, although, as we have noted, everyone has the biological / genetic ***capacity*** to develop a personality. This is an important distinction because it suggests a number of things:

> a. Our personality is not fixed at birth. It can be changed and developed.
>
> b. We have the ability to control and shape our personality
>
> c. It may not be useful to talk about people having a ***single personality***. On the contrary, we may adopt different personalities as and when the situation demands.

The Social Construction of Self (personality) and Identity.

1. We can start to examine these ideas in a general way by looking in more detail at various theories of Self development, beginning with a general overview of the type of ***Interactionist*** theory suggested by **Mead**.

2. For Interactionist sociologists, the development of our individual Self / personality is rooted in the twin processes of:

- ***Negotiation*** and
- ***Interpretation.***

3. In basic terms, the relationships that we form and enter (freely, through personal choice, or because we feel in some way forced to form them) provide us with a relatively ***flexible structure of rules*** which we have initially ***negotiated*** with others.

- Clearly, this idea of ***negotiation*** has to be interpreted widely, since in many situations the relationships we enter into are already surrounded by rules of behaviour, the basic boundaries of which are difficult if not impossible to change.

For example, when you first began school at the age of 4 or 5, you where given no choice about whether or not you wanted to attend (the role of schoolboy or schoolgirl was effectively forced on you).

Similarly, the basic role relationship between you and your teachers was not negotiable, since the roles of teacher and pupil in this situation are already very clearly defined in terms of their basic content.

However, even in this situation, relationships are negotiable and negotiated. With some teachers you establish a friendly, easy-going, relationship, yet with others you establish a cool and distant relationship. How you choose to play the role of pupil is also a matter for negotiation, since you may try to push the boundaries of the relationship to see how far it will go (for example, what you can get away with doing or not doing).

- Other social situations are, however, more clearly ***negotiated*** in the sense of being created by the relationship between the participants. Think, for example, about the range of relationships you form in your school / College on a daily basis which have to be recognised and maintained through some form of negotiation. For example, as you walk around, you may encounter the following relationships:

a. **Strangers**: These are people that you recognise as human beings and will respond to if required (for example, if they ask you for directions), but in the ordinary course of events you do not acknowledge their existence.

b. **Acquaintances**: These might, for example, be people from your class. Some you may have spoken to in class, others might just be vaguely recognisable faces or names. However, it may or may not be appropriate to recognise them as you walk around (depending on a number of factors), but if you do recognise your relationship its content might involve things like:

- making brief eye contact and smiling as you pass.
- saying "hello".
- stopping for a few seconds to hold a fairly meaningless conversation about the weather.

c. **Friends:** These are people that we know well and we have to recognise this fact when we meet them. We are expected to stop and talk to them when we meet and a range of topics will be included in the conversation. Unlike acquaintances, for example, we will know a reasonable level of detail and depth about their personal background and we are willing to reveal appropriately more about ourselves to them.

d. **Close friends**: This involves people with whom we are emotionally close, although we are probably not sexually involved with them. They include people of the same and / or opposite sex and are, for most of us, few in number. When we meet in passing we are more likely to stop to talk to them and the conversation will cover a range of topics. More emphasis is likely to be placed upon the personal feelings of the people involved than is the case with friends or acquaintances.

e. **Intimate friends**: People in this category are likely to be those with whom we share a loving / sexual relationship. Unlike with most other relationships, this is more likely to involve public (and private) touching behaviour (holding hands, kissing, etc.).

- These are a small sample of the relationships we are likely to recognise and remember during the day. These relate to our peers (people of the same age) and there is, of course, an even greater range of non-peer social relationships in our lives (family relationships being an obvious source here).

4. All of the above are clearly ***negotiated*** relationships. We can demonstrate this by thinking about how these relationships can change over time (acquaintances become friends, close friends become enemies when they betray the secrets we have entrusted to them and so forth). However, these different relationships also demonstrate the second aspect noted above, namely the significance of ***interpretation***.

5. If you think about the above relationships, our ability to differentiate between strangers, acquaintances, friends and so forth is based upon the way we are able to ***interpret*** the meaning of such relationships. Thus, we need to develop ways of identifying the different relationships we have and, most importantly, the content and ***meaning*** of such relationships to both ourselves and the other people involved.

- An example here might be to think about what happens when we misinterpret relationships; for example, if you mistake a complete stranger for a close, personal, friend. In such a situation the stranger is likely to react towards your behaviour in a way that is very different to the reaction of a close friend.

6. If we now try to apply some of these basic ideas to the way in which our personality (or Self) develops through social interaction, we can use an example to illustrate the basic nature of this developmental process:

- Imagine two people meeting in the street. They recognise the fact that they are friends and stop to talk to each other accordingly. In this situation a number of things are apparent:

  a. They have decided they have something in common (at root, the shared assumption they are playing the role of friend to each other).

  b. This assumption involves imposing on each other certain expectations. They will stop walking; they will greet each other in an appropriate manner; they will talk to each other and so forth.

  c. By doing this, each effectively tries to control the behaviour of the other, even though in this situation they may not consciously believe they are doing this, mainly because it seems somehow natural that this is how friends behave. They have done this so many times that each does not have to stop to think "Who is this person? What is their relationship to me? How should I behave in their presence? and so forth.

- In this situation, therefore, as in numerous other small-scale social encounters, social interaction involves:

  a. Trying to understand something about the people we meet.

  b. Using the behaviour of others to tell us something about ourselves.

  - For example, we may see ourselves as a generally popular sort of person who has many friends who want to be our friend because we are such good company.

- On the other hand, what might we think about ourselves if we recognise someone as a friend and prepare for the inevitable friendly encounter and they simply ignore us or give us a withering, scornful, look as they pass quickly by on the other side of the street?

7. In the above example, we can note a fundamental idea about the development of our ***identity***, namely that we use the way other people interpret our behaviour as evidence of who and what we are. **Charles Cooley** referred to this idea as the "***looking-glass self***". That is, the theory that we use the behaviour of others towards us as a kind of mirror in which is reflected an image of the person we are.

8. This suggests that "who we are" or "who we believe ourselves to be" is a reflection of what others think about us. Up to a point this is true. We look to the behaviour of other people around us to confirm the impression that we have about ourselves. **Philip Jones** ("Studying Society", 1993) summarises this idea in the following terms:

"***Socialisation***, for Interactionist sociologists, is not a process whereby cultural rules are generally ***internalised*** by people. Rather, it is an outcome of the ***interpretative*** process - the allocation of ***meaning*** between people - that is at the root of all social interaction. Our personalities are constructed by means of this interpreting process.

In our lives, we encounter a number of people, all of whom take our behaviour towards them to ***symbolise*** something about our ***selves***. They interpret our behaviour in the light of the evidence they are provided with. They then ***act*** towards us in the light of this interpretation, indicating through the symbolic means available to them what sort of person they have decided we are. The image we have of ourselves is crucially influenced by the ***reactions*** of individuals we come into contact with. We cannot ignore what kind of person others are telling us we are; the image of our '***self***' is seriously affected, if not created by, the image others have of us".

9. However, this is not the whole story since we are not simply "prisoners" of other people's behaviour (that is, we do not simply take the reactions of other people towards us as the single, defining, aspect of "who we believe ourselves to be". This is not the whole story of our personality development for a number of reasons:

a. We do not simply believe everything that people tell us about ourselves.

b. Other people rarely tell us directly what they think about us. We have to interpret what the behaviour of other people towards us means and this creative aspect of interpretation means that we frequently interpret the behaviour of others in ways that confirm the image we have of our selves.

c. Some people are more ***significant*** to us than others and their views carry more weight with us. These ***significant others*** are more influential in shaping our personality than people whose behaviour and opinions we care little about.

- For example, in an educational context, your lecturer is a ***significant other*** because they are in a position of power that allows them to judge your efforts as a student (they mark your work, for example). When playing the role of student you look to such people to tell you how successful you are in this role. This doesn't mean you have to like your lecturer, but if you are serious about playing the student role successfully then their opinion of you will be extremely significant.

d. As thinking individuals, we try to manipulate the impression that other people have of us. We are not "passive victims" of other people's behaviour and this idea of ***impression management*** is one we can now develop.

The Presentation of Self.

1. **Erving Goffman** ("The Presentation of Self In Everyday Life", 1969) uses a ***theatrical metaphor*** to illustrate his ideas about ***personality, self-development*** and ***social identity***. In basic terms, the social world is represented as a play in which the various members of society adopt certain roles and speak certain lines. Unlike a play, however, the lines that we speak are created by us, not for us.

2. Social life, therefore, is a series of dramatised encounters (a ***dramaturgy***) which vary in importance and significance. These encounters, just like in a play, have scenery that defines the situation for the actors (a ***social context***) and props (things such as ***possessions*** that we use to enhance our performance).

3. Whenever we have a ***social encounter*** (such as sitting in a classroom, getting married or whatever) **Goffman** argues that a complex process of ***social interaction*** is always created, even around the simplest of activities. We usually only recognise this complexity when we are faced with situations where we are unsure of our ability to play a role), uncertain about how we are expected to behave or have never encountered the situation before. An example should help us to clarify the above:

You are invited by a friend to a party they are giving. From your existing social knowledge you have a good idea about how to interpret the meaning of "party" in this particular context. For example, your experience of "parties" gives you a rough idea about such things as how to dress, when to arrive, how to behave and so forth.

This understanding provides the background against which you will play the role of "partygoer". In short, the party is the ***stage*** for your performance or, in sociological terms, the ***social context*** for your behaviour. This knowledge is important because it tells you what sort of basic role it is necessary to play when you attend the party. Once at the party you start to act. You present yourself to others in a way that tries to create the impression you want, in that context, to project (whatever this may be). At the same time the other people present are:

a. Trying to manage your impression of them.

b. Reacting to your attempts to manage their impression of you.

To aid your performance, you use various ***props***, (things like how you have chosen to dress, how you talk, drinking, smoking, etc.). These props are used ***symbolically***. That is, we use them to project an image of ourselves from the perception of others about the ***meaning*** of the symbol. For example, wearing an expensive piece of jewellery may give others the impression that you are rich.

At the end of the party, your performance in that particular situation is concluded, but you have collected and created a set of social characteristics that serve to identify you to the people with whom you have interacted. These impressions are remembered and used to identify you when or if you meet them again.

4. There are a couple of key ideas in the above that we need to clarify and elaborate.

- Firstly, we have noted the importance of ***role play*** and a ***role***, for Interactionist sociologists, represents a kind of ***mental map*** that we use to guide us through the social world. In this respect, adopting a role does not simply involve learning a set of rigid guidelines concerning appropriate and inappropriate behaviour; rather, a role involves learning a set of ***flexible behavioural principles*** (or rules of a situation) that are used to govern various forms of social interaction.

  For example, when each of you initially came into the classroom you were aware that you had to play the ***role*** of a ***student*** and, because you have played this role before, you had learnt some of the basic rules (***norms***) involved (you had received some form of socialisation into this type of role).

  This doesn't mean each of you plays this role in exactly the same way (although there will be ***broad similarities*** and ***shared meanings*** about the nature and content of the role). This is because the role of student has slightly different ***meaning*** for each of you, based on a range of personal and social factors. One of these factors, of course, is the ***teacher*** playing his or her role opposite you.

- Secondly, as we interact socially and develop a sense of self, we also begin to establish an ***identity*** - an understanding of who and what we are. There are a number of dimensions to ***social identity*** (individual identity, group identity and so forth) but what we will eventually need to think about is how the type of sociological theories we have just outlined concerning self development can be related to both identity and concepts such as ***class, gender, age, ethnicity*** and ***region***. One way we can do this is to use an idea developed by Interactionist sociologists call ***Labelling Theory***.

Labelling Theory.

1. Labelling theory seeks to illustrate and explain the relationship between individual actors and the wider society in which they live. In particular, it tries to show how the audience for our behaviour is influential in the creation of personal identities and to understand this theory we first have to understand the significance of ***social labels***.

2. As human beings we live in a ***symbolic*** world. Basically, this means that the ***meaning*** of everything we encounter has to be ***interpreted***. Nothing is self-evident and the meaning of something is highly dependent upon the ***context*** in which it exists.

For example, even the relatively straightforward act of me shaking my fist at you can have a range of different meanings, depending upon the context in which it takes place.

- If we have been having an argument, it could mean that I'm going to punch you. It could also mean that if you don't stop I will punch you. Either way, shaking my fist denotes some form of aggressive intent on my part.

- Alternatively, if I am smiling or laughing when I shake my fist, the interpretation is likely to be different. This may be an example of playfulness rather than aggression.

3. One of the main ways in which we interpret the meaning of an action is through what is called "***taking the role of the other***" (or ***empathy***). That is, we use our ability to metaphorically put ourselves in the shoes of the person with whom we are interacting in order to understand the meaning of their actions (the German sociologist **Max Weber** called this ***verstehen*** or "understanding").

4. For humans, the most symbolic system we develop is ***language***. Words are created to symbolise certain things or ideas. Thus, the word "elephant" is symbolic of "a large grey creature with big ears and a long nose called a trunk".

- It is symbolic (that is, taken to represent something) precisely because there is no real or logical connection between the word and the thing it describes. For example, the words "dog" and "chien" refer to the same type of animal in different languages (different ***symbolic systems***).

5. Language, therefore, is a system of ***labels*** or ***names*** that we apply to things. A label identifies and represents a class of objects and categorises them as being similar. For example, the label "male" identifies a biological sex and anyone who is given this label is considered to have something in common with other people bearing this label.

6. The sociological importance of labelling is not just that it enables us to communicate using a patterned system of shared meanings (although this is important).

- In addition, whenever we label something we assign to it a set of associated ***characteristics*** that effectively tell us:

    a. How to "***see***" that object and

    b. How to ***react*** towards it.

For example, the label "female" is not simply a name for a human being of a certain biological type. In addition, the label carries with it all kinds of social connotations. Thus, the class of "female" may have the associated characteristics of being soft, pretty, sexually passive, emotional and so forth.

7. In social terms, therefore, labelling is extremely significant since the labels we attract, either through choice or because they are forced upon us, are going to be significant in terms of:

    a. Our ***self-image*** and behaviour.

    b. The perception that others have of us and their interpretation of our behaviour based around those perceptions.

8. Having outlined the basic ideas involved in labelling theory, we will develop and apply these ideas in the next section that looks specifically at the concept of identity.

- Next, however, we need to look briefly at alternative conceptions of self development to those discussed above. In this respect, we need to look at Structuralist perspectives and in particular those ideas put forward by Functionalist and Marxist Conflict sociologists.

C. Structuralist Perspectives on Self-Development.

1. In ***Structural sociology***, the focus is placed more firmly on the way ***society***, in all its forms, ***shapes*** the behaviour of individuals. Although Structuralists differ in the emphasis they place on ***structural forces*** and the ability of individuals to shape their own lives, there is a general agreement that what really matters in terms of individual and group self-awareness and development is the way that these structural forces effectively seem to make people behave in certain more or less predictable ways.

2. In addition, structuralists tend to place a great deal of emphasis on the ***socialisation process*** as the means through which societies shape the beliefs, perceptions and behaviour of their members. In many respects, therefore, ***socialisation*** is viewed as a powerful guiding force in terms of the way people are:

    a. Made into ***self-aware*** beings.

    b. ***Categorised*** into particular forms of cultural identity.

Functionalist perspectives.

1. As we have seen earlier ("Consensus Theories of Culture") writers within this perspective stress the importance of ***socialisation*** and the way people learn the already-existing ***norms*** (rules) of expected behaviour. Functionalist writers argue that it is only by learning ***cultural rules*** that ***social interaction*** becomes possible.

2. Cultural rules, therefore, provide a ***structure*** for people's behaviour, effectively channelling behaviour in some ways but not others. The stress is on the way our behaviour is ***constrained*** by the rules of the society into which we are born.

3. ***Social structures***, according to this way of seeing things, operate at an ***institutional level*** in society. We experience structural pressures whenever we adopt a particular role, since as we have seen, by taking on a role we take on certain norms, give expression to certain values and have a particular status in society.

4. In order to exist, societies create numerous roles that have to be successfully filled and performed. In education, for example, roles such as student, lecturer, administrator and so forth have to be filled and performed if this institution is to fulfil its allotted purpose in society (that is, its ***function***).

5. If we see societies as ***structures*** of social relationships, it follows that people are ***socialised*** into already-existing and defined roles. For writers such as **Talcott Parsons** when people perform certain roles they necessarily ***internalise*** the basic "rules of society" (norms are incorporated into their personality - these norms are so familiar and self-evident we do not question them because they appear normal and natural).

- Individual personalities, therefore, are shaped by the ***socialisation process*** - people are a product of their cultural upbringing. Our socialisation tells us such things as how to see the nature of the world and our position in that world.

6. We can see this most clearly in small scale-societies where the number of roles people are required to perform is very limited. In such societies (sometimes called Traditional societies because behaviour is based upon custom and tradition) people's behaviour tends to be very conservative and limited in scope.

- In Modern societies, such as Britain in the 20th century, the situation is more complex since there are a huge range of possible roles and a wide range of socialising agencies. However, the basic principles remain the same.

7. From this perspective, ***human consciousness*** clearly exists, but it is not given the same (***primary***) level of significance that Interactionists give it. Clearly, humans have to be conscious of the world and they have to be able to recognise cultural needs and develop cultural rules to organise solutions to these needs - but the fact that people are ***forced*** to ***react*** in this way relegates human consciousness to a ***secondary*** position in the great intellectual scheme of things.

8. We can illustrate these ideas by looking at the following example:

- In order to take part in the cultural life of society one of the first things we start to learn is how to ***communicate*** with others. In our society the main form of communication we learn is ***language***.

- In order to learn a language (to be ***socialised*** into the ***norms*** of language use in our culture) it follows that it must already exist (since other wise we could not learn it). Thus, as far as the individual is concerned, language pre-dates them.

- Languages have a number of characteristics:

  a. They involve ***rules*** (grammar, for example).

  b. They are ***highly structured*** (they display regular relationships that form predictable patterns).

  c. It exists ***outside*** of the individual who uses it (that is, it appears to take-on a life of its own because language is ***external*** to the individual).

  d. The ***meaning*** of words has to be ***shared*** by the users of a language, since otherwise the language would be meaningless and redundant.

  e. The meaning of a word, therefore, already exists before it can be used. For example, you cannot think of something without having the words to define it and once you have learnt the definition, you know what it means.

  - The fact that the meaning of words can change over time is culturally important, but insignificant in terms of the basic principles governing language.

- Thus, in order to communicate, you have to use language. You are ***forced*** to use the existing set of ***cultural symbols***. Thus, you are ***locked-into*** a ***structure*** that not only defines how you communicate but also what you can communicate. By definition you cannot think of something that cannot be communicated.

- You can, of course, be very creative with language. Writers such as Shakespeare, Dickens and Wordsworth have used language to create valuable cultural artefacts (plays, novels, poetry and so forth) that are beyond the ability of all but a few to create - but it doesn't alter the fact that they used the English language, with all its rules and definitions and meanings in basically the same way that you or I use this language. They could no more escape the structure of language than anyone else.

To summarise these ideas we can note that:

- People, if they are to exist socially, must solve the problem of communication.
- The solution, in this respect, is language. Different societies may develop different forms of language, but the basic principles underlying them are the same).
- All language must, by definition, have a structure (relationships between words), otherwise they would not be languages and they could not be used to solve the problem of communication.
- When we learn a language we are forced to accept the constraints it imposes upon us. Since we have no choice in the matter, it follows that simply by using language we are limiting our ability to act freely.
- In this respect, all human beings are prisoners of the language we need to learn.

9. If you have understood the principles behind this idea of structuralism, it becomes a relatively simple matter to develop these ideas sociologically (rather than linguistically) and apply them to the ideas of both Structural Functionalism and, in a moment, Marxist Conflict Structuralism.

10. If we substitute a social need such as the "problem of survival" for the "problem of communication" and, as a solution to this problem the idea of "social institutions" instead of "language" it should be possible to grasp the basic ideas involved concerning the development of individual self awareness. In basic terms, every human being is the ***product*** of the culture in which they live and have been ***socialised*** to accept. Our sense of self, identity and behaviour is, therefore, created and sustained by the culture with which we identify.

Marxist perspectives.

1. Although, as with all sociological perspectives, there are a variety of competing interpretations in Marxist perspectives, Marxist Conflict theory differs from its Functionalist counterpart in important ways.

2. While Functionalism stresses the idea that society is a functioning entity that involves ***consensus*** over basic values, Marxists argue that although consensus necessarily exists, it is a form of consensus that is manufactured to reflect the interests of powerful groups or classes.

- That is, whereas Functionalists argue that consensus over values is the bedrock of any social system, Marxists argue that consensus is a phoney construction. It creates a sense of unity of purpose that obscures the fact that the rich and powerful benefit far more than the poor and powerless by maintaining the fiction of a basic value agreement.

3. Marxists, therefore, argue that social life involves inherent conflicts of interest, the most important of which is economic conflict; that is, the conflicts that arise from the fact that in capitalist societies, for example, some groups (called classes) have greater access to economic rewards than others.

- In basic terms, social classes are defined primarily in economic terms, usually by reference to what is called the ***means of economic production*** (that is, the way a society is organised to produce the things needed for its survival).

- Some people are in a position to own the ***means of production***, while others have little opportunity for ownership. This situation, Marxists claim, produces a class-based system of ***social stratification*** (a system of social ranking whereby one class is considered to be superior to another class). A simple expression of this might be:

  a. ***Upper or Ruling class*** - people who own businesses.

  b. ***Middle class*** - professional workers who help to run businesses on a day to day basis.

  c. ***Working or Lower class*** - people who have no economic ownership and are not involved in the control of businesses.

4. Social ***class*** is considered to be the most important source of ***self image*** and ***social identity*** although, as I have suggested, many Marxists argue that people may not always be consciously aware of this.

Summary.

1. In this section of the course we have looked at a number of different, but sociologically complimentary, theories of personality and self development.

- Some of these have been drawn from social psychological areas (Interactionism) which stress the importance of understanding how and why people are creative in their self-development. Others have been drawn from Structuralist areas (Functionalism and Marxism) that stress the way in which individuals are shaped by the structure of the society in which they live.

2. In this respect, we need to simply note the general differences in theoretical approach rather than make judgements about whether one perspective is superior or inferior to another. They are all, in their different ways, sociological perspectives and in this they differ from the perspectives put forward by other academic disciplines such as psychology (which has its own variety of perspectives on self and identity).

3. In the next section we will need to build on some of the ideas already discussed in order to understand a variety of sources of identity in our society.