"A" Level Sociology

TeachingNotes
for Students

Culture and Identity
3. Theories of Culture

~~Introduction~~

1. In this section of the course we are going to consider a variety of sociological explanations / theories of culture and cultural behaviour. To help us do this, these notes have been organised around the general theme of sociological perspectives on culture. This is, the idea that we can group various writers who, whilst they may have slightly different theories generally tend to have a number of basic ideas in common.

2. You will recall that in the previous section we introduced the idea of sociological perspectives and, in so doing, briefly outlined three main perspectives:

> *a. Functionalism.*
> *b. Conflict Theory.*
> *c. Interactionism.*

3. The first two of these perspectives (Functionalism and Conflict Theory) are sometimes called *Structural* or *Macro* perspectives, mainly because they focus on:

> a. The way social structures constrain individual behaviour (appearing to make people do things, limiting their choice of action and so forth).
>
> b. Large-scale social interaction, frequently at the group level, rather than the level of individual behaviour.

4. The third of these perspectives (Interactionism) is sometimes called a *social psychological* or *micro* perspective, mainly because it focuses attention on the individual and the way they create and recreate their social world.

A. Consensus-Based Structuralist Theories.

1. Theorists in this perspective tend to concentrate their theoretical efforts on some of the largest groups in any society, namely social institutions (something that is probably true of all structuralist theories, consensus or conflict). An institution, for our purpose here can be broadly defined as:

> *"A pattern of shared, stable, behaviour".*

- Thus, the characteristics of social institutions are that they involve behaviour that is carried out by large numbers of people (shared) and this behaviour must be of a type that continues over a reasonable period of time (stable). Examples of social institutions in our society, therefore, might be things like:

  - Work
  - Education
  - Family
  - Religion and so forth.

- The family can be considered to be an institution in our society for a number of reasons:

    a. It involves large numbers of people (all of us will, at one time or another, have been involved in some sort of family group).

    b. The are general social norms governing the conduct of family life.

    c. It is behaviour that is probably as old as our society itself (there has always, as far as it is possible to know, been some sort of family group in our society).

- When we talk about an institution in this way, it is important to avoid the mistake that everyone within the institution behaves in exactly the same way. Family life in Britain, for example, involves a diverse mixture of forms (dual-parent, single-parent, nuclear, extended, reconstituted and so forth).

- However, what it can be assumed to mean is that there are general cultural norms in existence governing the various ways that children, for example should be socialised, how parent should relate to children and so forth.

2. As we have seen earlier, Consensus sociologists identify four main institutional groupings (or functional sub-systems) in any society, namely:
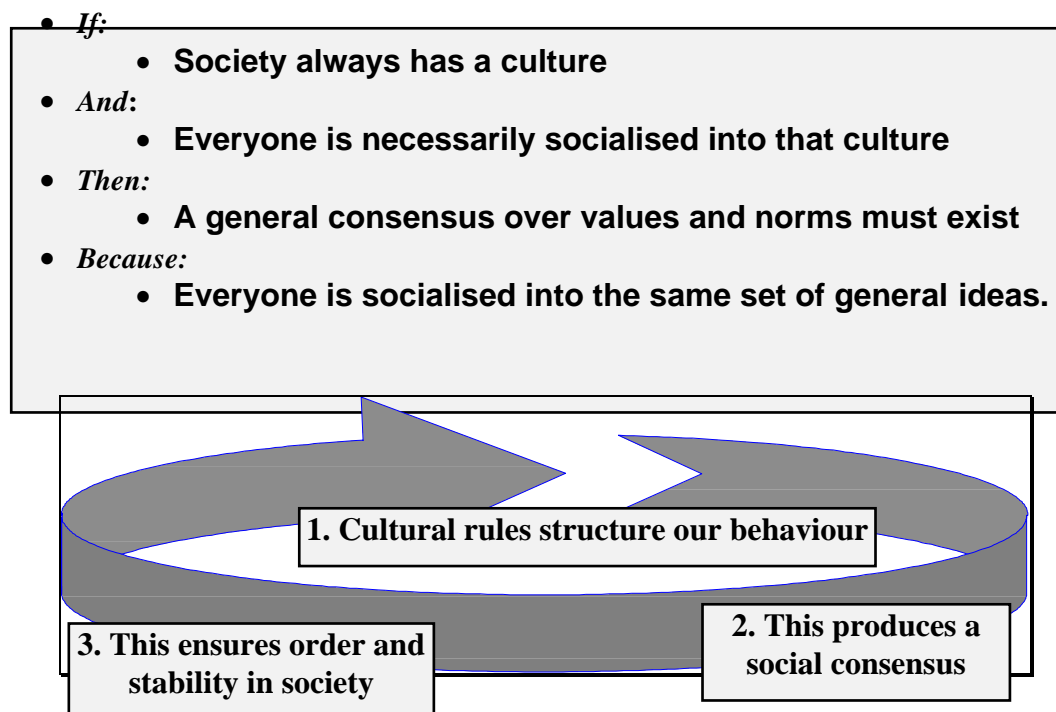
    a. Economic.
    b. Political.
    c. Family and Kinship.
    d. Cultural.

3. All of the above have some role to play in the overall determination of the culture of society, although some institutions (such as education, media, religion and so forth) play a more explicit part than others (which is why we term these ***cultural institutions***).

Culture, Socialisation and Consensus.

1. 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 here, therefore, is on the way our behaviour is ***constrained*** by the rules of the society into which we are born. We can understand this more clearly by thinking about the following examples.

- Whenever you enter a building, your behaviour is constrained by its physical structure, layout and purpose. For example, if you want to move from one room to another, then you have to use the doors that have been provided by the designer and builder. Similarly, it would be difficult for you to cook a hot meal in a room designed to be a bathroom, just as you might find it difficult to sleep in a kitchen.

  - These things are not, of course, impossible (you could simply smash a hole in the wall when you want to change rooms, but this deviant behaviour will produce negative social sanctions because you have broken a norm), but it cannot be denied that physical structures constrain our behaviour.

- A culture, with its attendant roles, statuses, values and norms similarly constrains our range of possible behaviours. This is not a physical constraint, as such, but rather a *mental* one that leads to the individual choosing to limit his or her range of behaviour. We feel inhibited, for example, about doing things that people find culturally distasteful (although, of course, we can use this cultural revulsion to produce shock and outrage at certain times - artists and writers, for example, are quite adept at breaking social norms in this way).

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. If we accept the above as plausible, we can then see the basis for this being a *consensus theory* of social organisation:

- *If:*
  - **Society always has a culture**
- *And***:**
  - **Everyone is necessarily socialised into that culture**
- *Then:*
  - **A general consensus over values and norms must exist**
- *Because:*
  - **Everyone is socialised into the same set of general ideas.**

1. Cultural rules structure our behaviour

2. This produces a social consensus

3. This ensures order and stability in society

~~**Problems.**~~

1. A major problem this theory is that of how to explain the very clear differences in behaviour that we see all around us everyday. People, for example, do not behave in exactly the same way and there are clear cultural differences present in the same society.

2. The solution to such a problem is usually created by arguing that there are different levels of socialisation in any society.

- **Level 1** is that of the society as a whole (the *societal level*). This is a level of socialisation that applies to everyone and involves certain basic cultural values and norms. At this level, there is little or no disagreement and involves what are called *core social values*. These values define such things as what it means to be:

    - English rather than French,
    - A man rather than a woman,
    - A child rather than an adult and so forth.

- The ideas involved at this level tend to be fairly general and abstract. For example, they may involve such things as:

    - A respect for the democratic process.
    - The right to free speech.
    - The right to a fair trial or
    - The freedom of the individual.

- **Level 2** is that of the different groups within a society (the *sub-cultural* level). This level relates to the fact that membership of different sub-cultural groups itself generates certain norms and values that are important in an individual's life since, in general, these are the values and norms that we learn through *our direct experience* in the social world These values and norms may be accord with general social values and norms, or they may be in opposition to these values and norms.

3. Clearly, therefore, the situation exists for a certain level of argument and disagreement over values and norms at this sub-cultural level. Consensus theorists tend not to deny this, but argue that this disagreement is itself part of the necessary dynamic process whereby societies adapt and change.

- In a peculiar way, therefore, conflict and deviance can be functional for a society because it will eventually produce a new, stronger, consensus over core values.

4. We can see an example of this argument in the work of the Consensus theorist Robert Merton when he analysed the nature of crime and deviance in American society in the 1930's.

Example: Robert Merton ("Social Structure and Anomie", 1938).

1. Merton explored the idea that, in American society, there existed a disjunction (a "lack-of-fit") between the socially-produced and encouraged *ends* or *goals* for people's behaviour and the *means* through which they could achieve these desirable ends. Merton was arguing that:

> a. People were encouraged, through the socialisation process, to want certain things out of life ("desired ends"). In simple terms, they were socialised into the *American Dream* of health, wealth, personal happiness and so forth.

> b. American society was so structured as to ensure that the majority of people could never realistically attain these ends. The means that American society provided (such as hard work and so forth) were simply not sufficient to ensure that everyone could obtain the desirable goals they were socialised to want.

2. In this respect, whilst American society placed a high social value on success in all its forms (it became a kind of *universal goal* or value), the *means* to gaining legitimate success were effectively closed to all but a few. The vast majority of people would never achieve such *goals* by working.

3. As Merton argued, if people are *socialised* into both wanting success and needing to be successful by working - yet they are effectively denied that success through such means, strains develop in the *normative structure* of society.

- On the one hand, you have people actively desiring success.

- On the other, you have a large number of potentially very unhappy people when they discover that the supposed means to such success does not deliver the goods. In such a situation, *anomie* occurs.

4. Merton argued that the disjunction between wanting success and the lack of legitimate opportunity for success did not mean people gave-up wanting success. The whole thrust of their socialisation was geared towards the value of success. In a situation whereby people desired success - yet were effectively denied it - he argued they would find other, probably less legitimate, means towards desired ends.

5. Before we look at the way Merton characterised a wide range of possible responses to this *anomic situation* (the strain and psychological confusion caused by wanting something that it is not possible to get legitimately), we should note that in explaining how people tried to resolve this "ends / means" problem, Merton was aware that different social groups had different expectations about the meaning of success.

- For someone who has been unemployed for many months, for example, the simple fact of getting a job may be considered as success - a desired end has been met.

6. Merton elaborated five basic responses to the anomic situation which he claimed to see in American society. He classified these types of conformity and deviance in terms of acceptance and denial of basic ends and means:

Response:	Means:	Ends:
a. Conformity	+	+
b. Innovation	-	+
c. Ritualism	+	-
d. Retreatism	-	-
e. Rebellion	**Rejects means**	**Rejects ends**

7. An example of each category might be as follows:

a. The law-abiding citizen. Accepts both socially-produced ends and the socially-legitimated means to achieve them.

b. Could apply to both "entrepreneurs" who develop new means / operate on the margins of criminal / non-criminal means (the "Arthur Daley" type) and criminals - people who pursue desired ends by illegitimate means.

c. Someone who conforms to socially-approved means, but has lost sight of the ends (or has come to accept that they will never achieve them). This person is likely to be someone who "goes through the motions" - possibly more likely to be elderly?

d. Someone who "drops-out" of mainstream society. The drug addict who retreats into a self-contained world, the alcoholic who is unable to hold-down a steady job and so forth.

e. Political deviance is a good example of "the rebel" - whether this is expressed in terms of working for a revolutionary party / group or in such ways as political terrorism / freedom-fighting.

8. Merton's analysis illustrates the relationship between core cultural values and sub-cultural values. In particular, it shows that people may turn to crime because society denies them the opportunity to achieve a core social value (in this case, "success").

- It also explains a number of different types of potential deviance, based around the particular experience that the individual has of the social world.

9. The reason for choosing to conform to or deviate from social norms was to be found, according to Merton, in the theory of *differential socialisation*. Different sub-cultural groups socialise their members in slightly different ways, depending upon their particular social circumstances. Whilst we do not need to explore this idea in any great depth, a classic distinction - between "working-class" and "middle class" socialisation - might serve to illustrate the point:

- Merton saw the working classes as being heavily involved in criminal behaviour and this observation was confirmed by Official Statistics about crime. The reason for this, he suggested, was that the socialisation of this group tends to be "less

~~rigid" in relation to their acceptance of and conformity to "conventional" means of~~
gaining desired ends.

- This seems to contradict Merton's claim that social order is based on a number of core shared values. However, since the working classes, by definition, are the least successful members of any society, they are the sub-cultural group to whom *conventional means* to success have least meaning.

- The cultural experience of working class adults (the fact of their failure by following conventional means) leads them to socialise their children in ways that will give them the greatest possible advantage in their adult lives (the greatest possible chance of achieving desired ends). This means adopting illegitimate / deviant means.

- Over time, these illegitimate means come to be seen (sub-culturally) as relatively normal; therefore, the working classes can violate "conventional norms / means" more easily and with less feelings of guilt etc. The socialisation process acts a channel for deviant behaviour whereby the individual is socialised into deviant norms, which increases / decreases the likelihood of different forms of adaption to social strains (anomie).

10. A further example, continuing the concept of the "American Dream" (a set of fundamental core values), is the 1972 Presidential election. The Democratic candidate, Robert McGovern, proposed a plan whereby heavy taxation would be levied on the inheritance of money above $500,000 (approximately £300,000).

- Clelland and Robertson have shown that this proposal would have adversely affected only 1% of the American population (the so-called Super Rich) - yet it aroused tremendous hostility across all sections of American society (especially amongst working class voters who could only be affected positively by such a proposal).

- Such hostility (and perhaps McGovern's eventually electoral defeat) can be explained by reference to core social values. Working class people were against something that was, objectively, in their financial interest because they were so well socialised into the core value of success. To place limits on what people could inherit meant that a part of the American Dream was taken away. People seemed to believe that one-day they might be in a position to inherit vast wealth and therefore did not want to place limitations on this possibility.

B. Conflict-Based Structuralist Theories.

1. One of the main Conflict perspectives you will meet from time to time during the course is better known as Marxism, after the founder of this particular way of looking at the social world, Karl Marx (1818 - 1883). There are, however, other forms of Conflict Structuralism at which we will look, the most important of these being Weberian sociology, named after its founder Max Weber (1864 - 1920).

2. Like its Functionalist counterpart, Conflict theories agree that society and culture influences individual behaviour, almost but not quite to the point of determining it, by the way it structures the way people are able to think and act.

3. The emphasis on the importance of *structure* and its influence on the individual does not, however, lead writers in this perspective to stress consensus as the basis of social organisation. In fact, the reverse is true. Conflict theorists stress the extent to which individuals, groups and classes within society are in *competition* with each other for whatever people in society consider to be important or worthwhile.

4. This does, of course, seem to raise a fundamental problem. On the one hand, Conflict theorists, by definition, argue that groups in society are always fighting each other. On the other, their Structuralist perspective leads them to suggest that the structure of a society produces social order and, in many respects, consensus. We need to examine how this apparent contradiction can be resolved.

5. The defining characteristic of any society, from a Conflict perspective, is inequality. Marxists, for example, argue that economic inequality is at the heart of all societies. In basic terms, some people will have more than their fair share of a society's economic resources (money) and others will consequently have less than their fair share.

- It is in the interests of those who have wealth to keep and extend what they own, whereas it is in the interests of those who have little or no wealth to try to improve their lot in life.

6. Consensus theorists do, of recognise social inequality, but they argue that inequality is functional for society (for a variety of reasons - giving people incentives, encouraging people to find new ways of creating wealth, making sure that the best-qualified people perform the most important jobs and so on). Thus, these theorists start from the fact of culture and then use it to explain inequality in society. This leads them to stress things like competition as being a core social value.

- Conflict theorists, on the other hand, reverse this idea. They start with the idea that every society will be economically unequal (although you should note that Marxist Conflict theorists argue that a Communist society is possible where economic inequality is eliminated). From this fact, those who are most powerful in society try to socialise the least powerful into accepting inequality in any way they can.

7. What we see here, therefore, is two different interpretations of the same thing:

- Consensus theory stresses how common values are the starting point for social organisation.

- Conflict theory stresses how common values are the end result of economic organisation and inequality, once the most powerful in society have been able to convince everyone else that things like economic inequality are socially necessary.

8. The way this is carried-out is through *cultural socialisation*. The rich and the powerful occupy the most important and influential positions in society and they use their positions to advance their own interests. This socialisation takes two main forms:

> a. It is desirable to convince people that their lack of power, influence, status, wealth and so forth is basically their own fault. If you can encourage people to compete against each other, then some will win and others will lose. If losers can be convinced that the competition is free and fair then their inability to achieve the good things in life can be rationalised as being their own individual fault.

> - This is where cultural institutions such as religion, education and the media are important, since their role is basically to encourage people to see the world in this way.

> b. However, if for whatever reason people fail to be socialised completely into these values, then *force (coercion)* is available to make them see the error of their ways.

> - This is the least desirable socialisation option, mainly because if you force someone to do something against their will you are setting up the conditions for conflict and resistance - something you avoid through the first form of socialisation where people do your bidding because they see it as in their interests to do so.

9. We can complete this section on Conflict theory and culture by outlining an example of the way in which it is possible to show the relationship between cultural socialisation, inequality, values and norms.

- An example we can use is one drawn from education and focuses on an idealised relationship between teacher and student.

A. Teacher

B. Student

- Controls a valuable social resource (knowledge).

- Wants access to the resource controlled by the teacher (because knowledge can be translated into qualifications, etc.).

Potential exists for conflict here, since the teacher has something (knowledge) that is desired by the student

- But this resource only has a value for the teacher if it can be sold. Therefore, teacher has an economic interest in selling access to the resource they control.

- Similarly, student cannot simply take knowledge from teacher without the teacher's co-operation

- It is in the teacher's interest to co-operate with the student, to sell their knowledge to the student in exchange for various social resources (money, status, power, etc.).

- It is in the student's interest to co-operate with the teacher. In order to gain the knowledge that is being sold, student has to agree to a teaching process determined by the teacher.

- Therefore, although this is a situation that contains the potential for conflict (one participant has something the other wants), it is in the interests of both to co-operate in the exchange of commodities (knowledge is exchanged for money, for example).

- This is not an equal relationship, however, since the person who controls the valued social resource (the teacher) has the advantage in this relationship and they can use this advantage to extract more from the student than they provide in return.

10. In the above example we can see, in very idealised terms, the idea that even where an apparent consensus exists (the teacher and student co-operate in the classroom) this is built on a potential conflict (one person or group controlling access to what another person or group needs).

- Thus, whoever controls resources considered culturally valuable will always have an economic advantage over those who desire access to these resources.

11. As the example, suggests, however, in order to occupy a dominant social position it is necessary to control a resource that other people want - and this is where we can look at other aspects of culture from a Conflict perspective.

1. Conflict theorists, unlike their consensus counterparts, tend to argue that all modern societies consist of the appearance of a common culture, shared by everyone in society, which masks the reality of competing cultural forms. Marxist Conflict theorists in particular have argued that every society consists of social classes defined in terms of whether they own or do not own the means of economic production in society (in simple terms, society ultimately consists of two great classes:

- The *bourgeoisie* (or *upper and middle classes*) who own and control the means of producing economic survival (they own factories, businesses and the like) and

- The *proletariat* (or *working class*) who survive by working for the bourgeoisie.

2. In this sense, each of these two classes have very different interests and experiences in society. The bourgeoisie, for example, are the wealthiest (minority) in society whose interests lie in hanging-on to their privileged position. The proletariat, consisting of the least wealthy majority, have according to Marxists the common interest of taking away the wealth of the bourgeoisie. As can be imagined, the relationship between these two great classes is built upon a fundamental conflict of interest.

3. For Marxists, therefore, the bourgeoisie have two main problems in terms of their relations with other social classes:

       a. How to maintain their privileged position from one generation to the next.

       b. How to stop other classes taking away their wealth and privilege.

4. One solution is to develop and enhance cultural artefacts (that is, the *material things* and *non-material ideas* that constitute a particular culture) relevant to the bourgeoisie for two main reasons:

       a. Firstly, to give the members of this class a sense of having things in common (a common culture and hence class identity) and

       b. Secondly, to try to impose the cultural ideas useful to this class on the rest of society. If this happens it makes it appear that everyone in society has much the same interests, making it less likely that the working class will see themselves as fundamentally different and opposed to the *ruling class*.

5. In this respect, many Marxist sociologists have tried to show how cultural artefacts can be used by a dominant economic class (*the ruling class*) to enhance their social *status* over other classes in society, This, therefore, is where a distinction between *high culture* and *low culture* can be an important one.

6. The status (or social standing) of a ruling class is enhanced through claims that their culture is superior to the culture of the rest of society ("the masses").

- By its ability to spread its concept of *superior* (high) and *inferior* (low) cultural forms (through ownership and / or control of *cultural institutions* such as *religion, education* and the *mass media*), a ruling class is able to impose cultural ideas on the rest of society that reflect its interests.

7. *High culture*, therefore, refers to what are (supposedly) the greatest artistic and literary achievements of a society. Clearly, what counts as "the greatest" is going to ultimately be a matter of *values* - judgements about what should or should not count as high culture.

- However, according to Marxists, the people who are in the most influential positions in society are able to impose their definitions of "great" - and these definitions invariably reflect the kinds of activities and ideas that are most relevant and useful to a ruling class. Cultural forms such as opera, classical music, the literary works of Shakespeare and so forth all fall under the heading of *high culture*.

8. *Low culture*, on the other hand, refers to a wide variety of cultural themes that are characterised by their production and consumption by "the masses". At various times, low cultural forms have included the cinema, certain forms of theatre, comics, television (especially soap operas, game shows and the like).

9. A simple example illustrates the difference between high and low culture:

- A painting of a nude woman hanging on the wall of a gallery is "art" (part of high culture), whereas a picture of a naked woman published in a mass circulation newspaper is certainly not "art" (and may, under certain conditions, be labelled as pornography) but the very opposite of art, namely low culture.

- The justification for the distinction is found not in the cultural form itself (a picture of a naked man or women is much the same whatever medium it is presented in) but in the theoretical elaboration of that form.

- Thus, when a painting is hung in an art gallery what is being admired is the skill and composition, the cultural references and representations. When a picture appears in a newspaper, these are absent and all that is left is a titillation factor.

10. Whether or not you are convinced by these arguments is probably a matter of your perspective on culture, since there can ultimately be no *cultural absolutes* on such matters, just *cultural preferences* - the argument being that one social class is able to impose its cultural preferences on other classes in society.

~~Elite Theory~~

1. Marxist Conflict theorists, by concentrating on the way cultural artefacts are used, generally tend not to make judgements about the relative worth of various cultural artefacts (whether or not, for example, classical music is a superior cultural form to pop music) - although as we will see in a moment, there are exceptions to this.

2. Elite theorists, on the other hand, have tended to try to isolate those aspects of a culture that are "the best in thought and deed" (the highest cultural forms to which a society should aspire) and to separate them from the worthless, the mass produced and the artificial (the lowest cultural forms characteristic of the masses).

- Shils (1971), for example, argues we can characterise this approach by the way it argues that modern societies are characterised by three basic cultural levels:

    a. *Highbrow* (the superior and refined, containing the best qualities of a society).

    b. *Middlebrow* (the mediocre that aspires to be highbrow but which lacks originality, subtlety or depth) and

    c. *Lowbrow* (the brutal and worthless aspects of a culture. Forms which lack any pretence at sophistication, insight or refinement and which supposedly characterise many of the cultural forms of modern, working class, culture).

3. For elite theorists, modern societies basically consist of a small, cultured, elite and a large, *acultured*, mass (*acultured* means, in this context, a culture that is relatively shallow and worthless in terms of the things it values). The problem, as such theorists see it, is how to protect, preserve and accentuate high culture from the negative effects of low culture.

4. The rise of *mass culture* is related to the rise of modern societies, where the process of industrialisation brought cheap, mass produced, ideas and items to the mass of society, replacing, in the process, the *folk cultures* and traditions of pre-industrial societies.

- The main agency responsible for this (supposed) diminution and cheapening of popular cultural forms is the mass media and, in particular, cinema and the popular press. The basic idea behind this theory is that the masses, easily lead and manipulated by an unscrupulous media pursuing their own narrow interests and profits, are sold cultural products (films, gossip and the like) that appeal simply to the lowest common denominator is society. These products lack depth and subtlety and their consumption by the masses (who knew no better) supposedly made (makes?) them easy to control and manipulate.

Problems

1. Criticisms of this types of elite cultural theory are numerous, but we can note that some of the most frequent are as follows:

- Elite theorists conveniently assume that high culture is inherently superior to what they term low culture, yet it does not seem possible to differentiate this easily between cultural differences without making an arbitrary judgement. I may feel that the works of William Shakespeare represent a higher cultural level than the works of Jeffrey Archer, for example, but it is difficult to see how this belief could be supported objectively.

- The easy distinction between elite and mass / popular culture is oversimplified.

- Many critics of this approach argue that there is little evidence to support the notion that popular culture is, by definition, brutish and impoverished. On the contrary, whilst some cultural forms are undoubtedly manufactured simply for profit and seem to have little intrinsic cultural value or longevity, many originally popular cultural forms have evolved into something of lasting value and worth.

- Finally, elite theorists contrast an idealised pre-industrial past filled with poor-but-happy peasants participating proudly in a dynamic folk culture with a supposedly moribund present where manufactured (both literally and metaphorically) cultural artefacts are passively consumed by an unthinking, forever unsatisfied, mass.

  - This is an important source of criticism (the idealisation of the past as a contrast to an unhappy present) and we can divert slightly to look briefly at the concept of folk culture in more detail.

Folk Culture

1. The distinction between *folk culture* and *mass culture* rests on the difference between two basic types of society.

- The first, in which *folk culture* is said to dominate, is characteristic of *pre-industrial societies*. That is, societies that existed before the invention of machines and mass power sources (steam, gas, electricity, etc.) and in which the main type of economic production was *agriculture* (basically subsistence agriculture where people farmed for their own survival with little surplus produce). An example of this type of society is Britain before the *Industrial Revolution* and the development of a *Capitalist* economic system.

- The second, in which mass cultural forms are held to dominate, is characteristic of *industrial societies* such as present-day Britain. This type of society is characterised by factory production based around machines, rather than agriculture.

2. *Elite theorists* in particular characterise *folk culture* as a vibrant lower class culture (music, dance, medicine, oral traditions and so forth) variously expressed through popular gatherings such as festivals, fairs, carnivals and so forth.

- This culture is passed from one generation to the next in a variety of traditional forms, in particular folk songs, fairy tales and word-of-mouth.

3. *Industrialisation* is the villain of the situation, in that it destroyed much of the basis of folk culture by forcing people away from agriculture into towns and factories, breaking-up the traditional communities on which much of this traditional culture was based. The cultural vacuum left by this break-up was filled by popular / mass culture, manufactured and sold to people as a substitute for this traditional past. Unlike traditional folk culture which was seen to be *active and participatory*, popular culture was seen to be characterised by its *passivity*. In basic terms, people simply *consumed* whatever was put in front of them, such was their desire for cultural products.

- In modern Britain, for example, modern elite theorists criticise the "Heritage Industry" that recreates the things of the past - buildings, communities and the like - and sells the "experience" to its customers who visit, watch the video and buy the T-shirt before moving-on to consume another pre-packaged slice of culture.

4. Trowler ("Investigating The Media", 1991) summarises this view thus:

> *"Capitalism quickly polluted folk culture and replaced it with a plastic commodity culture - mass culture. The old traditions were quickly wiped out. The working man and woman have become passive recipients of culture, not active participants in it. Today they sit in the cinema rather than take part in the folk dance. They buy fast food rather than make good food themselves with traditional recipes. Advertising has given them the constant desire for things which they can't have. The world is filed with characters from the television who they don't really know, though they spend hours reading and talking about them as they once might have done about characters in the village. The mass media's role has been to transmit and propagate mass culture".*

5. The above is a politically Conservative view of culture. A more politically-radical interpretation was given by a group of Marxist Conflict theorists, writing from the 1940's, known as the Frankfurt School. These writers offered a different solution to the problem of the development of mass culture.

6. They argued that mass culture was a way of distracting the working classes from the real causes of their problems in Capitalist society (low wages, exploitation, lack of power and status, etc.). In simple terms, the development of a *mass culture* that encouraged passive consumption of the pre-packaged products of big business not only destroyed vital, communal, aspects of *folk culture*, but also provided the working classes with an illusory sense of happiness, togetherness and well-being.

- A modern example of this might be the tabloid newspapers' preoccupation with the monarchy. People are encouraged to take an interest in the lives of people with whom they have little or nothing in common, seeing them as soap-opera figures to be watched with passive fascination rather than active criticism. Thus, vital questions about the role and purpose of a monarchy are overlooked in favour of questions about who is sleeping with whom, how much each will get from a divorce, whether Charles will marry the real "love of his life" - the permutations are endless.

- To aid our involvement, distant people with distant lives are personalised with pet names - Chas 'n' Di, Fat Fergie, the Royal Mistress and so forth. Through these devices, the argument goes, we are encouraged to view these people as somehow "just like everyone else, except they are fabulously wealthy". The behaviour of royalty is further portrayed, soap-opera fashion, as a series of scripted events and set-pieces. Thus, the "fairy-tale Wedding" gives way to the "saga of the Royal Divorce", made more complicated and fascinating by "the Other Woman" (or, by way of variation, the "Other Man").

7. Both the Elite and Frankfurt School viewpoints have things in common, even though they are politically far apart. For example:

- The working classes are seen as passive consumers of pre-packaged cultural forms.

- Working class culture lacks creativity.

- Working class cultural life is brutish and debased.

8. In summary, although both of these basic theories have modern-day advocates, the main argument levelled against them (apart from charges of political bias) is that neither accurately captures or reflects the true complexity of cultural developments and forms of behaviour.

- In particular, both see working class culture as dangerous and worthless (elite theorists saw it as a threat to high cultural forms, whereas the Frankfurt School saw it evidence of a working class that had been diverted from the pursuit of its real class interests by "bread and circuses").

9. More modern theories and arguments about culture and class, within the general Conflict perspective, have focused much more on the nature and development of different cultural forms. In this respect, these theories tend to be less damning of working class cultural forms and activities.

- Thus, to complete this section on Conflict perspectives we will look briefly at *Pluralism* and *Humanistic Marxism*.

Pluralist Perspectives.

1. This perspective is representative of a group of writers who, while emphasising the idea of competition between different groups in society, reject Marxist interpretations of culture. The general term for these non-Marxist Conflict theorists is "pluralist" because they see societies as made-up of a variety (or *plurality*) of different groups and classes, each with their own different interests and agendas.

2. Thus, pluralist writers stress the idea that societies are made-up of various groups who develop their own cultural values and norms, some of which they have in common with other cultural groups. This perspective, therefore, focuses on the idea of *cultural diversity*, an idea we will develop in more detail at a later point.

3. The *pluralist view of culture*, therefore, rejects the idea that a mass culture exists in modern societies (and certainly not one that has the negative connotations of Elite theories of culture). Pluralists reject the idea that cultural forms can be understood in simple "good or bad" terms. For example, the idea that lower class culture in pre-industrial society was somehow superior to lower class culture in industrial society is dismissed as both a gross over-simplification and the product of a romanticised view of lower class life.

- Trowler ("Investigating The Media", 1991) captures this idea when he notes:

> *"The reality is that for working men and women in pre-industrial society life was usually nasty, brutish and short. Modern society has made most people literate and this has enabled them to be discerning consumers of an ever-expanding cultural output. This includes not only literature in the conventional sense, but also TV and radio output, films, journalism and so on. People are also far more politically literate and aware of the world around them than was the case in the past. This allows them to appreciate and choose from a wide range of options. Class distinctions have become less and less important in influencing the choices made by individuals in this respect. Members of the working class are as likely to be watching Panorama as anybody else, while soap operas are now appealing to the middle class as well as the working class.".*

4. The main characteristic of pluralist perspectives, therefore, is the focus on the choices people make from a range of possible cultural forms. Clearly such choices will be made against a background of the individual's personal and social circumstances (their cultural socialisation), but they reject the idea that cultural activities are simply passive forms of consumption. Instead, they emphasise the expanding range of cultural developments and forms.

- They also reject the idea that some cultural forms are inherently superior to others (a form of cultural snobbery, perhaps). In short, the cultural choices people make reflect a complex, changing world in which cultural activities develop or die-out on the basis of their relevance to peoples' lives.

Humanistic Marxism

1. This modern version of Marxism sees cultures as involving ways of doing and thinking. In this respect culture is not simply a matter of personal choice and preference (although this is an important aspect of culture). It also reflects a wider sense of (class) struggle in society. This is because cultures are *integrating mechanisms* in society.

- What this means is that cultures bind people together by giving them things in common. Religious groups, for example, develop a common sense of culture based around things like a belief in the same god(s), practices and rituals. This common culture gives such groups an identity (they are different to other groups) and a common cause. In addition, these cultures give their individual members a sense of identity (who they are, their purpose in life and so forth).

2. Humanistic Marxists such as Gramsci (1891 - 1937) have argued that different social classes develop different cultural backgrounds and identities based on their different experiences in the social world.

- A rich white male, for example, experiences life in modern Britain very differently from a poor black female. Cultures, as a "design for living", develop to reflect these experiences precisely because they are ways we use to equip ourselves for living and coping in society.

3. Although this seems to reflect a pluralist view of culture, one of the main differences is that *Marxist Conflict theorists* see society in terms of large social groups (*classes*) rather than the much smaller groups characteristic of pluralist perspectives. Thus, broadly, each social class develops its own *cultural norms* that reflect its particular experiences in the world (although, in reality, it does tend to get more complex than this crude outline suggests).

4. This perspective stresses two important ideas:

- Class groups develop different cultural outlooks.

- Class groups are in a constant state of conflict with one another.

5. Unlike in the past when a ruling economic class could establish its leadership in society through force and terror (killing people who disagreed with its general view of the world), in modern societies leadership has to be earned. That is, a ruling class cannot take its "right to rule" for granted. Members of this class must, in short, convince both themselves and others in society that they have the "right to rule".

- Writers such as Gramsci, therefore, have used the concept of cultural *hegemony* (that is, the right to lead based on the *consent* - willing or manufactured - of those who are lead).

6. What this involves is a *dynamic relationship* between different *class cultures*. Rather than a ruling class simply imposing its culture on the rest of society, the process is more complex. This class, for example, seeks to propagate its values

throughout society (but not necessarily its norms), since if people can be convinced of certain values this will influence their normative development along particular lines.

- To use a simple example, if people can be convinced that Capitalism is the best possible economic system then they will develop norms that encourage them to try to succeed according to Capitalist values. In this way, Capitalism as an economic system survives (and a ruling class, by and large, survive over time since they are economically and culturally best equipped to succeed in this type of society).

7. The concept of *hegemony* is useful because it provides a sense of *cultural diversity* and dynamic political struggle. It can be used to explain, for example, how and why cultural forms (classical music, football, punk rock) are adopted and used by people of diverse cultural backgrounds.

- In this respect, *hegemony* solves the problem of how to explain:

    a. The fact that basic cultural forms survive over time (which is difficult to explain from a pluralist perspective that places much more stress on individual choice).

    b. The fact that cultural forms evolve, adapt and change over time (since cultural leadership is seen to be a process of struggle and conflict).

8. Finally, therefore, the idea of a *popular culture* is one that, for modern Marxist Conflict theorists, should be used to show the dynamic and creative nature of cultural forms and behaviour. People develop new cultural forms as a means of coping with their position in the social world, challenging the old order and, perhaps, creating forms of "*cultural space*" that provide a sense of meaning and identity in the modern world.

- Finally therefore, having dealt at some length with a variety of Conflict perspectives on cultural development, we can now turn to a perspective (Interactionism) that lays much theoretical stress on the idea of human meanings and purpose as people go about the daily task of creating and recreating the social world.

C. Interactionist Theories.

1. Interactionist theories are different in scope to the type of Structuralist theories that we have considered. While Interactionists write about much the same type of things as their Consensus and Conflict counterparts, the theoretical emphasis is different. This is something that we now have to elaborate when we look at the various ways that Interactionist sociologists have interpreted the concepts of culture and identity.

2. In general, Interactionist perspectives tend to concentrate upon relatively small-scale levels of social interaction (between individuals, small social groups and so forth) and, for this reason, they are sometimes referred-to as a *micro* level of sociological analysis. We can begin this brief overview of Interactionist theories of culture by identifying a number of the basic characteristics of human cultures.

3. It is a product of social interaction. That is, cultures develop out of the way people act towards one another in a way that involves both *purpose* and *meaning*.

For example, using the classroom as an example, teacher and students interact educationally in a way that has some *purpose*. My intended purpose might be "to teach sociology" and your purpose might be "to learn sociology", although we can't take this for granted since some of you may be here for the purpose of keeping warm. This interaction also has some *meaning* for each of us and at a *guess* most of us would probably agree that the meaning of this interaction is educational.

4. I have used the word "*guess*" deliberately because it illustrates the idea that we can never be certain of the *purpose and meaning* of any form of social interaction. This is because we are unable to know what someone else is thinking. The most we can do, therefore, is *observe* the behaviour of others and make assumptions (or educated guesses) about what they are thinking (their *purpose and meaning*) when they do something. For example, I assume that you turn-up to each of your classes for the *purpose* of studying Sociology (but I could be wrong).

- What if, for example, you have arrived here with different assumptions about the purpose and meaning of this interaction?

- What would happen if I assume I am here to teach you Sociology, but you each assume you are here for a different purpose (one of you assumes it is a party, another assumes it is a wedding, yet another assumes this is a public lavatory). If this were the case, then the *meaning* of this situation would be different for each of us and our behaviour, based on this meaning, would probably result in total confusion.

5. This example may be ridiculous (and we'll look at why in a moment), but it illustrates the *potential for confusion* that always exists in human interaction. If every time we tried to interact we had to check that:

- everyone shared the same purpose and

• the meaning of the situation was more or less the same for everyone,

then very little in the way of purposeful human interaction would be possible.

6. The question to answer, therefore, is how do we avoid these problems? Many animals, for example, avoid them because their behaviour *instinctive*. Their behaviour in any situation is governed by genetically predetermined *responses* to certain forms of *stimulation*. Many cats, for example, signal to another animal that they do not intend to attack it by raising their tail vertically. This is an instinctive action that does not have to be learnt - the cat instinctively knows that this is the correct signal to give in a non-threatening situation. This is efficient, but limiting.

• A system of behaviour based on simple *signals* limits the ability of animals to develop beyond very simple groups, mainly because they lack the ability to communicate and share anything beyond a relatively simple set of meanings.

7. Humans, on the other hand, can solve these problems by taking advantage of two major biological advantages we have over most animals:

   • a. Firstly, the ability to *communicate* through *language* (perhaps the ultimate system of shared meaning). This allows us to develop meaning in our behaviour.

   • b. Secondly, the ability to *remember meanings* and *act purposefully* on the basis of this stored *cultural* knowledge.

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

   • *Symbols* are different to *signals* since:

   a. A symbol does not need any direct relationship to the thing it symbolises. For example, the symbol "elephant" only means "a large animal with four legs, big ears and a long nose" because that is what we have learnt to interpret it as meaning. It could equally mean "a small furry animal with two legs".

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

9. An example of the way we both communicate symbolically and use this ability to create very complex cultural rules and meaning might be:

Imagine you were standing at traffic lights waiting to cross the road. If you see a car go through a red light you may interpret that behaviour as "wrong" (because it is dangerous) / "illegal" (because it breaks the law). If, however, the car has a flashing

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

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

Someone from a society where cars do not exist would not associate red traffic lights with "stop" or "it's dangerous to cross the road when the light is green" because that *symbolic association* between the two things would not be a part of their "*symbolic system of meaning*" (or *culture*).

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

11. Thus, the world humans inhabit is a *social construction*. This involves the idea that society is a product of our ability to think and express our thoughts *symbolically*. The things that we recognise as being "part of our society" or "part of our culture" are simply products of our mind.

12. This is one reason why Interactionists reject the idea that society has an *objective existence* that is separate from the people who, through their everyday relationships, create a sense of living in a society. Society is an *elaborate fiction* we create to help us make sense of our relationships and impose some sort of order on them.

- We create this *fictional universe* to make social life possible, since without a sense of shared meanings about what we see and do, interaction would, at best, be very difficult and, at worst, impossible. Cultures, therefore, represent the general store of shared meanings that people create to give them a feeling of having things in common and as the basis for constructive social interaction.

For example, think of any dealings you have had with people who do not behave in ways that conform to your cultural expectations. People who are drunk, for example, frequently fail to observe expected cultural norms and this makes it very difficult for us to interact with them on anything but a very basic level of understanding.

The Social Construction of Meaning.

1. As we have seen, humans have the ability to impose a sense of order and predictability on a potentially disordered and unpredictable social world by creating shared meanings about situations. This system of meaning (culture) involves the

~~standard sociological ideas of role play, values and norms, but the question to finally~~ consider is how do we go about the task of creating a culture in the first place?

- In simple terms, therefore, we have to consider the process whereby individuals "agree to agree" about what they are doing (the purpose of interaction) and why they are doing it (the meaning of interaction).

2. Interactionists generally start to explain this process by referring to the concept of a *definition of the situation*. That is, how we define a situation affects how we behave when we are in that situation. We can look at this process in more detail in the following way.

3. To make sense of the confusing world that we experience on a daily basis, Interactionists argue that we use a process of *categorization* and *labelling*. That is, as we interact we categorise similar experiences (or phenomena) in some way. For example, we create categories of people based around our perception of them as:

- Male or female.
- Young or old.
- Employer / employee.
- Traffic warden / police woman.
- Husband / wife.

4. Each category of related phenomena is like a little box that we hold inside our mind and, for our convenience, each little box has:

   a. A name or *label* that identifies it for us (for example, the label "mother").

   b. A *set of social characteristics* inside. That is, a set of related ideas that we associate with the label on the box.

- Thus, when someone we meet reveals one of their *social labels* to us ("I'm a mother", for example) we mentally "open the box" that contains our store of knowledge about "motherhood".

- This might include *objective* (*factual*) information (a mother is someone who has given birth to a child) as well as *subjective* (based upon *opinion* or *values*) information (I love my mother so all children love their mothers; a mother has a duty to look after her children and so forth).

5. By *categorising* the social world we give it the *appearance* of order and regularity, since when we meet people we are able to interact with them on the basis of the "general things that we know about this type of person".

- When we meet a police officer, for example, we might give them an exaggerated respect because we realise that they have the power to arrest us if we do not give the appearance of recognising their authority.

6. The *socialisation process*, therefore, is one that focuses on the teaching and learning of common cultural meanings, since this is the basis for all meaningful social interaction. One of the most important things we learn, in effect, is how to recognise different situations and how we are expected to generally behave in that situation.

Summary.

1. Macro and micro sociological perspectives both see cultures as specifying the *ground rules* for peoples' social behaviour.

- By the establishment, teaching and learning of these basic rules of behaviour, social interaction is made possible, orderly and reasonably predictable.

2. Macro perspectives focus more on how these rules affect our behaviour by placing restrictions (constraints) on our possible range and choices of behaviour. The focus here is upon large social groups and institutions in society.

3. Micro perspectives focus more on how and why these rules are created. That is, the focus is on small-scale interaction between conscious individuals.

4. Both perspectives have their advantages and disadvantages in terms of how completely or incompletely they are able to produce theories that explain human behaviour. For the moment, it is probably easier to see these sociological perspectives as complimentary, in the sense that each explains some aspects of our behaviour plausibly. As the course develops the differences between each of the perspectives will become more apparent and so will the basis for seeing these perspectives as having fundamental differences that make them incompatible with each other.