

Culture and Identity

There are lots of different theories about how society shapes individuals — or how individuals shape society. You need to have a decent idea of what functionalism, Marxism and interpretivism are.

Functionalism Says the Individual is the Product of Society

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was one of the founders of sociology. In his view, society is made up of various **institutions**, each of which has a useful **function**. So, Durkheim and his followers are known as **functionalists**. They looked at **how society was structured** — you can call functionalism a **structural theory**. Functionalists looked at how institutions in society work, and how they **affect individuals**. Here are some examples:

- 1) **The Family** — has the function of socialising children.
- 2) **Education** — has the function of preparing young people for adult society.
- 3) **Religion** — has the function of uniting society through shared beliefs.

Functionalists believe that the **structures** of society are set up to allow society to **run as smoothly as possible**. Durkheim was keen on the idea that individuals **internalise** the **norms** and **values** (the rules and ideas) of society. This means those norms and values **become a part of who you are** — your personality and your identity. The result is **consensus**, which means everyone sharing the **same norms and values**.

Durkheim called the **shared norms and values** that hold society together the “**collective consciousness of society**”.

Definitions

Structure — the way society operates as a whole. Individuals have almost no control over this.

Identity — an individual's mental picture of herself / himself.

Norms — ways of **behaving** and / or **thinking** that are seen as **normal** in society.

Values — **beliefs** about what things are **important** and what things are **right** and **wrong**.

Culture — The **combined effect** of norms and values — a way of life.

Not Everyone Agrees with Functionalist Thinking

- 1) **Interpretivists** (also called **interactionists**) focus on the **individual** more than functionalists do. They say functionalism is **wrong to ignore the individual**. They think that individuals can choose how to behave, and aren't simply responding to social forces.
- 2) **Marxists** say functionalism ignores the **unequal power** of some groups. Marxists say the rich have the most influence in defining the norms, values and beliefs in society. They think structures in society are set up to **serve the interests of the rich**, not to keep society ticking along as smoothly as possible.
- 3) **Postmodernists** say **functionalism is outdated** because it's based on the idea that there's only one dominant or shared culture. Postmodernists argue that today there's a **complex and diverse range** of cultural norms and values.

Marxism Says the Individual is the Product of Economic Forces

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was another of the founders of sociology. He focused on the **effects of capitalism**. He thought that the **economic system (infrastructure)** of a society determined the beliefs and values of that **society (the superstructure)**.



Marxists believe that the most important force in society is **class conflict**

- 1) In **capitalist societies**, workers are employed to produce goods which are sold by their employers at a profit.
- 2) Only a bit of this profit ends up in the workers' wages — most of it's **kept by the employer**.
- 3) Marx said that if workers were allowed to **notice the unfairness** of this, they'd revolt. So, to **avoid revolution**, the **capitalist system shapes the superstructure** to make sure that the workers accept their lot in life.
- 4) **Institutions** like the family, education and religion **lead individuals** into accepting the **inequalities of capitalism**.

In other words, Marxists think people are **socialised** into a **culture** based on their **social class**. They think people's **identity** depends on their **class position** in the capitalist system.

Not Everyone Agrees with Marx either...

- 1) **Functionalists** say Marx put too much emphasis on the role of **economic structures** in shaping ideas and beliefs.
- 2) **Interpretivists** say he placed too much emphasis on **class** and not enough on individuals.
- 3) **Postmodernists** say social class doesn't have such an important influence on individual identity any more. They say people are defined by the choices they make, not by whether they're a worker or a boss.

Culture and Identity

Interpretivists Say Individual Actions are Most Important

Many sociologists say that culture is actually determined by the **behaviour and interaction of individuals**. Theories like this are called **action theories** because they emphasise the **action** of individuals, as opposed to **structural theories** like functionalism and Marxism, which are all about the big structures of society.

Interpretivist (or **interactionist**) theories start with the idea that all individuals **interpret** society around them — people **try to make sense** of society. Interpretivists say that culture comes from **people's own ideas** of how people **interact** with each other.

Interpretivists don't say structures aren't important, but they do suggest that each of us **responds** to social structures in our **own way**. We aren't just products of socialisation — we all have **free will** and make **choices**. An important point here is that the **results of individual choice** can be **large-scale social change**. For example, **Jonathan Gershuny (1992)** made an interpretivist analysis of gender roles in the home.

It's always good to bring an example in.

- 1) Some **women decided** they wanted to **work outside the home**. That's the **individual choice** bit.
- 2) Male partners then took on **more childcare** and housework. It became **acceptable** for men to adopt roles in the family that had been considered **feminine**. That's the **large-scale social change** bit.

Labelling Theory Says We're Given Labels which Affect our Behaviour

The **classic example** of labelling theory is the **self-fulfilling prophecy** of **educational failure**. This is where a child is **labelled** as a bad student and then goes on to actually **become** a bad student.

Very strong labels, e.g. "**criminal**" or "**pervert**", can take on what's called **master status**, which means they replace an individual's other labels. Someone labelled a criminal could be seen as just a criminal, and **nothing else**.

It's important to remember that labelling theory is a kind of **interpretivism** — it says that the **individual** can choose to accept or reject labels. In other words, being called a failure will only turn you into a failure if you choose to accept the label.

What do you know... Not Everyone Agrees with the Interpretivists either...

Marxists say interpretivists don't pay enough attention to **conflict** or to the fact that some social groups are more **powerful** than others. **Functionalists** say they don't acknowledge the importance of the **socialisation process**.

To **sum up** — here's a nice table showing the **main ideas** of functionalism, Marxism and interpretivism.

Functionalism	Marxism	Interpretivism
Dominant in 1940s and 1950s	Dominant in 1960s and 1970s	Influential in the 1970s
Culture is produced by social structure to create consensus.	Culture is produced by social structure to disguise class conflict.	Culture isn't produced by social structure. Culture is produced by individuals.

Practice Questions

- Q1 What's the basic difference between structural and interpretivist approaches?
- Q2 Which theorist believed in consensus?
- Q3 Which theorist believed in class conflict?

Exam Question

- Q1 Explain what is meant by "labelling theory".

(2 marks)

Students of the world unite — all you have to lose is your brains...

Social structure, social action, consensus and conflict are key sociological ideas. If you understand them, many other topics will make a lot more sense. So **learn these pages**. Make sure you can jot down a few sentences about what functionalists, Marxists and interpretivists think about the relationship between individuals and society. Then you'll know you've learnt it.

Different Types of Culture

In the UK, there's more than one type of culture and there are lots of ways to look at culture — folk vs urban, high vs low, popular culture, global culture...

Culture is a Way of Life

Culture means the language, beliefs, shared customs, values, knowledge, skills, roles and norms in a society. It's the way of life of a social group or society. Culture is socially transmitted. That means it's passed on through socialisation (see p.10).

A subculture is an identifiable group within a culture whose members share values and behaviour patterns which are different from mainstream norms, e.g. youth subcultures like punks and goths. Subcultures can be a form of resistance to mainstream culture (see p.61).

Mass Culture replaces Folk Culture

Folk culture is the culture of pre-industrial society. It includes things like folk dances, folk songs, fairy tales, old wives' tales, traditional folk medicine and agricultural rituals. It's mainly passed on through word of mouth. Sociologists have looked at the ways culture changes as people move from villages into towns and cities.

- 1) Robert Redfield (1947) said that "folk societies" were based on strong extended families, supportive communities and a local culture. In urban societies these were not present.
- 2) Georg Simmel (1950) argued that urban societies showed a reduced sense of community, and that urban people were more individualistic and selfish.
- 3) Theorists from the Frankfurt School said that this reduced sense of community was linked to the development of a mass culture. They said that the media had become a strong agent of socialisation, and it was wiping out the differences between local cultures. Instead, it looked more and more like there was just one big culture, shared by everyone.
- 4) These days, the term mass culture is used not just to describe the effects of the media, but also to refer to fashion and other types of consumption, e.g. if you eat lunch in a famous burger chain, you're taking part in mass culture.



You can also Divide culture up into "High Culture" and "Low Culture"

The elite (better educated, with more money and power) tend to have a distinct culture from the masses.

- 1) Shakespeare, opera, sophisticated restaurants and arty French films are the type of things that are associated with "high culture".
- 2) Meanwhile, the masses enjoy low culture — e.g. soap operas, reality TV, musicals, fast food and Hollywood films.
- 3) High culture is generally considered more difficult to appreciate and the audience is seen as educated and having "good taste". Aspects of high culture are seen as good for society, though they don't make much money compared to a lot of low culture, so the government often subsidises them.
- 4) In recent years a lot of funding for high culture has come from a low culture source — the National Lottery[®]. Some customers have been hostile to the idea that the lottery is used to pay for "arty" dance and theatre companies. They suggest it's elitist culture — most lottery punters wouldn't get to see it and probably wouldn't like it if they did.

This is all linked to the ideas of "class taste", cultural deprivation and cultural capital — see p.56-57.

Many sociologists say there's No Such Thing as "Low Culture"

- 1) The ideas of mass culture and low culture are very negative. Some sociologists have argued that this view is based on an elitist perspective. For example, Bourdieu (1984) says the whole idea of "high culture" is just a way of giving status to elite groups — he says that status is maintained by passing on cultural knowledge.
- 2) Marxists argue that high culture is just ruling class culture, and that the ruling class have imposed their idea of culture on the rest of society, and defined it as "better" than working class culture. Some Marxists argue that so-called "low culture" is just as complex and sophisticated as "high culture". For that reason, they prefer to use the term "popular culture", which is more of a positive idea.
- 3) Important work on popular culture has been done by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). They analyse popular culture products like TV, magazines and youth fashions, finding meanings within them.

Popular Culture theorists emphasise that the Audience is Active

"Mass" and "Low" culture are both concepts that are based on the idea of a passive audience. They assume that the audience is being manipulated by the media and doesn't have much control. "Popular" culture is a concept that is based on the idea of an active audience. This audience shapes and changes the culture. The CCCS has done a lot of research into the way this happens in youth fashions and subcultures.

Different Types of Culture

There's also a Global Culture

Giddens (1990) says that **technological change** has led to globalisation. Goods can be **transported** to anywhere in the world, and **information** can be quickly transmitted across the globe. This has meant that cultures that were once local have become global. For example, British and American pop music is everywhere. American and Indian films are popular internationally.

- 1) Klein (2000) and Sklair (1995) point out that a few large **transnational corporations** (TNCs), e.g. Coca-Cola®, NIKE and TimeWarner, are involved in the majority of cultural production, making cultural goods that are consumed all over the world. Sklair argues that TNCs and the global media have **more power** than individual **nation states**.
- 2) Critics of globalisation worry that these TNCs will replace the world's current **cultural diversity** (the differences in people's lifestyles because of the society they live in) with Western culture. They refer to cultural globalisation as **cultural imperialism**. Klein (2000) says there's already a trend towards **cultural homogeneity** (everyone having the same culture, wearing the same trainers, eating the same burgers, drinking the same fizzy drinks).
- 3) Supporters of cultural globalisation argue that it's a **two-way process**. Western culture is transmitted to new societies, and other identities and cultures get passed back to Western societies — e.g. through **Bollywood films** shown in Western mainstream cinemas. With the movement of people from different countries and cultures to other parts of the world, many countries are now **multicultural societies**. Postmodernists argue that this allows people to consume a **plurality** of cultures — this is called **multiculturalism**. They think that globalisation leads to **hybridity** (a **pick and mix**) of cultures rather than one culture being imposed on another.

A Cultural Industry is... an Industry that Creates Culture

- 1) In pre-industrial times, people mostly **made their own things**, or made things for their **community**. They made their own folk culture — singing folk songs, telling stories round the fire, even... morris dancing.
- 2) In our capitalist industrial society, we **buy cultural goods** that have been made by the **cultural industries**. Buying goods has become part of the culture of modern, Western society — it's known as **consumer culture**.
- 3) Some of the most important examples of **cultural industries** are the fashion industry and various media industries such as film, news, music, advertising, broadcasting and the magazine industry. All of these industries create and sell things that fit into people's **cultural lives** — the stuff they **think about**, and **talk about**, and in many cases the stuff that helps them to **define who they are**. Some theorists, e.g. Featherstone (1991), call this "**symbolic consumption**" — see below.

Symbolic Consumption means Buying Things that help Define who you are

- 1) In modern industrial societies, **hardly anyone** buys any product based on its function alone.
- 2) For example, most **trainers** are just comfortable shoes — so choosing a pair should be pretty easy, right... yeah, right. The thing is, when most people choose a pair of trainers, they have to make sure that they're the **right brand** and the **right style**. You don't just buy the shoes, you buy what the shoes stand for — their "**symbolic value**". What you're actually buying is part of your **identity**.
- 3) That means that **most industries** in the modern world have actually become cultural industries. They're selling things that have some kind of "**cultural meaning**" attached. Any industry that makes things with a **brand image** that means something to people, or stands for something, is involved in **cultural production**.

Practice Questions

- Q1 What is folk culture?
- Q2 What is mass culture?
- Q3 What is globalisation?
- Q4 Give an example of symbolic consumption.

Exam Question

- Q1 Assess the view that high culture is elitist.

(24 marks)

If I watch X factor on top of Ben Nevis, does that make it high culture?

Culture is everywhere, apparently. Even something as simple as choosing Coke® over PEPSI®, or Burger King® over McDonald's, is seen by sociologists as a case of symbolic consumption. In fact, a sociologist would probably see this very book as a cultural product. You need to be familiar with the terms on these pages, because you'll need them to analyse different views of culture in the exam.