SOCIOLOGY 0495 · CHAPTER 2

Identity: self and society

Culture, norms, values and roles, nature and nurture, socialisation and its agencies, social control and resistance to it, and what shapes social identity, from age and gender to the digital self and globalisation.

Who you are is partly your own choice and partly shaped by the society you grow up in. This chapter covers how identity is **learned** (socialisation), how society **keeps people in line** (social control), and what influences **social identity** today.

2.1 How do we learn our identity?

Key concepts

Concept	Meaning	Example
Culture	the whole way of life of a society: its language, beliefs, food, dress and behaviour	festivals, cuisine, religion
Norms	the **unwritten rules** of acceptable behaviour	queuing, greeting elders, silence in an exam
Values	**shared beliefs** about what is important or right	respect for family, honesty, education
Customs	traditional ways of behaving in particular situations	wedding ceremonies, gift-giving at Eid or Christmas
Roles	the **expected behaviour** that goes with a position	parent, student, teacher
Status	a person's position or rank in society: **ascribed** (given at birth: age, sex, caste) or **achieved** (earned: doctor, champion)	
Stereotypes	**fixed, oversimplified** ideas about a group ("teenagers are lazy")	often wrong and can harm

These ideas shape behaviour and identity: we learn what is expected, copy it, and are rewarded or punished for it.

Nature or nurture?

- **Nature** says behaviour is mostly **biological** (inherited, instinct).
- **Nurture** says behaviour is mostly **learned** from culture and upbringing.

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Evidence for nurture: **feral children** such as **Genie**, a girl in the USA who was kept isolated until the age of 13 and never fully learned language, show how much we need social contact to become fully human. Sociologists stress nurture, but most accept both play a part.

The **relativity of culture** means what is normal in one society may be unusual in another (dress, marriage customs, how people greet, eating with hands or cutlery). No culture is simply "right": behaviour is judged by the standards of the culture it is in.

Socialisation

Socialisation is the lifelong process of learning the culture of a society.

- **Primary socialisation** happens in early childhood, mainly in the **family**: language, basic norms and values.
- **Secondary socialisation** continues through the rest of life, in the **agencies** below.

Agency	How it socialises	Process
Family	first and most powerful agency; teaches basic norms, gender roles	**canalisation** (steering a child's interests, such as dolls for girls and cars for boys), **role modelling**
Education	teaches knowledge, rules, punctuality, competition	**hidden curriculum**: the unwritten lessons of school (obedience, queuing, hierarchy, gender roles)
Peer group	people of similar age; teaches fitting in	**peer pressure**
Media	shows values, stereotypes and ideals	**media representations** (how groups are portrayed)
Religion	moral rules and beliefs	**religious teachings**
Workplace	work norms, discipline, teamwork	**workplace training**

> **Canalisation (Oakley) is steering a child's interests and activities in directions seen as suitable for their gender. Manipulation is encouraging or discouraging behaviour with praise and punishment.**

The **effectiveness** of each agency changes with the person and the time. The family is strongest in early life; peers matter most in the teenage years; the media now reaches almost everyone through social media. Agencies can **conflict** (a child's family and peers may teach different things).

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Sociological perspectives on socialisation

Perspective	View of socialisation
Functionalist (consensus)	socialisation teaches **shared norms and values**, creating **value consensus** and **social cohesion**. If it fails (**inadequate socialisation**), deviance results. Society is like a body whose parts work together.
Marxist (conflict)	socialisation teaches the **ideology of the ruling class**, so workers accept inequality; it **reproduces social class**.
Feminist (conflict)	socialisation teaches **gender roles** (masculinity and femininity) that keep men in power (**patriarchy**).

Consensus theories see society as based on agreement; **conflict** theories see it as based on a struggle between groups with different interests.

2.2 How does society control us?

Social control is the ways society makes people **conform** to norms and values.

	Formal	Informal
What	**written** rules, laws and punishments	**unwritten**, everyday pressure
Agencies	government, **police**, **courts**, **penal system** (prisons), **armed forces**	**family**, **education**, **peer group**, **media**, **religion**, **workplace**
Methods	**law-making**, **coercion**, **digital surveillance**, **arrest**, **sentencing**, **imprisonment**	approval and disapproval

Sanctions are rewards and punishments:

- **Positive sanctions** reward conformity: praise, pocket money, promotion, social media "likes".
- **Negative sanctions** punish deviance: a fine, prison, a detention, **ostracism** (being shut out), disapproval.

Informal control is **often more effective than formal control**, because people follow it from habit and want to be accepted. Formal control is needed where informal control fails, but it is costly and does not reach everything (a lot of crime goes undetected).

Theories of social control

- **Functionalism**: control is **necessary** to keep order and protect shared values. Laws reflect a value consensus.

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- **Marxism**: laws and control **protect the ruling class and its property**; the police and courts act harshly against working-class crime but leniently on white-collar crime.
- **Feminism**: control is stricter on **women** and keeps them in subordinate roles (for example, expectations of dress and behaviour); the law has been slow to deal with domestic violence.

Resistance to control

Some people **resist** control, through **protest groups** (climate or human-rights campaigns), and **sub-cultures** such as youth sub-cultures (punks, skaters, mods), **online sub-cultures** and **religious sub-cultures**. People join for **identity, belonging, a cause**, or because they feel excluded. This can be **deviant** (breaking norms) or simply **non-conformist** (different but not harmful). Not all resistance is illegal.

2.3 What influences our social identity?

Social identity is how we see ourselves and how others see us, as members of groups. Four key aspects are **age, gender, ethnicity and social class**.

Aspect	Impact
Age	expectations of behaviour, rights and status change over the life course (children, youth, adults, the elderly); the elderly may lose status in societies that value youth, but gain respect in others
Gender	gender roles shape clothing, jobs and expectations; patriarchy means men often hold more power
Ethnicity	shared culture, language, religion and ancestry; may bring pride and belonging, or prejudice and discrimination
Social class	wealth, education and job shape lifestyle and **life chances**

The impact differs in **different societies**: for example, age brings high status in some cultures and low status in others.

The digital self

Social networks, social media and virtual communities let people **present and choose** an identity online.

- **Positive**: connection, support groups, creativity, a voice for minorities.
- **Negative**: cyberbullying, comparing yourself with others, false identities, addiction, pressure to look perfect.

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Globalisation and identity

Globalisation is the growing connection of the world through trade, travel, migration, media and technology.

Effect	Meaning
Homogenisation	cultures become **more alike** (global brands, English, Western fashion)
Hybrid identities	people **mix** cultures (British Asian, music that blends styles)
Cultural defence	groups **protect** their traditional culture against outside influence (language laws, religious revival)

Cultural **diversity**, **multiculturalism** and a **global culture** can be **positive** (tolerance, choice, enrichment) and **negative** (loss of local culture, tension between groups).

Postmodernist views

Postmodernists say identity today is **chosen rather than given**: class, gender and ethnicity matter less than they did. People build **digital identities** and express them through **consumption and lifestyle** (clothes, music, brands) in a **"pick and mix"** society. **Criticism**: not everyone has the money to choose, and class, gender and ethnicity still limit people's options.

TRY IT

Explain why the family is seen as the most important agency of socialisation. The family is the first agency: it carries out primary socialisation (language, basic norms and values) when a child is most open to learning. It teaches gender roles through canalisation and role models, and its lessons last a lifetime. Functionalists see this as vital for value consensus. **But** peers, school and the media have a growing influence, and a family may teach values that conflict with them, so the family is the first, but not the only, powerful agency.

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