The Significance of Gender, Class and Ethnicity for Contemporary Youth

This Factsheet considers how important gender, social class and ethnicity are for young people today. It does so in relation to culture and identity as well as looking at how gender, social class and ethnicity can impact upon other areas of social life, such as families, education, religion and crime.

For those studying the OCR specification in Sociology, this Factsheet will particularly be of use for the modules 'The Individual in Society' (AS), 'Culture and Socialisation' and 'Social Inequality and Difference' (A2) as well as being relevant to the course as a whole.

For those studying WJEC specification, the Factsheet will be particularly useful for Unit 1, Acquiring Culture but will be particularly useful for the Youth Culture option (AS) within this unit. The core themes within this factsheet - gender, social class and ethnicity are integral to all the topic areas in AS and A2 (education, health, religion etc)

For those studying the AQA specification, gender, social class and ethnicity are again highly relevant issues throughout the course. This Factsheet considers these three core themes with studies relevant to many of the modules.

Why are gender, class and ethnicity core themes in AS/A2 Sociology?
While growing up and throughout adulthood we learn the norms and values of our society, we learn about our culture and we discover our roles and identity. This process is known as 'socialisation'. While we are being socialised, gender, social class and ethnicity can have an impact upon what we learn and what is expected of us. For example, boys are often taught to be less emotional and girls to be more nurturing.

People from higher class backgrounds may value education more because their parents are more likely to have gone to college/ university. People with different ethnic backgrounds may learn different norms and values because of their cultural heritage, or religion. For example, it is the norm for British people to eat with a knife and fork, whereas for Chinese people it is the norm to eat with chopsticks. For Christians, the holy day is Sunday whereas for Jewish people, it is Saturday. All of these differences in the socialisation process lead to people forming different identities. These are just examples of how gender, social class and ethnicity may impact upon an individual's identity. The differences can also have an effect upon a person's life chances, that is, the opportunities that they have in life to succeed.

Why are gender, class and ethnicity important for contemporary youth?
In the past, gender, social class and ethnicity were not always considered as things that could lead to social difference or inequality. They were 'lurking in the background', but their significance has only really started to be discovered since the 1960s. What is important to know is that each of the three key issues has been dealt with separately and it is only very recently that gender, social class and ethnicity have been considered together as being significant. This is especially important when thinking about young people today as we move into a society that is much more varied than in the past. The divide between male and female/masculine and feminine is no longer so obvious. The boundaries between the classes are changing and overlapping, and the UK is more multicultural than ever before.

Key terms
Socialisation = The ways in which we learn about our culture, norms and values.

Primary socialisation = The process of socialisation that takes place within the family.

Secondary socialisation = The process of socialisation that takes place beyond within the family – in school, through the media, with peers, through religion, at work.

Social construction = Something that does not exist naturally, but is created by people in society.

Why is gender significant?

Whether someone is male or female is something that many societies consider important. In the past, when a woman was pregnant, the big question was always "Will it be a girl or a boy?" This is still important today although with technological advances, the question is often answered before the baby is even born. This has been used in many cases so that parents can prepare themselves for the arrival of their baby – usually by buying the 'appropriate' pink or blue baby clothing and accessories. What sociologists argue to be significant about this is that from birth, boys and girls are treated differently. Sociologists argue that gender is a social construction, that is, created by society. What sociologists have aimed to do is explain the consequences of boys and girls being socialised differently.

Studies of gender and young people

Sociologist/s	Study/findings
Oakley (1972)	Parents socialise boys and girls differently by encouraging them to do different activities – boys play with guns, girls with dolls. They also learn their gender role through the imitation of the roles of 'mother' and 'father'. For example, boys learn to fix cars, girls learn to cook. Boys and girls are also dressed differently, in blue or pink accordingly.
McRobbie (1974)	Bedroom culture - Girls tend to stay in more and have friends round to talk about their pop idols, gossip, listen to music, experiment with make-up whereas boys tend to be out playing on the streets more, therefore being involved in different activities.
Mac an Ghaill (1994)	Crisis of masculinity – traditional identities for men were formed around industries involving manual work such as mining or shipbuilding. These have almost completely disappeared and many jobs are office-based, seen traditionally as roles for women. As the old masculine identity is not relevant, males have responded by giving up, becoming depressed or turning to crime, or by forming new identities.
Wilkinson (1997)	Values of this generation have changed since their parents grew up. Young people are now more assertive and confident and this change has been most obvious amongst girls. Many girls now reject the idea that males and females have separate places in society. An example of this would be that many more young girls play football today. Wilkinson also argues that males find it easier today to be more feminine.
Reynold (2001)	Hegemonic masculinity – found that one particular form of masculinity dominates in schools. This is one where males are expected to be tough, aggressive and competitive. Other masculine identities exist – gentle, academic, non-sporty, artistic. However, the males with these characteristics tend to be bullied for being 'geeks', 'swots', 'nerds' and 'squares'.

Feminism has played a particularly important role in providing studies on gender. In the 1970s and 1980s many female sociologists carried out research to fill the gap that they believed existed because of sociology being male-dominated. As a result, much research was focused on girls and women and their place in society.

> **Exam Hint:** Show in your answers to questions on gender that equal opportunity laws (e.g. Sex Discrimination Act 1975) have led to changes between males and females in many areas of society – for example, education, work and leisure AND illustrate how these all link together e.g. girls are getting higher qualifications than boys and can therefore get better jobs with higher pay etc

Key terms

Sex = physical/biological differences between males and females.

Gender = the masculine/feminine expectations of males/females.

Why is social class significant?

Like gender, social class has been an important part of peoples' lives for a long time. In the UK, higher status in aimed for by many and is achieved predominantly by moving up the social ladder in terms of our role in the workplace. The emphasis of status in the UK is based upon jobs, but people also inherit their status or gain it through luck e.g. winning the Lottery. All in all, our status is determined by our income and wealth, which is determined by our social class.

Studies of social class and young people

Sociologist/s	Study/findings
Cohen (1955)	Argues that youth subcultures are formed as a reaction to a lack of status. He suggests that everyone wants status but young, working-class males lack the opportunities to achieve status – they suffer 'status deprivation' and this is partly a result of inequality within the education system. The answer to this for many young males is to form subcultures where they feel that they have status.
Hall and Jefferson (1976)	Subcultures form among young people in the middle class as well as the working class. In the post-war period, subcultures have been established such as hippies, a number of new religious movements and political movements, all of which are middle-class based.
Willis (1977)	Learning to Labour – Willis argues that young males form subcultures that are 'anti-school' and this is in order to prepare themselves for the workplace, where inequality also exists and where they feel that they would lack status.
Scott (1991)	The upper class still exist and do so through their culture and through inheritance. Cultural capital as well as wealth is inherited, which allows young people to be successful because of the values they form and the powerful contacts they have. The upper class have confidence and exclusiveness, and are connected through high-status institutions/occasions/interests – public schools, Oxbridge, Royal Ascot, fox-hunting.
Savage *et al.* (2001)	Class identities are weaker today than previously. Most people recognise that class is important in society today but do not tend to define themselves of a certain social class as that takes away their individuality.

Many studies on social class have been influenced by Marxism. Marxists believe that there are only two classes – the bourgeoisie (ruling class) and the proletariat (working class). However, more recent studies have shown that the issue of social class is much more complicated than this.

Exam Hint *The idea that class is less important today is an argument – you need to be able to provide evidence that social class is still important today. For example - education determine jobs and jobs determine salaries and salaries determine life chances. These factors can all be determined by social class. However, you also need to show that class is not important any more as you could argue that other factors e.g. gender are becoming more important. Your argument needs to be balanced.*

Key terms

Social class The category people are put into according to their status in society, which is determined by wealth and occupation.

Ascribed status Where people are born into wealth, status is inherited.

Achieved status Where people gain status, usually through working for it in terms of education and occupation, but also where luck is involved or marriage to someone of higher status.

Cultural capital The experiences gained that help people to do well in life. For example, travelling to places of cultural interest or having powerful contacts.

Why is ethnicity significant?

Ethnicity has been considered an influential factor in identities and in life chances in recent years. It should be remembered that everyone has an ethnic origin, as often ethnic minorities are referred to. Ethnic minority groups are those that are not from the mainstream culture. It is also important to remember that ethnic minority people can be white - often the assumption is that they are of Black or Asian descent.

In the UK today, people have different levels of association with and commitment to their ethnic origins and for young people today, multiculturalism has a huge impact upon culture and identities. Multicultural society has led to positive changes, with people being more aware of the culture of others, yet there has also been resulting conflict between different ethnic groups. Either way, it is often young people who struggle to assert their identity in terms of ethnicity or who struggle to succeed in life because of the way their ethnicity is perceived.

Studies of ethnicity and young people

Sociologist/s	Study/findings
Hebdige (1979)	Young black people form subcultures, in part as a reaction to the white subcultures that are hostile towards black people. Black culture is indirectly influential over white culture, for example, through music. (More recently, it could be said to be more directly influential, for example, Eminem being a white rap artist arguably shows that overlap between cultures is now more accepted).
Marsland (1989)	Marsland blames the culture of Afro-Caribbean culture for the over-representation of Afro-Caribbean people living in poverty and experiencing unemployment. He argues that Afro-Caribbeans are more likely to be workshy and depend upon the state benefits.
Butler (1995)	Argues that a number of identities are important to young Muslim women in the UK today. She found Islam to be important to young British Muslim women and also that conflicts exist between generations on the likes of clothes and marriage. Butler suggests that British Muslim women today can mix and match parts of British culture and Islamic religion in order to form their identity.
Hewitt (1996)	Studied a deprived area of London and from his study suggests that young white people sometimes feel that they have an 'invisible culture'. He found that young whites felt that every other culture seemed to be celebrated except their own and that they had experienced British/English symbols being associated with racism.
Sewell (1997)	Suggests that young Afro-Caribbeans are influenced a great deal by commercial popular culture, particularly designer names/logos, in the pursuit of forming their identity.

Although relatively little has been researched in the area of ethnicity in comparison to gender and social class, sociologists have extended their theories beyond those that deal solely with ethnicity. Black feminism focuses largely upon the power struggles of Black females in society. Black Marxism tries to explain the struggle of Black people as a consequence of them being predominantly in the working class.

Much more research has been carried out about Black ethnic minority groups than any other and much of this has focussed upon how Black culture is often portrayed in a negative way.

> **Exam Hint** *When discussing ethnicity, bring in 'hybrid identities', where relevant. This is a more recent argument, suggesting that it is now difficult to determine where one culture ends and another begins. Our lifestyles are arguably much more mixed in terms of culture than previously. A key name here is Back (1996) - you may wish to find out more about his research – New ethnicities and urban cultures.*

Key term
Ethnicity = Having shared characteristics including descent, geographical roots, language, history, religion and traditions.

> **Exam Hint :** *Remember! Gender, social class and ethnicity are better explained when all are considered. Although a question may ask about gender for example, you can gain evaluation marks by showing that you are aware that gender should be considered along with social class and ethnicity. Gender cannot be seen as the only explanation for inequalities This is particularly relevant for the essay-style questions.*

Linking gender, social class and ethnicity

The table below demonstrates some of the ways in which gender, social class and ethnicity are linked, outlining how it is impossible to take each separately when considering how young people form their identities and how their life chances are affected. It focuses upon different sociological topic areas and indicates how you could use the information on gender, class and ethnicity to answer different questions within these different topic areas.

Topic	Sub-topic	How gender/social class/ethnicity can be applied
Families and Households	Socialisation	The family is the primary agent of socialisation. Children learn very early in life basic norms and values and they gain simple knowledge about their culture. What they learn depends upon whether they are male or female, their social class and also their ethnic background. For example, it could has been suggested in sociology that young Chinese boys are more likely to succeed in education, because their culture values education, particularly for males, and they are more likely to be found in the middle class, which means that they will have more cultural capital.
Mass Media	Moral panics/labelling	Young people are often at the centre of media attention, and for negative reasons. However, the extent to which young people are portrayed in a negative light varies depending on a number of factors. Three of the key factors are gender, social class and ethnicity. For example, studies have shown that Afro-Caribbean boys of working-class backgrounds are more likely to receive negative media attention. This was found particularly during the moral panics about muggings in the 1970s and the resulting 'stop and search' methods used on young black males on the streets. For more information research Hall *et al* (1979) – Policing the Crisis.
Wealth, Poverty Welfare	Social distribution of poverty	A number of factors have an impact upon the risk of an individual and living in poverty. Being young puts a person at more risk. Females are more at risk than males. Ethnic minority groups are more at risk than white people. Being born into poverty (cycle of deprivation) is more likely if you from lower classes. So for example, the risk is heightened and therefore life chances lowered for young females of Afro-Caribbean origin.
Health	Inequalities in health	An individual's health is affected by various factors, which include gender, social class and ethnicity. Obviously, there are strong links with poverty here. Evidence shows that women live longer but are more likely to suffer ill-health, working-class people are more likely to suffer ill-health and ethnic minority groups are more likely to suffer ill-health, which is linked to more ethnic minority people being found in the working-class. Infant mortality rate is highest amongst lower class. Therefore, white British males of middle-class or upper-class backgrounds are likely to be in better health, improving their life chances.
Education	Differential achievement/labelling	Some pupils are more likely to be labelled by teachers than others. Those least likely to be labelled negatively are white British, middle-class pupils. Working-class pupils are more likely to be labelled and if these pupils are also male and Afro-Caribbean then the chances are higher, evidence has found.
Work and Leisure	Equal opportunities in the workplace	It has been found that women are more likely to experience the 'glass ceiling effect' (not succeed in getting desired promotions). Due to racism and discrimination, if the women are of ethnic minority backgrounds, they are even more likely to experience this problem.
Religion	Membership of sects and cults	Evidence shows that those more likely to have joined sects/cults in the USA during the 1960s and 1970s were middle-class and white.
Crime and Deviance	Trends/patterns	According to Social Trends 36 (Feb. 2006), offenders were more likely to be young (aged 10-17), black males of working-class backgrounds.