

Culture and Identity

Worksheet 4.1: Class & Identity

Read the following passage and pages 205 to the top of 214 in the textbook, then answer the questions that follow

There have been controversial sociological debates about whether or not social class has any influence on shaping identity today. The arguments suggesting that social class is of declining significance in shaping identity are mainly brought forward by supporters of postmodernism. They argue that people's choice of consumer goods and lifestyle is now a much more important influence on identity than the means of earning the income to buy those goods. An individual's identity is increasingly based on choice and a range of influences beyond the traditional social influences of class, gender and ethnicity.

However, other sociologists claim that class still has important influences on an individual's identity and that people do not have a free choice in consumer goods and lifestyle, but that these are influenced, rather, by both how much people earn and the type of jobs they do to earn their money. There is a lot of evidence that suggests that class still affects almost everyone. There is still an upper-class which enjoys lifestyles and wealth beyond even the dreams of most ordinary folk, and many manual workers continue to see themselves in terms of social class and believe in possible conflicts of interest between social classes. A Guardian/ICM poll published in October 2007 showed that Britain remains a nation deeply divided by social class divisions, with a huge majority certain that their social standing determines the way they are judged. Of those questioned, 89% said they thought people are still judged by their class – almost half saying that it still counts for 'a lot' – with the poorest people in society most likely to see class, not ability, affecting the way they are seen. 53% of people considered themselves working class. The poll painted a picture of a nation divided by social attitudes and life chances, with many still seeing social class playing an important part in the way they are judged by others.

However, the poll also showed how consistently bad people were at correctly identifying their own class. For example, the poll revealed that skilled manual workers (upper working class) were the best at correctly identifying their own class, with three quarters claiming working-class status. Yet almost a quarter – 24% – still thought they were middle class. Among the upper-middle and middle classes, a third were under the impression that they were working class and nearly a third of the lower working class and the poor believed themselves to be middle class. Although the vast majority of people (89%) believe they are judged on their class and regard class as a significant influence on their identity, it also appears there is some confusion and a lack of agreement on what class is.

Adapted from Julian Glover, *Riven by Class and No Social Mobility - Britain in 2007*, and Decca Aitkenhead, *Class Rules*, both in the *Guardian* 20th October 2007

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Questions

1. Suggest and explain two reasons why postmodernists believe social class is of declining influence on people's identity today.
2. When examining the influence of social class on a person's behaviour, suggest two reasons why it is important to understand people's own definition of their social class.
3. Suggest two reasons why many manual workers continue to believe in possible conflicts of interest between social classes.
4. The Guardian/ICM poll 'painted a picture of a nation divided by social attitudes and life chances'. Suggest two social attitudes and two life chances which might be considered to divide the nation today.
5. Suggest two reasons why people were often so bad at correctly identifying their own class.
6. Suggest two possible consequences for individuals and society of individuals incorrectly identifying their own class.
7. Identify and explain three social influences on identity apart from social class.