

AS Sociology

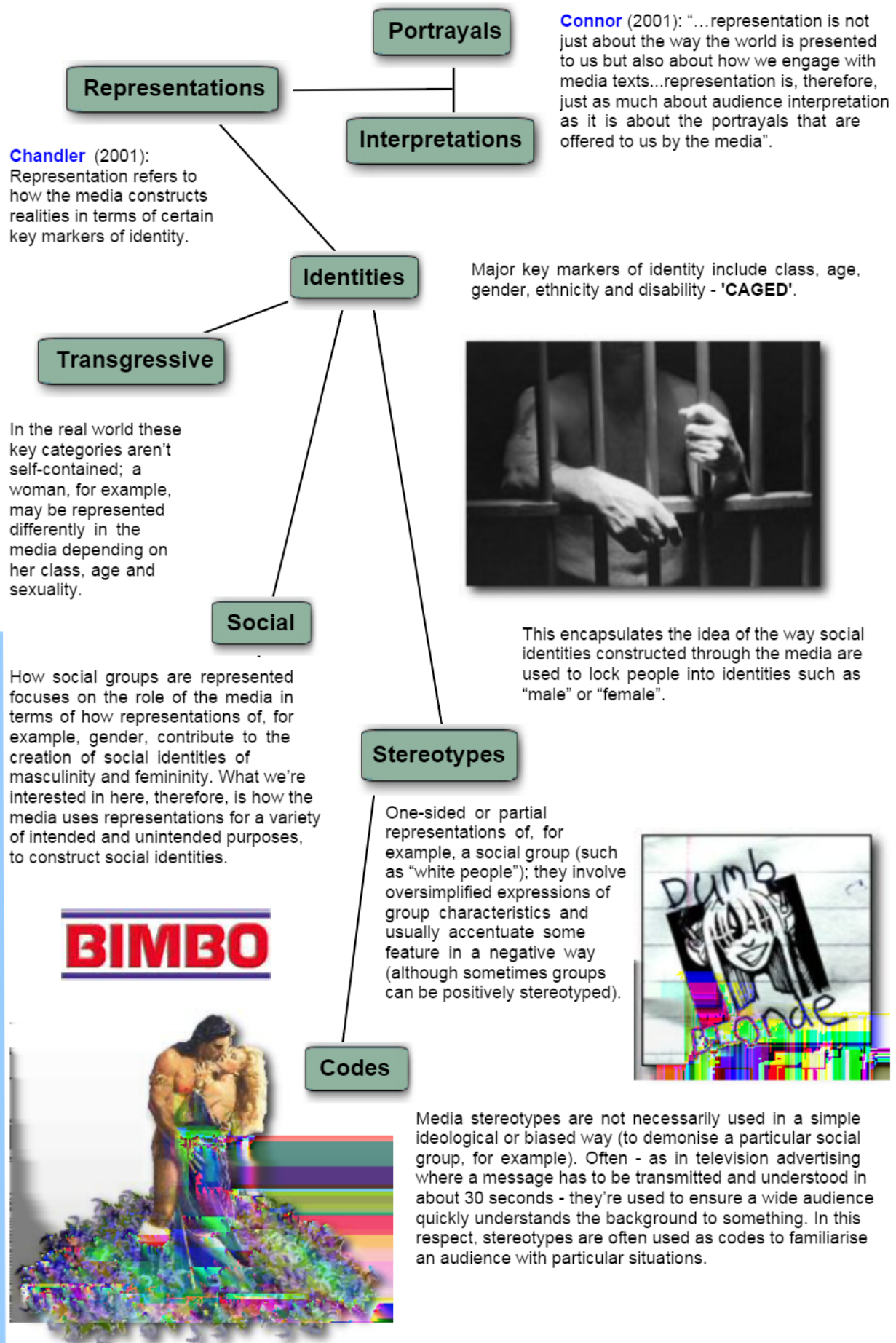
**Revision
Mapping**

Mass Media



**“The role of the mass media in representations
of age, social class, ethnicity,
gender, sexuality and disability”.**

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News reporting involves a representation of reality that **Fiske** (1987) calls the *transparency fallacy* - a rebuttal of the idea news reporting represents a neutral "window on the world", reflecting events as they unfold.

The media generally presents information through the eyes of middle class professionals or upper class owners. **Example:** News images of the working classes are often framed in term of conflict, whereas fictional images often reflect idealised images of "community". And conflict.

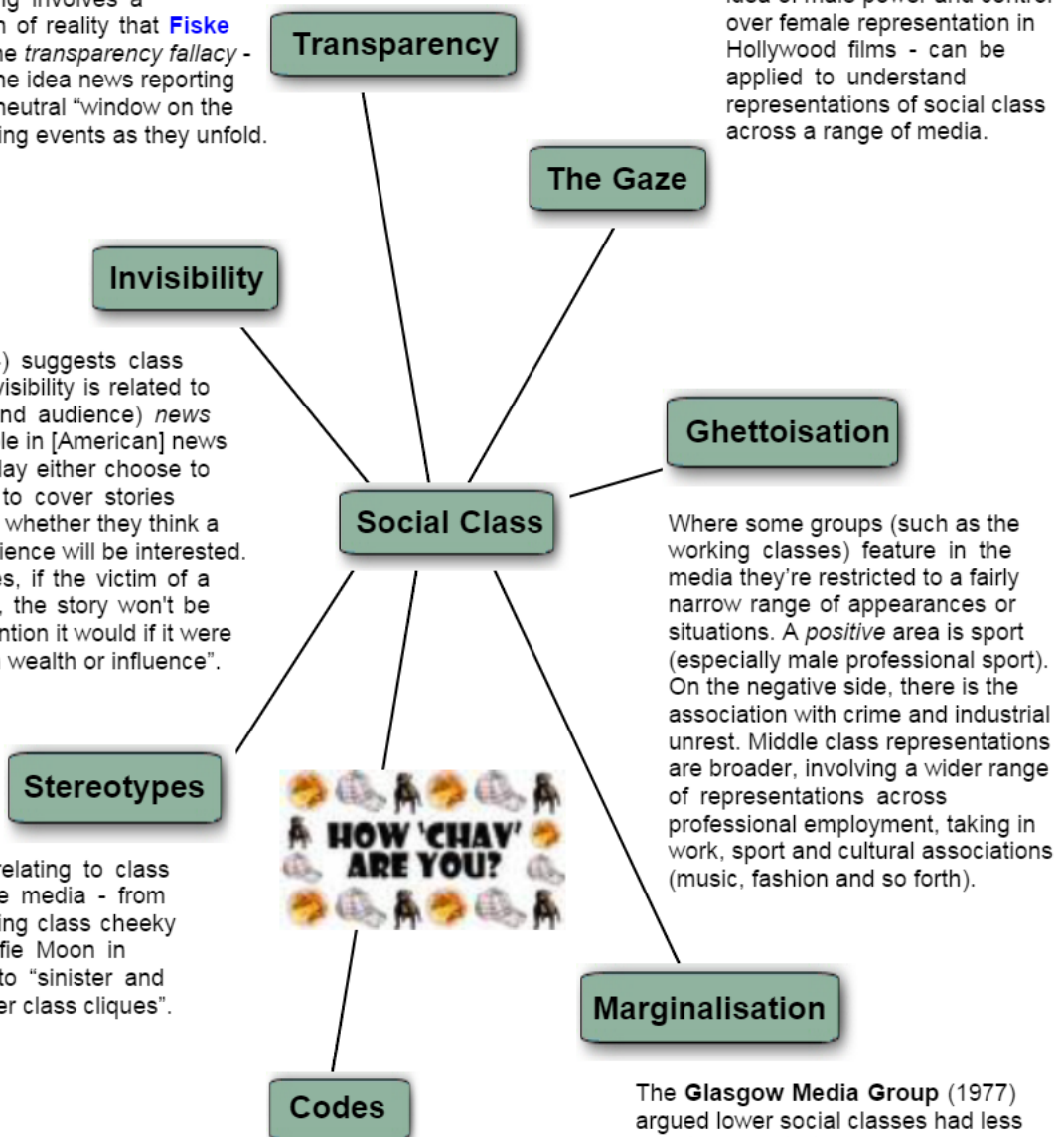
This concept - originally developed by **Mulvey** (1975) as a way of expressing the idea of male power and control over female representation in Hollywood films - can be applied to understand representations of social class across a range of media.

Heider (2004) suggests class visibility or invisibility is related to journalistic (and audience) *news values*: "People in [American] news rooms each day either choose to cover or not to cover stories depending on whether they think a particular audience will be interested. In many cases, if the victim of a crime is poor, the story won't be given the attention it would if it were someone with wealth or influence".

Stereotypes relating to class abound in the media - from "lovable working class cheeky chappies" (Alfie Moon in *EastEnders*) to "sinister and shadowy upper class cliques".



Things that tell us something about someone - such as their class or sexual orientation. Here, social class is represented through a number of subtle - and not very subtle - codes. **Fawbert** (2003), for example, notes how the "replica football shirt" is used throughout the media as shorthand for working class - in much the same way the business suit and the hand-made suit denote middle and upper class respectively.



Elderly traditionally represented as *social problems* (as a burden for example) and portrayed *unsympathetically* - as senile, ill, unattractive etc.

Youth often represented as being "a problem" (rebellious, disrespectful, ungrateful, sex-obsessed, uncaring...).

Different age groups are neatly compartmentalised into discrete categories. **Connor** (2001) notes how ghettos exist *within* age groups and **Willis** (1999) notes, in terms of television: "Everyone over the age of 55 tends to be lumped together as if they were a completely homogeneous group".

Buckingham et al (2004): Children regarded as "a 'special' audience in debates about broadcasting" - they are subject to particularly strong forms of censorship which, in part, reflects the way children are viewed in our society - as a particularly vulnerable group, easily influenced by the media.

In situations where children probably know more about the medium than their parents, faith in technology (guardian software / censorship software etc.) replaces faith in adults.

Age - perhaps more than any other key marker - involves different categories focused on different interests, attitudes and needs.

Adults urged to control their children's use of the medium.

The vision of uncorrupted youth falling prey to sexual predators via chatrooms and the like is almost Biblical (youth as the Garden of Eden and Paedophiles as the snake) - youth as an arena for folk devils and moral panics.

The elderly have, at least in the recent past, been something of an invisible group as far as the media are concerned. This may be changing because of:

The "Grey Pound" (the amount of money the elderly have available to spend on consumer goods) is increasingly attractive to the advertisers who fund large areas of the British media.

There are more elderly people (currently 15 million over 55) as a percentage of the overall population than ever before; **Willis** (1999) notes they are the heaviest viewers of television.

The mass media is a relatively new phenomenon in our society and, as the people who own, control and work in the media grow older it's possible their interests are reflected in new and different representations of the elderly.

Since the media, by-and-large, are controlled by adults (and mainly middle-aged, white, male adults), it's not surprising to find children, young people and the elderly are largely viewed through the eyes of this group.

The category of youth is represented through various media in ambivalent terms; representations are constantly changing, reflecting the various ways youth can be a highly fragmented category- in terms of media stereotypes at least.

Willis (1999): "...older people were often crudely stereotyped in drama... showing them as grumpy, interfering, lonely, stubborn and not interested in sex. Older women are often seen as 'silly', older men as 'miserable gits'. In some situations, middle-aged or elderly men are used to add a sense of seriousness / moral gravity to a situation (as in the case of news readers, for example).



Ghettoisation

Technical

Social

Control

Classification

The Gaze

Agendas

Age

Normality

Invisibility

Affluence

Stereotypes

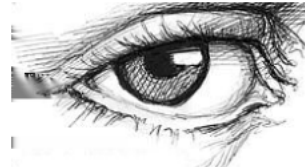
Population

Professionals

Female: **Enciso** (1995) argues women have become more adept at developing a female gaze, one that, according to **Jacobsson** (1999), encourages the viewer to see both men and women in non-sexist ways - although **Enciso** notes this "reversal of the male gaze" may simply result in men being viewed as objects by women.



Male: At its most obvious, the male gaze refers to areas such as pornography or the use of female bodies in advertising; less obviously, it refers to how images of women are presented from both the male perspective and for the gratification of a male audience - the viewer becomes a *spectator* (or *voyeur* in some cases), who looks, through male eyes, at women reduced to *objects* (a series of body parts).



The Gaze

Masculinity and **femininity** are also heavily stereotyped across a range of media (although factors such as age and class are significant components of the overall picture - young masculinity, for example, is represented in different ways to elderly masculinity).

Adverts: **Macdonald** (2003) identifies differences in the way men and women are represented in magazine adverts - especially those for alcohol.

Body-shape - traditionally for women but, increasingly, for men (although men are allowed a greater range of culturally-acceptable body shapes). This forms part of wider cultural debates about beauty and how women, in particular, should look (especially in terms of the unstated assumptions that female beauty is both heterosexual and largely for the benefit of the male gaze).

Stereotypes

Sexuality

A particular form of female (hetero)sexuality is often used to advertise and sell things - combining body-shapes (thin, large-breasted...) with patriarchal notions of "availability".

Gender

Normality

Almost invariably represented in terms of heterosexuality and, while the wider representations of gay males and females are largely a thing of the past, homosexual relationships are rarely portrayed as being part of a "normal" gender discourse.

Advertising

A significant recent development is the use of bodies as both "walking advertising spaces" (for global brands such as Nike) and as a means of making gender statements. **Gill** (2003) uses the example of T-shirts with the slogan "Fit chick unbelievable knockers" to demonstrate the idea of both women having the freedom to advertise their sexuality and as an example of how women collude in their own objectification.

GIRL POWER

Identities

Gender identities are not fixed and unchanging and fragmented social identities are reflected in the way people start to see themselves in new and different ways. **Gill** (2003) argues contemporary representations of women are not "liberating" but rather they're another - more exploitative - form of what **Bordo** (1993) has termed a "new disciplinary regime". Although media representations offer the "promise of power" by suggesting they can *choose* whether or not to become "sex objects", this promise is illusory since, whether they choose it or not, the objective is to please men.

Women ("as a housewife or low-status worker") have been replaced by "feisty, successful girl power"

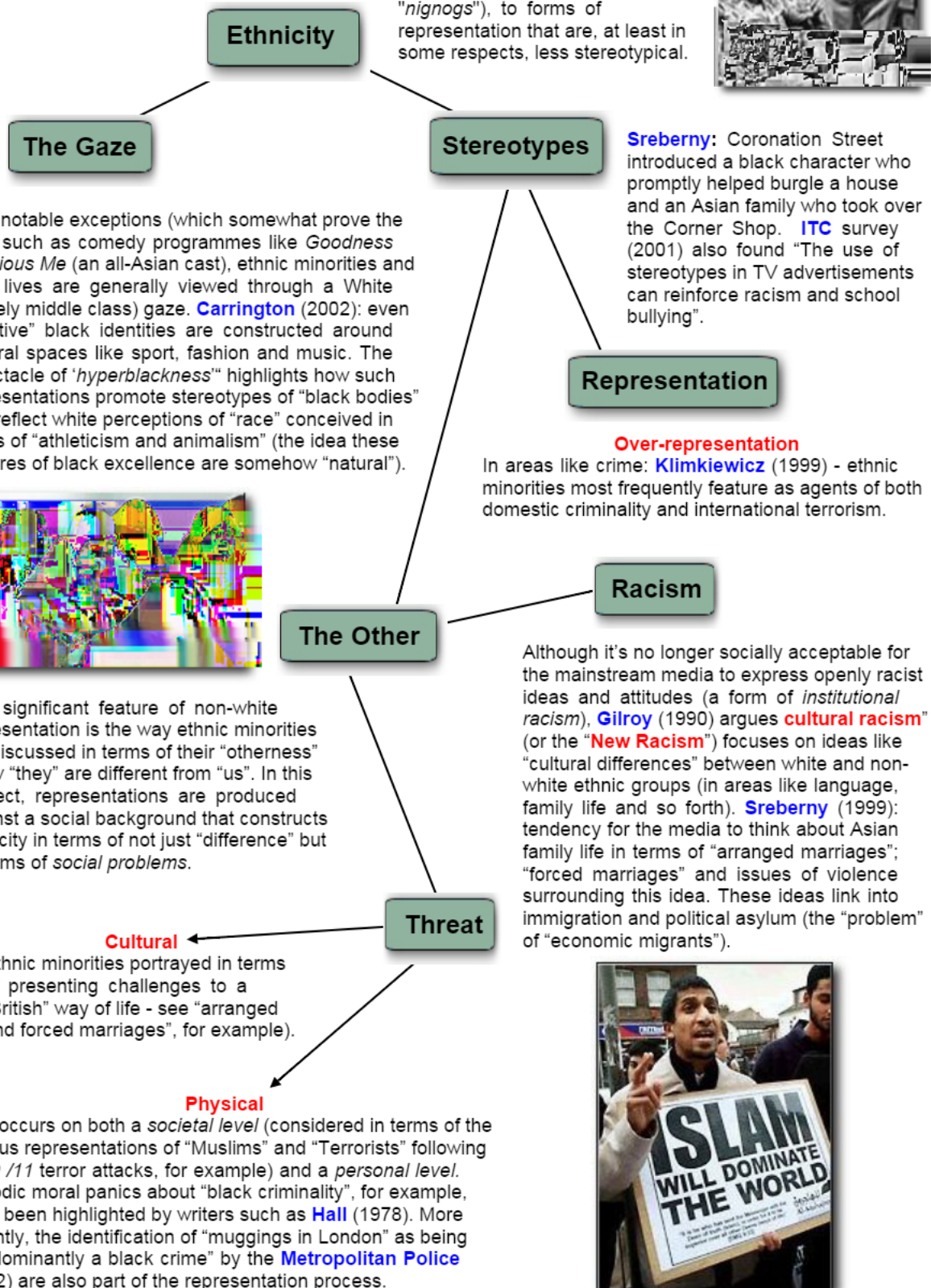
Men have changed, from "ideals of absolute toughness, stubborn self-reliance and emotional silence" to a greater emphasis on emotions, the need for help and advice and the "problems of masculinity".

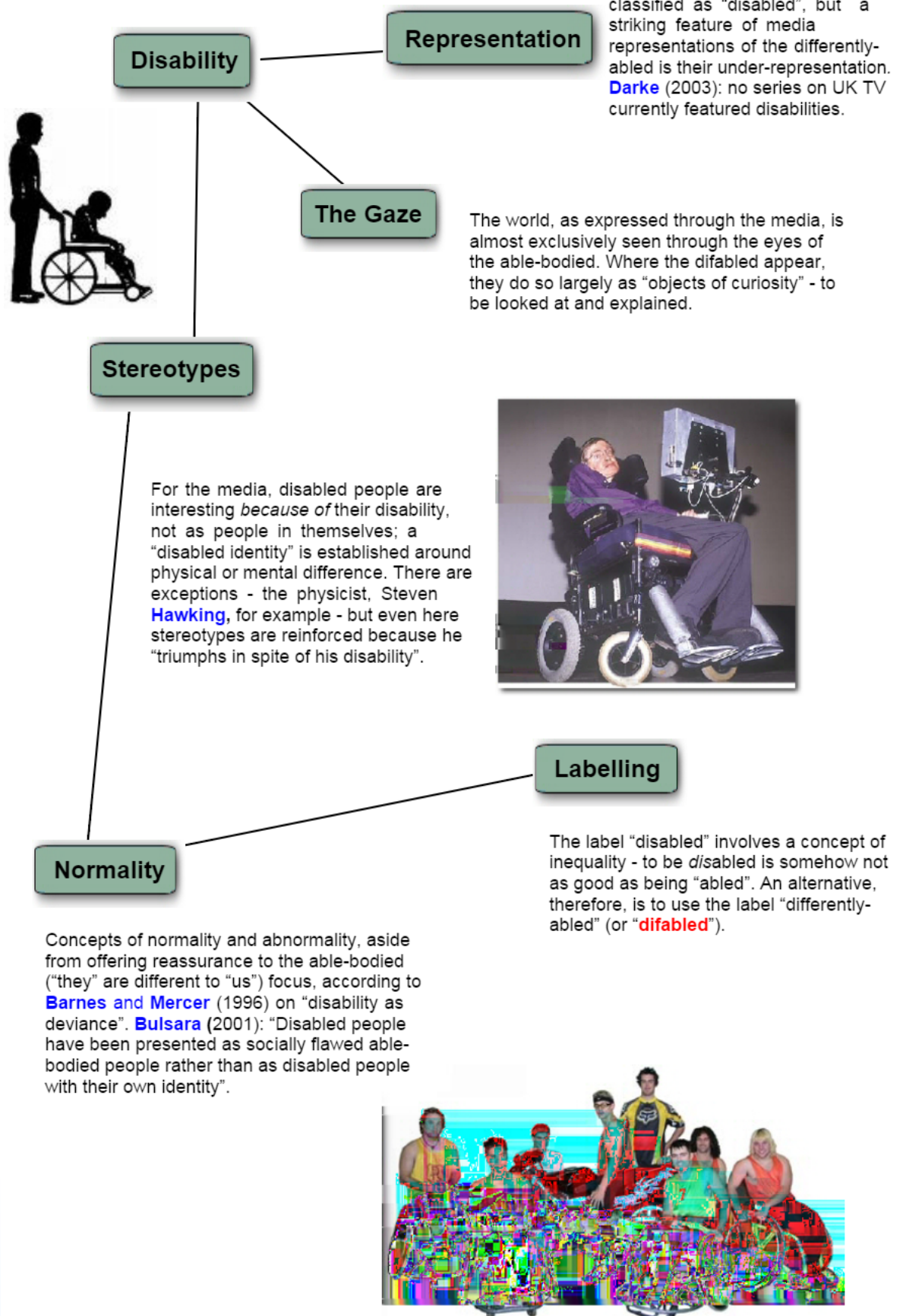
Fragmentation

Reflects the idea that, with generational changes, it makes it harder - if not impossible - to talk about "men" or "women" as useful gender categories. Rather, we need to think in terms of the different ways it is possible to be "a man" or "a woman" in our society.

Inferential racism: While representations are less overtly and crudely racist, ethnic groups are still discussed and represented in ways that stress their difference (usually in cultural, rather than biological, terms) and *problematic nature* (for example, debates about ethnicity revolving around ethnic groups as the source of social problems).

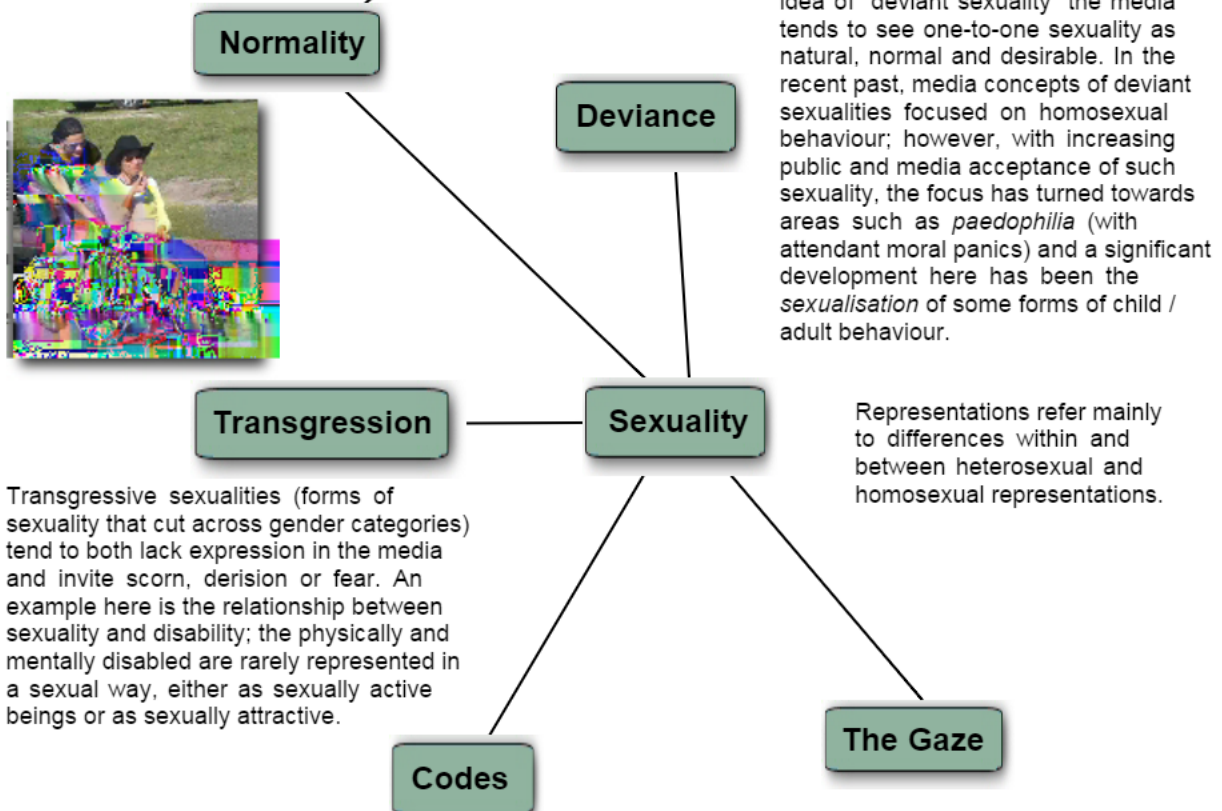
A feature of ethnic representation is the change from the *crude* forms of stereotypical, negative and demeaning representations of "black people" prevalent in even the recent past (see, for example, hugely popular television sitcoms such as *Love Thy Neighbour* in the early 1970's in which blacks were described as "sambos" and "nignogs"), to forms of representation that are, at least in some respects, less stereotypical.





Normal and abnormal sexuality is a recurring feature of tabloid newspapers, whereby various aspects of sexuality (especially male homosexuality) are represented in ways that "define the normal". For example, homosexuality has been variously linked in the British tabloid press to both paedophilia and AIDS (a "Gay Plague", according to The Sun).

The media continuously reinforces this concept (although no longer necessarily in the context of marriage) as a natural state of being for heterosexual - and, increasingly, homosexual - couples.



Transgressive sexualities (forms of sexuality that cut across gender categories) tend to both lack expression in the media and invite scorn, derision or fear. An example here is the relationship between sexuality and disability; the physically and mentally disabled are rarely represented in a sexual way, either as sexually active beings or as sexually attractive.

One change in the way homosexuality is represented is that the language used to describe gay men and women no longer relies on euphemistic references ("confirmed bachelor" to suggest male homosexuality). This partly reflects changing audience attitudes but it also reflects how gays have organised to promote their own sexuality (the adoption of the term "Queer Theory", for example).

McLean notes: "...sly homophobia is still rife...the fact [Pop Idol winner, Will Young's] coming out was seen as a 'confession'...is indicative of the idea that homosexuality is something of a sin, a foible to be 'admitted' (does anyone, for example, ever have to 'confess' or 'admit' to being heterosexual?)."

Similarly, media representations of lesbianism have changed significantly over the past 25 years; depictions of "butch, shaven-headed, women in dungarees and boots" are largely redundant images. **Caudwell** (2003) questions the extent to which current media representations of lesbians simply reflect a changed male (political) gaze - the decoupling of lesbianism from feminism - returning it to its pre-feminist status as a male fantasy.

Although the tabloid press relishes the idea of "deviant sexuality" the media tends to see one-to-one sexuality as natural, normal and desirable. In the recent past, media concepts of deviant sexualities focused on homosexual behaviour; however, with increasing public and media acceptance of such sexuality, the focus has turned towards areas such as *paedophilia* (with attendant moral panics) and a significant development here has been the *sexualisation* of some forms of child / adult behaviour.

Representations refer mainly to differences within and between heterosexual and homosexual representations.

Although alternative forms of sexuality are increasingly represented in the media, **Caudwell** (2003) argues this increased representation represents a form of (male) heterosexual voyeurism. In programmes like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Channel 4: 2004), we find a form of gaze that, while seemingly homosexual is mainly viewed through a heterosexual lens; such programmes are about selling a certain type of lifestyle to a heterosexual audience.

The male gaze is not restricted to homosexuality; the heterosexual youth magazine market has developed in recent years with magazines such as "Zoo", "Nuts", "FHM" and "Loaded" featuring a diet of "Birds, Booze and Football" as a way of attracting readers and advertisers. Magazines aimed at women, however, tend to stress how to attract the male gaze - including advice on looking pretty, how to attract a man and so forth. Alternatively, writers such as **Gauntlett** (2002) argue women buy magazines like "More" and "Cosmopolitan" for reasons of self-esteem, reassurance and so forth.

