



What is sociology?

Sociology is the study of society and of people and their behaviour.

Sociologists study a wide range of topics. For example, the AQA AS and A level specifications include topics such as education, families and households, beliefs in society, and crime and deviance.

In studying topics like these, sociologists create **theories** to explain human behaviour and the workings of society. Theories are explanations of the patterns we find in society. For example, we may have a theory as to why there are differences in girls' and boys' achievement levels in school.

Sociology is an **evidence-based** subject. This means it is not just about the sociologist's personal opinion or pet theory – our opinions and theories must be backed up by facts about society. Sociologists therefore collect evidence methodically by carrying out **research** to establish whether their theories are correct. A good theory is one that explains the available evidence.

As well as producing theories about society, sociology has practical applications. For example, if we know the causes of social problems such as educational underachievement, we may be able to use this knowledge to design **social policies** to improve children's educational opportunities. Governments may use the findings of sociological research to develop more effective policies.

Learning objectives

When you have studied this chapter, you should:

- Know the meaning of key terms: culture, norms, values, socialisation, status and role.
- Understand the importance of culture and socialisation for explaining human behaviour.
- Understand the difference between structural and social action views of society, and between consensus and conflict views of society.
- Understand the differences between traditional, modern and postmodern society.
- Know the main patterns of inequality in today's society.
- Understand that sociologists use a variety of research methods and that these have both strengths and limitations.
- Know what studying AS and A level sociology involves, including the exam papers, assessment objectives and ways of developing your knowledge and skills.

Box 1 The effects of extreme isolation

Over the years, there have been several cases of 'feral' (wild) children found in forests and elsewhere who had apparently been reared by wolves or other animals. There is no way of knowing for sure if such children really had been nurtured by animals, but it is certain they had had little contact with other humans. One case was that of Shamdev, an Indian boy aged about five found in a forest playing with wolf cubs. When first found:

'Shamdev cowered from people and would only play with dogs. He hated the sun and used to curl up in shadowy places. After dark he grew restless and they had to tie him up to stop him following the jackals which howled around the village at night. If anyone cut themselves, he could smell the scent of blood and would scamper towards it. He caught chickens and ate them alive, including the entrails. Later, when he had evolved a sign language of his own, he would cross his thumbs and flap his hands: this meant "chicken" or "food".' (The Observer, 30 August 1978)

Of course, it is possible that parents abandon such children because they have disabilities, and they may not have developed like other children even if they had been raised in human company. However, the case of Isabelle suggests otherwise. Discovered at the age of six, Isabelle was the child of a mother who could not hear or speak. They had both been kept shut up by the family in a darkened room for most of the time.

According to Kingsley Davis (1970), 'Her behaviour towards strangers was almost that of a wild animal, manifesting much fear and hostility. In place of speech she made a strange croaking sound. In many ways she acted like an infant... At first it was even hard to tell whether or not she could hear, so unused were her senses.' She was also unable to walk properly, and at first it was thought she might have severe learning difficulties. However, in two years of intensive training, Isabelle was able to cover the stages of learning and development that usually take six years. These examples show that basic human social characteristics are not inborn or instinctive. We have to learn to be 'normal human beings' through contact with others in our early years.

Working alone or in small groups:

- 1 Make a list of all the characteristics of Shamdev and Isabelle that might be described as 'non-human'.
- 2 What 'human' characteristics, skills and abilities would you expect most five- or six-year-old children to possess? Are any of these inborn?
- 3 What conclusions would you draw about the importance of nurture and nature in human development?

value on individuals fulfilling their duties to the group, including the duty to share their wealth rather than keep it for themselves.

While values lay down general principles or guidelines, **norms** are the specific rules that govern behaviour in particular situations. For example, cultures that place a high value on respect for elders usually have specific rules on how they are to be approached or addressed. It may not be permissible to look directly at them when speaking to them, or openly disobey or disagree with them.

Each culture has detailed rules or norms governing every aspect of behaviour, from food and dress to how we perform our jobs or who we may marry. Some norms, such as written laws or rules, are formal. Other norms are informal, such as table manners.

If we fail to keep to a norm, others may punish us. For example, stealing may result in a fine or imprisonment. Likewise, when we uphold a norm, we may be rewarded. For example, obeying the norm that we should work hard at school may earn us a place at university.

Sociologists use the term **sanctions** to describe anything that encourages people to conform to norms. Rewards are positive sanctions, while punishments are negative sanctions. Sanctions are a form of **social control**. That is, they are a way of ensuring that society's members behave as others expect them to.

Cultures and their norms vary greatly. What one culture considers normal or desirable, another may see as unacceptable. For example, in some cultures it is permitted to have several spouses at the same time (polygamy),

Activity What counts as food?

- 1 In small groups, discuss whether or not you would find it acceptable to eat the following: rabbits, guinea pigs, dogs, horses, lambs, chickens, swans, burgers, deer, cheese, cabbage. Give your reasons.
- 2 In your groups, carry out research to find cultures where the following are:
 - a forbidden as food: beef; pork; shellfish. Explain why they are forbidden.
 - b acceptable as food: insects (e.g. grubs, grasshoppers); snakes; rats.
- 3 Which of your answers to 1 and 2 are examples of formal norms, and which are examples of informal norms?
- 4 What does this activity as a whole tell us about what counts as food?

Activity Research

Cannibalism as a norm

...go to www.sociology.uk.net



Those who occupy a given status are expected to follow particular norms of behaviour. For example, someone occupying the status of teacher is expected to mark students' work, treat them fairly, start lessons punctually, know their subject and so on. This set of norms together makes up the **role** of teacher.

Activity Status and role

Norms are expectations of how those who occupy a role should act. The text gives the example of a teacher.

- 1 Work in small groups. Each group should take one of the roles below. Compile a set of norms for your particular role. Try to be quite detailed and specific.

a Gym instructor	b Passenger on a bus
c Doctor	d Checkout worker
- 2 What could you do to disrupt the expectations that others (e.g. bus driver, patient, shopper) have of your role? Based on the norms you have identified, suggest some behaviours that would be unexpected for that role. For example, before the start of the first lesson a teacher might sit at the back of the class as the students enter and not make it clear they were the teacher until long after the lesson was due to start.
- 3 Share your group work with the rest of the class. What does this activity tell us about the importance of the norms associated with social roles?

Socialisation involves not only learning the general culture of society as a whole, but also the things we need to perform our particular roles within society. For example, boys and girls may be socialised differently to prepare them for different gender roles in adulthood.

Individual and society

So far, we have assumed that individuals are shaped by the socialisation process to ensure that they perform the roles society requires of them. However, this implies we are simply the products of society and have no choice in how we act. How true is this? There are two main views:

- **the structural view**
- **the social action view.**

The structural view sees us as entirely shaped by the structure of society (the way society is organised or set up). It sees us as behaving according to society's norms and expectations, which we internalise through the socialisation process.

In this view, society determines our behaviour – we are like puppets on a string, manipulated by society. This is sometimes described as a 'macro' (large-scale) approach because it focuses on how wider society influences us. The emphasis is firmly on the power of society to shape us.

The social action view sees us as having free will and choice. It emphasises the power of individuals to create society through their actions and interactions. This is

sometimes described as a 'micro' approach because it focuses on small-scale, face-to-face interactions between individuals. An example is the study described in **Box 2**, which shows how the beliefs that we hold about others influence how we interact with them.

In practice, most sociologists accept that individuals do have some degree of choice, as the social action view argues, but that their choices are limited by the structure of society, as the structural view argues.

Activity Research

Think about your own educational experiences and choices.

- 1 In what ways do you have freedom of choice about your education?
- 2 In what ways are your choices shaped by wider society (e.g. by your parents' views or income, the job market, your school or college)?

Consensus or conflict?

Although structural sociologists agree that society shapes our behaviour, there are disagreements among them about the kind of structure society has. Functionalist sociologists see society as based on value consensus; that is, harmony and agreement among its members about basic values. By contrast, Marxist sociologists see society as based on conflict.

According to **functionalists**, society is held together by a shared culture into which all its members are socialised. Sharing the same culture integrates individuals into society by giving them a sense of solidarity or 'fellow feeling' with others. It enables members of society to agree on goals and how to achieve them and so allows them to cooperate harmoniously.

Functionalists see society as like a biological organism such as the human body. Like a body whose parts (organs, cells etc) fit together and depend on one another, society too is a system of interdependent parts. Each part performs functions that contribute to the well being of society as a whole. For example, the family reproduces the population and performs the function of primary socialisation, while the education system equips us with the knowledge and skills needed for work.

Marxists disagree with the functionalist view. They see society as based on class conflict, not consensus. They argue that society is divided into two social classes:

- **The minority capitalist class, or bourgeoisie**, own the means of production such as the factories, raw materials and land.
- **The majority working class, or proletariat**, own nothing but their own labour, which they have to sell to the bourgeoisie in order to survive.

The bourgeoisie exploit the workers and profit from their labour. This exploitation breeds class conflict, which

Box 3 Social change and types of society

Sociology as a subject first developed in response to major changes that began to take place in western society from the 18th century onwards. One key change was **urbanisation** – the shift from a largely rural society where people lived in villages, to an urban society where they lived in towns and cities. The process of urbanisation was paralleled by one of **industrialisation**, in which the workforce increasingly moved out of agriculture and into factory production.

These changes had an enormous impact on all areas of social life and to understand them, many sociologists made a distinction between two types of society:

- **traditional society:** a rural-agricultural society where there was little social change, a strong sense of community and religion dominated people's view of the world.

- **modern society:** an urban-industrial society with social and technological change and a belief in progress and science.

However, some sociologists argue that we now live in a new type of society:

- **postmodern society:** a post-industrial society in which change is increasingly rapid but uneven, and where people have lost faith in the ability of science to bring about progress.

In postmodern society, information technology and the media play a central role. The world moves towards a single global economy and culture. Sources of individual identity become more diverse.

Critics argue that postmodernists exaggerate this change and that we are still living in the modern rather than a postmodern era.

For example, Marxists argue that society is still capitalist and class inequality remains its key feature.

Inequality

Britain remains an unequal society. For example, the richest 10% in Britain own 45% of the nation's total wealth, while the poorest half of the population share only 8% of total wealth.

Sociologists are interested in social stratification – that is, inequalities between groups such as social classes, men and women, ethnic groups and age groups. They use the concept of 'life chances' to describe these inequalities. Life chances refer to the chances of enjoying the 'good things', such as educational success, a long and healthy life, high quality housing, and well-paid, interesting work. Different classes, genders, ethnic groups and age groups tend to have different life chances.

Gender

Although there have been major changes in recent years, such as girls overtaking boys at school, men and women still do not occupy equal positions in society.

- More women than men are in poverty. Most low-paid workers and poor pensioners are women.
- On average, women earn about 15% less than men.
- Women do more housework and childcare than men.

Social class

Sociologists usually define a person's class in terms of their occupation. Those in non-manual jobs such as doctors, teachers and office workers are defined as middle-class, while those in manual jobs such as electricians, bus drivers and street sweepers are defined as working-class. Class has a major effect on many aspects of our lives, as the following examples show:

- Manual workers earn less than non-manual workers and are more likely to become unemployed.

- Those working in routine or manual occupations are three times more likely to smoke. Those living in the most deprived areas are over four times more likely to smoke than those in the least deprived areas, and almost twice as likely to suffer from lung cancer.
- The infant mortality rate in the most deprived areas is almost double that in the least deprived areas.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to shared culture and identity. An ethnic group is one whose members see themselves as a group with a shared heritage and cultural background, often including the same language and religion. Ethnicity doesn't just refer to minority groups – most societies also have an ethnic majority. In the UK:

- Unemployment is almost twice as high for minority ethnic groups as for White people.
- Minority ethnic group employees tend to earn less than White employees and are more likely to work shifts.
- The infant mortality rate of Black and Asian babies is around double that of White babies.

Age

Age is an important factor affecting a person's status and age stratification is a basic feature of many societies.

- In many traditional societies, the old are accorded high status. By contrast, in today's society, they have a low status.
- Children in today's society are economically dependent on adults and legal restrictions prevent them from working. This is not the case in all societies.
- The old and the young are more likely to be poor, compared with other age groups.

These different forms of inequality often overlap. For example, gender and age inequalities may reinforce one

What does AS and A level sociology involve?

AS and A level sociology gives you an understanding of important aspects of society, and of how sociologists study and explain people's behaviour. Studying sociology will enable you to discuss social issues in a more informed and systematic way and it will help you to make sense of your own and other people's experiences.

The skills you develop will help you to think logically about the world. AS and A level will give you a firm foundation if you want to study sociology at degree level.

Topics and exams

If you are doing AQA AS sociology or the first year of A level sociology, you will study the following topics: education, families and households, research methods, and methods in context.

If you are taking the AS exams at the end of the year, you will sit two papers:

AS Paper 1 Education plus Methods in Context

AS Paper 2 Families and Households plus Research Methods

If you are taking the A level exams at the end of your second year, you will sit three papers:

A level Paper 1 Education, Methods in Context, and Theory and Methods*.

A level Paper 2 Families and Households plus Beliefs in Society.

A level Paper 3 Crime and Deviance plus Theory and Methods*.

*Theory and Methods includes the topics you have studied under Research Methods in your first year, plus the study of sociological theories.

What the examiners are looking for

When you sit an exam, your work is marked in terms of three aims or 'assessment objectives':

- Assessment Objective 1 (AO1): Knowledge and Understanding
- Assessment Objective 2 (AO2): Application
- Assessment Objective 3 (AO3): Analysis and Evaluation

Knowledge and Understanding means you need to know and understand some of the main ideas and methods sociologists use, and what they have discovered as a result of their studies.

Application involves linking ideas, theories and studies to the set question, clearly showing their relevance to what you have been asked about.

Analysis involves explaining things in detail, showing how ideas fit together, comparing and contrasting, organising answers logically and drawing conclusions.

Evaluation involves judging something, such as the advantages and disadvantages of different research methods, or the arguments for and against a sociologist's views.

For more about the exams and assessment objectives, see Chapter 5.

Developing your knowledge and skills

Developing your knowledge and understanding of sociology and your skills of application, analysis and evaluation is a gradual process and something you will need to work at throughout your course. There is no quick fix. However, here are some pointers that will help you:

Keep up with your course Attend regularly, do the work your teacher sets you, pay attention to the feedback you receive, keep your folder well organised.

Work with others Join in class discussions, form study groups with classmates, discuss sociology topics outside class, revise together, talk to friends who have already done sociology.

When you don't understand, ask your teacher or classmates, or look it up. Don't be shy – you're probably not the only one who doesn't get it.

Use your textbook It contains thorough coverage of the topics you're studying and detailed guidance on exam success.

Apply what you learn Sociology is about the real world, and you'll find lots of examples of sociological ideas all around you – in the news, on the street, at home, in school or college. Use examples in your writing. This will help you with the skill of Application.

Be critical When you come across new information, don't take it at face value. Look for the strengths and weaknesses of ideas; ask what evidence there is for someone's argument. This will help you develop the skill of Evaluation.

Take ideas apart to see how they 'tick'. Try to make comparisons and contrasts between the different ideas, theories and methods you study. This will help you develop the skill of Analysis.

Answer the question When doing written work, keep focused on what you've actually been asked. Make a plan, and keep checking back to it and the question. Make it clear why you're including the material.