



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 under-achievement, 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.

Nature or nurture?

People disagree about whether our behaviour is somehow 'natural' or innate (inborn), or whether it is the result of nurture – that is, our upbringing in society.

Some biologists argue that behaviour is mainly shaped by natural **instincts**. An instinct is an innate, fixed, pre-programmed pattern of behaviour shared by all members of a given species. For example, all blackbirds are 'programmed' to produce the same song patterns, and a blackbird reared in isolation from others will still produce the same song.

In other words, instinctive behaviour doesn't have to be learned. Many instincts are an automatic response to particular stimuli in the environment, such as birds migrating as the seasons change. These behaviours are not learned and the animal apparently has no control over them.

Many biologists argue that, like animal behaviour, our behaviour too is governed by instinct. For example, they claim that humans have natural instincts for reproduction and self-preservation, and that women have a maternal instinct for childbearing and rearing.

However, sociologists question whether human behaviour really is governed by instincts. They point out that on the whole our behaviour is not fixed biologically.

Although we may all possess the same biological urges or drives, the way we act on them varies between individuals and societies. For example:

- Although we all have a sex drive, the way we satisfy it can vary: from promiscuity to monogamy, polygamy etc – or we may choose to remain celibate.
- We have a drive for self-preservation, yet some people choose to commit suicide or risk their lives in war.
- Women are said to have a maternal instinct, yet some choose to abandon or abuse their children – and today over a fifth of all women in Britain choose not to have children at all.

If our behaviour really was determined by instincts, we would not expect to find such enormous variations in behaviour between individuals and societies.

Sociologists argue that the reason for these variations is that our behaviour is **learned** rather than instinctive. Much of this learning occurs in our early years through contact with others and this has an enormous influence on our behaviour and development.

For example, language, knowledge of right and wrong, practical skills such as dressing oneself, table manners and so on all have to be learnt from other members of society. **Box 1** shows some of the harmful effects that lack of social contact in our early years can have on human development.

Sociologists therefore argue that biology and instincts cannot explain our behaviour, because most of it is learned not inborn, and because it is not fixed for all members of our species, but varies between societies. As an alternative way of explaining human behaviour, therefore, sociologists use the two related ideas of culture and socialisation.



▲ Much of our learning occurs in our early years.

Culture, norms and values

Sociologists define **culture** as all those things that are learned and shared by a society or group of people and transmitted from generation to generation. Culture includes all the things that a society regards as important, such as customs, traditions, language, skills, knowledge, beliefs, norms and values.

For example, the culture of societies whose way of life is based on hunting will include hunting skills and techniques, knowledge of the habits and movements of game animals and so on. Similarly, such cultures often contain shared beliefs about the spirits of the animals they hunt and how they should be treated.

Members of a society also share norms and values. **Values** are general principles or goals. They tell us what is good and what we should aim for. For example, modern American society places a high value on individual achievement and the accumulation of personal wealth. By contrast, societies such as those of Native American Indians place a high

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 children like Shamdev precisely because they are abnormal, and such children may not have developed normally 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 deaf mute single mother. Both mother and child had 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 that normally take six years and she went on to develop normally. 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 a normal five or six year old child 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: cats, dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs, horses, lambs, calves, swans, beefburgers.
- 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 As well as the type of food that people may eat, many cultures have rules on the slaughtering of animals for food. Find an example of a rule from a particular culture that governs how animals must be slaughtered.
- 4 Which of your answers to 1, 2 and 3 are examples of formal norms, and which are examples of informal norms?
- 5 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





▲ Horsemeat butchers, France

whereas in others only one is allowed (monogamy). Similarly, some cultures have taboos on specific foods, or rules about what foods may be eaten together.

There may also be cultural variations within a society, especially a large complex one such as Britain. Different groups may have their own **subcultures** that vary significantly from the mainstream culture. For example, different religious groups may have different dietary norms as well as different beliefs about the afterlife.

Cultures and their norms and values may change over time. For example, attitudes to a wide range of behaviour, including smoking, homosexuality, married women working, cohabitation and sex before marriage have all changed in the recent past.

Activity Research

Changing norms about homosexuality

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



Socialisation

As the examples of feral children show (see **Box 1**), we are not born knowing right from wrong, how to speak a language or what type of food we should eat. That is, we are not born with a culture – instead we must learn it from other members of society.

Sociologists refer to this process of learning one's culture as socialisation – learning all the things that are necessary for us to be accepted as full members of society. Another way of describing socialisation is to say it is a process of 'internalising' the culture, whereby society 'gets into' and becomes part of us.

Socialisation begins when we are born and continues throughout life. Sociologists distinguish between primary and secondary socialisation:

- **Primary socialisation** takes place in the early years of life and occurs largely within the family, where we learn language, basic skills and norms.
- **Secondary socialisation** takes place later, at school and in wider society.

Through primary socialisation, we learn what is expected of us as members of a family, but secondary socialisation introduces us to the more impersonal adult world. As well as the family and school, there are other agencies of socialisation, including peer groups, the mass media and religion. Each of these plays a part in transmitting the norms, values and skills we need in order to perform our roles in society.

Activity Gender role socialisation

- 1 In what ways would you say little boys and little girls are treated differently? What kinds of behaviour are encouraged and discouraged for each gender?
- 2 The following gender patterns have been found in work roles:
 - a Primary school teachers and checkout workers are more likely to be female than male.
 - b Secondary school head teachers and engineers are more likely to be male than female.

Why are certain jobs seen to be more appropriate for men and others more suitable for women?
- 3 Is there any gender discrimination in the job market? If so, why do you think it exists?

Status and role

A **status** is a position in society. We can think of society as made up of lots of different positions or statuses. Some statuses are **ascribed**: based on fixed characteristics that we are born with and cannot normally change, such as our sex or ethnicity. Other statuses are **achieved** through our own efforts, such as getting into university or being promoted at work.

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



▲ Why do the police target some groups more than others?

Karl Marx (1818-83) believed would eventually lead to the working class overthrowing capitalism and creating a classless, equal society. In the Marxist view, all social institutions – such as religion, the media and the education system – serve to maintain capitalism, for example by promoting the idea that inequality is inevitable and fair.

Feminist sociologists agree with Marxists that there are fundamental divisions and conflicts in society, but they see gender rather than class as the most important division.

They regard society and its institutions as male-dominated or *patriarchal*. For example, they see the family as unequal and oppressive, with women doing most of the housework and childcare.

Diversity and identity

According to Marxists and functionalists, in modern society the individual's identity is largely fixed. Marxists see our identity as stemming from our class position, while functionalists see it as the result of being socialised into the shared culture.

However, **postmodernist** sociologists argue that we are now living in a postmodern society (see **Box 3**). Unlike modern society, where individuals share a common culture or class identity, postmodern society is fragmented (splintered) into a wide variety of different groups.

These groups are based on differences in ethnicity, age, religion, region, nationality, sexuality and so on. This diversity gives individuals greater freedom to 'pick and mix' their identities from a wide variety of sources.

However, critics argue that postmodernists exaggerate how far things have really changed. In particular, postmodernists ignore the continuing importance of social inequality and the ways this limits people's choices and shapes their lives.

In what ways does poverty limit people's choices and shape their lives?

Box 2 Shoplifting in Chicago

Interactionist sociologists take a social action approach to crime. Rather than seeing crime as caused by 'society', they see it as the outcome of the labels people apply to others in their interactions with them. Mary Cameron's (1964) study of shoplifting in Chicago department stores is a good example of this approach.

Cameron found that stores didn't automatically prosecute everyone they suspected of shoplifting. They were often reluctant to prosecute because of the difficulty of proving the case and the cost of releasing employees to be witnesses. They were inclined to let suspects off with a warning, particularly if they were willing and able to pay for the goods.

However, not everyone was treated in the same way. According to Cameron, store detectives made assumptions about what the 'typical shoplifter' is like. They believed adolescents and black people were more likely to be shoplifters and kept them under surveillance when they were in the store. By contrast, the detectives were unlikely to be suspicious of people they saw as 'respectable'. These people tended to be middle-class and white. Even when the detectives witnessed an offence, they were less likely to report it if the suspect was of a similar background to themselves.

When arrests were made, the stores were more likely to press charges if the suspects were black. For example, only 9% of arrested white women were charged, but 42% of black women. Furthermore, when cases went to court, not only were black women more likely to be found guilty; they were six times more likely to be jailed than white women.

Cameron's study shows how people's beliefs about others influence how they act towards them. In this case, the ideas of the store detectives and others about the 'typical shoplifter' affected which groups they chose to pursue, and this in turn criminalised more blacks than whites.

- 1 What evidence does Cameron give of suspects being able to negotiate an outcome other than prosecution?
- 2 Apart from being young and black, what other characteristics do you think store detectives might see as typical of shoplifters?
- 3 How could you apply Cameron's ideas to explaining the fact that the working class are more likely to be convicted of crimes than the middle class?

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 44% of the nation's total wealth, while the poorest half of the population share only 9% 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.

- People in class V (unskilled manual workers such as cleaners) are three times as likely to be smokers and nearly five times as likely to die of lung cancer, compared to people in class I (professionals such as doctors).
- The infant mortality rate (deaths during the first year of life) is nearly twice as high for babies in class V as for those in class I.

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.

- Unemployment is almost twice as high for ethnic minorities as for whites.
- Minority employees tend to earn less than whites and are more likely to work shifts.
- The infant mortality rate of African Caribbean and Pakistani babies is more than double that of whites.

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

another. Women are likely to have smaller pensions in old age because they have not worked full-time for as long, due to family responsibilities.

- 1 Suggest two reasons for social class differences in death rates.
- 2 Suggest two reasons why women earn less than men.
- 3 Suggest two reasons why members of ethnic minority groups are more likely than whites to be unemployed.

How do sociologists study society?

As we saw earlier, sociologists create theories to explain society and human behaviour. To be of any value, these theories must be based on evidence about the real world.

Sociologists have to collect this evidence. To do so, they carry out research using a variety of methods and sources of evidence. These include:

- **social surveys**, which involve asking a sample of people a series of questions in an interview or a written questionnaire
- **participant observation**, where the sociologist joins in with the group they are studying in order to gain deeper insight into their lives
- **official statistics** compiled by the government (for example on educational achievement, family size, unemployment and crime rates).

When choosing a method of research, sociologists need to be aware that every method has its particular strengths and limitations.

For example, a social survey can usually gather information from a large cross-section of the population, but often the results will lack depth and detail, compared for example with a study using participant observation. However, research that uses participant observation can usually only study small numbers of people.

Summary

Sociology is the study of society and human behaviour. Sociologists construct **theories** – general explanations of social patterns. They conduct research to collect **evidence** to support their theories. Governments may use sociologists' findings to develop **social policies**.

Human behaviour is not instinctive, but **learned** through contact with others, as the examples of feral children show. **Culture** includes all those things learned and shared by a group, including knowledge, beliefs, norms and values. **Values** are general principles. **Norms** are specific rules of behaviour. Complex societies may contain many **subcultures**. **Socialisation** is the process of learning one's culture. Sociologists distinguish between **primary** and **secondary** socialisation.

Society is made up of **statuses**, some of which are ascribed (fixed at birth) while others are **achieved**. A **role** is the set of norms that govern how a person in a particular status should act.


The **structural view** sees society as shaping the individual. The **social action view** sees individuals as having choice, creating social reality through their interactions. **Functionalists** see society as based on **value consensus**, with interdependent parts performing functions for the good of the whole. **Marxists** see society as based on **class conflict**, in which the bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat. **Feminists** see society as **patriarchal** or male dominated.

Postmodernists believe we have moved to a more **fragmented** society in which there are diverse sources of identity. Critics argue that they ignore important **class**, **gender**, **ethnic** and **age inequalities**. These have a powerful effect on people's **life chances**.

Sociologists use a variety of **methods** and sources, such as surveys, participant observation and official statistics to gather evidence to test their theories.

QuickCheck Questions

- 1 What do the examples of 'feral' children show about human behaviour?
- 2 Explain what is meant by:
a culture; b norms; c socialisation.
- 3 Explain the difference between ascribed status and achieved status.
- 4 What is the difference between the structural and social action views of society?
- 5 According to Marxists, what is the cause of class conflict?

Check your answers at www.sociology.uk.net 

- 6 According to functionalists, what is the advantage of members of society sharing the same culture?
- 7 Explain what is meant by 'patriarchal society'.
- 8 What is social stratification?
- 9 In which types of society (traditional, modern or postmodern) are the following features likely to be found:
a belief in progress; b little social change;
c diverse sources of identity?
- 10 Suggest one limitation of participant observation as a research method.