

Lesson One

What is Sociology?

Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- relate sociology to other social sciences
- understand key sociological concepts
- look at some of the debates in the subject, including the structure/action debate and debates between conflict and consensus approaches
- identify the sociological perspectives of functionalism, Marxism, feminism, interactionism, phenomenology and postmodernism

Context

The first lesson of the course introduces some of the basic themes which are going to dominate your studies. In particular, you will see that there is not *one* sociological approach but several approaches, either complementary or conflicting.



Sociology AS for AQA, Unit 1 (compulsory)

Sociology: Themes and Perspectives, Introductory Chapter and Chapter 12 (optional extra).



Oxford Open Learning

Introduction

Living in a modern society can be challenging. Although modern living offers a sense of liberation or freedom, and dynamic development such as online communication and globalization makes the modern world feel rather exciting, people often feel rather confused by events. To explain this further, the following examples outline a few contradictory modern societal challenges:

- Global communication has effectively 'shrunk' the world and interacting with people across the world has never been easier. In fact we can now find out much more about societies in other parts of the world; how they function and what their lives are like.
- Exposure to information allows us to be informed about key issues such as global poverty and inequalities, environmental issues etc. However it also exposes us to issues such as terrorism war and crime.

Therefore we can ask ourselves some fundamental questions which are listed below, and as you study the course your sociological perspectives will develop and you will engage with a range of evidence that will inform your knowledge development and help you have a balanced response to each of the questions. For now they are reflective questions which you can return to frequently as you progress with your study.

Questions we should ask ourselves

- 1: How did societies develop?
- 2: Why is modern life different to the lives that previous generations experienced?
- 3: Why do such gross inequalities still exist in the world?
- 4: What does the future hold for societies?

What is sociology?

Sociology can be described as **the systematic scientific study of human life, social groups, societies and in fact the world as we know it.**

However, sociology is a subject characterised by a lot of debate, so you will find many different views between sociologists as to exactly how the subject should be defined and how sociologists should do their research; there has been, for example, a big debate about whether sociology can be scientific. Sociologists aim to study society

and social behaviour in a systematic manner. By this, they mean that they wish their research to be unbiased and rigorous, and to be based on empirical research. The term 'empirical research' refers to evidence that is gathered through observation or by experiment.

It should be clear already that there is a bit more to sociology than just being 'interested in people'. Sociologists want to make the claim that their findings about social behaviour are more valid than, for example, journalist's articles, or people's own individual experiences, because they work on a larger scale and use systematic research methods. Most sociologists would want to say that this enables them to make valid generalisations about social behaviour, relationships and institutions. In everyday life we are often critical about the idea of generalisations, because people who generalize too easily often make inaccurate statements or observations. However, sociologists are trying to make valid generalisations, or general statements, about society.

Therefore we can clearly see that the scope of sociology as a subject is wide ranging and now encompasses global issues as well as issues within our own society. This change reflects advances in communication, exposure to information and because individuals are becoming more interested in how their own society functions and what they can do to bring about positive changes.

Here are a few examples of the sort of generalisations that sociologists have found are supported by empirical research:

- Men earn more than women
- Men in Cambridge live longer than men in Manchester
- Girls do better than boys at GCSE and A level
- The higher the social class of your parents, the better are your own chances of staying in that social class

Sociology is concerned with finding out why these patterns occur. Are they, for example, the result of natural differences between men and women? Maybe, for instance, girls do better in education because they are more intelligent? Maybe men in Manchester just happen to have some genetic weakness which means that on average they do not live as long as men in Cambridge. Sociologists tend to be sceptical of such biologically based explanations and aim to discover the social causes of these patterns.

A key factor that is important here is the word, social. Already we have talked about social behaviour and social causes. Sociologists argue that humans are social beings. This means that we live in groups and learn and interact with other people. Sociologists argue

that this makes human behaviour complex and distinctive. It also means that we cannot simply explain human behaviour in terms of natural drives and instincts, because all of our behaviour is influenced by what we learn from other people, a process that begins from the minute we are born. This is the process of socialisation, which is defined in more detail further below. Sociologists argue that while some aspects of human behaviour are indeed determined (or shaped) by nature, there are also important social causes, which we should not neglect if we wish to have a full understanding of our society.

One example will do here. Aggression is a human characteristic. Biologists can tell us about the chemical and physiological mechanisms that create aggression. Psychologists can tell us something about why certain individuals are aggressive. Sociology however aims to show how society influences aggression, by showing how society defines and controls aggression, and how aggression is perceived in our culture. Thus, sociologists studying football hooliganism will aim to investigate the social causes leading those from certain social groups to participate in violence at football matches, whilst others express their aggression in other ways, by playing rugby or some other sport. Sociologists will want to know what social factors have led to this pattern of behaviour. For example, sociologists will wish to know how gender and class are related to aggression, and whether and why football hooligans appear to come from only certain sections in society.

These examples give us a brief indication of what is involved in studying society. It is now appropriate to look in a little more detail at how sociologists study society, and the intellectual equipment they use to do this.

Using your sociological imagination and thinking critically

In 1970, **C. Wright Mills** talked about the **sociological imagination** by which he meant learning to think in a sociological way. We can all acquire knowledge from books, the internet and interaction with other people but, in order to think about concepts in a sociological way, you have to look at issues from a wider context and from different perspectives.

A note on dates

When mentioning the theories, studies and experiments of sociologists, it is helpful to supply the date when the work was published. It is not necessary to learn all these dates. But it is helpful to gain a gradual sense of how the study of sociology has changed over the years. All theories may be (and generally have been!) challenged and more recent studies may well have very different findings.

When we start to develop our sociological imagination we can also begin to think about issues critically. Critical thinking in sociological terms means taking different aspects of ordinary activities or concepts and considering how they might impact people's lives and change behaviour. Therefore the aim is to deepen understanding and widen perspectives when studying sociological topics.

How do sociologists find out about society?

Whilst sociology always involves a lot of debate, this does not mean that it is a cosy subject that lets us retain our pet theories and opinions about social issues. If sociology did this, it would be no different to common sense – which is precisely the claim that ill-informed critics make of sociology. However, sociology is very different to common sense. Sociology differs from common sense in several important ways. Sociological thinking always has to involve the following elements:

Empirical evidence

We need to be clear here that empirical evidence is based on theoretical perspectives. The creation of theoretical perspectives means constructing interpretations that are based on a set of statements or assumptions related to factual events or situations.

For example, if you were researching a social media platform and its effects on a specific group in society, you might first look at how communication technology has developed over time, and also examine changing behaviour patterns of its users. There is a further example in the next section.

Sociologists do not make claims without having empirical evidence, that is, evidence gained through rigorous research, to support their claims. Some critics of sociology are quick to make the point that 'you can't generalise'. However, taken as it stands this is an inadequate claim. Sociologists would say that you can indeed make generalisations – that is one of the points of the subject. However, sociologists must always make sure that their generalisations are valid, that is, true. An example of a current valid general statement that comes from sociological research is that girls generally have a higher level of educational attainment at GCSE and AS/A level than boys. To gain empirical evidence, sociologists use research method and, as we will see later, these have to be rigorous and systematic.

Concepts

Sociologists use many concepts – or ideas, which come from sociological theories. Some of these concepts become so well-known

that they pass into everyday language – sometimes inaccurately. Examples of sociological concepts that have become part of our everyday language would be ‘class’, or ‘labelling’, and there are many others. In sociology, as in other subjects, we need to use new concepts because we are trying to explain social life in new and different ways – to change the way we see things, and to challenge our everyday and taken-for-granted ways of seeing things. This is why you will develop a new vocabulary in studying sociology.

Theories

Sociologists also use and develop theories. These are composed of sets of concepts and they aim to help us explain how society works. Examples of sociological theories are Functionalism, Marxism, Feminism, Interactionism, and Postmodernism. There is more detail on these later on in this lesson and you will continue to learn more about the theories throughout the course. Do not worry if you feel you do not understand everything about the theories straight away. There are a lot of new terms and ideas to grasp, and you will find that you will build your knowledge up gradually over the course.

Sociological theories are also known as perspectives. It may be useful to think of sociological perspectives in the following way: we all have our own particular views on social issues or events, about why and how they happened. This is all that sociological theories are. They offer contrasting explanations and views on what society is and how it works.

You should try not to be too rigid in the way in which you use the theories. For example, there is no single theory that provides the ‘truth’ about society. Equally, many sociologists will use some ideas from particular theories, but this does not mean that they agree with everything that a theory states. For example, you may agree with the feminists about the importance of patriarchy (male dominance) in modern society, but you may disagree with Marxist-Feminists that patriarchy is caused by capitalism. So you can borrow ideas from different theories and sometimes ‘mix them up’ – or synthesise ideas – but if you do this you do of course need to take great care that the ideas you have mixed are not contradictory.

A summary so far

So, to conclude this section of the lesson, if we use all of these three elements then we are being sociological. Many students wonder if all this means that their own views are relevant when they are studying sociology. Of course they are! However, your own views and opinions also have to be subjected to sociological scrutiny, and examiners want you to show how sociological you can be in your work. This means that you will debate the views of other sociologists, by, for example, arguing that their research is

inadequate because it was based on a small sample, or perhaps by suggesting that since some original research was carried out a number of years ago society has changed considerably. Examiners and teachers want you to demonstrate that you have a sociological imagination. This means that you will be able to demonstrate that you can see links between individual action or behaviour and social structures.

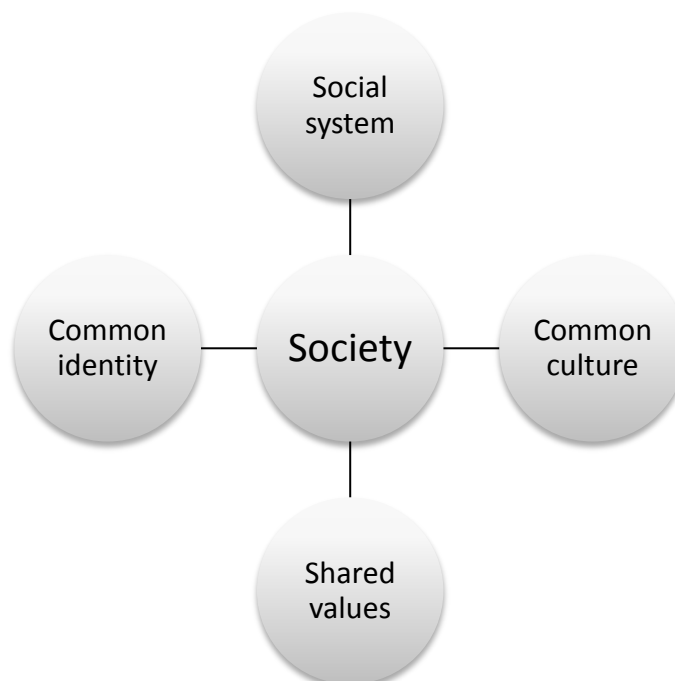
Key Sociological Concepts

The previous section has indicated that there are a number of key concepts in sociology. The following brief comments will give you an outline of what these concepts are and why they are important. You will encounter these concepts often as you study the course and will study them in different contexts and from different perspectives.

Society

If Sociology is the study of society, then it is important to understand what is meant by this term. Broadly speaking, society can be thought of as a social system, made up of people who interact with each other and who share a common culture and a sense of common identity. These concepts are explained below and are simply represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Society structure



Norms

Norms are socially defined rules that determine what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in different social situations. Groups and institutions within society may have their own particular norms, e.g. a school, a society, a factory.

The following is a list of some common social norms. You may be able to think of many more

- Stop at a red traffic light
- Shake hands with someone when you meet them
- Say please and thank you
- Call home if you are going to be late
- Give up your seat on the bus/train for an older person

The above examples are rather simplistic but they are good examples of accepted normal rules of behaviour within society.

Values

Values are beliefs we hold as individuals, groups or whole societies about right and wrong – or ethics. Some sociologists (called Functionalists – more about these shortly – believe that societies need to have shared values in order to function effectively. The term ‘value-consensus’ is used to refer to these shared values which are seen to be necessary and which bind a society together.

Examples of some ‘social’ values follow:

- Equal opportunity
- Justice
- Social inclusion
- Morality

Culture

Norms values, roles, language, customs, expression and statuses combine together to form a culture. All societies have a culture. This gives each society its distinctive way of life. It reflects its knowledge and ways of thinking and behaving. Culture also refers to the shared way of life of a group or an organisation within a society, e.g. a criminal culture, a shop floor culture (in a factory), or police culture.

As societies develop and become larger, they also become more complex in terms of having a range of cultures simultaneously developing within them. This situation is known as cultural diversity. Sociologists refer to cultures within cultures as subcultures.

Above we outlined the elements which combine to make a culture and in Table 1 they are described in more detail:

Norms	Values	Customs	Roles	Statuses
Norms can be described as values that we have put into practice and therefore influence the way we behave	Widely held and accepted society beliefs, for example the belief in democracy or family life	These are the regular or traditional behaviours which are associated with specific social contexts, for example ceremonies such as marriage	Roles attract specific societal expectation because of their status, for example doctors who are expected to behave professionally	Each member of a society has a position (or status) and this can be fixed at birth (gender, race, etc) or achieved, for example education, work role, etc.

Table 1: Elements that combine to make a culture

Socialisation

Socialisation is the process by which individuals learn the norms and values of society. Socialisation takes two forms: primary socialisation and secondary socialisation. According to the 1950s American sociologist Talcott Parsons, primary socialisation occurs from birth to around the age of five. Secondary socialisation refers to all socialisation processes that occur after this initial phase but, importantly, this part of socialisation continues throughout life, in different organisations and roles, e.g. starting a new job or becoming a parent, a grandparent or a pensioner. All these changes require us to learn the new norms that accompany our new role.

Social Identity

This is a form of labelling, reflecting how individuals perceive themselves (or are perceived by others) based on membership of groups such as class, gender, race or ethnicity, and age. An example of something that forms part of your social identity could be that you are working class, or middle class.

Social Differentiation

This concept is linked to the one above, in that it refers to the way in which societies may be divided into different groups according to perceived differences, for example on the basis of class, gender, race or age. These groups often receive differing treatment in terms of jobs, employment, etc.

Social Stratification

Social stratification refers to the idea that there are inequalities between different social groups and that they can be ranked into different levels on the basis of, for example, wealth, status or power.

Power

Put simply, power refers to the probability that an individual will be able to carry out his own will, even in the face of opposition, and shape the actions of other people. It can be thought of as the level of 'influence' a person has. For example, some sociologists argue that, in the UK, men are more powerful than women.

Social Structure

Structure is a difficult concept, but one way of explaining it for our present purposes would be to see it as a set of patterned (or structured) relationships of power. These relationships or structures have important effects on individuals, shaping the opportunities (or life chances as sociologists tend to call them) that individuals will generally have in life in a particular society.

So, for example, as we discussed above, men may generally have better opportunities in their careers than women; this is not because men are better at work than women. Sociologists would argue that it reflects structured inequalities between men's and women's opportunities in the labour market. These can be seen as being caused by cultural values, e.g. patriarchy, supported and reinforced by social and economic policies and laws formed by the government and other organisations (e.g. Trade Unions). They may also be the result of resistance by men, both at work (to women employees) and at home (by resistance to the idea of their wife going out to work).

Sociologists argue that these structures are socially constructed – this means that they are made by social action between the various institutions and members of society, as indicated in the preceding paragraph. The patterns and inequalities that social structures form, therefore, should not be seen as natural or inevitable – they are socially constructed, and the sociologist's job is to study how and why this happens, and how it changes over the course of time.

Class

Sociologists see class as a key form of stratification in modern societies. A population can be seen as consisting of several groups of people who have a similar economic and social position, based upon their occupation, income, and wealth. There are differences in definition and emphasis in the study of class; some sociologists following more in the tradition of Marx and others following Weber.

For those influenced by Marx the key aspect of class is whether or not a person owns the means of production. Those influenced by Weber see occupation as a better indicator of class position. Arguably, Weberian-influenced views of class have been more influential on studies of class structure in Britain, and various ways of classifying occupations have been devised.

Within the UK, social class is perceived as a way of achieving **upward mobility** through education, hard work, etc. Achievement-orientated societies which are also class-based are said to have **meritocratic systems** which means they are based on rewards earned through achievement. We will meet this term several times during the course.

Look at Table 2 which provides a more detailed overview of the class structure.

Upper class	Categorised as landowners who have largely inherited land/property; the entrepreneurial rich whose wealth is tied up in things like stocks and shares; the jet set rich which includes celebrities as well as professionals
Middle class	Non-manual social groups such as professionals (doctors, solicitors etc.) characterised by high levels of quality education which allows acquisition of cultural capital (knowledge and skills required to take advantage of further opportunities); managers and white collar workers; the petit bourgeoisie or self-employed (for example farmers)
Lower class	Manual workers which includes semi and unskilled workers

Table 2: Class structure

Race

Race is now a heavily debated term in sociology. It was argued that the human species could be scientifically categorized into different racial groups. However, the scientific accuracy of this view is now disputed. Nevertheless, sociologists and researchers continue to use the term, sometimes interchangeably with ethnicity.

Gender

Sociologists make a distinction between sex and gender. Sex differences are biological differences between males and females and these are natural – that is, they are the result of nature and natural forces. Gender differences, though, are differences of culture, and are learnt through socialization and enforced through social control. They are the result of nurture, not nature.

Gender therefore is about the ways men and women learn the rules or norms about gendered behaviour – that is, the appropriate ways to behave in order to be considered a normal man or woman. Socialization into gender roles begins almost literally from birth, with western or British society having very different norms and expectations for individuals depending upon their sex. These gender roles will also vary between different societies, since different societies have different cultures.

Age

Age is an important way in which members of society are distinguished. We may think that age is simply a natural phenomenon – from birth we age, and there is not much that we can do about the course of nature. On the same lines, people may point out that human beings mature and decline. As small children our capacities are limited, they increase as we become adults, and then with old age, our physical abilities decline.

All this is true, but sociologists are interested in the way in which these processes are socially controlled, and how different statuses apply to particular age groups in different societies. These relationships are not determined by biology, but by culture, and different cultures have different norms and values relating to, for example, the young and the old.

Core Themes

Note that ‘socialisation, culture and identity’ and ‘social differentiation, power and stratification’ are themes that run throughout the course and which you will need to consider in relation to the topics you study. It is therefore important that you understand these terms. Table 3 provides an overview of the key sociological concepts and their meanings which will help you to remember them.

Socialisation	The process by which children develop an awareness of social norms, values and accepted behaviour
Social identity	How society views individuals in terms of cultural expectations
Social differentiation	The differentiation of social groups through cultural variation
Social stratification	Hierarchical ranking based on social status
Power	Maintenance of inequalities against the will of others
Social structure	The elements that make up a society
Class	Main form of stratification in a class based society

Race	A set of social relationships which situate individuals and groups according to biological attributes
Gender	Social expectations related to behaviour of each sex
Age	Biological, psychological and social processes through life stages

Table 3: Sociological concepts

Social Control

Social control is the process whereby individuals are forced to comply with the norms and values of a society or a social group. Compliance with norms and values is achieved through the use of sanctions. Sanctions are rewards or punishments. Sociologists talk about four types of sanctions: formal and informal, positive and negative.

- **Formal** sanctions relate to behaviour that can be formally dealt with by social institutions, such as the courts or the education system. Formal positive sanctions reward us if, for example, we report information regarding a crime to the police. Formal negative sanctions are the punishments a person is liable to receive if they break the law.
- **Informal** sanctions, in contrast, only apply to less formal rules, for example, the dress codes of certain clubs, the rules that a family might agree on regarding washing up, or the rules that a peer group creates.

The concept of social control is very important, since it demonstrates that however much of an independent individual any one of us might feel we are, we have to follow – to some extent – social rules. In a much more sophisticated way, sociologists would also point out that the very idea of seeing ourselves as individuals, is not natural, but is the result of the particular socialisation processes of our culture.

Sociologist David Hargreaves (1967) has commented on the highly individualistic nature of the British education system in contrast to the Japanese system. In Japanese culture there is a much greater emphasis on the social group (family, work, and nation). Individual identity is stressed much less than it is in British culture, and individuals tend to think of themselves and develop their sense of identity much more in terms of a group.

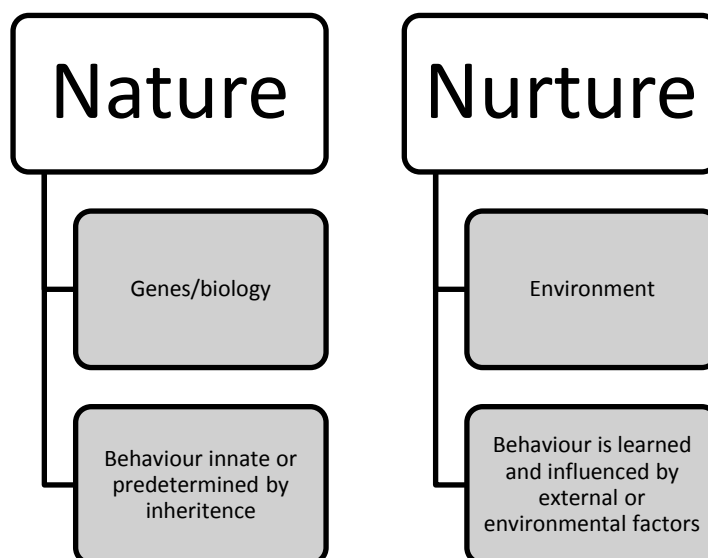
The Nature/Nurture debate

In studying society, sociologists aim to show how the actions of individuals are affected by wider social forces, such as class, ethnicity and gender, and by social institutions, such as governments, schools, banks, factories, etc. One of the key concepts that sociologists use in illustrating these influences is culture, which we have already discussed (see above). The importance of this concept becomes clear when contrasted with the view of the theorists known as Sociobiologists.

Sociobiologists argue that human behaviour can be explained in terms of inherited behaviour. This involves seeing behaviour as natural, and sociobiologists would want to explain, for example, the differences in male and female behaviour purely in terms of natural differences. Male behaviour would be seen as being naturally more aggressive, since in previous times men acted as hunters, whilst women were carers. This view also carries with it the assumption that since behaviour is natural, it cannot be fundamentally changed.

The debate over whether human beings or their societies are more influenced by nature or by learnt behaviour - or culture - is termed the nature/nurture debate. Sociologists would argue that the concept of culture shows us that many aspects of our lives are not 'natural', but are ways of living that we have learnt. The study of people who have for various reasons, missed out the vital stages of learning a culture, indicate that human behaviour is cultural behaviour. Figure 2 outlines the main nature/nurture debate components

Figure 2: The nature/nurture debate



A Brief Introduction to Sociological Perspectives

The point and nature of sociological perspectives has already been commented on. The following comments provide a little more detail on the nature of several key perspectives. You will find much more detail in the recommended reading and in other lessons. What is provided here are some of the key features of the main sociological perspectives, and some of the associated debates. Remember, this material may well seem very abstract at first (it is!), but as you move on to the individual topics and start applying it, you will get a clearer idea of how it is applied in more concrete terms.

Many criticisms can be made of all of the theories discussed below, but these will be dealt with in detail when examining individual topics. The intention here is to provide a broad overview and introduction to the theories. However some of the key theoretical debates will be briefly considered after a review of the key theories.

Functionalism

Functionalism is a structural theory. Functionalists argue that society must be seen as an interrelated system – each part plays a vital role in the success of the whole. This is often referred to as the **organic analogy** – this means that society can be understood as broadly comparable to an organism, e.g. a horse. It has certain systems, such as a digestive system, a nervous system, and so on, and all of these have to work harmoniously together if the organism is to function effectively.

The system also has certain essential needs – called **functional prerequisites**, which must be met if the system is to survive. The basic functional prerequisites identified by the well-known American sociologist Talcott Parsons in the 1950s are:

- adaptation
- goal attainment
- integration
- pattern maintenance.

These can be explained as follows. Adaptation just means that societies must adapt to their environment, e.g. natural resources, climate, and so on. Goal attainment refers to the need for societies to set goals or aims, such as economic growth. Integration refers to the need all societies have, to manage conflicts between different groups. Pattern maintenance refers to the need to maintain the set of shared values over time – a society must have these if it is to survive.

Society depends on shared norms and values – there is value consensus. Society must maintain harmony and equilibrium (balance, stability), and shared norms and values allow this, by integrating members of society around shared norms. Social control is achieved through sanctions.



The French functionalist sociologist, **Emile Durkheim** (1858, 1893, and 1912) (left) argued that socialisation teaches acceptance of society's moral order such that people want to obey; thus force is not usually necessary.

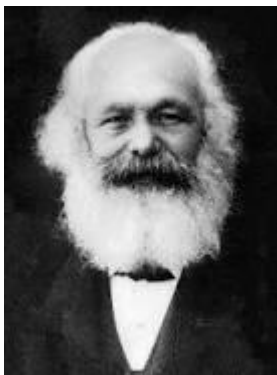
Functionalists do acknowledge that societies change and develop, but they argue that societies do this in an evolutionary way. Parsons argued that societies would change from simple to more complex systems as they developed, improving their technology and control over their environment.

However, as societies change, the social system changes, and the different parts of society must also adapt to fit the needs of the system. For example, the nuclear family according to Parsons best fits the needs of modern industrial society, as does a meritocratic educational system, which allows individuals to reach their maximum potential regardless of class, gender or ethnicity. However, both of these social institutions have developed over time, as society has adapted to changed circumstances.

The American sociologist Robert Merton developed functionalism further in the 1950s, arguing that not all parts of the social system may be functional – some may be dysfunctional, that is, adverse in their effects upon the social system.

Functionalism's heyday was during the 1960s. More recently, sociologists such as Jeffrey Alexander and Niklas Luhmann have attempted to modify the theory. Alexander argues that it is still a useful theory, if it is used as a way of describing (not explaining) relations between social institutions and society.

Marxism



Marxism, like Functionalism, is a structural theory (it looks at the structure or pattern of society on a macro, or large, overall scale), but the key difference is that unlike Functionalism, Marxism sees society as based on conflict rather than consensus.

Marxism is based on the work of the nineteenth century philosopher and political activist **Karl Marx** (left). However, sociologists are interested not in promoting Karl Marx's political goals (communism), but in using his ideas to provide an explanation of the way society works. The sort of question

sociologists are interested in posing is whether capitalist society really does work in the way in which Marx said it did. Marxists consider that society is best thought of as a system or structure. Marxists see society in terms of the base/superstructure model. The base (also called the infrastructure) is essentially the economic system of society – the means by which a society makes, provides, and distributes its goods necessary for survival.

Marxists see the base as consisting of the means of production – the equipment used in economic production, and the relations of production. 'Capitalist production leads to relations of production between workers and employers, or the two classes which Marx terms proletariat and bourgeoisie. For Marxists then, society is best understood as being formed on the basis of conflict, and particularly the conflict that arises from the ownership of private property. This does not necessarily mean that we have to agree with Marx's political goals. We are concerned to use his ideas as analytical tools – hence we may ask 'Is society best seen as working on the basis of economic conflict?'

Marxists argue that all conflict is class conflict and reflects the basic clash of interests between bourgeoisie and proletariat, or owners and workers. Owners want to maximise profits, workers want to maximise their wage. In capitalist society production is organised to maximise profit for capitalists, not, as Functionalism argues, to fulfil the needs of society – that is, all society, treating all members as equal, and as benefiting equally from social arrangements.

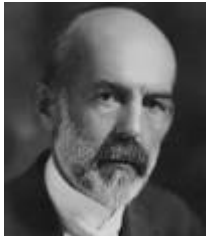
Another difference from Functionalism is that Marxists see society as being held together through coercion (force) rather than consensus. Social control is exerted through ideology – the ideas of the dominant social classes (or ruling class). This is achieved through the superstructure, which consists of institutions such as the government, the education system, the media, religion, and the family. Marxists see the superstructure as inevitably reflecting the base of society. Thus if the base of society is organised on a class basis, these divisions will be reflected throughout the rest of the structure.

Since the superstructure reflects the base, the system is continually reproduced. Key institutions such as the family, education, the media, and the family, function in such a way as to reproduce the class system.

Interactionism

Interactionism is very different to the previous two theories. Interactionist theories are micro-theories, studying social behaviour at the level of interactions between individuals, rather than structures. Interactionists therefore focus on what they call action.

By this they simply mean the way that people relate together in groups, and how people make sense of society. In doing this, interactionist sociologists have invented lots of concepts, such as role, labelling, self-concept, and self-fulfilling prophecy, amongst others. There are a variety of interactionist theories including symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and Social Action theory, but it is not necessary to discuss here the complex differences between all of these versions of interactionist thought.



Interactionists such as the American sociologist, **Charles Horton Cooley** (left) argued in 1909 that the self-concept was a key influence in explaining human behaviour. A person's self-concept is influenced by the way others respond to them. The concepts of labelling and the self-fulfilling prophecy suggest that this influence can have very important consequences. The symbolic interactionist Harold Blumer argued that people act on the basis of meanings, rather than structures. The task of sociology is therefore to research and understand the meanings that actors attach to their behaviour. This emphasis means that interactionist sociology can be very different to structural approaches such as Marxism and Functionalism.

Interactionist sociology focuses on the role of the meanings that govern actors' behaviour. Interactionists see meanings as the product of social interaction between people, but they are continually being modified, and vary depending upon the social context, and therefore require interpretation. Interactionists argue that meanings are vital to the study of sociology, and they are what make sociology different from the natural sciences, like chemistry. Unlike atoms or chemicals, people have reasons for behaving as they do. Therefore if we wish to study society, we need to bear this point in mind and devise appropriate methods; methods which will allow us to discover the meanings held by members of society and the motivations for their various behaviours.

Interactionists also have a different way of looking at social order. Social order refers to the way that society holds together and is reproduced between different generations. Functionalists see social order as being constructed by culture and through social control and sanctions. However, for Functionalists, social order is always achieved through consensus – the upholding of shared norms and values. For Marxists, things are rather different. Social order is achieved through the dominance of the capitalist ruling class, and their ownership of the means of production gives them the power to dominate society. For interactionists though, social order is the end product of shared meanings, and is not imposed by social structures. Social order is much more flexible than structural views suggest and is the result of continual interpretation and negotiation. There is no great structure or plan that society has to adhere to; it is much more as if societies make things up as they go along.

More recent perspectives

The theories above dominated sociology for a long time. Marxism and Functionalism dominated through the 1950s to the 1960s. From the 1960s, interactionist theory developed at great pace and gained in popularity. From the 1960s, though, other theoretical perspectives developed, including feminism. From the 1970s onwards there were a range of theoretical developments, including post-structuralism and post-modernism. The most important for you to know something about are feminism and postmodernism. You will find much more detail in the recommended reading (especially Haralambos).

Feminism

Feminism developed, particularly in sociology, from the 1960s, and American sociologists did the much of the early work in this perspective. Feminism, like Marxism, can be seen as - indeed is - a political perspective as well as a sociological perspective. This means that some or many feminists were partly motivated by the desire to see women achieve equal rights with men. However, sociologists are primarily concerned to use feminist theory as an analytical tool to understand contemporary society.

So why was – and is – feminism sociologically important? It was important because, from the 1960s, feminists set about a sustained critique of academic sociology, claiming in essence that it was biased. This bias was evident, feminists claimed, in several ways. Firstly, most academic sociologists were male, and this led them to exhibit bias in their academic work. They routinely, feminists argued, neglected both issues and questions pertinent to the role of women in society, frequently seeing these areas as irrelevant or of no sociological interest. This, of course, would carry the implication that knowing about the role of women or the views of women, would not help explain anything about society.

A good example of feminist work at the time would be that of the British sociologist **Ann Oakley**. In the early 1970s, Oakley became interested in the sociology of work. At that time the field of the sociology of work was mainly concerned with work relations in industrial workplaces. Oakley thought that it would be interesting to examine the concept of housework in a sociological light, and ask questions, such as, for example, whether housewives were alienated (just as academic sociologists examined alienation amongst industrial workers). Alienation basically refers to the degree of satisfaction workers gain from their work. Oakley met tremendous resistance from academic sociologists and found it difficult for her idea to be accepted as a PhD. Eventually, though, her proposal was accepted and her research was completed.

Oakley's work provided a new view of housework and gender relations – it made people see things in a new light. It also shed light on an area which traditional academic sociology neglected. Since Oakley's research, feminists have repeated this achievement in just about all the different areas studied by sociologists. Feminism, moreover, is important not simply because it rectifies a bias and increases the validity of sociological research or perspectives, it is also important because of some of the concepts it gives sociology. Chief of these has been patriarchy. Patriarchy simply means male dominance. Feminists have shown that the nature of contemporary society can be seen as one that is thoroughly patriarchal, and how these structure works. This is a considerable contribution and, as mentioned above, it reflects one of the hallmarks of sociology – its provision of concepts which allow us to understand society.

Feminism consists of a number of different varieties – such as radical, liberal and Marxist, though there are several others. You will need to know about basic feminist concepts and some of the criticisms of them. Showing that you are aware of the breadth of feminist thought, and that not all feminists share the same views, can be sufficient to gain you credit, though clearly you need to bear in mind the requirements of specific questions.

In Lesson Two we will be covering sociological research and its associated methods. When you study this lesson you will learn about some further key (and current) research being undertaken and which is now shaping current sociological perspectives.

Activity 1

Of which sociological perspectives are the following adherents?

1. Talcott Parsons
2. Emile Durkheim
3. Karl Marx
4. Ann Oakley

(Answers at the end of the lesson)



- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Postmodernism

To bring you right up to date it is necessary to say a little about a theory called postmodernism. Postmodernism is a new theory that is critical of what are called 'grand theories' (or metanarratives), such as Marxism, Functionalism, and Feminism. Postmodernists argue that these theories are mistaken in claiming to be objective, and indeed a key postmodernist claim is the philosophical one that it is impossible to achieve the goal of objective knowledge.

Postmodernist theory argues that modern society has undergone tremendous political, economic, social, and cultural change. One of the key effects of such changes is that it is no longer possible for sociologists to use the key sociological category of class since society is no longer organised around production. Society has changed from a modern society, characterised by modern institutions such as the nation-state, to a postmodern society, where such institutions and the social structures that went with it (class, gender, and ethnicity) are fragmenting. So we are no longer living in 'modernist' society – hence the term 'postmodernism'.

Postmodernists claim that sociologists should not be so concerned about structural features such as class, race or gender. Of much greater importance in contemporary society where there are high levels of affluence (wealth), is consumption – i.e. spending. Postmodernist sociologists argue that we are now living in a very affluent society, and that how we spend our money is much more important than what we do to earn it – as perhaps used to be the case.

Postmodernists argue that we live in a consumer culture and this allows us to construct and create our own identities in many different ways, unconstrained by our class, race, gender, or age. Consumer culture is mostly influenced by the mass media and it is this that creates the most important social divisions in society today. So what postmodernists may see as the 'old' social divisions of class, race, and gender, are becoming much more complex. Many sociologists would argue against such a dramatic claim, so again this is an area of great debate.

Postmodernism has forced sociology to consider issues of culture and identity in much more detail than was previously the case. You do not have to be an expert on postmodernism to do well at AS/A level, but if you can grasp some of the basic ideas and use them throughout the course, and apply them appropriately, that will be sufficient for you to do well.

Activity 2

The sociological terms below all 'belong' to one of the following theories – Marxist, Functionalist, Interactionist, Feminist, and Postmodernist. Make a column heading for each theory in the box and, underneath each heading, list the concepts associated with that theory.

Means of production; value-consensus; social solidarity; patriarchy; relations of production; social integration; class conflict; meritocracy; metanarratives; labelling; self-fulfilling prophecy; organic analogy; equilibrium; base; superstructure



Marxist Functionalist Interactionist Feminist Postmodernist

Debates about Perspectives

Before moving on to consider the importance of research methods, there are two key debates about perspectives that need to be discussed.

Structure or Action?

Sociologists disagree as to whether structure is more important than action or vice versa. In other words, do we, as humans, have free will to make choices about our lives and behaviour? Structural theories such as Marxism and Functionalism, stress the importance of structures in influencing social behaviour, whereas action theories like interactionism, see human social behaviour as being the outcome of negotiation and interaction – thus a more flexible view of social behaviour.

Anthony Giddens (1991, 1997, and 1999) has argued that sociology requires a synthesis of structure and action. His theory of structuration is an attempt to provide such a synthesis. Giddens

argues that people create structures through their everyday actions but that, once created, these structures constrain our individual lives and may influence our action in unexpected ways. Other sociologists, though, continue the debate and disagree over key issues such as whether society is best seen in terms of conflict or consensus, structure or action. Sociological theories reflect these differences.

Structural theories such as Marxism or Functionalism are commonly criticised for being deterministic and neglecting to take seriously the view that people reflect and have reasons for acting as they do. Theories that focus on action, such as interactionism, are commonly criticised for voluntarism – the view that people can act freely and relatively unhindered by structural forces.

Giddens' theory of structuration has itself been criticised being more biased towards action theory, and thus tending to voluntarism (over-emphasising free-will).

Postmodernism offers a criticism of all sociological perspectives, but it can itself be criticised. Postmodernists are critical of all 'grand theories', but postmodernism itself can be seen as a grand theory, and so in this sense it is contradictory. Sociologists are also critical of the relativism of postmodernism, which claims that since there can be no absolute truth there are no grounds for preferring any one theory over others. If this is true, why should we believe in postmodernism?

To summarise then, Marxism and Functionalism are structural theories, whilst interactionism (in its various forms) is an action theory. Structural theories share the view that society can be seen as a structure, and the structure is seen as determining or shaping the way in which individuals act. Action theories, in contrast, focus on the fact that people's actions are meaningful. Action theory attempts to uncover these meanings in order to explain social life.

Giddens' structuration theory suggests that both structure and action are needed to explain social phenomena adequately. Whilst some sociologists find this synthesis convincing, others still tend to lean towards either structure or action in their theoretical approach. Theories tending to lean towards structure are often criticised for being too deterministic – that is as seeing human beings as unable to have any significant freedom of choice in their behaviour. Theories leaning towards action, in contrast, are often seen as being too voluntaristic – they see people as having too much freedom to act, whereas critics argue that our scope for action is often severely constrained by factors such as class, race, or gender, or simply by the lack of power which individuals face, or the force of social control.

Conflict or Consensus?

Another key debate is that between those who argue that society is formed on the basis of consensus, and those who see it as formed on the basis of conflict. Functionalists take the view that society is characterized by consensus – that is, shared values. Whilst they may acknowledge conflict, functionalists would see this as minor. They would assume that, on a broad level, all societies do have shared norms and values, e.g. belief in the rule of law, that those who break the law should be punished, that murder is wrong, and so on.

Marxists and feminists, however, see things differently. From this perspective, societies never really manage to achieve a consensus over values, because they are composed of too many diverse interest groups. Marxists, for example, argue that workers and employers are always in conflict, since the workers wish to maximize their income for as little work as possible, whereas employers wish to maximize profit and minimize wages. Other theorists – such as German sociologist Max Weber, argue that societies may be beset by conflict, but they differ from Marxists in many ways, by, for example, not believing that the origin of conflicts is always solely economic. There can, for example, be severe conflicts over cultural issues, such as religion or ethnic identity.

Sociologists do tend to fall into camps on this issue. These are broad views which can help you work out which theories and perspectives you find most convincing and thus help you evaluate sociological debates. Obviously, no matter which views you tend to find more convincing, when creating arguments you have to show good reasons for your views and evidence to support them.

Activity 3

To further illustrate the two views, look at the following. It illustrates these two different approaches to the question of social inequality.

A Conflict View of Inequality

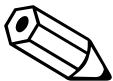
Within Western industrial societies there are two main classes - a small wealthy ruling class and a large, relatively poor, subject class. The former owes its position of dominance to its ownership and control of industry. It owns the factories in which members of the subject class labour. Its wealth comes in the form of capital produced by its exploitation of the subject class.

There exists a basic conflict of interest between the two classes since the ruling class benefits at the expense of the subject class. However, members of the subject class are largely unaware of this. They generally accept the situation as reasonable or at least inevitable since the values and beliefs of society support the interests of the ruling class. The relationships between factory owner and worker is depicted by government and the mass media as normal and reasonable. Workers are paid wages and owners gain profits. Nothing could be more reasonable!

A Consensus View of Inequality

Every society has some system of social inequality. This system is based on agreement or value consensus. Those who perform successfully in terms of society's values will be ranked highly and will receive a variety of rewards (e.g. wealth). In Western industrial society, much value is placed on successful economic activity. The person who runs a productive and efficient company is therefore highly regarded and well paid. Because society places a high value on their skills and achievements, successful business executives' rewards are seen as well deserved and justified. Furthermore, their success will not only benefit themselves, everyone will gain from an efficient business sector. In this way, the best interests of society as a whole are served by social inequality.

Adapted from T Parsons - 'The Social System' 1951.



1. According to extract A, a conflict view, how are social order and control maintained?
2. According to extract B, a consensus view, how are social order and control maintained?



Before going any further, ensure that you have read *Sociology AS for AQA*, Unit 1 and/or *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, Introductory Chapter and Chapter 12.

Lesson summary

This lesson has been challenging in terms of the range of concepts covered but, as an introductory lesson, it was important to provide a comprehensive introduction to sociology. This lesson will provide a sound basis from which to progress through your study journey and will also be a useful revision resource when completing assignments and for examination revision.

Before moving on to the next lesson, please make sure you are confident in your understanding of the main concepts covered in this lesson. Familiarise yourself with sociological terminology and meanings so that you can begin to use these key terms when writing about sociological topics.

It is a good idea to make a set of notes that summarise the key points from the lesson and the textbook. Note-making will help you to understand and remember the information you have read. The tables and figures provided in the lesson will also help to reinforce meanings of terms and concepts.

Suggested Answers to Activity One

1. Parsons is a functionalist.
2. Durkheim is a functionalist.
3. Marx is of course a Marxist.
4. Oakley is a feminist.

Suggested Answers to Activity Two

Marxist

Means of production

Base

Superstructure

Relations of production

Class conflict

Functionalist

Social integration

Value-consensus
Social solidarity
Organic analogy
Equilibrium
Meritocracy

Feminist

Patriarchy

Interactionist

Labelling,
Self-fulfilling prophecy

Postmodernist

Metanarratives

Suggested Answers to Activity Three

1. Members of the subject class are not aware of the situation. They do not realise that they are oppressed and exploited. Therefore, they do not seek to overthrow those who rule them.
2. From this viewpoint, social order is based on value consensus – everyone agrees. People accept the values because they believe that by doing so everyone in society benefits, not just a minority. Therefore, it would be against their own interests to disrupt society.