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Introducing Sociology

Key issues:

- What is sociology?
- Sociology and common-sense and naturalistic explanations
- Key introductory ideas
- Sociological perspectives
- Sociological problems, social problems and social policy

In this chapter the focus is on introducing sociology and some of the key terms, ideas and sociological approaches which will be referred to throughout this book. It is an important chapter which will help to lay the groundwork for later ones. It is therefore worth spending some time on learning the main points covered.

Newcomers to sociology often have only quite a vague idea of what the subject is about, though they often have an interest in people. This interest is a good start, because the focus of sociology is on the influences from society which shape the behaviour of people, their experiences and their interpretations of the world around them. To learn sociology is to learn about how human societies are constructed and where our beliefs and daily routines come from; it is to re-examine in a new light many of the taken-for-granted assumptions which we all hold, and which influence the way we think about ourselves and others. Sociology is above all about developing a critical understanding of society. In developing this understanding, sociology can itself contribute to changes in society, for example by highlighting and explaining social problems like divorce, ill-health and poverty. The study of sociology can provide the essential tools for a better understanding of the world we live in, and therefore the means for improving it.

What is sociology?

Sociology is the systematic (or planned and organized) study of human groups and social life in modern societies. It is concerned with the study of social institutions.

Social institutions are the various organized social arrangements which are found in all societies.

For example, the family is an institution which is concerned with arrangements for marriage, such as at what age people can marry, whom they can marry and how many partners they can have, and the upbringing of children. The education system establishes ways of passing on attitudes, knowledge and skills from one generation to the next. Work and the economic system organize the way the production of goods will be carried out, and religious institutions are concerned with people's relations with the supernatural.

Sociology tries to understand how these various social institutions operate, and how they relate to one another, for example in the influence the family might have on how well children perform in the education system. Sociology is also concerned with describing and explaining the patterns of inequality, deprivation and conflict which are a feature of nearly all societies.

Sociology and common sense

Sociology is concerned with studying many things which most people already know something about. Everyone will have some knowledge and understanding of family life, the education system, work, the mass media and religion simply by living as a member of society. This leads many people to assume that the topics studied by sociologists and the explanations sociologists produce are really just common sense: what 'everyone knows'.

This is a very mistaken assumption. Sociological research has shown many widely held 'common-sense' ideas and explanations to be false. Ideas such as that there is no real poverty left in modern Britain, that the poor and unemployed are inadequate and lazy, that everyone has equal chances in life, that the rich are rich because they work harder, that men are 'naturally' superior to women, or that sickness and disease strike people at random have all been questioned by sociological research. The re-examination of such common-sense views is very much the concern of sociology.

A further problem with common-sense explanations is that they are closely bound up with the beliefs of a particular society at particular periods of time. Different societies have differing common-sense ideas. The Hopi Indians'

common-sense view of why it rains is very different from our own – they do a rain dance to encourage the rain gods. Common-sense ideas also change over time in any society. In Britain, we no longer burn 'witches' when the crops fail, but seek scientific explanations for such events.

Not all the findings of sociologists undermine common sense, and the work of sociologists has made important contributions to the common-sense understandings of members of society. For example, the knowledge which most people have about the changing family in Britain, with rising rates of divorce and growing numbers of lone parents, is largely due to the work of sociologists. However, sociology differs from common sense in three important ways:

- Sociologists use a sociological imagination. This means that, while they study the familiar routines of daily life, sociologists look at them in unfamiliar ways or from a different angle. They ask if things really are as common sense says they are. Sociologists re-examine existing assumptions, by studying how things were in the past, how they've changed, how they differ between societies and how they might change in the future.
- Sociologists look at evidence on issues before making up their minds. The explanations and conclusions of sociologists are based on precise evidence which has been collected through painstaking research using established research procedures.
- Sociologists strive to maintain objectivity and value freedom in their work.

Objectivity means sociologists should approach their research with an open mind – a willingness to consider *all* the evidence, and to have their work available for scrutiny and criticism by other researchers.
Value freedom means sociologists should try not to let their prejudices and beliefs influence the way they carry out their research and interpret evidence.

Sociology and naturalistic explanations

Naturalistic explanations are those which assume that various kinds of human behaviour are natural or based on innate (in-born) biological characteristics. If this were the case, then one would expect human behaviour to be the same in all societies. In fact, by comparing different societies, sociologists have discovered that there are very wide differences between societies in customs, values, beliefs and social behaviour. For example, there are wide differences between societies in the roles of men and women and what is considered appropriate 'masculine' and 'feminine' behaviour. This can only be because people learn to behave in different ways in different societies. Sociological explanations recognize that most human behaviour is learnt by individuals as members of society, rather than something with which they are born. Individuals learn how to behave from a wide

range of social institutions right throughout their lives. Sociologists call this process of learning socialization.

Some key introductory ideas

Socialization and culture

Socialization is the life-long process of learning the culture of any society.

Socialization is carried out by agencies of socialization, like the family, the education system or the mass media.

The term **culture** refers to the language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, dress, diet, roles, knowledge and skills which make up the 'way of life' of any society.

Culture is socially transmitted (passed on through socialization) from one generation to the next.

Roles, role models and role conflict

Roles are the patterns of behaviour which are expected from people in different positions in society.

Roles are very like the roles actors play in a television series. People in society play many different roles in their lifetimes, such as those of a man or woman, a child and an adult, a student, a parent, a friend, and work roles like factory worker, police officer or teacher. People in these roles are expected to behave in particular ways. The police officer who steals, the teacher who is drunk in the classroom, or the parent who neglects his or her children are clearly not following the behaviour expected in these roles, and these examples show how important these expectations of others are.

Roles are often learnt by copying or imitating the behaviour and attitudes of others. Children, for example, will often learn how to behave by copying the behaviour of their parents, teachers or friends. Those whose behaviour we consciously or unconsciously copy are known as role models.

Role models are the patterns of behaviour which others copy and model their own behaviour on.

One person plays many roles at the same time. For example, a woman may play the roles of woman, mother, student, worker, sister and wife at the same time. This may lead to role conflict, where successful performances of two or more roles at the same time may come into conflict with one another.

Role conflict is the conflict between the successful performance of two or more roles at the same time, such as worker, mother and student.

A woman who tries to balance, and is often torn apart by, the competing demands of being a night-class student, having a full-time job, looking after children and taking care of a dependent elderly mother illustrates this idea of role conflict.

Values and norms

Values are general beliefs about what is right or wrong, and the important standards which are worth maintaining and achieving in any society or social group.

Values provide general guidelines for behaviour. In Britain, values include beliefs about respect for human life, privacy and private property, about the importance of marriage and the importance of money and success. While not everyone will always share the same values, there are often strong pressures on people to conform to some of the most important values in any society, which are often written down as **laws**. These are official legal rules which are often based on matters that many people think are very important. Laws are formally enforced by the police, courts and prisons, and involve legal punishment if they are broken. Laws against murder and theft, for example, enforce the values attached to human life and private property in our society.

Norms are social rules, which define correct and acceptable behaviour in a society or social group to which people are expected to conform.
Customs are norms which have existed for a long time.

Norms are much more precise than values: they put values (general guidelines) into practice in particular situations. The norm that someone should not generally enter rooms without knocking reflects the value of privacy, and rules about not drinking and driving reflect the values of respect for human life and consideration for the safety of others. Norms exist in all areas of social life. In Britain, those who are late for work, jump queues in supermarkets, laugh during funerals, walk through the streets naked, or never say hello to friends when they are greeted by them are likely to be seen as annoying, rude or odd because they are not following the norms of expected behaviour. Norms are mainly informally enforced – by the disapproval of other people, embarrassment, or a 'telling

off' from parents or others. Customs are norms which have lasted for a long time and have become a part of society's traditions – kissing under the mistletoe at Christmas, buying and giving Easter eggs or lighting candles at Divali are typical customs found in Britain.

Values and norms are part of the culture of a society, and are learned and passed on through socialization. They differ between societies – the values and norms of an African tribe are very different from those of people in modern Britain. They may also change over time and vary between social groups even in the same society. In Britain, living together without being married – a cohabiting relationship – is much more accepted today than it was in the past, and wearing turbans – which is seen as normal dress among Sikh men – would be seen as a bit odd among white teenagers.

Social control

Social control is the term given to the various methods used to persuade or force individuals to conform to the dominant social norms and values of a society, and to prevent **deviance** – a failure to conform to social norms.

Processes of social control may be formal, through institutions like the law or school rules, or they may be informal, through peer-group pressure, personal embarrassment at doing something wrong, or the pressure of public opinion.

Sanctions are the rewards and punishments by which social control is achieved and conformity to norms and values enforced. These may be either **positive sanctions**, rewards of various kinds, or **negative sanctions**, various types of punishment.

The type of sanction will depend on the seriousness of the norm: positive sanctions may range from gifts of sweets or money from parents to children, to merits and prizes at school, to knighthoods and medals; negative sanctions may range from a feeling of embarrassment, to being ridiculed or gossiped about or regarded as a bit eccentric or 'a bit odd', to being fined or imprisoned.

Activity

1 Identify at least four roles that you play, and describe the norms of behaviour to which you are expected to conform in each case.
2 Describe the sanctions you might face if you failed to conform to the norms you have identified.
3 Identify how the successful performance of one role might conflict with the successful performance of another.

Social class, social mobility and status

'Social class' is a term you will read a lot about in sociology, including this book. It is often used in a very general and imprecise way. Social class is generally associated with inequality in industrial societies.

A **social class** is a group of people who share a similar economic situation, such as occupation, income and ownership of wealth.

Often occupation, income and ownership of wealth are closely related to each other and to other aspects of individuals' lives, such as their level of education, their social status and lifestyle (such as housing, car ownership and leisure activities), and how much power and influence they have in society.

An individual's social class has a major influence on his or her life chances.

Life chances are the chances of obtaining those things defined as desirable and of avoiding those things defined as undesirable in any society.

Life chances include the chances of obtaining things like good-quality housing, good health, holidays, job security and educational success, and avoiding things like ill-health and unemployment.

To help you to understand the different social classes in modern Britain, the following simplified classification will suffice for the purposes of this book:

- The **working class** is one of the largest social classes, referring to those working in manual jobs – jobs involving physical work and, literally, work with their hands, like factory or labouring work.
- The **middle class** is also a large class, and refers to those in non-manual work – jobs which don't involve heavy physical effort, and which are usually performed in offices and involve paperwork or ICT work (Information and Communication Technology) of various kinds. Some argue that those in the lowest levels of non-manual work, such as supermarket checkout operators and those in routine office work, should really be included in the working class, as their pay and working conditions are more like those of manual workers than many sections of the middle class.
- The **upper class** is a small class, and refers to those who are the main owners of society's wealth, including wealthy industrialists, landowners and the traditional aristocracy. Often these people do not work for others, as they have such a large amount of assets that work is not necessary to survive.
- The **underclass** is a small class, and refers to a group of people who are right at the bottom of the class structure, whose poverty often excludes them from full participation in society. The term 'underclass' is used in different ways,

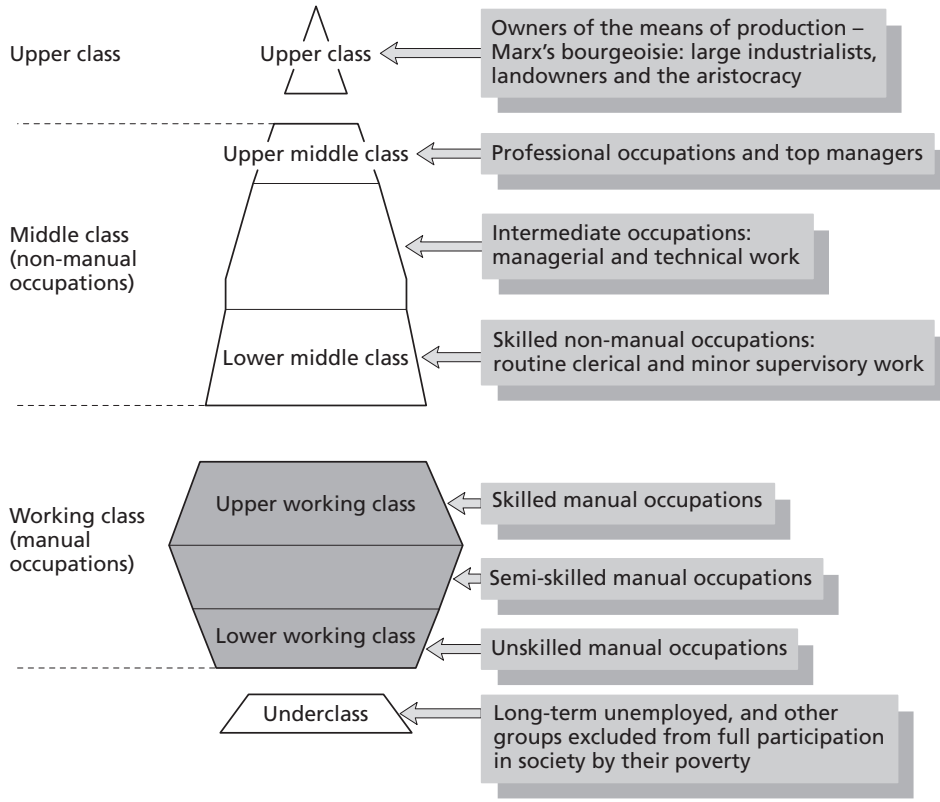


Figure 1.1 The class structure

and is a controversial concept. It is discussed more fully in chapter 6 on wealth, poverty and welfare.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the class structure of modern Britain, and is a helpful guide to the use of social class in this book.

Social mobility refers to the movement of groups or individuals up or down the social hierarchy, from one social class to another.

The term **status** is used in sociology in two main ways. It is often used to refer to the role position someone occupies in society, like a father, worker or consumer. It is also sometimes used to refer to the ranking of individuals in society according to the differing amounts of prestige or respect given to different positions in a group or society by other members of that group or society – people's social standing in the eyes of others.

Ascribed status is status that is given by birth or family background and which, in general, cannot be changed by individuals. Examples of such status include a person's age, ethnic group, sex, or place or family of birth.
Achieved status refers to any social position or position of prestige that has been achieved by an individual's own efforts, such as through education, skill and talent, promotion at work and career success.

Three other concepts you will come across in sociology, and which are also referred to widely in this book, are those of ethnicity, minority ethnic group and gender.

Ethnicity refers to the shared culture of a social group which gives its members a common identity in some ways different from other social groups.

A **minority ethnic group** is a social group which shares a cultural identity which is different from that of the majority population of a society, such as African-Caribbean, Asian and Chinese ethnic groups in Britain.

Gender refers to the culturally created differences between men and women which are learnt through socialization, rather than simply *sex* differences, which refer only to the biological differences between the sexes.

Sociological perspectives

A sociological **perspective** is simply a way of looking at society.

Newcomers to sociology often find the different perspectives in sociology difficult, as there appears to be no 'right answer'. A useful insight might be gained from the following situation.

Imagine there are five people looking at the same busy shopping street – a pickpocket, a police officer, a roadsweeper, a shopper and a shopkeeper (see cartoon). The pickpocket sees wallets sticking out of pockets or bags, and an opportunity to steal. The police officer sees potential crime and disorder. The road sweeper sees litter and garbage left by everyone else. The shopper might see windows full of desirable consumer goods to buy, and the shopkeeper sees only potential customers. All are viewing the same street, but are looking at different aspects of that street. What they see will depend on their 'perspective' – what they're looking for. They might all be seeing different things, but you can't really say any of their views is more correct than another – though you might think some views provide a more truthful, rounded and fuller description of the street than others do.

People may view the same scene from different perspectives.

Sociological perspectives are basically similar, in that they are the different viewpoints from which sociologists examine society. We might say that different sociological perspectives, and the different research methods they lead to, simply emphasize and explain different aspects of society. Often, debates between and criticisms of these different perspectives help us to understand social issues much more clearly.

Sociological perspectives are often best understood by looking at particular areas, and this book will illustrate them in various chapters, particularly those on the family and education. However, what follows is an introduction to some of these perspectives.

Sociological perspectives centre on the theme of how much freedom or control the individual has to influence society, and there are two main approaches here:

- the sociology of system, often referred to as structuralism
- The sociology of action – social action or interpretivist theories

Structuralism

Structuralism is concerned with the overall structure of society, and the way social institutions, like the family, the education system, the mass media and work, act as a constraint, or limit and control individual behaviour.

Structuralist approaches have the following features:

- The behaviour of individual human beings is seen as being a result of social forces which are external to the individual – the individual is moulded, shaped and constrained by society through socialization, positive and negative sanctions, and material resources like income and jobs. For example, institutions like the family, the education system, the mass media, the law and the workplace mould us into our identities. From the structuralist approach, the individual is like a puppet, whose strings are pulled by society. We might see people as almost like jelly, poured into a 'social mould' to set.
- The main purpose of sociology is to study the overall structure of society, the social institutions which make up this structure, and the relationships between these social institutions (or the various parts of society), like the links between the workplace and the economy, the political system, the family, the education system and so on. The focus of sociology is on the social structure as a whole, not on the individual. This is sometimes referred to as a **macro** (or large-scale) **approach**.

Activity

1 To what extent is our behaviour moulded by social forces beyond our control? Try to think of all the factors which have contributed to the way you are now, and which prevent you from behaving in any way you like. You might consider factors like the influences of your parents and family background, the mass media, experiences at school, your friendship groups, income and so on.

2 Imagine you were creating an ideal society from scratch. Plan how you would organize it, with particular reference to the following issues:

   - the care and socialization of children
   - the passing on of society's knowledge and skills from one generation to the next
   - the production of food and other goods necessary for survival
   - how you would allocate food and other goods to members of society
   - the establishment and enforcement of rules of behaviour
   - how you would deal with people who didn't conform to social rules
   - how you would co-ordinate things and resolve disputes between members of society

3 Consider how your ideal society is similar to, or different from, the organization of contemporary Britain. How would you explain these differences?

There are two main varieties of structuralism: functionalism (consensus structuralism) and Marxism (conflict structuralism).

Functionalism (consensus structuralism)

Functionalism sees society as built up and working like the human body, made up of interrelated parts which function for, or contribute to, the maintenance of society as a whole.

For example, in order to understand the importance of the heart, lungs and brain in the human body, we need to understand what function or purpose each carries out and how they work together in providing and maintaining the basic needs of human life. Similarly, functionalists argue that any society has certain **functional prerequisites** (certain basic needs or requirements) that must be met if society is to survive, such as the production of food, the care of the young, and the socialization of new generations into the culture of society. Social institutions like the family or education exist to meet these basic needs, in the same way as we have to have a heart and lungs to refresh and pump blood around our bodies.

Just as the various parts of the human body function in relation to one another and contribute to the maintenance of the body as a whole, so, according to functionalist sociology, social institutions meet functional prerequisites, maintaining the social system and order and stability in society. In this view, social institutions like the family, education and work are connected and function in relation to one another for the benefit of society as a whole.

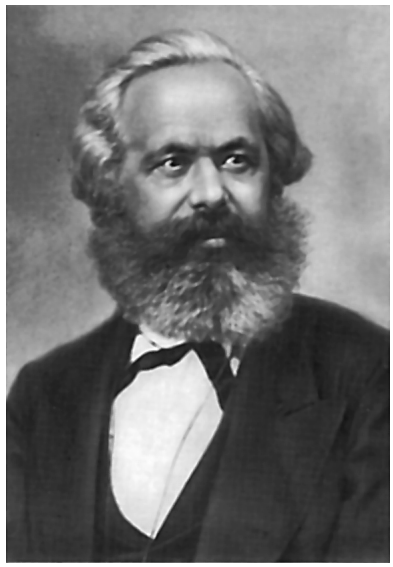
Stability in society is based on socialization into norms and values on which most people agree. These shared norms and values are known as a **value consensus**.

It is this value consensus which functionalists believe maintains what they see as a peaceful, harmonious society without much conflict between people and groups.

Activity

Try to think of all the connections or links you can between the following institutions – for example, how what happens in the family may influence what happens at school and educational achievement:

- the family and the education system
- the family and the workplace
- education and the workplace



Karl Marx, 1818–83

Marxism (conflict structuralism)

Marxism comes from the work of Karl Marx, who lived from 1818 to 1883.

Marxism sees the overall structure of society primarily determined (or influenced) by the economic system – the **means of production**, such as the land, factories and offices necessary to produce society's goods.

These means of production are privately owned, and most people depend on the owners for employment. Marx argued that workers produce more than is needed for employers to pay them their wages – this 'extra' produced by workers is what Marx called **surplus value**, and provides profit for the employer. For example, in a burger chain, it is the workers who make, cook, package and serve the burgers, but only half the burgers they sell are necessary to pay their wages. The rest of the burgers provide profit for the burger chain owners. This means the workers who produce the burgers do not get the full value of their work, and they are therefore being exploited.

Discussion

Do you think those who produce the wealth should get the full share of what they produce? Do you think most goods today are produced because people need them, or because they are persuaded to buy them by advertising?

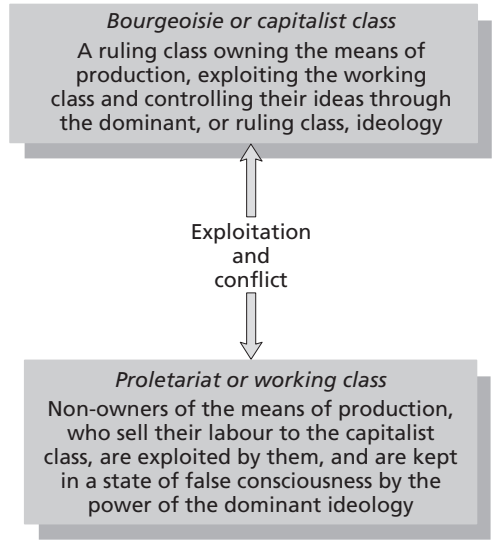


Figure 1.2 A summary of the Marxist view of society

Capitalists and workers

Figure 1.2 summarizes the Marxist view of society. Marx argued there were two basic social classes in capitalist industrial society: a small, wealthy and powerful class of owners of the means of production, (which he called the **bourgeoisie** or **capitalists** – the owning class) and a much larger, poorer class of non-owners (which he called the **proletariat** or working class). The proletariat, because they owned no means of production of their own, had no means of living other than to sell their labour, or **labour power** as Marx called it, to the bourgeoisie in exchange for a wage or salary. The capitalists exploited the working class, by making profits out of them by keeping wages as low as possible instead of giving the workers the full payment for the goods they'd produced.

Class conflict

Marx argued this exploitation created major differences in interest between the two classes, and this created conflict. For example, the workers' interests lay in higher wages to achieve a better lifestyle, but these would be at the expense of the bosses' profits. The bosses wanted higher profits to expand their businesses and wealth, but this could only be achieved by keeping wages as low as possible and/or by making the workers produce more by working harder. The interests of these two classes are therefore totally opposed, and this generates conflict between the two social classes (**class conflict**). Marx believed this class conflict would affect all areas of life.

The ruling class

Marx argued that the owning class was also a **ruling class**. For example, because they owned the means of production, the bourgeoisie could decide where factories should be located, and whether they should be opened or closed down, and they could control the workforce through hiring or firing. Democratically elected governments could not afford to ignore this power of the bourgeoisie, otherwise they might face rising unemployment or other social problems if the bourgeoisie decided not to invest its money.

Dominant ideology

Marx believed the ruling or dominant ideas in any society, what he called the **dominant ideology**, were those of the owning class (hence it is sometimes also called *ruling class ideology*) and the major institutions in society reflected those ideas.

For example, the law protected the interests of the owning class more than it did the workers; religion acted as the 'opium of the people', persuading the working class to accept their position as just and natural (rather than rebelling against it), by promising future rewards in heaven for putting up with their present suffering; the bourgeoisie's ownership of the mass media meant only their ideas were put forward. In this way, the working class were almost brainwashed into accepting their position. They failed to recognize they were being exploited and therefore did not rebel against the bourgeoisie.

Marx called this lack of awareness by the working class of their own interests **false consciousness**.

Revolution and Communism

However, Marx thought that one day the circumstances would arise in which the workers did become aware of their exploitation, and develop class consciousness.

Class consciousness is an awareness in members of a social class of their real interests and their exploitation.

The workers would join together to act against the bourgeoisie through strikes, demonstrations and other forms of protest. This would eventually lead to a revolution against and overthrow of the bourgeoisie. The means of production would then be put in the hands of the state and run in the interests of everyone, not just of the bourgeoisie. A new type of society – **Communism** – would be created, which would be without exploitation, without classes, and without class conflict.

Marx therefore saw society as based on the exploitation of one large class by a small group of owners, creating social classes with opposing interests, and inequalities of wealth and power in society. Rather than seeing society functioning harmoniously as the functionalists do, Marxists see society based on conflict between rival social classes (class conflict) with social institutions serving to maintain the interests of a ruling class. However, like functionalists, Marxists see the behaviour of individuals as still largely determined or moulded by social institutions.

Question

Comparing the views of functionalists and Marxists, which view of society do you think provides the most accurate and useful insights into the way British society is currently organized? Is it mainly based on consensus or conflict? Give reasons for your answer, with examples to illustrate the points you make.

Social action or interpretivist theories

Individual behaviour in everyday social situations is the main focus of these approaches.

Social action or **interpretivist** theories are concerned with discovering and thereby understanding the processes by which interactions between people (actions between individuals) take place, how people come to interpret and see things as they do, and how the reactions of others can affect their view of things.

Social action or interpretivist theories include the following features:

- Society and social structures/institutions are seen as the creation of individuals. An emphasis is placed on the free will of people to do things, rather than the **determinism** of structuralism. Determinism means that the activities of individuals are moulded by forces beyond their control, and they have little control or choice in how they behave. It almost suggests people are programmed to behave the way they do by society.
- An emphasis is placed on the individual and everyday behaviour rather than the overall structure of society. The focus of sociology is on the individual or small groups of individuals, not on the social structure as a whole. Rather than studying general trends and the wider causes of crime, for example, interpretivists are more likely to study a juvenile gang, to see how they came to be seen and labelled as deviant, and how they themselves see the world. This is sometimes referred to as a **micro** (or small-scale) **approach**.
- People's behaviour is viewed as being driven by the meanings they give to situations: their definitions of a situation, or the way they see things and therefore behave, become very important. For example, a parent might interpret a baby crying as a sign of tiredness, hunger, fear or illness. The action the

parent takes – putting the baby to bed, feeding her, comforting her or taking her to the doctor – will depend on how the parent defines the situation, and to understand the parent's behaviour we have to understand the meaning he or she gives to the baby's crying.

- The main purpose of sociology is to study, uncover and interpret the meanings and definitions individuals give to their behaviour.

Questions

1 How do the attitudes and interpretations of other people affect your view of yourself? Give examples to illustrate the points you make.
2 Imagine you wanted to study the family and the education system. Identify three things for each institution you might be interested in if you adopted a structuralist approach, and three things for each institution if you adopted an interpretivist approach.

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a social action perspective particularly concerned with understanding human behaviour in face-to-face situations, and how individuals and situations come to be defined or **classified** in particular ways. This is known as **labelling**. It is also concerned with the consequences for individual behaviour of such definitions, since people will behave according to the way they see situations.

For example, the sociologist's task is to understand the point of view and experience of, say, the disillusioned and hostile student who hates school, as well as the teachers and others that label him or her as 'deviant'. Sociologists should try to understand how and why teachers classify some students as deviant, and what happens to the behaviour of those students once they have been classified in that way.

Structuration: a middle way between structure and action

In real life, society is probably best understood using a mixture of both structural *and* action approaches. In other words, constraints from social structures, like the family, work (and the income it does or doesn't produce), the law and education limit and control the behaviour of individuals or groups. However, individuals can, within limits, make choices within those structures and act accordingly. For example, the school is part of the education system – a social structure. Young people are constrained (forced) by law to go to school, and that school continues to exist even after generations of young people have come and gone. It therefore has an existence separate from the individuals who attend that school at any one time. That structure continues only so long as people support the law and agree to attend school (and some don't) – if everyone stopped sending their children to school, the system would either have to be changed

or it would collapse. This shows human beings create and reinforce, or can change or destroy, these structures.

If we take a particular school or group of schools, while they are constrained by the demands of the National Curriculum, the laws on education and the income they have, what happens within each individual school is controlled to some degree by the people within it – governors, students, teachers and parents. If attendance is poor, behaviour is dreadful, teaching quality is inadequate, exam results a catastrophe, and the school has a weak or incompetent headteacher, we may see this as a 'failing' school. It might be inspected by OFSTED (the Office For Standards in Education), and officially classified as 'a failing school'. If parents opt to send their children to another school, the first school may face declining income, making things worse. As a result, it might face closure.

However, the school might be dramatically improved by the harder work of teachers and others in the school community to try and turn the school around. We might then eventually see it as a 'good' school. The school might be held up as a showpiece of improvement by the government, and used as a model for all other schools to follow. This change shows that within social structures like education, human action – human activity – can make differences by changing those structures.

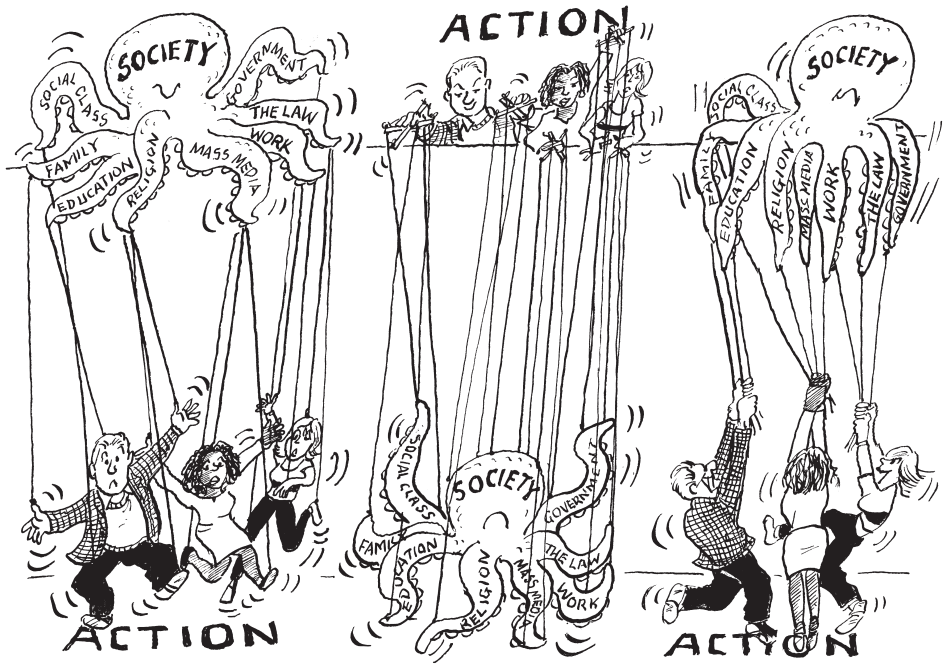
This means that while people operate within the constraints of the social structure, they can also act, make choices, and sometimes change that social structure. It has to be supported by people, and constantly recreated: parents have to send their children to school because it is against the law not to do so, and most parents don't question this. But they do have to agree to this, and there are lots of cases where parents refuse to send their children to school because there is something wrong with the school. If they refuse, especially a lot of them, then there would undoubtedly be a change in the schooling system.

This third or middle way, between structuralism and action theories, recognizes the importance of both the constraints of social structure and choice: the actions people can take to accept or change those structures. This is Anthony Giddens's highly influential theory of **structuration**.

The three approaches of structuralism, social action theory and structuration are illustrated in the cartoon.

Activity

Some argue that living in society is like living in a goldfish bowl – you are constrained by the bowl, even though you can't see the glass walls. In the light of what you have read in this chapter, discuss in a group to what extent you think this is an accurate view of society. Give reasons for your answers.



Structuralism | Social action or interpretivist theories | Structuration

Feminist perspectives

Feminism examines society particularly from the point of view of women.

They argue that a lot of mainstream sociology has been focused on the concerns of men – 'malestream sociology' – and has failed to deal with the concerns of women, and the unequal position they have traditionally occupied in society. There are a number of strands within feminist approaches, but three of the main ones are Marxist feminism, radical feminism and liberal feminism.

Marxist feminism takes a Marxist approach to the study of women and women's interests, and emphasizes the way in which women are doubly exploited – both as workers and as women.

Radical feminism tends to focus more on the problem of **patriarchy** – the system whereby males dominate in every area of society, such as the family, the workplace and politics. For radical feminists, the main focus is the problem of men and male-dominated society.

Both of these approaches fundamentally challenge the way society is presently organized, and seek major social change.

Liberal feminism basically accepts the system as it is, but wants to ensure that women have equal opportunities with men within that system, through steps such as changes to the law to stop sex discrimination, removing obstacles to women's full participation in society, and better childcare measures so that women can play their full part in paid employment.

New Right perspectives

The **New Right** is more a political philosophy than a sociological perspective, and is associated mainly with the years of the Conservative government in Britain between 1979 and 1997. This approach is, however, found in the work of some sociologists, and is referred to in various parts of this book.

This approach has four main features:

- *An emphasis on individual freedom*, and the need to reduce the power of the state to the minimum, and reduce control of the individual by unnecessary state interference.
- *Reduced spending by the state*, by making individuals more self-reliant. An example is cutting welfare benefits and encouraging people into work to make them 'stand on their own two feet', and not expect them to be dependent on the state for support if they are physically and mentally capable of supporting themselves.
- *A defence of the free market*. This means that free competition between individuals, companies, schools and other institutions is encouraged, to give individuals maximum choice between competing products, such as in health care and education. An example might be giving parents a free choice of schools as 'consumers' of education, and their right to reject some schools in favour of others, just as people choose between competing products in a supermarket. The selling off of state-owned industries like gas, electricity, water, British Airways and British Telecom to private companies was seen as a way of introducing competition in these areas, on the assumption that more competition would lead to lower prices and better-quality services or products.
- *A stress on the importance of traditional institutions and values*, such as traditional family life, and a condemnation of anything that challenges these values. For example, lone-parent families have been viciously attacked by the New Right, and blamed for a whole range of social problems, such as poor discipline and underachievement at school, crime, a culture of laziness, failure, welfare dependency and the lack of a work ethic, and the existence of poverty.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is most likely to be considered and examined in the second year of an A-level course, rather than at AS-level. However, it is included here as you may come across the term in any wider reading you might do, and it is useful to have a bit of background, especially as some postmodernist ideas influence parts of this book.

Postmodernism is an approach in sociology, as well as other subjects, which stresses the chaos and uncertainty in society, and argues that social structures like 'the family' or 'social class' are breaking down. These are replaced by a whole range of different and constantly changing social relationships.

Postmodernists argue it is nonsense to talk of an institution called the 'family', for example, as people now live in such a wide range of personal relationships. Gay and lesbian couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples, multiple partners, divorce and remarriage, lone parents, step-parents and step-children, dual income families with both partners working, people living alone, couples who have differing arrangements for organizing household tasks, all mean that any notion of the 'typical family' or 'the family as an institution' is absurd.

Because society is now changing so constantly and so rapidly, societies can no longer be understood through the application of general theories. There can therefore be no 'big' theories like Marxism or functionalism, which seek to explain society as a whole, as society has become fragmented into so many different groups, interests and lifestyles that it is essentially chaotic.

Postmodernists believe there are few of the social constraints on people that structuralist approaches identify, and society and social structures cease to exist – there is only a mass of individuals making individual choices about their lifestyles. People can now form their own identities – how they see and define themselves and how others see and define them – and they can be whatever they want to be. People can make choices about their lifestyles, how they see themselves and the image they want to project to other people, by picking from a whole mass of constantly changing choices, which are available from across the globe.

Activity

Go through the following statements, and try to classify them as one of the following:

- functionalist
- Marxist
- Marxist feminist
- radical feminist
- liberal feminist
- interpretivist
- New Right

(a) We will challenge all aspects of society not relevant to women, bring about a complete female take-over, eliminate the male sex and begin to create a female world.
(b) The family is one of the main building blocks in creating the shared values which are such an important part of a stable society.
(c) There are conflicts between the rich and the poor in our society. This is hardly surprising, given the richest 10 per cent of the population own over half the country's wealth.
(d) To make sure women have equal opportunities with men, there must be more free childcare provided.
(e) Women are exploited both as women and as workers – they get exploited in paid employment, and they get exploited at home, where they do most of the housework and childcare and get nothing for it.
(f) The ruling ideas in society are those of the ruling class.
(g) Some people may see an amber traffic light as a warning to speed up before it turns red. Others may see it as a sign to slow down before stopping. In order to understand such events, you need to understand the meaning people give to events.
(h) The education system is of major importance in preparing a well-trained and qualified labour force so the economy can develop and grow.
(i) The education system prepares an obedient workforce that won't rock the boat and complain about their exploitation at work.
(j) If you think people are out to get you, even if they're not, then this is likely to affect the way you behave. To understand behaviour, we have to understand people's point of view.
(k) Women will never achieve equality in society so long as men hold all the positions of power in society.
(l) It is in everyone's interests to pull together at work for the benefit of society as a whole.
(m) Despite girls doing better than boys in education now, girls could do better still. We must make sure that any obstacles to girls' progress in school are removed.
(n) We must make sure women get equal pay for equal work.
(o) Some students are almost bound to fail, because teachers give the impression they're thick, and this undermines the self-confidence of the students, who then think it isn't worth bothering.
(p) The welfare state has produced an underclass of people who are idle and don't want to work, and are content to scrounge off over-generous welfare state benefits rather than get a job to support themselves.

Sociological problems, social problems and social policy

A **sociological problem** is, quite simply, any social issue that needs explaining.
A **social problem** is something that is seen as being harmful to society in some way, and needs something doing to sort it out.
Social policy concerns the package of measures taken to solve social problems.

Social problems are nearly all sociological problems, but not all sociological problems are social problems. However, very often sociologists have been able by research to show that many social problems are not simply a result of the behaviour of individuals, but are created by wider social factors. A useful example is that of accidents.

Accidents as a social and a sociological problem

Accidents are a social problem, and the accident statistics show a clear social pattern in terms of age, class and gender. For example, young people and old people, the poor and males are more likely to die or be seriously injured because of an accident. Accidents may happen to us individually, and sometimes randomly, but the causes are often socially influenced, by factors such as poor-quality housing, inadequate home care for the elderly, low income, dangerous working conditions and a dangerous environment, with busy roads and no safe play areas for children. Accidents provide an often dramatic and tragic but nevertheless excellent example of how seemingly random or individual experiences and events are in fact socially patterned and socially influenced.

The study of accidents shows how clear sighted C. Wright Mills (1970) was when he wrote about the distinction between 'the personal troubles of milieu (immediate social surroundings)' and 'the public issues of social structure'. Every single accident is a personal experience but the social pattern of these experiences in Britain every year is for all of us a social problem – not least because of the harm they cause and the millions of pounds spent treating them by the National Health Service. This social problem is also a sociological problem – something which needs explaining by sociologists. The pattern of accident statistics illustrates well Mills's distinction between 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' to which we referred above. To paraphrase Mills, when in a nation of 60 million only one person has an accident, then that is his or her personal trouble, and for its solution we look at the circumstances of that person. But when, in a nation of 60 million, 8 million have accidents, with a clear social pattern, that is a public issue and a social problem, and we cannot hope to find a solution within the personal situations and characters of individuals.

Sociological research has often made major contributions to the social policy solutions needed to tackle social problems like accidents, ill-health, crime, poverty or educational failure. However, sociologists also try to explain social issues that aren't social problems, like the improved performance of females in the educational system, or why the birth rate is declining and why people are having smaller families.

It is this ability of sociology to explain social events and to contribute to the understanding and solution of social problems, and the social policy solutions adopted, which makes it such a worthwhile, useful and exciting subject.

Chapter summary

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- explain how sociology is different from common-sense and naturalistic explanations.
- define the meaning of socialization, culture, roles, role models, role conflict, values, laws, norms, social control, deviance, and positive and negative sanctions, and explain their importance in understanding human behaviour in human society.
- explain what is meant by social class, and identify the main social classes in contemporary Britain.
- explain what is meant by a sociological perspective, and identify the main features of the structuralist approaches of functionalism and Marxism, and the social action or interpretivist approaches, including symbolic interactionism.
- explain what is meant by structuration, and how it provides a middle way between structural and action perspectives.
- explain the variety of feminist perspectives, and the features of the New Right approach in sociology.
- explain what is meant by, and the differences between, a sociological problem and a social problem, and the contribution of sociology to social policy.

Key terms

achieved status
ascribed status
bourgeoisie
capitalists
class conflict
class consciousness
Communism
culture
customs
determinism
deviance
dominant ideology
ethnicity
false consciousness
feminism
functionalism
functional prerequisites
gender
interpretivism
labelling
labour power
laws
liberal feminism
life chances
macro approach
Marxism
Marxist feminism
means of production
micro approach
middle class
minority ethnic group
negative sanctions
New Right
norms
objectivity
patriarchy
perspective
positive sanctions
postmodernism
proletariat
radical feminism
role conflict

role models
roles
ruling class
ruling class ideology
sanctions
sex
social action theory
social class
social control
social institution
social mobility
social policy
social problem
socialization
sociological problem
status
structuralism
structuration
surplus value
symbolic interactionism
underclass
upper class
value consensus
value freedom
values
working class