

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

This is an important chapter that introduces sociology and some of the key terms, ideas and sociological approaches that are referred to throughout this book. 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**.

These 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, religious institutions are concerned with people's relations with the supernatural, and the law is concerned with controlling and regulating the behaviour of people in society. These social institutions make up a society's **social structure** – the building blocks of society.

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

Social structure refers to the social institutions and social relationships that form the 'building blocks' of society.

Sociology tries to understand how these various social institutions operate, and how they relate to one another, for example the way in which the family might influence 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, and 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 very much 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, or see mental illness as evidence of satanic possession, but seek scientific, medical or psychiatric 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 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. These involve keeping an open mind, considering all the evidence, allowing others to scrutinize research findings, and keeping personal beliefs out of the research process.

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 (inborn) 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 them in terms of 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 through their lives. Sociologists call this process of learning 'socialization'.

Some key introductory ideas

SOCIALIZATION, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Socialization is the lifelong process of learning the culture of any society.

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.

Identity is concerned with how individuals see and define themselves and how other people see and define them.

Socialization is the lifelong process by which people learn the **culture** of the society in which they live. Socialization is carried out by agencies of socialization, such as the family, the education system, religious institutions or the mass media. Culture is socially transmitted (passed on through socialization) from one generation to the next.

Socialization plays a crucial part in forming our identities. **Identity** is about how we see and define ourselves and how other people see and define us.

For example, we might define ourselves as gay, black, a Muslim, Welsh, English, a woman, a student or a mother. Many aspects of our individual identities will be formed through the socialization process, with the family, friends, school, the mass media, the workplace and other agencies of socialization helping to form our individual identities. Many chapters in this book refer to aspects of this socialization process and the formation of our identities.

However, while lifelong socialization plays a very important part in forming our identities, individuals also have the free will to enable them to 'carve out' their own personal identities and influence how others see them, rather than simply being influenced by them. Individuals are not simply the passive victims of the socialization process. While individual identities are formed by various forces of socialization, the choices individuals and groups make and how they react to these forces can also have an influence. For example, while the mass media might influence our lifestyles, attitudes and values, and how we see ourselves and how others see us, individuals may also react to what they read, see or hear in the media in different ways.

A woman from a minority ethnic background may define herself as black or Asian, but she may also see herself mainly as a woman, a mother, a teacher or a Muslim. Similarly, we have some choices in the consumption goods we buy, the clothes we wear, and the leisure activities we choose to pursue. Through these choices, we can influence how others see us, and the image of ourselves we project to them. Individuals may also have multiple identities, presenting different aspects of themselves in different ways to different groups of people. People may therefore not adopt the same identity all the time, and different people will see them in different ways.

Activity

- 1 Suggest three ways, with examples, in which individuals learn the culture of society in contemporary Britain.
- 2 Describe three factors, apart from the examples given, that others might use to define your identity, such as your dress or taste in music. Explain your answer with examples.
- 3 Suggest three ways that individuals' choices in consumer goods may influence how other people define them.
- 4 Suggest reasons why people may have difficulty in getting other people to accept whatever identity they wish to project to others.

ROLES, ROLE MODELS AND ROLE CONFLICT

Roles are very like the roles actors play in a theatre or television series. People in society play many different roles in their lifetimes, such as those of a man or a 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 by society to behave in particular ways. For example, police officers who steal or take bribes, the teacher who is drunk in the classroom and the parent who neglects his or her children are clearly not conforming to the ways society expects them to behave, and these examples show how important such 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**.

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 the successful performance of two or more roles at the same time may come into conflict with one another.

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 dependent elderly parents illustrates this idea of role conflict.

VALUES AND NORMS

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 often deal with matters that many people think are very important. Laws against murder and theft, for example, enforce the values attached to human life and private property in our society. Laws are formally enforced by the police, courts and prisons, and involve legal punishment if they are broken.

Norms are social rules which define the correct and acceptable behaviour in a society or social group to which people are expected to conform. 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

Roles are the patterns of behaviour which are expected from individuals in society.

Role models are people's patterns of behaviour which others copy and model their own behaviour on.

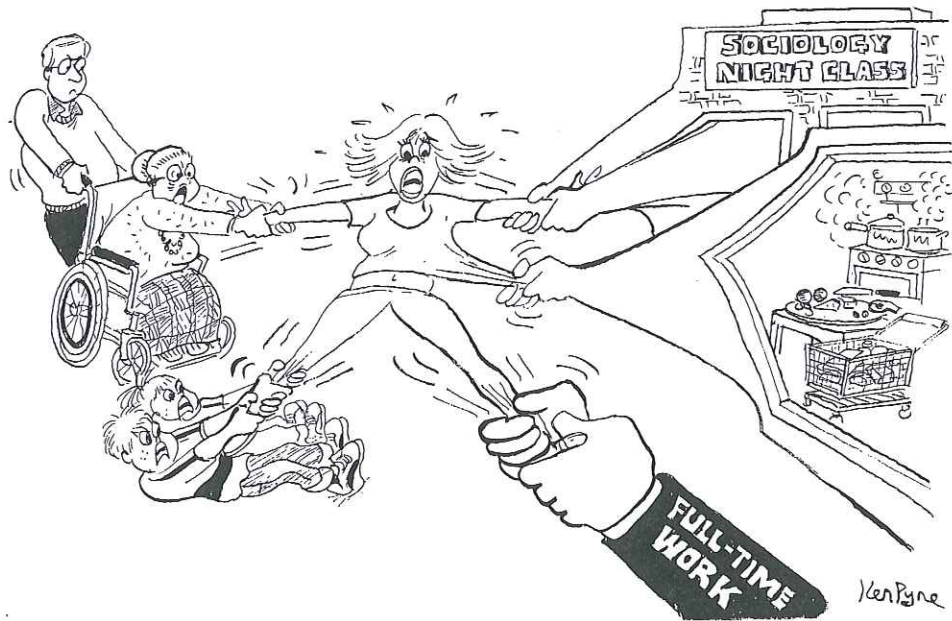
Role conflict is the conflict between the successful performance of two or more roles at the same time, such as those of worker, mother and student.

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

Laws are official legal rules, formally enforced by the police, courts and prison, involving legal punishment if the rules are broken.

Norms are social rules which define the correct and acceptable behaviour in a society or social group to which people are expected to conform.

Role conflict for working women



Norms control behaviour in nearly all aspects of our lives, with positive and negative sanctions to enforce them. Try jumping queues to see the sanctions that follow



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 unreliable, 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 Diwali are typical customs found in Britain.

Customs are norms which have lasted for a long time and have become a part of society's traditions.

Activity

Values and norms, and related customs and traditions, are embedded deeply within a society's culture. They include a large number of unwritten rules, some of which are tiny, and even trivial, but they are nonetheless important aspects making up the familiar and taken-for-granted characteristics of a society's culture. These are learnt by most people through socialization, but behaviour which passes for normal in one's own culture may be considered unacceptable in others.

- 1 Go to the following links to four videos on YouTube which illustrate some cultural differences, or do a search in YouTube for 'HSBC ads', or 'cultural differences'. You may come across similar videos in the same location, which you may also wish to view.

<http://youtu.be/WcEzfzHB08QE>

http://youtu.be/JK_NinOmFWw

<http://youtu.be/8jrbu0lCWjk>

<http://youtu.be/v1wLQd53Ps>

After viewing these videos:

- 2 Identify four differences in social norms, customs and traditions either between the different countries of the UK (England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) or between the UK and other cultures.
- 3 Suggest four social norms that you think people raised in another culture might find odd if they visited or came to live in the UK.
- 4 Explain how the videos you have watched show the importance of socialization in helping people to live together in society.

Values and norms are part of the culture of a society, and are learnt 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.

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.

Deviance is the failure to conform to social norms.

Sanctions are the rewards and punishments by which social control is achieved and conformity to norms and values enforced.

Positive sanctions are rewards of various kinds.

Negative sanctions are various types of punishment.

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

Income is a flow of money which people obtain from work, from their investments, or from the state.

Wealth is property in the form of assets which can, in general, be sold and turned into cash for the benefit of the owner.

Life chances

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

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

The **upper class** consists of those who are the main owners of society's wealth. It includes wealthy industrialists, landowners and the traditional aristocracy.

The **middle class** consists of those in non-manual work – jobs that don't require heavy physical work and are usually performed in offices and involve paperwork or computer work.

The **working class** consists of those working in manual jobs, involving physical work and, literally, work with their hands, such as factory or labouring work.

Activity

- 1 Identify three important values in Britain today and three norms relating to these values. Suggest ways in which these norms and values are enforced.
- 2 Identify at least four roles that you play, and describe the norms of behaviour to which you are expected to conform in each case.
- 3 Describe the sanctions you might face if you failed to conform to the norms you have identified.
- 4 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 in this book. Social class is generally associated with inequality in industrial societies. It is often used in a very broad and imprecise way, but generally refers to a group of people sharing 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 how much power and influence they have in society, their level of education, their social status (or position in society – see below), their type of housing, car ownership, leisure activities and other aspects of their lifestyle.

An individual's social class has a major influence on his or her **life chances**. Life chances include the chances of obtaining things like good-quality housing, a long and healthy life, holidays, job security and educational success, and avoiding things like unemployment, ill-health and premature death. **Social mobility** refers to the movement of groups or individuals up or down the social hierarchy, from one social class to another.

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 **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 their assets are so large that work is not necessary for them to survive.
- The **middle class** is 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 (information and communication technology) of various kinds. Some argue that those in the lowest levels of non-manual work, such as supermarket check-out 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 like those of many sections of the middle class.
- 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 **underclass** is a small class, and refers to a group of people who are right at the bottom of the class structure, and whose poverty often excludes them from full participation in society. The term 'underclass' is used in different ways, and is a controversial concept. It is discussed more fully in chapter 4 on wealth, poverty and welfare.

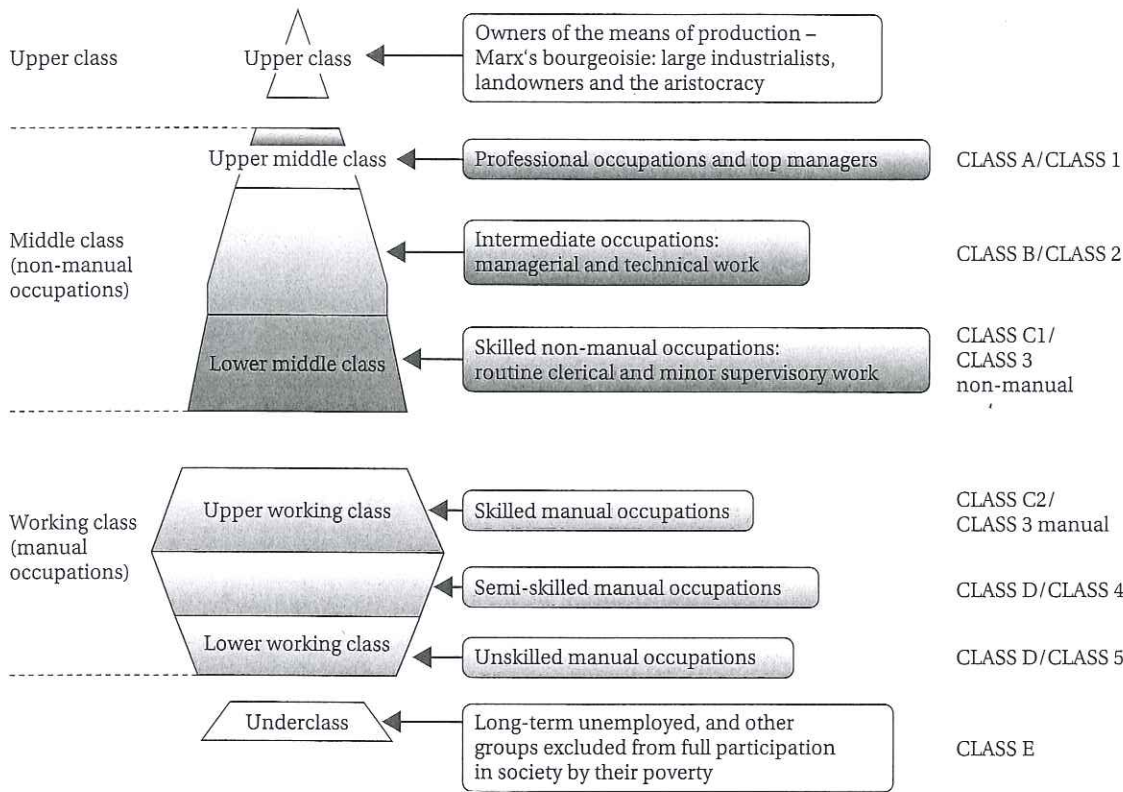


Figure 1.1 The class structure

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

Status

The term **status** is used in sociology in two main ways. It is often used to refer to the role 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 by other members of that group or society – people’s social standing in the eyes of others. **Ascribed status** is status given by birth or family background, 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.

The **underclass** is the social group right at the bottom of the social class hierarchy, consisting of those who are in some ways cut off, or excluded, from the rest of society.

Status

sometimes refers to the role position someone occupies in society, but more commonly refers to the amount of prestige or social importance a person has in the eyes of other members of a group or society.

Ascribed status is status given by birth or family background, which, in general, cannot be changed by individuals.

Achieved status is status that is achieved by an individual’s own efforts or talents.

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

Gender refers to the culturally created differences between men and women which are learnt through socialization.

Sex refers to the biological differences between men and women, as opposed to culturally-created gender differences.

ETHNICITY AND GENDER

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 that of 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, Indian 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.

Activity

Using the word list below, fill in the blanks in the following passage. Each dash represents one word.

identity	social structure	values
social control	norms	social mobility
status	working class	role conflict
value freedom	ascribed status	status
social class	positive	upper class
achieved status	socialization	objectivity
ethnicity	roles	underclass
minority ethnic group	social institutions	negative sanctions
social classes	deviance	life chances
gender	social classes	

Sociology involves studying the social world, but as sociologists are themselves part of this social world, they need to take care that they look at things in a detached and impartial way. They should approach research in an open-minded way, considering all the evidence before making up their minds. This is known as _____. They should also try not to let their own beliefs and prejudices influence their research. This _____ is important if sociology is to be seen as something more than newspaper journalism.

Society is constructed of a range of _____, like the family, religion, the education system and the law. These make up the _____ – the 'building blocks' of society. Sociologists generally believe that people learn the culture of their society, and this learning process is known as _____. For example, males and females often learn to behave in different ways. This difference is known as _____. The learning process influences the formation of the individual's _____ – how they see and define themselves and how others see and define them. _____ refers to the shared culture of a social group which gives its members a common identity in some ways different from that of other social groups. If a group has a cultural identity different from the majority population of a society, such as black and Asian groups in Britain, it is known as a _____.

Everyone in society is expected to behave in particular ways in particular situations, and these patterns of expected behaviour are known as _____, but sometimes these come into conflict with each other, causing _____.

Every society has sets of guidelines for behaviour. _____ establish the important standards about what is important in a society and what is right or wrong. _____ provide rules about how to behave in particular situations.

People are encouraged to conform to these rules by _____, which is carried out by a range of rewards and punishments known as _____ and _____. Non-conformity to social rules is known as _____.

A _____ is a group of people who share a similar economic situation, and this can have an important influence on their chances of obtaining the desirable, and avoiding the undesirable, things in life – their _____. The two largest _____ are the _____ and the middle class. The main owners of society's wealth are known as the _____, while the very poorest group, which is excluded from full participation in society by poverty, is known as the _____. Sometimes people can move up or down between _____, and this is known as _____. Some people and some positions in society are ranked by others in terms of different amounts of prestige or respect, and this is known as _____. If this is given by birth or family background, it is known as _____. However, some people can achieve their _____ through their own individual efforts and talents. This is known as _____.

The solution to this activity can be found on the teachers' pages of www.politybooks.com/browne.

Sociological perspectives

A **perspective** is simply a way of looking at something. A **sociological perspective** is 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 below). The pickpocket sees wallets sticking out of pockets or bags, and an opportunity to steal. The police officer sees potential crime and disorder. The roadsweeper 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, and possibly shoplifters. 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, more rounded and fuller description of the street than others do.

Sociological perspectives are basically similar, in that they are the different viewpoints from which sociologists examine society. Different sociological perspectives 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.

What follows is an introduction to some of these sociological perspectives. These perspectives are often best understood by looking at particular areas, and this book will explore them further in various chapters, building on and illustrating what is said below.

Sociological perspectives centre on the themes of how much freedom or control the individual has to influence society. To what extent is the individual's identity moulded by social forces outside her or his control? How much control does the

A **perspective** is a way of looking at something.

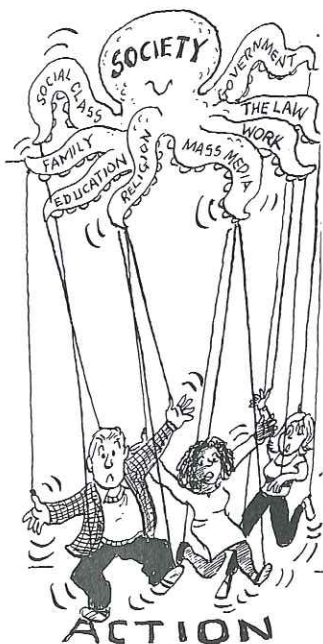
A **sociological perspective** involves a set of theories which influences what is looked at when studying society.



People may view the same scene from different perspectives

Structuralism is a perspective which is concerned with the overall structure of society, and sees individual behaviour moulded by social institutions like the family, the education system, the mass media and work.

A **macro approach** focuses on the large-scale structure of society as a whole, rather than on individuals.



Structural approaches see individuals formed by the wider social forces making up the social structure of society

individual have over these social forces, and how free are individuals to form their own identities?

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 on, or limit and control, individual behaviour. Structuralist approaches have the following features:

- The behaviour of individual human beings, the way they act (their social action) and the formation of their identities are 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. According to the structuralist approach, the individual is like a puppet, whose strings are pulled by society. We might see people 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) such as the links between the workplace and the economy, the economy and the political system, the family and the education system, and so on. The focus of sociology is on the study of social institutions and the social structure as a whole, not on the individual. This is sometimes referred to as a **macro approach**.

Structuralism is illustrated in the cartoon on the left.

Activity

- 1 How much 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 coordinate 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 is most closely associated with the work of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and the American Talcott Parsons (1902–79), who are referred to in various parts of this book. Functionalism sees society 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. These include 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 our blood and pump it 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

Marxism (conflict structuralism)

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

Base and superstructure Marx believed that the economy was the driving force in society, and it was this that determined (or influenced) the nature of social institutions, and people's values and beliefs. Marxism sees the structure of society divided into two main parts, illustrated in figure 1.2.

- 1 The economic base, or *infrastructure*, which underpins and determines everything else in society; this consists of:

Functionalism

is a sociological perspective which sees society as made up of parts which work together to maintain society as an integrated whole. Society is seen as fundamentally harmonious and stable, because of the agreement on basic values (value consensus) established through socialization.

Functional prerequisites

are the basic needs that must be met if society is to survive.

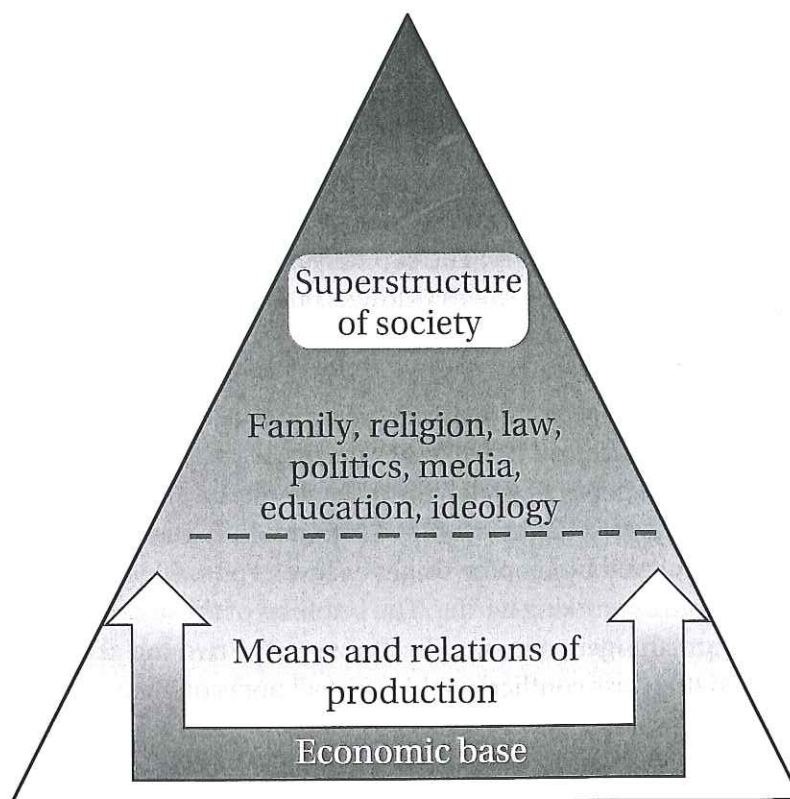
Value consensus

is a general agreement around the main values and norms of any society.

Marxism

is a structural theory of society which sees society divided by conflict between two main opposing social classes, due to private ownership of the means of production: the key resources necessary for producing society's goods, such as land, factories and machinery.

Figure 1.2 The base and superstructure in Marxist theory



The **means of production** are the key resources necessary for producing society's goods, such as land, factories and machinery.

The **relations of production** are the forms of relationship between those people involved in production, such as cooperation or private ownership and control.

Ideology is a set of ideas, values and beliefs that represents the outlook, and justifies the interests, of a social group.

Surplus value is the extra value added by workers to the products they produce, after allowing for the payment of their wages, and which goes to the employer in the form of profit.

- the **means of production**, like the land, factories, raw materials, technology and labour necessary to produce society's goods.
 - the **relations of production**: the relations, such as shared ownership or private ownership, between those involved in production; who controls production; and the relationship between owners and non-owners, e.g. whether people are forced to work, like slaves, or paid for their work.
- 2 *The superstructure*, which includes society's social institutions, such as the family, education, the mass media, religion and the political system, and beliefs and values (**ideology**), which Marx saw as primarily determined (or influenced) by the economic system.

Surplus value and exploitation In a capitalist society, the 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 cover production costs and pay their wages. The rest of the sales provide profit for the owners of the burger chain. This means that the workers who produce the burgers do not get the full value of their work, and they are therefore being exploited.

Activity

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 can be persuaded to buy them by advertising? See what other people think about this.

Capitalists and workers Marx argued that 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 asserted that 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 those of 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

The **bourgeoisie** (or capitalists) is the class of owners of the means of production in industrial societies, whose primary purpose is to make profits.

The **proletariat** is the social class of workers who have to work for wages as they do not own the means of production.

Labour power refers to people's capacity to work. People sell their labour power to the employer in return for a wage, and the employer buys only their labour power, and not the whole person.

Class conflict is the conflict that arises between different social classes. It is generally used to describe the conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat in Marxist views of society.

The **ruling class** is the social class of owners of the means of production, whose control over the economy gives them power over all aspects of society, enabling them to rule over society.

The **dominant ideology** is the set of ideas and beliefs of the most powerful groups in society, which influences the ideas of the rest of society.

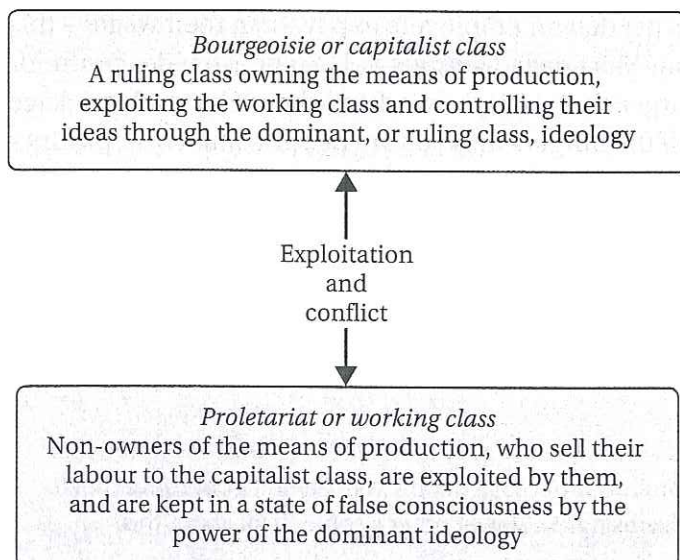


Figure 1.3 A summary of the Marxist view of society

Ruling class ideology is the set of ideas of the ruling class.

False consciousness is a failure by members of a social class to recognize their real interests.

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

Communism refers to an equal society, without social classes or class conflict, in which the means of production are the common property of all.

Social action theories or **interpretivist** approaches are perspectives which emphasize the creative action which people can take, rather than seeing them as simply passive victims of social forces outside them. Social action theory suggests it is important to understand the motives and meanings people give to their behaviour, and how this is influenced by the behaviour and interpretations of others. The focus of research is therefore on individuals or small groups rather than on society as a whole.

Determinism is the idea that people's behaviour is moulded by their social surroundings, and that they have little free will, control or choice over how they behave.

'drugging' them and inducing hallucinations of 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 workers 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. They would develop **class consciousness** (an awareness of their real interests and their exploitation) and 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. Marx foresaw this leading to a new form of society which he called **communism**. This new communist society would be an equal society, in which the means of production would be the common property of all, and would be without exploitation, without classes and without class conflict.

Marx therefore saw society 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.

Activity

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 **social action** or **interpretivist** approaches. These theories are concerned with discovering and thereby understanding the processes by which interactions between individuals or small groups take place, how people come to interpret and see things as they do, how they define their identities, and how the reactions of others can affect their view of things and their sense of their own identity.

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, in how they act and form their identities, rather than on the **determinism** of structuralism. Determinism means that the activities and identities 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 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. In turn, how the parent acts in response to the meaning given to the baby's behaviour is likely to affect the baby's behaviour – whether it stops crying because it is no longer tired, hungry, afraid or ill.
- The main purpose of sociology is to study, uncover and interpret the meanings and definitions individuals give to their behaviour.

Social action approaches are illustrated in the cartoon on the right.

Activity

- 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. Suggest 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.

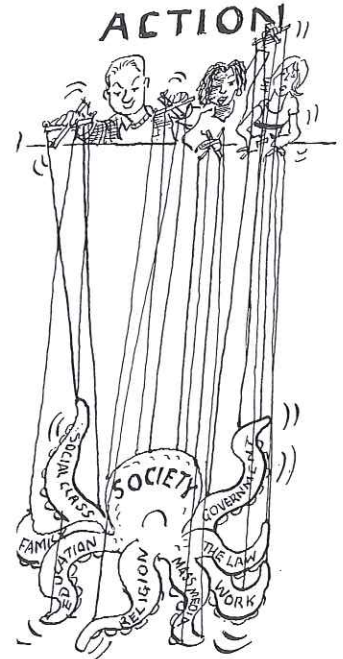
Symbolic interactionism

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 of the teachers and others who 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 institutions, 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, and have important influences on the formation of individual and group identities. However, individuals can, within limits,

A **micro approach** focuses on small groups or individuals, rather than on the structure of society as a whole.



Social action or interpretivist theories emphasize the free will and choice of individuals, and their role in creating the social structure

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective which is concerned with understanding human behaviour in face-to-face situations, and how individuals and situations come to be defined in particular ways through their encounters with other people.

Labelling refers to defining a person or group in a certain way – as a particular 'type' of person or group.

What consequences might follow for someone who has been labelled a deviant?

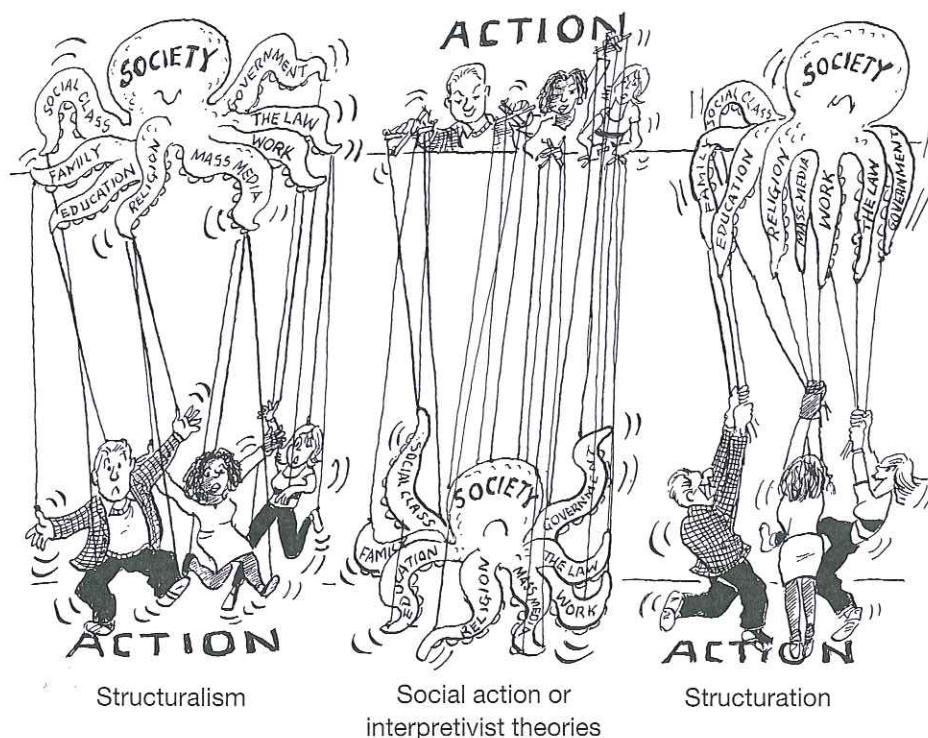


make choices within those structures and act accordingly. For example, the school is part of the education system – a social structure. Young people are constrained (forced) by law to go to school, and that school continues to exist even after generations of young people have come and gone. It therefore 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 – 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 closely connected to it – governors, students, teachers and parents. If attendance is poor, behaviour dreadful, teaching quality 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, Children's Services and Skills), and officially classified as a school requiring 'special measures' to put it right. If parents opt to send their children to another school, it may face declining income, making things worse. As a result, it might face closure.

However, the school might be dramatically improved by teachers and others in the school community working harder 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 or 'beacon school' 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



Structuralism

Social action or
interpretivist theories

Structuration

to send their children to school because they believe 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 both of the constraints of social structure and of 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.

FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES

Feminism examines society particularly from the point of view and interests of women. Feminists 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 and interests 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 on the problem of men and male-dominated

Structuration is an approach between structuralism and social action theory. It suggests that, while people are constrained by social institutions, they also have choice and can at the same time take action to support or change those institutions.

Feminism is a view that examines the world from the point of view of women, who are seen as disadvantaged, with their interests ignored or devalued in society.

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 focuses on the problem of men and male domination under **patriarchy** – the system whereby males dominate in every area of society.

Liberal feminism focuses on measures to ensure that women have equal opportunities with men within the present system.

society. Liberal feminism emphasizes the rights of women as individuals, and believes in removing all forms of discrimination to establish equality of opportunity for women with men. They want to ensure that women have equal opportunities with men within the present system, through steps such as changes to the law to stop sex discrimination, establishing equal pay, removing obstacles to women's full participation in society, and better childcare measures so that women can play their full part in paid employment. Marxist feminism and radical feminism fundamentally challenge the way society is presently organized and seek major social change, while liberal feminism basically accepts the system as it is but seeks to ensure women have equal opportunities with men within that system.

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 self-interest*, and the need to reduce the power of the state to the minimum, reducing control of the individual by unnecessary state interference. Self-interest is given priority over the needs and welfare of others.
- *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 expecting them to be dependent on the state for support if they are physically and mentally capable of supporting themselves. Lower taxes were seen as a means of increasing incentives for individuals and businesses to succeed.
- *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, for instance in healthcare and education. An example might be giving parents a free choice of schools as consumers of education, and the right to reject some schools in favour of others, just as people choose between competing products in a supermarket. Support for private healthcare and the selling-off to private companies of state-owned industries like gas, electricity, water, British Airways and British Telecom were seen as ways of introducing competition in these areas, on the assumption that private companies with 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 traditional education, 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, immorality, crime, a culture of laziness, welfare dependency and the lack of a work ethic, and the existence of poverty.

POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism is an approach in sociology, as well as in other subjects, which stresses that society is changing so rapidly and constantly that it is marked by chaos, uncertainty and risk. Social structures like the family or social class are breaking down,

The New Right approach stresses individual freedom and self-help and self-reliance, reduction of the power and spending of the state, the free market and free competition between private companies, schools and other institutions, and the importance of traditional institutions and values.

Postmodernism is an approach that stresses that society is changing so rapidly and constantly that it is marked by chaos, uncertainty and risk, and is fragmented into many different groups, interests and lifestyles. Social structures are being replaced by a mass of individuals making individual choices about their lifestyles. Societies can no longer be understood through the application of general theories or grand stories (metanarratives), like Marxism or functionalism, which seek to explain society as a whole.

and are being replaced by a whole range of different and constantly changing social relationships. Postmodernists argue that it is nonsense to talk of an institution called the family, for example, as people now live in such a wide range of ever-changing personal relationships. Gay and lesbian couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples who do not marry, multiple partners, divorce and remarriage, lone parents, stepparents and stepchildren, dual-income families with both partners working, people living alone, people living in shared households with friends, 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.

Postmodernists suggest society and social structures have ceased to exist, and have been replaced by a mass of individuals making individual choices about their lifestyles and identities, free from traditional constraints like social class, gender or ethnicity. Society is fragmenting into a mass of individuals and groups with such a wide diversity of interests and lifestyles, and is so constantly and rapidly changing, that it is essentially chaotic. This means that societies can no longer be understood through the application of 'big' theories or grand stories (called **metanarratives** – master narratives) like Marxism or functionalism, which seek to explain society as a whole. In any case, for postmodernists there is no single 'true' theory – no explanation is any better than any other, and different theories are just a variety of different points of view of equal value.

Postmodernists believe there are few of the social constraints on people that structuralist approaches identify. In postmodern societies, the emphasis is on individuals as consumers, making their own choices in education, health, their personal relationships and lifestyle. 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 are free to make choices about their lifestyles, and the image they want to project to other people. Postmodern society involves a media-saturated consumer culture in which individuals are free to pick 'n' mix identities and lifestyles, chosen from a limitless range of constantly changing consumer goods and leisure activities, which are available from across the globe.

A metanarrative is a broad all-embracing 'big theory' (literally, a 'big story') or explanation for how societies operate.

Activity

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

- Functionalist ● Marxist feminist ● liberal feminist ● postmodernist
- New Right ● Marxist ● radical feminist ● interpretivist

- (a) We will challenge all aspects of society not relevant to women, bring about a complete female takeover, 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 that 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) Truth is whatever you choose to believe.
- (h) 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 behaviour, you need to understand the meaning people give to events.

- (i) The education system is of major importance in preparing a well-trained and qualified labour force so the economy can develop and grow.
- (j) The education system prepares an obedient workforce which won't rock the boat and complain about being exploited at work.
- (k) A person's identity is purely a matter of her or his personal choice, regardless of social factors like their class, gender or ethnicity.
- (l) 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.
- (m) Women will never achieve equality as long as men hold all the positions of power in society.
- (n) It is in everyone's interests to pull together at work for the benefit of society as a whole.
- (o) Although girls now do better than boys in education, they could do better still. We must make sure that any obstacles to girls' progress in school are removed.
- (p) We must make sure women get equal pay for equal work.
- (q) Some students are almost bound to fail, because teachers give them the impression that they're thick, and this undermines the self-confidence of the students, who then think it isn't worth bothering.
- (r) The welfare state has produced an underclass of people who are idle and don't want to work, and are content to scrounge off overgenerous welfare state benefits rather than get a job to support themselves.

The solution to this activity can be found on the teachers' pages of www.politybooks.com/browne.

Sociological problems, social problems and social policy

A **social problem** is something that is seen as being harmful to society in some way, and needs something doing to sort it out.

A **sociological problem** is any social issue that needs explaining.

Social problems are matters that are seen as being harmful to society in some way, and as needing some action to sort them out. A social problem is nearly always a **sociological problem** – a social issue that needs explaining – but not all sociological problems are social problems.

Very often sociologists have been able to show by research 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

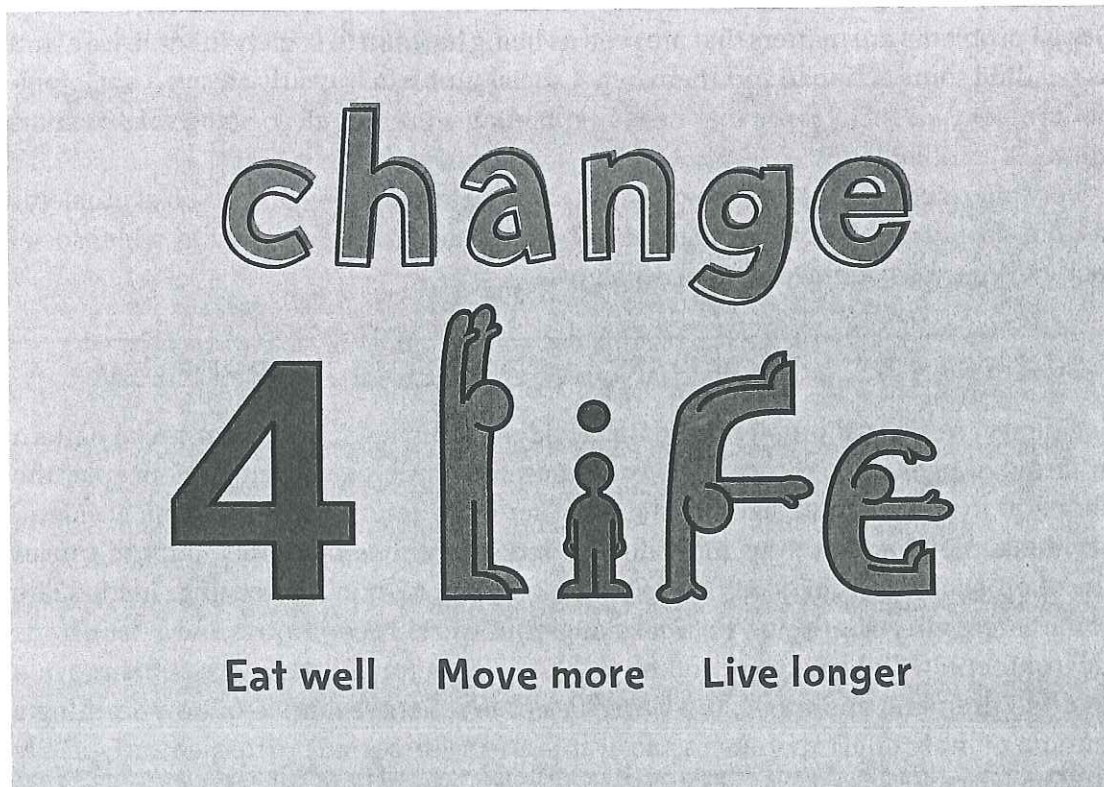
surroundings) and 'the public issues of social structure'. Every single accident is a personal experience but the social pattern of these experiences in Britain every year is for all of us a social problem – not least because of the harm they cause and the billions of pounds spent treating them by the 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 1 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 characteristics 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. Social policy refers to the packages of plans and actions taken to solve social problems or achieve other goals that are seen as important. These are usually adopted by national and local government or various voluntary agencies. Examples are measures taken to solve social problems like obesity and alcohol abuse and to achieve the goal of a healthier nation, such as the Change4Life campaign (www.nhs.uk/Change4Life), or to improve the educational performance of boys compared to girls. 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 to the social policy solutions adopted, which makes it such a worthwhile, useful and exciting subject.

Social policy

refers to the packages of plans and actions adopted by national and local government or various voluntary agencies to solve social problems or achieve other goals that are seen as important.



The Change4Life campaign is one example of a social policy which seeks to address social problems (in this case, obesity and unhealthy lifestyles)



CHAPTER SUMMARY AND REVISION CHECKLIST

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- explain what is meant by a 'social institution' and 'social structure'.
- explain how sociology is different from common-sense and naturalistic explanations.
- define the meaning of socialization, culture, identity, 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 the contemporary United Kingdom.
- 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.
- outline some of the features of postmodernism.
- 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

(these are already defined in the text, and may also be found in the glossary at the end of the book)

achieved status	ideology	objectivity	social mobility
ascribed status	income	patriarchy	social policy
bourgeoisie	interpretivism	perspective	social problem
capitalists	labelling	positive sanctions	social structure
class conflict	labour power	postmodernism	socialization
class consciousness	laws	proletariat	sociological perspective
communism	liberal feminism	radical feminism	sociological problem
culture	life chances	relations of production	status
customs	macro approach	role conflict	structuralism
determinism	Marxism	role models	structuration
deviance	Marxist feminism	roles	surplus value
dominant ideology	means of production	ruling class	symbolic interactionism
ethnicity	metanarrative	ruling class ideology	underclass
false consciousness	micro approach	sanctions	upper class
feminism	middle class	sex	value consensus
functional prerequisites	minority ethnic group	social action theory	value freedom
functionalism	negative sanctions	social class	values
gender	New Right	social control	wealth
identity	norms	social institution	working class



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