



Sociology Central Teaching Notes

1. Introduction to Sociology

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Introduction

1. Most, if not all, A-level Sociology students begin their course with a fairly vague idea about what is involved in the “study of society”. A copy of the syllabus is an initial starting point because it maps-out for you the areas you will be studying during your course. However, it doesn’t tell you a great deal about what Sociology is. This Introduction, therefore, is designed to help you identify the subject matter of Sociology and, to help us do this we will be looking at four main ideas:

- a. An initial **definition** of Sociology as a subject.
- b. The types of **questions** that sociologists ask.
- c. **The Sociological Perspective** (how Sociology differs from other social sciences).
- d. The difference between **Naturalistic** (or **commonsense**) and **sociological** ideas and explanations.

A. The Subject Matter of Sociology.

1. As I noted above, Sociology is the study of human societies. It is usually classed as one of the social sciences (along with subjects like psychology) and was established as a subject in the late 18th century (through the work of people like the French writer Auguste Comte).

However, the subject has only really gained acceptance as an academic subject in the 20th century through the work of writers such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Talcott Parsons (all names that, for the present, probably mean very little to you). One name that you may have heard of - Karl Marx (the founder of modern Communism) - has probably done more to stimulate people’s interest in the subject than anyone else, even though he lived and wrote (1818 - 1884) in a period before Sociology became fully established as an academic discipline.

Sociology, therefore, has a reasonably long history of development (150 - 200 years) although in Britain it has only been in the last 30 - 40 years that Sociology as an examined subject in the education system has achieved a level of prominence equivalent to or above most of the other subjects it is possible to study. At present, approximately 40,000 students sit an A-level Sociology exam, making it one of the most popular A-levels in our society.

2. Definitions of the subject are not difficult to discover and although, as you will see, a precise definition is not always easy to come by, each of the following have sufficient in common for us to draw some sort of overall conclusion about how Sociology can be defined.

a. Ginsberg (“The Study of Society”, 1939):

“Sociology may be defined as the study of society; that is of the web of human interactions and relationships”.

b. Sugarman (“Sociology”, 1968):

“Sociology is the objective study of human behaviour in so far as it is affected by the fact that people live in groups”.

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c. Giner (“Sociology”, 1972):

“The purpose of Sociology is the scientific study of human society through the investigation of people’s social behaviour”.

d. Ritzer (“Sociology”, 1979):

“Sociology is the study of individuals in a social setting that includes groups, organisations, cultures and societies. Sociologists study the interrelationships between individuals, organisations, cultures and societies”.

e. Giddens (“Sociology”, 1989):

“Sociology is the study of human social life, groups and societies. It is a dazzling and compelling enterprise, having as its subject matter our own behaviour as social beings. The scope of sociology is extremely wide, ranging from the analysis of passing encounters between individuals in the street up to the investigation of world-wide social processes”.

f. Lawson and Garrod (“The Complete A-Z Sociology Handbook”, 1996):

“Sociology is the study of individuals in groups in a systematic way, which grew out of the search for understanding associated with the industrial and scientific revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries”.

3. I have deliberately provided a relatively large number of possible definitions to enable you to get some initial flavour of the subject matter of Sociology.

✓ In addition, you should be able to identify the common themes in each definition that will help us to focus our attention more directly on the question “What is Sociology?”

⇒ **Identify the major common themes in the above definitions**

4. In the above definitions there are two basic themes we can identify and investigate further:

a. What sociologists study

Sociology is the study of the social world. It involves studying human beings and their patterns of behaviour. In order to do this, we focus on the way people form **relationships** and how these relationships, considered in their totality, are represented by the concept of a “**society**”.

In this respect, the focus of the sociologist’s attention is group behaviour. That is, the effect that the groups people join or are born into (family, work, education and so forth) have upon people’s social behaviour.

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b. How sociologists study the social world

The definitions included words like “**scientific**”, “**systematic**” and “**objective**” - ideas that tell us something about the both the way sociologists study social behaviour and the kind of knowledge they are trying to produce about social life. While we will develop these ideas in much greater detail in another part of the course (“Theory and Methods”), we need to note a couple of things about them now.

a. **Objective** basically means that sociologists try to create knowledge that is factual, rather than simply based on opinion. In simple terms, sociologists try to avoid personal bias intruding into their research. To do this, they use:

b. **Systematic** ways of studying social behaviour. By this is meant that sociologists try to use methods of research (questionnaires, observations, experiments and so forth) that are governed by certain rules of evidence. For example, a sociologist will try to test his or her ideas in some way. We will see an example of this in a moment when we look at the difference between **Naturalistic (commonsense)** and sociological explanations of human behaviour.

5. To summarise this section, therefore:

Sociology is a social science concerned with the study of human social relationships and the various ways these relationships are patterned in terms of social groups, organisations and societies.

In the next section we can look briefly at the different types of questions sociologists use in their study of the social world.

B. Sociological Questions

1. One of the main characteristics of any A-level course of study is that examiners demand that you, as a student, develop the ability to demonstrate two basic forms of knowledge:

a. **Firstly, the ability to understand and demonstrate the difference between facts and opinions.**

Facts, in this respect, are things that are true, regardless of whether or not we would like them to be true. For example, it is a fact that, at the end of your course, you will be examined. How well you do in these exams will determine the grade you are awarded at the end of your course. This is a fact because it will happen to you regardless of whether or not you want it to happen.

One major characteristic of factual knowledge is that it is considered true because we have tried to test it in some way (for example, through observing something over time) and found that we cannot show it to be false.

For example, I have observed various sociology courses over time and found it to be true that there is always an examination at the end of the course. This is not to say that facts are always “true for all time” (for example, sometime in the future sociology grades may not be awarded on

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the basis of end of course tests - they may be examined in some other way). However, given certain specified conditions a fact is a statement that is true whilst those conditions apply.

Opinions, on the other hand, can be generally defined as ideas that may or may not be factual or true. An opinion is simply a statement we make that we believe to be true, regardless of whether or not we have any evidence to support it.

For example, I may have the opinion that you are the most intelligent group of students I have ever taught, but the only way to confirm this opinion is to test it in some way (by examining you, for example).

Sociologists, therefore, attempt to produce factual knowledge about human behaviour. That is, we try to generate statements about the nature of the social world that are not only true, but we are able to demonstrate that these statements are true.

In basic terms, therefore, factual questions relate to **what** we know about the social world. It is important to remember this idea, since it will form the basis for a great deal of your work during the course.

b. Secondly, the ability to demonstrate how factual knowledge is created and its significance in terms of the social world.

At A-level, it is necessary - but not sufficient - for students to both separate facts from opinions and be able to demonstrate a sound knowledge of these facts. Sociology, at this level, is not a simple memory test ("If I can memorise enough facts I will pass the course"), but clearly factual knowledge is very important.

However, sociologists are interested in how facts are produced, by whom and for what purpose. In this respect, sociologists ask theoretical questions.

A **theory**, for our purpose, is something that explains the relationship between two or more things. For example, it is a fact that in 1995 approximately 160,000 marriages in Britain ended in divorce. Sociologically, we would like to know **why** this happens - for example, what is the cause / what are the causes of divorce?

We can only explain facts by constructing possible explanations (theories) and then testing our theory against reality (facts). For example, a very basic theory in this instance might be that "If a man and a woman are both in their teens when they marry, they are more likely to divorce at sometime in the future" (something that, statistically, happens to be true).

Another example might be the fact that men have larger brains than women. A theoretical question for sociologists might be why is this a fact (the answer is that, biologically, men are generally larger than women. In terms of brain size to average body weight, female brains are actually proportionately larger...).

2. To help us understand the social world, both factually and theoretically, sociologists use another form of questioning, that of **comparison**. Comparative questions have two main forms:

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- a. A comparison between two different societies (for example, is the divorce rate different in Britain and France - and if so, why?).
- b. A comparison between the present and the past in the same society (sometimes called historical or **developmental questions**). For example, is the divorce rate in modern Britain higher or lower than 100 years ago - and why?).

Comparative questions not only help us to develop factual knowledge about the social world, they can also help us to test theoretical questions. For example, comparatively we know that in 1995 the number of people who divorced was:

160,000 in Britain.
0 in Eire (Southern Ireland).(There were no divorces in Eire in that year).

⇒ **What theory could you construct that might explain these facts?**

3. To complete this section, we can relate the ideas noted above to your course of study. In particular, we can note the way the different types of questions that sociologists ask relate to and correspond with the skills that the various Examination Boards require you to develop throughout the duration of your course. In this respect, there are five major skill domains we can reference:

- a. **Knowledge.**
- b. **Understanding.**
- c. **Interpretation.**
- d. **Application and Analysis**
- e. **Evaluation.**

We can relate these skill domains to sociological questions in the following way:

You have to demonstrate sociological **knowledge** and this involves a mastery of **factual** information. In order to interpret the significance of factual knowledge, you have to understand sociological **theories**. By combining these two skills (**knowledge** and **interpretation**) you are **applying** sociological **theories** to the construction of **factual knowledge**. Additionally, in any area of the course there will usually be a number of different **theories** that compete to explain some aspect of the social world and you have to **evaluate** them (that is, weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of each **theory**) against one another to arrive at some conclusion about their relative worth. Finally, by using each of the four skills in combination, you will arrive at an overall level of **understanding** that is sociological in origin.

We can summarise the above in the following terms:

Understanding consists of your ability to:

Create **knowledge** (**factual** information or plausible **explanations** about some aspect of human behaviour). To create knowledge you have to:

Interpret sociological **theories** correctly. That is, you have to **understand** them and:

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Apply your **knowledge** and **understanding** in order to explain some feature of human behaviour. This involves some form of **analysis** (in the sense of thinking, for example, about how different forms of knowledge or different types of explanation can be applied to understand something). Finally, you need to look critically at the **explanations** (*theories*) you use, thereby:

Evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages and so forth.

Finally, if this all seems a bit complicated at the moment it will be much clearer once you start to use the various skills in the work you do on the course.

C. The Sociological Perspective.

1. A **perspective** can be defined as a way of looking at and seeing something. To have a perspective, therefore, means to look at something (whatever that thing might be) in a particular way. For sociologists, the thing we are looking at is the social world - in effect, the various ways that human beings behave in a social way. Thus, when we talk about "society" or the social world what we are really referring to is the behaviour of human beings - the real object of study for Sociologists.

2. When we talk about the sociological perspective, therefore, we are talking about the particular way that sociologists, as opposed to non-sociologists, try to understand human social behaviour.

This is not to say all sociologists necessarily look at the social world from exactly the same perspective (or viewpoint), not that sociologists are always in complete about what they are seeing, how behaviour could or should be understood and so forth. As we will see, the sociological perspective is made-up of a number of quite different sub-perspectives. However, it is possible - and at this stage of your course desirable, to identify a number of common ideas which most, if not all, sociologists believe. We can note these as follows:

a. Human beings are social animals. That is, we need to co-operate with others in some way to produce the social world in which we live.

b. Human social behaviour is learned, not instinctive. In this respect, the argument is that we have to learn, from the moment we are born, how to be not just a human being but also a recognisable member of the society into which we happen to have been born.

c. To understand human social behaviour we have to focus our attention on the groups to which people belong. These groups are many and varied, as we will see in a moment, but the largest group to which people belong is a **society**.

d. Sociology is a perspective that looks at the totality of relationships in an individual's life. In this respect, sociologists do not restrict their studies to a single dimension of an individual's life (economics, politics, history, geography, psychology and so forth). Although each of these is significant and interesting, to varying degrees, it is only by looking at how these relationships affect each other that we can arrive at a complete picture of human social behaviour.

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3. This final idea leads us briefly to consider other, possibly complimentary, social sciences. You should note that sociologists do not reject out of hand the contributions of writers in areas such as economics, politics and psychology. However, the existence of sociology as an academic discipline is based on a recognition that human beings are not one-dimensional beings but rather **multi-dimensional beings**.

For example, in our society people work (economic dimension), have the opportunity to vote in elections (political dimension), live in different areas of the country (geographic dimension) and so forth. What interests sociologists, for example, might be the relationship between these three dimensions (for example, how does the area in which a person lives affect the type of work they do and how does the type of work they do affect how they vote in elections?).

If the sociological perspective differs from that provided by other social sciences, it is evident that it also differs from a final perspective we have to consider, namely that of Naturalistic or Commonsense explanations of the social world. The basic ideas I have just noted invariably put sociologists in opposition to commonsensical interpretations of human behaviour. Therefore, by investigating some examples of commonsense ideas about the social world it will allow us to:

- a. Demonstrate more effectively the idea of a sociological perspective.
- b. Show how Sociology provides a greater understanding of human behaviour.

D. Sociology and Commonsense.

1. Commonsense ideas and explanations represent a form of social perspective since they claim to represent the things that “everyone knows” about the social world and / or human behaviour. These ideas, whatever they may be, are not necessarily incorrect, but they do tend to have one characteristic that sets them apart from sociological forms of knowledge, namely that commonsense ideas are simply assumed to be true.

Sociological knowledge, however, has greater validity than most forms of commonsense knowledge because it has been tested through some form of observation. In simple terms, sociologists try to base their statements about human behaviour on evidence rather than simple assumption.

2. There are two particular points to note when you consider the following ideas:

- a. Sociological knowledge is frequently at odds with “what everyone knows”, mainly because it is the product of theory development and testing.
- b. Sociological knowledge is not simply the “statement of the obvious” using lots of long, complicated, words whose main purpose is to obscure the fact that all sociologists are really doing is making simple, self-evident, statements.

3. We can illustrate some differences between commonsense and sociological perspectives by examining a number of commonsense statements about various forms of human behaviour. This short test should give you an insight into the difference between knowledge that is produced sociologically and knowledge that, however plausible, obvious or self-evident it may appear, doesn't necessarily give us a true picture of the social world.

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Read the following statements and judge whether they are true or false....

1. Men and Women.

True False

a. A woman walking alone at night is in greater danger of sexual assault or rape by a stranger than a woman in a familiar place with a man she knows.

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b. Men are naturally more aggressive than women.

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c. "Falling in love" is a natural human emotion. Therefore, romantic love has existed in all societies at all times.

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d. By teaching children about sexual relationships, the education system encourages young people to experiment sexually, leading to an increase in teenage pregnancies.

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e. Making contraceptives available to teenagers through school clinics will encourage them to be more sexually active because they will not have to worry about unwanted pregnancy.

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2. Family Life.

a. In Britain 100 years ago the family was less likely to break-up through divorce and single parent families were very rare.

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b. The high divorce rate in our society indicates that marriage as an institution is under threat in our society.

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c. Single parent families are mainly created by young mothers who choose not to live with / marry the father of their child.

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3. Work and Welfare.

a. Britain is more prone to strikes than any other similar industrial country.

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b. In countries that have a Welfare State, the poor become dependent upon government handouts and lose the will to work.

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4. Crime.

a. Armed robbery is more dangerous to the victim than unarmed robbery.

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b. The deliberate killing of one human being by another human being has always been seen by society to be wrong.

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c. A criminal is someone who has broken the law.

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Answers

1. Men and Women.

a. The Women's Safety Survey (1985) showed that:

50% of sexual assaults and 25% of rapes involved strangers.

Most rapists are known to the victim. The most likely rapists include a casual acquaintance, boss / supervisor, friend, workmate, family member or neighbour.

The most common places for rape or assault are, in order of frequency:

The victim's home.

A street or alleyway.

The assailant's home.

b. All humans beings have the capacity to be aggressive. We need this ability in order to motivate ourselves. However, when talking about male and female aggression what we are talking about is the socially-inappropriate use of aggression, rather than aggression itself. While it is true that men (and young men in particular) tend to use violence as a means of problem-solving more readily in our society, this is a result of cultural factors and expectations.

In basic terms, men have more freedom than women in our society (their behaviour is less tightly controlled by others) and aggressive behaviour, up to a point, is more socially-acceptable or encouraged in men than women.

However, the fact that not all men are overly aggressive and that many women have shown themselves capable of extreme forms of violence demonstrates that a tendency to socially-inappropriate aggression is not something that people are born with.

c. Although sexual attraction may be universal (that is, present in all human societies), this is not the same as "love". In many societies, for example, people do not marry for love. Hindu's, for example, practice a system of arranged marriages where the marriage partners may know little or nothing about each other prior to their marriage. Some religious sects (the Unification Church, for example) arrange marriages for their members simply by telling the prospective partners who they will marry.

In addition, in our society the idea of "romantic love" is relatively recent. In the past people married for economic reasons (to protect their wealth and power or to create families that could work together on the land).

d. Government studies in Holland and Britain show the opposite to be true. Holland has the lowest rate of teenage pregnancies in Europe, whilst offering school children the most sex education. In Britain, the reverse is true.

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One of the reasons for this might be that in Britain there is a tendency to see children as “innocent until corrupted by adults”. That is, the idea that children are blissfully ignorant of sex until adults tell them about it, thereby exiting their curiosity and encouraging them to experiment.

e. Moore and Caldwell, in a review of the relevant studies, argue that, if anything, this practice reduced the level of teenage sexual activity and significantly reduced the level of teenage pregnancy. They argue that where teenagers are better informed about sex they are less inclined to either indulge in sexual activity out of curiosity / ignorance or are more willing to limit their sexual behaviour.

2. Family Life.

a. Anderson (“How Much Has The Family Changed?”) argues that compared with now families in Britain 100 years ago:

Did not break-up through divorce, mainly because it was not possible to legally gain a divorce unless you were male, very rich and very influential.

According to the 1851 Census, 18% of households were headed by a single parent (mainly through things like the death of a partner, separation and so forth) compared with 9% in 1981.

b. Joseph (“Sociology For Everyone”) argues that:

90% of people who divorce remarry, which suggests that marriage itself is not unpopular. Rather, people have different expectations of what marriage involves.

In the past, divorce was not possible for the majority of the population. People in unhappy marriages simply separated from each other. Since they could not legally remarry, this distorted the figures for marriage in the past.

c. Divorce and the death of a partner are the main causes of single parent families in Britain. In addition, approximately 10% of all single parent families are headed by a man.

3. Work and Welfare.

a. Government statistics show two things:

Working days lost to industrial disputes fluctuate from year to year (if an industry employing many thousands of workers is involved in a strike, this inflates the overall figure for a society).

In 1986, for example, the UK (90 days lost to industrial disputes per 1000 employees) lost fewer days to strikes than:

Germany (700 days lost per 1000 employees).

Canada (690).

Italy (390).

Australia (240).

Sweden (170).

USA (126).

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b. Duncan (“Years of Poverty, Years of Plenty”) has shown that the majority of people classed as poor at any given time will not always be poor. Research by both the British and American governments has shown that poverty is something that tends to affect people at different times in their life-cycle. For example, people can be plunged into poverty by the death of the main breadwinner, or through the birth of children. As their lives change, people can move out of poverty. It is generally untrue that the majority of the poor are poor through choice.

In addition, the majority of the unemployed do not work because:

They are temporarily unemployed between jobs.
They are unable to work through disability or age.
There are no jobs for them in the economy.

4. Crime.

a. Thio (“Sociology”) notes that an unarmed robber is more likely to hurt the victim because the victim is more likely to resist during the course of the robbery.

b. Numerous examples to the contrary exist:

In war time, deliberate killing is encouraged, not condemned (in fact, a soldier will be condemned if they do not carry-out deliberate acts of killing).

In many countries Capital Punishment is routinely carried-out by the State.

In Britain in the past, the killing of a peasant by a member of the aristocracy could be considered regrettable, but not a matter for punishment.

c. The term “criminal” actually refers to someone who has been identified (or labelled) as such. It is a social category that refers to people who have been convicted of a criminal offence.

It is probable that, in Britain, everyone has, at some point in their lives broken the law. However, the vast majority of these “law breakers” are not charged or convicted and so neither they nor society considers them to be criminals.

Additionally, an unknown number of people are falsely convicted for crimes they did not commit.

E. Conclusion.

1. The main point of the little test you have just done is not to ridicule commonsense explanations. Rather it is to demonstrate that:

a. The purpose of sociology is to add to the sum total of human knowledge about our behaviour.

b. Knowledge that is produced through testing and examination helps us to explain more than knowledge that is simply based on faith, assertion or opinion.

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c. Knowledge that “everyone knows” is not by definition false. The objective of all social science is to produce valid knowledge - knowledge that paints an accurate picture of human behaviour, meanings and motives (thereby adding to the sum total of what “everyone knows” to be true in a society).

2. In the next section we can start to develop the idea of a sociological perspective in more depth, concentrating on two main ideas:

a. Firstly, the way in which sociologists have developed an understanding of the way human societies are organised. This will involve a discussion of the concept of “society”, as well as concepts such as culture and socialisation (how we learn how to be members of a culture and society).

b. Secondly, an initial outline of the way the general sociological perspective can be further refined by looking at differences of perspective and interpretation within Sociology.

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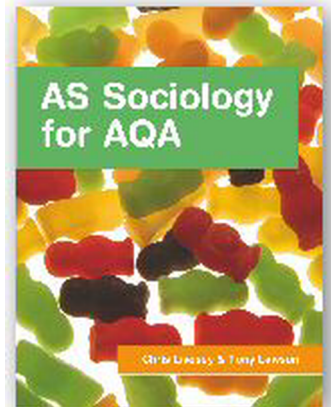
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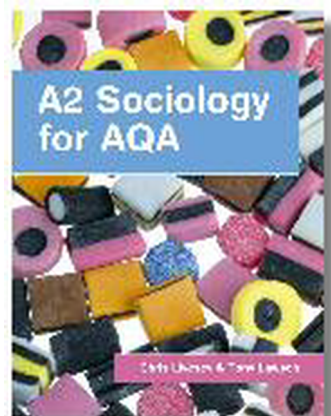
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