Sociology transition activity 2026

This work is designed to prepare you for studying A-level Sociology. As we don't offer Sociology at GCSE at The Grey Coat Hospital so it is important that you arrive in September with a basic knowledge of sociological concepts and perspectives. I don't mind if you complete the work as a word document, in writing or as an amended version of this document.

What is Sociology?

Task 1

- Read an 'sociology themes and perspectives' by Michael Haralambos and Martin Holbourn 'introduction to sociology' by Anthony Giddens and Philip Sutton'
- This will give you a sense of the sort of reading you will be doing for the next 2 years.

Task 2

- Answer the 6 questions after the chapters

aknifton@gch.org.uk

Haralambos and Holborn chapter 1:

Introduction

Sociology is one of a number of social sciences (including economics, psychology and human geography) that attempt to explain and understand the behaviour of human beings in society. Unlike some social sciences (such as economics), it does not confine itself to one particular area of social life. Indeed, sociologists have studied a vast and diverse range of topics including shopping, popular music, sexuality, the body, ethnic conflict, poverty, sport, science, health, drug use, the law, war, religion, migration, death, colonialism, housework, mobile phones, humour and murder. It is hard to think of any significant area of social life that has never been the subject of a sociological study. Because the subjects it examines are so numerous and so varied, sociology cannot be defined simply in terms of the subjects it studies. It is more useful to define sociology in terms of its approach or approaches to explaining social life rather than its subject matter.

Compared to psychology, sociology is much less concerned with the individual, and much more concerned with human groups. The size of the groups studied in sociology can vary considerably, ranging from studies of delinquent gangs or school classes, to studies of institutions (such as the education system or the family), studies of whole societies (for example, British society or the society of the Sioux Indians of South Dakota), and even the study of the globe as a whole. However, whatever the scale and scope of a sociological study, to be sociological it must look beyond the individual to understand and explain human behaviour. Rather than explaining human behaviour simply in terms of individual mental states, sociology sees patterns of behaviour as related to the wider social context in which people live. This point can be illustrated through a number of examples, all of which explain apparently individual behaviour (depression, suicide and murder) in sociological ways.

1. In the 1970s and 1980s, researchers studied the causes of depression among a sample of women in London (Brown and Harris 1978, 1989). The study found that the chances of women becoming depressed could not be explained simply in terms of a tendency towards psychological problems. Instead, depression was triggered by stressful long- or short-term life events such as loss of a job, being evicted from your home or being in poverty. The research also found that the chances of suffering from a stressful life event were directly related to income and class background. The lower your income and social class, the greater your chances of being made redundant, losing your home and so on. Working-class women also had less supportive social networks to help them cope with the stresses and strains of life than middle-class women. The researchers therefore concluded that a person's mental state was substantially influenced by their economic and class position in society. (See pp. 34-31 for further details of this study and other sociological studies of mental illness.)

2. In 1897, Emile Durkheim published a study of suicide that showed that rates of suicide varied considerably between countries and between social groups. For example, England consistently had a higher suicide rate than France, and married people had lower suicide rates than the unmarried. Durkheim concluded that suicide, an apparently individual act, was actually shaped by social

factors. One factor which Durkheim thought was important was the extent to which individuals were involved in and integrated into social groups. For example, married people with children who belonged to a close-knit religious community were much less likely to commit suicide than childless single people who were not involved in a religious community (see pp. 887-97 for a discussion of Durkheim and other sociological theories of suicide).

3. Another act that has often been seen as a highly individual one is murder or homicide. Yet murder too can be seen as an act that is strongly influenced by social factors. Your chances of being murdered or of becoming a murderer vary considerably depending on the social groups to which you belong and the society in which you live. According to the latest figures available in 2011 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011), the homicide rate (homicides per 100,000 of the population) was 1.2 in England and Wales, 4.8 in the USA, 3.1 in South Africa, 56.9 in the Côte d'Ivoire, 69.2 in El Salvador and 91.6 in Honduras. In contrast, Japan had a homicide rate of just 0.4, Iceland had a rate of 0.1, and there were no homicides at all in Palau and Monaco. Homicide rates by country are shown in Figure A.1.

Such huge differences cannot be explained in terms of individual characteristics or motivations of individual offenders. Instead they can be seen as resulting from differences between the societies. There are various possible differences that could account for variations in the homicide rate, but James Gilligan (2001) put forward an interesting and plausible theory. Gilligan believes that differences in homicide rates are related to the amount of inequality in society. According to Gilligan, high levels of inequality lead to shame among those who are doing poorly, and shame is a breeding ground for violence and murder. His view was supported by the UNODC report that concluded that:

Higher levels of homicide are associated with low human and economic development. The largest share of homicides occur in countries with low levels of human development, and countries with high levels of income inequality are afflicted by homicide rates almost four times higher than more equal societies. UNODC, 2011, p.10

No reliable figures have been produced on the murder rate in Syria during the civil war between the government and opposition forces that began in 2011. However, there is no doubt it became one of the most dangerous places on earth to live. Again, a sociologist would not explain this only in terms of the motivations of individual killers, but would also look at factors such as the causes of conflict in Syria, and even the global context, particularly the 'Arab Spring', which involved rebellions against authoritarian governments in several Arab states from December 2010.

Another reason why psychological explanations alone cannot explain homicide is that very few offences can be attributed to the mental illness of the offender. For example, in 2002/3 only 4 of 1,007 homicides in England and Wales were found to involve a suspect who was mentally disturbed (Cotton, 2004). Evidence from Britain suggests that men are much more likely to turn into killers than women; that most murderers are overwhelmingly from lower social classes; that some minority ethnic groups are more likely to be victims of homicide than others; and that very few murderers are elderly (Brookman, 2005).

Culture, inequality and society

In sociology, then, it is essential to understand the social context in which human behaviour takes place. At the most basic level, this involves understanding the culture of the society in which social action occurs. To all intents and purposes, a newborn human baby is helpless. Not only is it physically dependent on older members of the species, but it also lacks the behaviour patterns necessary for living in human society. It relies primarily on certain biological drives, such as hunger, and on the charity of its elders to satisfy those drives. The infant has a lot to learn. In order to survive, it must learn the skills, knowledge and accepted ways of behaving of the society into which it is born. It must learn a way of life; in sociological terminology, it must learn the culture of its society.

Ralph Linton (1945) stated that 'The culture of a society is the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation.' In Clyde Kluckhohn's elegant phrase (1951), culture is a 'design for living' held by members of a particular society.

Culture and socialisation: norms, subcultures and identity

To a large degree, culture determines how members of society think and feel: it directs their actions and defines their outlook on life. Culture defines accepted ways of behaving for members of a particular society. Such definitions vary from society to society. This can lead to considerable misunderstanding between members of different societies, as the following example provided by Otto Klineberg (1971) shows:

Among the Sioux Indians of South Dakota, it is regarded as incorrect to answer a question in the presence of others who do not know the answer. Such behaviour would be regarded as boastful and arrogant, and, since it reveals the ignorance of others, it would be interpreted as an attempt to undermine their confidence and shame them. In addition, the Sioux regard it as wrong to answer a question unless they are absolutely sure of the correct answer. Faced with a classroom of Sioux children, a white American teacher who is unaware of their culture might easily interpret their behaviour as a reflection of ignorance, stupidity or hostility.

The process by which individuals learn the culture of their society is known as socialisation. Primary socialisation, probably the most important aspect of the socialisation process, takes place during infancy, usually within the family (see Chapter 8 for a discussion of the family). By responding to the approval and disapproval of its parents and copying their example, the child learns the language and many of the basic behaviour patterns of its society.

In Western society, other important agencies of socialisation include the educational system (see Chapter 10), religion (see Chapter 7), the mass media (discussed in Chapter 12), the occupational group, and the peer group (a group whose members share similar circumstances and are often of a similar age). Within its peer group, the young child, by interacting with others and playing childhood games, learns to conform to the accepted ways of a social group and to appreciate the fact that social life is based on rules.

Socialisation is not, however, confined to childhood. It is a lifelong process that continues as people change jobs or roles and as society itself changes.

Socialisation teaches members of society the norms, or informal rules, which govern behaviour. Norms specify the type of behaviour that is considered appropriate in particular situations. For example, norms of dress give guidelines on what to wear on particular occasions. The same clothes would not be considered appropriate at a graduation ceremony, at a party, on a building site or on the beach. Norms vary from society to society. The loincloths worn by the Bushmen of the Kalahari (Thomas, 1969) would not be considered appropriate dress (at least in most contexts) in Britain or in other Western European countries.

As well as varying from society to society, culture and norms also change over time. A change in society such as the introduction of new technology can lead to new ways of behaving. The growth of text messaging, for example, has led to a whole new culture with its own language and its own norms (or informal rules) about appropriate behaviour.

Rich Ling (1997) used interviews to study mobile phone use among Norwegian teenagers. He found that they had developed their own norms about the use of phones. For example, the teenagers frowned upon their peers who talked into their mobile phones loudly and ostentatiously in public places as if they were making important business calls. The teenagers regarded such behaviour as 'harry' (tacky) and 'soss' (vulgar). Most of the teenagers conformed to this norm and used their phones discreetly.

Although it is possible for the sake of simplicity to treat each society as having a particular and distinct culture, in reality this is unlikely to be the case. First, apart from a handful of relatively isolated tribal societies (see below), most societies now contain a mix of people from different cultural backgrounds. Migration and other international movements of people (see pp. 166–74) have led to the creation of ethnically and culturally pluralistic societies. Second, all societies have divisions between subcultures.

A subculture can be defined as a social group within society that has a lifestyle that is distinctive from the culture of the society as a whole. For example, sociologists have studied a variety of youth cultures such as goths, mothers and punks. Members of each of these groups have distinctive ways of dressing and they tend to listen to particular types of music. However, they are not completely different from other members of society; they share much in common with their peers who do not belong to the subculture. Thus goths might wear distinctive black clothing and make-up, and listen to Bauhaus, The Cure, Marilyn Manson and Slipknot, but in many other ways they live conventional lives. Individuals can choose whether to belong to particular youth cultures, but they have less choice about some of the social groups to which they belong. Major social divisions such as those between men and women, ethnic groups and social classes exist independently of the choices made by individuals, and these too lead to subcultural differences.

Culture and subcultures are an important source of social identity. Social identity has been defined as ‘our understanding of who we are, and who other people are’ (Jenkins, 1996). People tend to associate themselves or identify with those who are similar to themselves, and to feel more distant from those who are dissimilar.

At a basic level, people tend to associate themselves with those from the same society. So, for example, people from Britain, France, Pakistan or Nigeria may see themselves as British, French, Pakistani or Nigerian, even if they are living outside their country of origin. They may mix with people from their society, support sports teams from their country of origin and so on. So, for example, some British people who have settled in Spain have relatively few social contacts with the local Spanish population, choosing instead to mix mainly with other Britons. They see themselves as British rather than Spanish, read English language newspapers, and make little effort to integrate into the local population or adopt Spanish culture.

Subcultures can also be an important source of social identity. Thus goths see themselves as a distinctive group, and they may tend to associate more with other goths than with peers who are part of different youth subcultures.

Inequality and social divisions

As well as specific youth subcultures, there are a number of important social divisions within any society that tend to give rise to subcultural differences in lifestyle. These social divisions are also important as sources of inequality and differences in identity. (Social divisions are seen as particularly important in conflict theories in sociology – see pp. 115–13 for details.)

Issues of inequality concern differences in access to scarce resources. When there are insufficient resources to satisfy everybody, then humans often compete to obtain access to those resources. For example, if there is insufficient food for everybody to have the diet they would like, or insufficient housing to meet everybody's aspirations, then inequality can develop between those who are more successful and those who are less successful in gaining the desired resources. To simplify, there are two main types of inequality in Western capitalist societies:

1. Inequality of power concerns the ability of a person or group to get what they wish regardless of the wishes of others (see Chapter 9). For example, the president of the United States has much more power than an ordinary citizen of the country. The president can declare war and direct the most powerful armed forces in the world, giving him/her enormous power. On a more mundane level, one partner in a marriage may get their own way more often than the other partner, giving them greater power than their spouse.

2. Material inequality concerns access to wealth and income. Those individuals, institutions or countries with great wealth have an advantage over those that are poor. They control more resources, they have more choices, and they have greater power. Thus, for example, Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft and one of the wealthiest men in the world, is greatly advantaged compared to an impoverished labourer in a third world country. Chapter 1 (Stratification, class and inequality) is largely concerned with the inequality between social classes within societies, and Chapter 15 (Sociological theory) looks at the inequality between societies.

Inequality gives rise to social divisions between groups in society. Geoff Payne (2006) defines social divisions as 'those substantial differences between people that run throughout our society'. Any social division involves at least two groups or categories. As Payne comments, 'one category is better positioned than the other and has a better share of resources because it has greater power over the way our society is organised'. Payne goes on to say, 'Membership of a category is closely associated with a social identity that arises from a sense of being similar to other members and different from other categories'. It could be added that just as each group develops a distinctive identity, it also tends to develop a distinctive lifestyle and subculture.

A large number of social divisions can be distinguished within any society, but there are some social divisions that are seen as particularly important by sociologists. Each of these will now briefly be discussed.

1. Social class divisions result from economic or material inequality between social groups. In modern Western societies many sociologists have distinguished between social classes that result from economic inequality. Sociologists have put forward a variety of social class categories, but many have distinguished between an upper class, a middle class and a working class. At the risk of oversimplification, the upper class owe their position to the ownership of wealth, the middle class to qualifications and the possession of valuable work jobs, while the working class do manual work which requires fewer formal qualifications and tends to be low-paid. This social division can produce cultural differences in many areas of social life, including leisure activities (for example, visiting the opera or playing bingo), accent, clothing and so on. Chapter 1 explores the significance of social class and similar types of social division in detail. Social class differences are seen as particularly important in Marxist theories of society (see pp. 11–13).

2. Gender divisions are concerned with the differences and inequalities between men and women in society. Although male and female roles have become less sharply differentiated in some societies than they were in the past, there are still a very important source of inequality and difference. For example, as Chapter 2 shows, in contemporary Britain men still earn more than women, and women are much less likely than men to occupy elite positions in society. Furthermore, there are still considerable differences in the behaviour and roles associated with masculinity and femininity. In Britain, for example, women still do the vast majority of the caring work for children and the elderly, while men still dominate in areas such as politics and business. Gender divisions are central to feminist theories of society (see p. 13).

3. Ethnic divisions are directly related to cultural differences between groups that believe they have a common origin (see pp. 174-85 for a detailed definition of ethnicity). Different ethnic groups might have different patterns of marriage and family life, wear distinctive clothes, have their own language and their own religion, and eat distinctive food. However, ethnicity is not just linked to culture; there is also likely to be inequality between different ethnic groups. In the USA, for example, black Americans have much lower average living standards than the white majority. In Britain, some minority ethnic groups (such as Chinese and Indians) have been more successful than other groups (such as Bangladeshis) in achieving a high living standard.

4. All societies also have divisions between age groups. In traditional, pre-industrial societies such as the Nuer of American Pomo Indians (Aginsky, 1944), elders tended to have higher status and more power than younger members of the group. Among Pomo Indians of elderly were regarded as wise, and younger industrial societies, both the elderly and children tend to have low status and, particularly in the case of children, little power. Chapter 8 examines age divisions in the context of family life.

Class, gender, ethnicity and age are probably the most important social divisions studied by sociologists. Other significant divisions include religious differences (see Chapter 7), divisions between the disabled and the able-bodied (see pp. 338-9) and differences in sexuality (between heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual). These and other social divisions comprise a central theme within this book and within sociology as a whole.

Having set out some of the basic concepts and issues within sociology, we will now go on to briefly consider the way in which human societies have developed, before looking at the theories which sociologists have used to explain the social divisions and social changes which are central to sociology theory and research.

The development of human societies

Some sociologists believe that human societies have passed through certain broad phases of development. Many sociologists distinguish between premodern and modern societies. The distinction is a very general one and can neglect differences between the societies of each type. Nevertheless, the distinction is both influential and useful. It is useful because it has allowed sociologists to identify some of the key changes that have taken place in human history. They have tended to be able to discuss the significance of these changes. Some sociologists, though by no means all, argue that a new type of society, the postmodern society, has recently developed or is developing. In this section, we will briefly introduce some of the main ideas associated with the distinctions between premodern, modern and postmodern societies. These concepts have a very important role in the development of sociological thinking and will be developed in detail throughout the book.

Premodern societies

Premodern societies took a number of forms. Anthony Giddens distinguishes between three main types: hunting and gathering societies, pastoral and agrarian societies, and non-industrial civilisations (Giddens, 2009).

Hunting and gathering societies

The earliest human societies survived by gathering fruit, nuts and vegetables and by hunting or trapping animals for food. They usually consisted of small tribal groups often numbering fewer than 50 people. Such societies tended to have few possessions and little material wealth. What possessions they did have were shared. According to Giddens, they had relatively little inequality, although elder members of the tribe may have had more status and influence than younger ones. Hunting and gathering societies have largely disappeared, but Giddens calculates that some 250,000 people (just 0.001 per cent of the world's population) still survive largely through hunting and gathering. Hunters and gatherers still exist in regions of Africa, New Guinea and Brazil, but few have remained untouched by the spread of Western culture.

Pastoral and agrarian societies

According to Giddens, these first emerged some 20,000 years ago. Pastoral societies may hunt and gather but they also keep and herd animals (for example, cattle, camels or horses). Animal herds provide supplies of milk and meat and the animals may also be used as a means of transport. Unlike hunting and gathering societies, pastoral societies make it possible for individual to accumulate wealth in the form of their animals. They therefore tend to have more inequality than hunting and gathering bands. They also tend to be nomadic, since they have to move around to find pasture for their animals. Because of this they are likely to come into contact with other groups. The individual societies have tended to be larger than hunting and gathering bands and in all may number as many as 250,000. There are still some pastoral societies in parts of the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

Agrarian societies rely largely upon the cultivation of crops to feed themselves. Like the herding of animals, this provides a more reliable and predictable source of food than hunting and gathering and it can therefore support much larger populations. Such societies are not likely to be nomadic. Food such as grain is often stored and it is possible for individuals to accumulate substantial personal wealth. Agrarian societies can therefore have considerable inequality.

Agriculture remains the main way of earning a living in many parts of the world today. Giddens notes figures from 2007 that showed that around 90 per cent of the population of Rwanda, 82 per cent of the population of Uganda, and 80 per cent of the Ethiopian population worked in agriculture. However, the cultures of contemporary agrarian societies have not remained entirely traditional. Most have been influenced by the culture of modern, industrial societies.

Non-industrial civilisations

These types of society first developed around 6000 BC. According to Giddens, they were based on the development of cities, showed very pronounced inequalities of wealth and power, and were associated with the rule of kings and emperors. Compared to the hunting and gathering and early pastoral and agrarian societies, they were more developed in terms of arts and science and had more institutionalised and centralised systems of government. Non-industrial civilisations also invented writing.

Some of these civilisations expanded across wide areas and developed their own empires. Examples of non-industrial civilisations include the Aztecs, the Maya and the Incas in Central and South America; Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire in Europe; Ancient Egypt in Africa; and Indian and Chinese civilisations in Asia. Most of them had substantial armed forces, and some, such as the Romans, managed major military conquests. None of these civilisations survived indefinitely, and none exists today. Despite their importance, none has had as big an impact on the development of human society as modern industrial societies. These first emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Modern industrial societies

According to Lee and Newby (1983), in the early 19th century 'there was widespread agreement among observers and commentators at this time that Northern Europe and North America were passing through the most profound transformation of society in the history of mankind'.

Lee and Newby identify four main transformations that took place:

1. Industrialism. The industrial revolution, which started in the late 18th century, transformed Britain, and later other societies, from economies based largely on agriculture to economies based largely on manufacturing. New technology led to massive increases in productivity, first in the cotton industry and then in other industries. An increasingly specialised division of labour developed - that is, people had more specialised jobs. Social life was no longer governed by the rhythms of the seasons and night and day; instead people's lives were based on the clock. Instead of working when the requirements of agriculture demanded, people started working long shifts at fixed periods (often 12 hours) in the new factories.

2. Capitalism. Closely connected to the development of industrialism was the development of capitalism. Capitalism involves wage labour and businesses run for the purpose of making a profit. Before the advent of capitalism, many peasants worked for themselves, living off the produce they could get from their own land. Increasingly, peasants lost their land and had to rely upon earnings as wage-earners in agriculture, labourers or as workers in the developing factories. Capitalist businesses were developed with the aim of making a profit year after year. New classes emerged - principally a class of entrepreneurs who made their living by setting up and running capitalist businesses, and a working class of wage labourers employed in the entrepreneurs' factories.

3. Urbanism. A massive movement from rural to urban areas accompanied the development of industry. In Britain in 1750, before the industrial revolution, only two cities had populations of over 50,000 (London and Edinburgh). By 1851, 29 British cities had a population of more than 50,000. The population no longer needed to be thinly spread across agricultural land, and was increasingly concentrated in the centres of capitalist industry. Urbanism – the growth of towns and cities – brought with it numerous social problems such as crime, riots, and health problems caused by overcrowding and lack of sanitation. Many commentators suggest that the new towns and cities also destroyed the traditional sense of community associated with rural villages. They believe that urbanism weakened some of the traditional mechanisms of social control (such as gossip), which operated in close-knit communities, but which became ineffective in the anonymity of urban life.

4. Liberal democracy. Before the changes of the 18th and 19th centuries, the right of kings and queens to rule was nearly unquestioned (an exception being the English Civil War of the 17th century). The monarch was expected as God's representative on earth, and their authority was not therefore open to question. However, in the French Revolution of 1789 the French monarchy was overthrown. Similarly, the American War of Independence (1775-83) overthrew British monarchical rule in America. In both cases there was a new emphasis on citizenship rights of individuals - individuals were now to have a say in how their countries were run rather than accepting what they were told by monarchs. This opened the way for the development of political parties and new perspectives on society. How society was to be run became more a matter for debate than it had ever been before.

Modernity

Taken together, the changes described above are often seen as characterising modern societies, or as constituting an era of **modernity**. Modernity involves the following concepts: a belief in the possibility of human progress; rational planning to achieve objectives; a belief in the superiority of rational thought over emotion; faith in the ability of technology and science to solve human problems; a belief in the ability and rights of humans to shape their own lives; and a reliance upon manufacturing industry to improve living standards.

Sociology developed alongside modernity and, not surprisingly, it has tended to be based upon similar foundations. Thus early sociological theories tended to believe that societies could and would progress, that scientific principles could be used to understand society, and that rational thought could be employed to ensure that society was organised to meet human needs. For most of its history, sociological thinking has been dominated by such approaches. However, some thinkers, including some sociologists, believe that modernity is being, or has been, replaced by an era of postmodernity.

Postmodernity

Some sociologists believe that in recent years, fundamental changes have taken place in Western societies. These changes have led to, or are in the process of leading to, a major break with the old concept of modernity. They suggest that people have begun to lose their faith in the ability of science and technology to solve human problems. People have become aware, for example, of the damaging effects of pollution, the dangers of nuclear war and the risks of genetic engineering. They have become more sceptical about the benefits of rational planning. For example, many people doubt that large, national, bureaucratic organisations (such as big companies or the British National Health Service) can meet human needs. They have lost faith in political beliefs and grand theories that claim to be able to improve society.

Furthermore, few people now believe that communism can lead to a perfect society. The modern belief in progress has also been shaken by a growing awareness that many of the world's problems remain unresolved. Millions of people still live in poverty, war and ethnic conflict continue, and environmental problems remain. According to some postmodernists, these changes are linked to changes in the economy. Industrial society has been superseded by post-industrial society. Relatively few people in Western societies now work in manufacturing industry. More and more are employed in services and particularly in jobs concerned with communications and information technology. Computer technology has meant that fewer people are needed to work in manufacturing, and communications have become very much faster.

Furthermore, in affluent Western countries people are spending a higher proportion of their income on leisure. When they purchase products it is often as much for the image that they represent as the quality and usefulness of the product. Thus people will pay high prices for clothes with designer labels. The media have also become increasingly important in people's lives and in the economy.

Although some of these changes have undoubtedly taken place, some sociologists do not believe that the changes are sufficiently large and significant to justify the claim that there has been a shift from modern to postmodern society. Others believe not just that societies have changed, but also that new theories of society are necessary. Their views will be examined after we have considered some of the longer-established sociological theories.

Theories of society

In this section, we will examine some of the most influential theories of society. A theory is a set of ideas that claim to explain how something works. A sociological theory is therefore a set of ideas that claims to explain how society or aspects of society work. Theories described in this section represent only a selection from the range of modern sociological theories. They have been simplified and condensed to provide a basic introduction. Since they are applied to various topics throughout the text, an initial awareness of them is essential. Criticism of the theories has been omitted from this chapter for the sake of simplicity, but it will be dealt with throughout the text and in detail in Chapter 15.

There are many variations on the basic theories examined in this chapter. Again, for simplicity, most of these variations will not be mentioned at this stage, but will be introduced when they are relevant to particular topics.

Functionalism

Functionalism first emerged in 19th-century Europe. The French sociologist, Emile Durkheim was the most influential of the early functionalists. American sociologists such as Talcott Parsons developed the theory in the 20th century, and it became the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology during the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in the USA. From the mid-1960s onwards its popularity steadily declined, due partly to damaging criticism, partly to competing perspectives which appeared to provide superior explanations, and partly to changes in fashion.

The key points of the functionalist perspective may be summarised in terms of a biological analogy. If biologists wanted to know how an organism such as the human body worked, they might begin by examining the various parts such as the brain, lungs, heart and liver. However, if they simply analysed the parts in isolation from each other, they would be unable to explain how life was maintained. To do this, they would have to examine the parts in relation to each other, since they work together to maintain the organism. Therefore the brain analyse the relationships between the heart, lungs, brain and so on to understand how they operate and to appreciate their importance. In other words, any part of the organism must be seen in terms of the organism as a whole.

Functionalism adopts a similar perspective. The various parts of society are seen to be interrelated and taken together, they form a complete system. To understand any part of society, such as the family or religion, the part must be seen in relation to society as a whole. Thus where a biologist will examine a part of the body, such as the heart, in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the human organism, the functionalist will examine a part of society, such as the family in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of the social system.

Structure

Functionalism begins with the observation that behaviour in society is structured. This means that relationships between members of society are organised in terms of rules that stipulate how people are expected to behave. Rules can be formal (for example, laws) or informal. Informal rules are known as norms. Norms are specific guides to action, which tell you, for example, how you are expected to dress and behave at a funeral or at a party. Social relationships are patterned and recurrent because of the existence of rules.

Values

Values provide general guidelines for behaviour. They provide the overall beliefs about what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable in a society. For example, in Western societies, values such as honesty, privacy, ambition and individual achievement are important. Values are translated into more specific directives in terms of norms.

The value of privacy produces a range of norms, such as those that stipulate that you should knock before entering a room and that you should ask people's permission before photographing them.

Norms are associated with particular roles in society. Roles are formal or informal social positions that carry expectations of certain types of behaviour. Examples of roles include lecturer, student, friend, brother, doctor, cleaner and so on. Thus lecturers and students are expected to behave in different ways because there are norms governing the behaviour within these different roles.

The structure of society can be seen as the sum total of normative behaviour – the sum total of social relationships, which are governed by norms. The main parts of society, its institutions – such as the family, the economy, and the educational and political systems – are major aspects of the social structure. Thus an institution can be seen as a structure made up of interconnected roles or interrelated norms. For example, the family is made up of the interconnected roles of husband, father, wife, mother, son and daughter. Social relationships within the family are structured in terms of a set of related norms.

Function

Having established the existence of a social structure, functionalist analysis turns to a consideration of how that structure functions. This involves an examination of the relationships between the different parts of the structure and their relationship to society as a whole. This examination reveals the functions of institutions. At its simplest, function means effect. Thus the function of the family is the effect it has on other parts of the social structure and on society as a whole. In practice, the term function is usually used to indicate the contribution an institution makes to the maintenance and survival of the social system. For example, a major function of the family is the socialisation of new members of society. This represents an important contribution to the maintenance of society, since order, stability and cooperation largely depend on learned, shared norms and values.

Functional prerequisites

In determining the functions of various parts of the social structure, functionalists are guided by the following ideas. Societies have certain basic needs or requirements that must be met if they are to survive. These requirements are sometimes known as functional prerequisites. For example, a means of producing food and shelter may be seen as a functional prerequisite, since without food and shelter members of society could not survive. A system for socialising new members of society may also be regarded as a functional prerequisite, since, without culture, social life would not be possible. Having assumed a number of basic requirements for the survival of society, the next step is to look at the parts of the social structure to see how they meet such functional prerequisites. Thus a major function of the economic system is the production of food and shelter. An important function of the family is the socialisation of new members of society.

Value consensus

From a functionalist perspective, society is regarded as a system. A system is an entity made up of interconnected and interrelated parts. From this viewpoint, it follows that each part will in some way affect every other part and the system as a whole. It also follows that, if the system is to survive, its various parts must have some degree of cooperation. Thus a functional prerequisite of society is a minimal degree of integration between the parts.

Many functionalists argue that members of society share this integration largely on value consensus: that is, on agreement about values. Thus if the major values of society are expressed in the various parts of its social structure, those parts will be integrated. For example, it can be argued that the value of materialism integrates many parts of the social structure in Western industrial society.

The economic system produces a large range of goods, and ever-increasing productivity is regarded as an important goal. The educational system is partly concerned with producing the skills and expertise to expand production and increase its efficiency. The family is an important unit of consumption, with its steadily rising demand for consumer durables such as dishwashers, tablet computers and microwaves. The political system is partly concerned with improving material living standards and raising productivity. To the extent that these parts of the social structure are based on the same values, they may be said to be integrated. and sociologist, Karl Marx (1818–83). The following account is a simplified version of Marxist theory. It must also be seen as one interpretation of that theory; Marx's extensive writings have been variously interpreted and, since his death, several schools of Marxism have developed. (See Marx and Engels, 1949, 1950, for extracts from Marx's most important writings.)

Contradiction and conflict

Marxist theory begins with the simple observation that, in order to survive, humans must produce food and material objects. In doing so they enter into social relationships with other people. From the simple hunting band to the complex industrial state, production is a social enterprise. Production also involves a technical component known as the **forces of production**, which includes the technology, raw materials and scientific knowledge employed in the process of production. Each major stage in the development of the forces of production will correspond with a particular form of the social relationships of production. This means that the forces of production in a hunting economy will correspond with a particular set of social relationships.

Taken together, the forces of production and the social relationships of production form the economic basis or **infrastructure** of society. The other aspects of society, known as the **superstructure**, are largely shaped by the infrastructure. Thus the political, legal and educational institutions and the belief and value systems are primarily determined by economic factors. A major change in the infrastructure will therefore produce a corresponding change in the superstructure.

Marx maintained that, with the possible exception of the societies of prehistory, all historical societies contain basic contradictions, which mean that they cannot survive forever in their existing form. These contradictions involve the exploitation of one social group by another: social society, lords exploit their serfs; in capitalist society, employers exploit their employees. This creates a fundamental conflict of interest between social groups, since one gains at the expense of another. This conflict of interest must ultimately be resolved, since a social system containing such contradictions cannot survive unchanged.

We will now examine the points raised in this brief summary of Marxist theory in greater detail. The major contradictions in society are between the forces and relations of production. The forces of production include land, raw materials, tools and machinery, the technical and scientific knowledge used in production, the technical organisation of the production process, and the labour power of the workers. The 'relations of production' are the social relationships that people enter into in order to produce goods. Thus in feudal society they include the relationship between the lord and vassal, and the set of rights, duties and obligations that make up that relationship. In capitalist industrial society they include the relationship between employer and employee and the various rights of the two parties. The relations of production also involve the relationship of social groups to the means and forces of production.

The **means of production** consist of those parts of the forces of production that can be legally owned. They therefore include land, raw materials, machinery, buildings and tools, but not technical knowledge or the organisation of the production process. Under capitalism, labour power is not one of the means of production, since the workers are free to sell their labour. In less societies though, the labour power is one of the means of production, since the workforce is actually owned by the social group in power. In feudal society, land, the lord owns the major means of production, and the serfs the right to use land in return for services or payment to the lord. In Western industrial society, the capitalists own the means of production, and workers work only their labour, which they hire to the employer in return for wages.

Exploitation and oppression

The idea of contradiction between the forces and relations of production may be illustrated in terms of the infrastructure of capitalist industrial society. Marx maintained that only labour produces wealth. Thus wealth in capitalist society is produced by the labour power of the workers. However, the capitalists – the owners of the means of production – appropriate much of this wealth in the form of profits. The wages of the workers are well below the value of the wealth they produce. There is thus a contradiction between the forces of production, in particular the labour power of the workers that produces wealth, and the relations of production that involve the appropriation of much of that wealth by the capitalists.

A related contradiction involves the technical organisation of labour and the nature of ownership. In capitalist society, the forces of production include the collective production of goods by large numbers of workers in factories. Yet the means of production are privately owned, and individuals appropriate the profits. The contradiction between the forces and relations of production lies in the social and collective nature of production and the private and individual nature of ownership.

Marx believed that these and other contradictions would eventually lead to the downfall of the capitalist system. He maintained that, by its very nature, capitalism involves the exploitation and oppression of the worker. He believed that the conflict of interest between capital and labour, which involves one group gaining at the expense of the other, could not be resolved within the framework of a capitalist economy.

Contradiction and change

Marx's history as divided into a number of time periods or epochs, each being characterised by a particular mode of production. Major changes in history are the result of new forces of production. Thus the change from feudal to capitalist society stemmed from the emergence, during the feudal epoch, of the forces of production of industrial society. This resulted in a contradiction between the new forces of production and the old feudal relations of production. Capitalist industrial society required relations of production based on wage labour rather than the traditional ties of lord and vassal. When they reach a certain point in their development, the new forces of production will lead to the creation of a new set of relations of production. Then, a new epoch of history will be born which will sweep away the social relationships of the old order.

However, the final epoch of history, the communist or socialist society that Marx believed would eventually supplant capitalism, will not result from a new force of production. Rather it will develop from a resolution of the contradictions contained within the capitalist system. Collective production will remain, but the relations of production will be transformed. Ownership of the means of production will be collective rather than individual, and members of society will share the wealth that their labour produces. No longer will one social group exploit and oppress another. This will produce an infrastructure without contradiction and conflict. In Marx's view this would mean the end of history, since communist society would no longer contain the contradictions that generate change.

Ideology and false consciousness

In view of the contradictions that beset capitalist societies, it appears difficult to explain their survival. Despite its internal contradictions, capitalism has continued in the West for over 200 years. This continuity can be explained in large part by the nature of the superstructure. In all societies the superstructure is largely shaped by the infrastructure. In particular, the relations of production are reflected and reproduced in the various institutions, values and beliefs that make up the superstructure. Thus the relationships of domination and subordination found in the infrastructure will also be found in social institutions. The dominant social group or ruling class – that is, the group which owns and controls the means of production – will largely monopolise political power, and its position will be supported by laws which are framed to protect and further its interests.

In the same way, beliefs and values will reflect and legitimate the relations of production. Members of the ruling class produce the dominant ideas in society. These ideas justify their power and privilege and conceal from all members of society the basis of exploitation and oppression on which their dominance rests. Thus, under feudalism, honour and loyalty were dominant concepts of the age. Vassals owed loyalty to their lords and were bound by an oath of allegiance that encouraged the acceptance of their status. In terms of the dominant concepts of the age, feudalism appeared as the natural order of things.

Under capitalism, exploitation is disguised by the ideas of equality and freedom. The relationship between capitalist and wage labourer is defined as an equal exchange. The capitalist buys the labour power that the worker offers for hire. The worker is defined as a free agent, since he or she has the freedom to choose his or her employer. In Marxist thought, this equality and freedom are illusions: the employer-employee relationship is not equal. It is an exploitative relationship. Workers are not free, since they are forced to work for the capitalist in order to survive. All they can do is exchange one form of 'wage slavery' for another.

Marx refers to the dominant ideas of each epoch as **ruling-class ideology. Ideology** is a distortion of reality, a false picture of society. It blinds members of society to the contradictions and conflicts of interest that are built into their relationships. As a result they tend to accept their situation as normal and natural, right and proper. In this way **a false consciousness** of reality is produced which helps to maintain the system. However, Marx believed that ruling-class ideology could only slow down the disintegration of the system. The contradictions embedded in the structure of society must eventually find expression. Although highly critical of capitalism, Marx did see it as a stepping stone on the way towards a communist society. Capitalism would help to develop technology that would free people from material need; there would be more than enough food and clothe the population. In these circumstances it would be possible to establish successful communist societies in which the needs of all their members were met. Despite its pessimistic tone, Marxism shares with functionalism the modern belief that human societies will improve, and that rational, scientific thinking can be used to ensure progress.

Feminism

There are several different versions of feminism, but most share a number of features in common. Like Marxists, feminists tend to see society as divided into different social groups. Unlike Marxists, they see the major division as being between men and women rather than between different classes. Like Marxists, they tend to see society as characterised by exploitation. Unlike Marxists, they see the exploitation of women by men as the most important source of exploitation, rather than that of the working class by the ruling class.

Many feminist characterise contemporary societies as patriarchal; that is, men dominate them. For example, feminists have argued that men have most of the power in families, that they tend to be employed in better-paid and higher-status jobs than women, and that they tend to monopolise positions of political power. The ultimate aim of these types of feminism is to end men's domination and to rid society of the exploitation of women. Such feminists advance a range of explanations for, and solutions to, the exploitation of women. However, they all believe that the development of society can be explained and that progress towards an improved future is possible.

Some feminist writers (sometimes called **difference feminists**) disagree that all women are equally oppressed and disadvantaged in contemporary societies. They believe that it is important to recognise the different experiences and problems faced by various groups of women. For example, they do not believe that all husbands oppress their wives, that women are equally disadvantaged in all types of work, or that looking after children is necessarily oppressive to women. They emphasise the differences between women of different ages, class backgrounds and ethnic groups. Like other feminists, they believe that the oppression of women exists, but they do not see it as affecting all women to the same extent and in the same way. For example, a wealthy white woman in a rich capitalist country is in a very different position from a poor black woman living in an impoverished part of Africa. Since their problems are different, they would require very different solutions.

Despite their disagreements, feminists tend to agree that, at least until recently, sociology has neglected women. Certainly until the 1970s, men largely wrote sociology about men. There were relatively few studies of women, and issues of particular concern to women (such as housework and women's health) were rarely studied.

A number of feminists criticise what they call **mainstream sociology**. By this they mean mainstream, male-dominated sociology. They have attacked not just what male sociologists study, but also how they carry out their studies. For example, they have

suggested that feminist sociology should get away from rigid 'scientific' methods and should adopt more sympathetic approaches. These can involve working in partnership with those being studied rather than treating them as simply the passive providers of data (see pp. 90-1).

As feminist scholarship has developed it has started to examine numerous aspects of social life from feminist viewpoints. Many of the resulting studies will be examined in later chapters. (Feminist perspectives are discussed in detail on pp. 104-30.)

Interactionism

Functionalism and Marxism have a number of characteristics in common. First, they offer a general explanation of society as a whole, and as a result are sometimes known as **macro theories**. Second, they regard society as a system; hence they are sometimes referred to as **system theories**. Third, they tend to see human behaviour as shaped by the system. In terms of Talcott Parsons's version of functionalism, behaviour is largely directed by the norms and values of the social system. From a Marxist viewpoint, behaviour is ultimately determined by the economic infrastructure. Some versions of feminism have similar characteristics in that they explain how society works in terms of the existence of a patriarchal system and explain the behaviour of males and females in terms of that system. (Other feminist theories are very different and share some features in common with interactionism.)

Interactionism differs from functionalism, Marxism and most feminist theories in that it focuses on small-scale interaction rather than society as a whole. It usually rejects the notion of a social system. As a result it does not regard human action as a response or reaction to the system. Interactionists believe that it is possible to analyse society systematically and that it is possible to improve society. However, improvements have to be made on a smaller scale and in a more piecemeal way than implied by macro or system theories.

Meaning and interpretation

As its name suggests, interactionism is concerned with interaction, which means action between individuals. The interactionist perspective seeks to understand this process. It begins from the assumption that action is meaningful to those involved. It therefore follows that an understanding of action requires an interpretation of the meanings that the actors give to their activities.

Picture a man and a woman in a room and the man lighting a candle. This action is open to a number of interpretations. The couple may simply require light because a fuse has blown or a power cut has occurred. Or they may be involved in some form of ritual in which the lighted candle has a religious significance. Alternatively, the man or woman may be trying to create a more intimate atmosphere as a prelude to a sexual encounter. Finally, the couple may be celebrating a birthday, a wedding anniversary or some other red-letter day. In each case a different meaning is attached to the act of lighting a candle. To understand the act, it is therefore necessary to discover the meaning held by the actors.

Meanings are not fixed entities. As the above example shows, they depend in part on the context of the interaction. Meanings are also created, developed, modified and changed within the actual process of interaction. A pupil entering a new class may initially define the situation as threatening and even hostile. This definition may be confirmed, modified or changed depending on the pupil's perception of the interaction that takes place in the classroom. The pupil may come to perceive the teacher and fellow pupils as friendly and understanding and so change his or her assessment of the situation. The way in which actors define situations has important consequences. It represents their reality in terms of which they structure their actions. For example, if the pupil maintains a definition of the classroom as threatening and hostile, they may visit and speak only when spoken to. Conversely, if the definition changed, there would probably be a corresponding change in the pupil's actions in that context.

Self-concepts

The actions of the pupil in the above example will depend in part on their interpretation of the way others see them. For this reason many interactionists place particular emphasis on the idea of the self. They suggest that individuals develop a **self-concept**, a picture of themselves, which has an important influence on their actions.

A self-concept develops from interaction processes, since it is in large part a reflection of the reactions of other towards the individual; hence the term **looking glass self**, coined by Charles Cooley (1864–1929) (discussed in Chapter 7). Actors tend to see themselves as their self-concept. Thus if they are consistently defined as disrespectable or respectable, servile or arrogant, they will tend to see themselves in this light and act accordingly.

The construction of meaning

Since interactionists are concerned with definitions of situations and self, they are also concerned with the process by which those definitions are constructed. For example, how does an individual come to be defined in a certain way? The answer to this question involves an investigation of the **construction of meaning** in interaction processes.

This requires an analysis of the way actors interpret the language, gestures, appearance and manner of others and their interpretation of the context in which the interaction takes place.

The definition of an individual as a delinquent is an example. Research has indicated that the police are more likely to perceive an act as delinquent if it occurs in a low-income inner-city area. The context will influence the action of the police, since they typically define the inner city as a 'bad area'. Once arrested, a male youth is more likely to be defined as a juvenile delinquent if his manner is interpreted as aggressive and uncooperative, if his appearance is seen as unconventional or slovenly, if his speech is defined as ungrammatical or slang, and if his posture gives the impression of disrespect for authority or arrogance. Thus the black American youth from the inner-city ghetto with his cool, arrogant manner and colourful clothes is more likely to be defined as a delinquent than the white 'all-American girl' from the tree-lined suburbs.

Definitions of individuals as certain kinds of person are not, however, simply based on preconceptions that actors bring to interaction situations. For example, the police will not automatically define black juveniles involved in a fight as delinquent and white juveniles involved in a similar activity as non-delinquent. A process of negotiation occurs from which the definition emerges. Often negotiations will reinforce preconceptions, but not necessarily. The young blacks may be able to convince the police officer that the fight was a friendly brawl that did not involve intent to injure or steal. In this way they may successfully promote images of themselves as high-spirited teenagers rather than as malicious delinquents. Definitions and meanings are therefore constructed in interaction situations by a process of negotiation.

Negotiation and roles

The idea of negotiation is also applied to the concept of role. Like functionalists, interactionists employ the concept of role but they adopt a somewhat different perspective. Functionalists imply that roles are provided by the social system, and individuals enact their roles as if they were reading off a script that contains explicit directions for their behaviour. Interactionists argue that roles are often unclear, ambiguous and vague. This lack of clarity provides actors with considerable room for negotiation; moreover, improvisation and creative action. At most, roles provide very general guidelines for action. What matters is how they are employed in interaction situations.

For example, two individuals enter marriage with a vague idea about the roles of husband and wife. Their interaction will not be constrained by these roles. Their definition of what constitutes a husband, a wife and a marital relationship will be negotiated and continually renegotiated. It will be fluid rather than fixed, changeable rather than static. Thus, from an interactionist perspective, roles, like meanings and definitions of the situation, are negotiated in interaction processes.

While interactionists admit the existence of roles, they regard them as vague and imprecise and therefore as open to negotiation. From an interactionist perspective, action proceeds from negotiated meanings that are constructed in ongoing interaction situations.

Postmodernism

The challenge to modernism

Since the 1980s, postmodern perspectives have become increasingly influential in sociology. These perspectives take a number of forms, and the more radical of these represent a major challenge to the perspectives examined so far.

Some postmodern theorists contend themselves with describing and explaining what they see as the crucial changes in society. They retain elements of conventional approaches in sociology. For example, they still believe that it is possible to explain both human behaviour and the ways in which societies are changing. They no longer assume that the changes are progressive, but they stick to a belief that they can be explained through developing sociological theories.

Some postmodernists go much further than this. They argue that conventional, modern approaches in sociology, which grew out of modern society, must be abandoned. While approaches such as Marxism, functionalism, feminism and interactionism might have explained how the social world worked in previous eras, they are no longer useful. New theories are needed for the postmodern age. They support this claim in two main ways. First, some postmodernists argue that social behaviour is no longer shaped as it used to be by people's background in terms of their socialisation. They argue that factors such as gender and ethnic group influence people a great deal less than they used to. Instead, people are much freer to choose their own identity and lifestyle. Thus, for example, people have more choice about whether to be heterosexual or homosexual, where they live and where they travel, what sort of people they mix with and what clothes they wear. The boundaries between social groups are breaking down, and you can no longer predict the sorts of lifestyles that people will adopt. If so much choice exists, then many of the aspects of social life studied by modern sociologists are no longer important and their studies are no longer useful.

Second, some postmodernists question the belief that there is any solid foundation for producing knowledge about society. They argue that modern sociologists were quite wrong to believe that sociology could discover the truth by adopting the methods of the physical sciences. From their perspective, all knowledge is based upon the use of language. Language can never describe the external world perfectly. Knowledge is essentially subjective – it expresses personal viewpoints that can never be proved to be correct.

Postmodernists such as Jean Baudrillard argue that it has become increasingly difficult to separate media images from anything even approximating to reality (see pp. 989–91). Society has become so saturated with media images that people now sometimes confuse media characters with real life. For example, they talk about soap opera characters or they were real people rather than dramatic roles.

Postmodernists such as Jean François Lyotard (see pp. 988–9) are particularly critical of any attempt to produce a general theory of how society works (for example, Marxism or functionalism). Lyotard believes that all attempts to produce such theories are doomed to failure. They cannot truly explain something as complex as the social world. Generally such theories are simply used by groups of people to try to impose their ideas on other people, for example in communist or fascist societies. General theories are therefore dangerous and should always be rejected. In Lyotard's view, modern sociological theories fall into this category and should be rejected.

Difference

Many writers who adopt some of the stronger claims of postmodernism emphasise differences between people rather than similarities between members of social groups. They believe that it is the job of the researcher to uncover and describe these differences rather than to make generalisations about whole social groups. This involves acknowledging that there are many different viewpoints on society and that you should not judge between them. All viewpoints are seen as being equally valid; none is superior to any other. Sociologists should not try to impose their views on others, but should merely enable the voices of different people to be heard. This is very different from the goals of other sociologies (such as Marxists and functionalists) who set out to produce scientific explanations of how society works and how social groups behave.

Postmodern perspectives will be examined and evaluated in more detail later in the book, in relation to particular topics. The theory of postmodernism will be discussed in detail in Chapter 15.

Human behaviour and sociological research

The last section looked briefly at five theoretical perspectives in sociology. This section deals with the empirical views of human behaviour. These views have influenced both the type of data sociologists have collected and the methods they have employed to collect data.

Views of human behaviour can be roughly divided into those that emphasise external factors and those that stress internal factors. The former approach sees behaviour as being influenced by the structure of society, which is objective and exists outside the individual's consciousness. The latter approach places more emphasis upon the subjective states of individuals: their feelings, the meanings they attach to events, and the motives they have for behaving in particular ways. From this point of view, the way that people respond to external factors is shaped by the way that the individual interprets them.

The use of this 'dichotomy' (a sharply defined division) is somewhat artificial. In practice, most sociologists make use of the insights provided by both approaches when carrying out research and interpreting the results. There are also a number of variations on each approach. For example, as a later section will show (see p. 17), phenomenologists differ in their approach from other sociologists who emphasise the importance of internal influences upon human behaviour.

Positivism

Many of the founders of sociology believed it would be possible to create a science of society based upon the same principles and procedures as the natural sciences like chemistry and biology, even though the natural sciences have often dealt with inanimate matter and so are not concerned with feelings, emotions and other subjective states. The most influential attempt to apply natural science methodology to sociology is known as positivism.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who is credited with inventing the term sociology and regarded as one of the founders of the discipline, maintained that the application of the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences would produce a 'positive science of society'. He believed that this would reveal that the evolution of society followed invariable laws. It would show that the behaviour of humans was governed by principles of cause and effect that were just as invariable as the behaviour of matter, the subject of the physical sciences.

In terms of sociology, the positivist approach makes the following assumptions. The behaviour of humans, like the behaviour of matter, can be objectively measured. Just as the behaviour of matter can be quantified by measures such as weight, temperature and pressure, methods of objective measurement can be devised for human behaviour. Such measurement is essential to explain behaviour.

For example, in order to explain the reaction of a particular chemical to heat, it is necessary to provide exact measurements of temperature, weight and so on. With the aid of such measurements it will be possible to observe accurately the behaviour of matter and produce a statement of cause and effect. This statement might read A × B = C, where A is a quantity of matter, B a degree of

heat and C a volume of gas. Once it has been shown that the matter in question always reacts in the same way under fixed conditions, a theory can be devised to explain its behaviour.

From a positivist viewpoint, such methods and assumptions are applicable to human behaviour. Observations of behaviour based on objective measurement will make it possible to produce statements of cause and effect. Theories may then be devised to explain observed behaviour.

The positivist approach in sociology places particular emphasis on behaviour that can be directly observed. It argues that factors that are not directly observable, such as meanings, feelings and purposes, are not particularly important and can be misleading. For example, if the majority of adult members of society enter into marriage and produce children, these facts can be observed and quantified. They therefore form reliable data. However, the range of meanings that members of society give to these activities, their reasons for marriage and procreation, are not directly observable. Even if they could be accurately measured, they might well divert attention from the real cause of behaviour. One person might believe they entered marriage because they were lonely; another because they were in love, a third because it was the 'thing to do', and a fourth because they wished to have children. Reliance on this type of data for explanation assumes that individuals know the reasons for marriage. This can obscure the real cause of their behaviour.

The positivist emphasis on observable 'facts' is due largely to the belief that human behaviour can be explained in much the same way as the behaviour of matter. Natural scientists do not enquire into the meanings and purposes of matter. Atoms and molecules do not act in terms of meaning; they simply react to external stimuli. Thus if heat, an external stimulus, is applied to matter, that matter will react. The job of the natural scientist is to observe, measure and then explain that reaction.

The positivist approach to human behaviour applies a similar logic. People react to external stimuli and their behaviour can be explained in terms of this reaction. They enter into marriage and produce children in response to the demands of society; society requires such behaviour for its survival and its members simply respond to this requirement. The meanings and purposes they attach to this behaviour are largely inconsequential.

It has often been argued that systems theory in sociology adopts a positivist approach. Once behaviour is seen as a response to some external stimulus (such as economic forces or the requirements of the social system), the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences appear appropriate to the study of humans. Marxism has sometimes been regarded as a positivist approach, since it can be argued that it sees human behaviour as a reaction to the stimulus of the economic infrastructure. Functionalism has been viewed in a similar light. The behaviour of members of society can be seen as a response to the functional prerequisites of the social system.

These views of systems theory represent a considerable oversimplification. However, it is probably fair to say that system theory is closer to a positivist approach than the views that will now be considered.

Social action perspectives

Advocates of social action perspectives argue that the subject matter of the social and natural sciences are fundamentally different. As a result, the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences are inappropriate to the study of humans. The natural sciences deal with matter. To understand and explain the behaviour of matter it is sufficient to observe it from the outside. Atoms and molecules do not have consciousness: they do not have meanings and purposes that direct their behaviour. Matter simply reacts unconsciously to external stimuli; in scientific language, it 'behaves'. As a result, the natural scientist is able to observe, measure and impose an external logic on that behaviour in order to explain it. Scientists have no need to explore the internal logic of the consciousness of matter.

Unlike matter, humans have **consciousness** – thoughts, feelings, meanings, intentions and an awareness of being. Because of this, humans' actions are **meaningful**: humans define situations and give meaning to their actions and those of others. As a result, they do not react to external stimuli as matter does; they are moved by the way they interpret them.

Imagine the response of early humans to fire caused by volcanoes or spontaneous combustion. They did not simply react in a uniform manner to the experience of fire. They attached a range of meanings to it and these meanings directed their actions. They defined fire as a means of warmth and used it to heat their dwellings; they saw it as a means of defence and used it to ward off wild animals; and they saw it as a means of transforming substances and employed it for cooking and for hardening the points of wooden spears. Humans do not just react to fire; they act upon it in terms of the meanings they give to it.

If action stems from subjective meanings, it follows that the sociologist must discover those meanings in order to understand action. Sociologists cannot simply observe action from the outside and impose an external logic upon it. They must interpret the internal logic that directs the actions of the actor.

Max Weber (1864–1920) was one of the first sociologists to outline this perspective in detail. He argued that sociological explanations of action should begin with observing and interpreting the subjective 'states of minds' of people. As the previous

section indicated, interactionism adopts a similar approach, with particular emphasis on the process of interaction. Where positivists emphasise facts and cause-and-effect relationships, interactionists emphasise insight and understanding. Since it is not possible to get inside the heads of actors, the discovery of meaning must be based on interpretation and intuition. For this reason, objective measurement is not possible and the exactitude of the natural sciences cannot be duplicated. Since meanings are constantly negotiated in ongoing interaction processes, it is not possible to establish simple cause-and-effect relationships. Thus some sociologists argue that sociology is limited to an interpretation of social action.

Nevertheless, both Weber and the interactionists did think it was possible to produce causal explanations of human behaviour, so long as an understanding of meanings maintain that the values of sociologists directly influence every aspect of their research. They argue that the various theories of society are based, at least in part, on value judgements and ideological positions. They suggest that sociological perspectives are shaped more by historical circumstances than by objective views of the reality of social life.

Those who argue that an objective science of society is not possible maintain that sociology can never be free from ideology. The term **ideology** refers to a set of ideas that present one particular view of reality. An ideological viewpoint also includes values. It involves a judgement not only about the way things are, but also about the way things ought to be. Thus ideology is a set of beliefs and values which provides a way of seeing and interpreting the world, which results in a partial view of reality. The term ideology is often used to suggest a distortion, a false picture of reality. However, there is considerable doubt about whether reality and ideology can be separated. As Nigel Harris (1971) suggested, 'Our reality is the next man's ideology and vice versa'.

Ideology can be seen as a set of beliefs and values that express the interests of a particular social group. Marxists use the term in this way when they talk about the ideology of the ruling class. In this sense, ideology is a viewpoint that distorts reality and justifies and legitimates the position of a social group.

Karl Mannheim (1948) used the term in a similar way. He stated that ideology consists of the beliefs and values of a ruling group which 'obscures the real condition of society both to itself and others and thereby stabilises it'. Mannheim distinguished this form of ideology from what he called **utopian ideology**. Rather than supporting the status quo – the way things are – utopian ideologies advocate a complete change in the structure of society. Mannheim argued that such ideologies are usually found in oppressed groups whose members want radical change. As their name suggests, utopian ideologies are based on a vision of an ideal society, a perfect social system. Mannheim referred to them as 'wish-images' for a future social order. Like the ideologies of ruling groups, he argued that utopian ideologies are a way of seeing the world that prevents us seeing it and obscures reality.

Mannheim's ideas will now be applied to two of the major theoretical perspectives in sociology: Marxism and functionalism. It has often been argued that Marxism is largely based on a utopian ideology, and functionalism on a ruling-class ideology. Marxism contains a vision and a promise of a future ideal society – the communist utopia. In this society the means of production are communally owned and, as a result, oppression and exploitation disappear. The communist utopia provides a standard of comparison for present and past societies. Since they inevitably fall far short of this ideal, their social arrangements will be condemned. It has been argued that the communist utopia is not a scientific prediction but merely a projection to the 'wish-images' of those who adopt a Marxist position. Utopian ideology has therefore been seen as the basis of Marxist theory.

By comparison, functionalism has often been interpreted as a form of ruling-class ideology. Where Marxism is seen to advocate radical change, functionalism is seen to justify and legitimate the status quo. With its emphasis on order and stability, consensus and integration, functionalism appears to adopt a conservative stance. Rapid social change is not recommended since it will disrupt social order. The major institutions of society are justified by the belief that they are performing functional prerequisites of the social system.

Although functionalists have introduced the concept of **dysfunction** to cover the harmful effects of parts of the system on society as a whole, the concept is rarely employed. In practice, functionalists appear preoccupied with discovering the positive functions and the beneficial effects of social institutions. As a result, the term function is associated with the ideas of 'useful' and 'good'. This interpretation of society tends to legitimate the way things are. Ruling-class ideology has therefore been seen as the basis of functionalist theory.

It is important to note that the above interpretation of the ideological bases of Marxism and functionalism is debatable. However, a case can be made to support the view that both perspectives are ideologically based.

Postmodernists would certainly support the view that Marxism and functionalism are ideologically based. Postmodernists do not just reject these particular perspectives – they reject any attempt to produce a theory of society as a whole. They see such theories as dangerous. This is because they can lead to one group trying to impose its will on others. From this viewpoint it is neither possible nor desirable to try to remove values from sociology. Instead, a range of different values should be accepted and tolerated. People have a right to be different from one another and to hold different views. It is not the job of the sociologist to arbitrate between these different values and say which is better.

Some sociologists reject this standpoint. **Critical sociologists** (whose ideas are examined on pp. 898–910) do not deny that values must inevitably enter into sociology. However, they do not believe that sociologists should just accept the range of different values present in society. Rather, it is the duty of social scientists to try to improve society. If, like postmodernists, they were simply to accept the range of different values that exists, they would be shirking their responsibility. By refusing to make any judgement about whose values are better, they would be accepting the way society is. Taken to extremes, this would mean, for example, that the values of the racist are no worse than those of the rape victim; the values of racists are no worse than those of people who campaign against racism; and the values of capitalists who exploit their workers are no worse than those of people who try to help the poor.

Critical social scientists argue that sociologists should take sides and that they should try to use their work to fight injustice and improve society. The American sociologist C. Wright Mills, whose ideas are examined below, generally supports this view.

The sociological imagination

Although sociologists vary in their perspectives, methods and values, they all (with the exception of some postmodernists) share the aim of understanding and explaining the social world. Combining the insights offered by different approaches might be the best way of achieving this goal. **Structural theories of society**, such as functionalism and Marxism, emphasise the importance of society in shaping human behaviour. On the other hand, approaches such as interactionism emphasise the importance of human behaviour in shaping society. Many sociologists today believe that good sociology must examine both the structure of society and social interaction. They believe that it is only by combining the study of the major changes in society and individual lives that sociologists can develop the understanding of social life.

This idea is not new: the very influential German sociologist **Max Weber (1864–1920)** (see pp. 971–6) supported it, and more recently the British sociologist **Anthony Giddens** (see pp. 985–7) examined it in depth. However, perhaps the American sociologist **C. Wright Mills** put forward the clearest exposition of this view.

Mills called the ability to study the structure of society while also studying individuals 'the sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959). He argued that the sociological imagination allowed people to understand their private troubles in terms of public issues. People experience unemployment, war and marital breakdown in terms of the problems these events produce in their personal lives. They react to them as individuals, and their reactions have consequences for society as a whole.

However, to Mills, these issues can only be fully understood in the context of wider social forces. For example, very specific circumstances might lead to a person becoming unemployed, but when unemployment rates in society as a whole rise, it becomes a public issue that needs to be explained. The sociologist has to consider 'the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals'.

According to Mills, then, sociology should be about examining the biographies of individuals in the context of the history of societies. The sociological imagination is not just for use to sociologists; it is important to all members of society if they wish to understand, change and improve their lives. Perhaps sociology can be seen as succeeding when it allows people to achieve this imagination, and the theories and studies examined in the rest of the book can be judged in these terms.

Summary and conclusions

Sociology is a social science whose subject matter is human groups and societies. It attempts to explain human behaviour, institutions and societies in their broad social context rather than looking to individual psychology. For example, homicide rates can be linked to a variety of social causes rather than the mental state of individuals.

Human behaviour is strongly influenced by the culture into which people are born and socialised, but societies are never static, homogeneous or united. There are different subcultures in all societies. There are also divisions between social groups such as classes, ethnic groups and males and females. There are material inequalities and differences in power that lead to some having more opportunities than others.

Early human societies were based on hunting and gathering, and a few such societies remain today. However, much more complex modern or postmodern societies are now dominant and they rely much less on tradition than early societies. These societies can change rapidly, although the exact nature of the changes in these types of society is contested.

Sociologists have developed a range of theoretical perspectives or theories that they use to attempt to understand the nature of society. These range from consensus perspectives, which emphasise shared interests (such as functionalism), to perspectives that emphasise conflict between social groups (such as Marxism and feminism). Macro theories focus on society as a whole and its major institutions, whereas micro theories (such as interactionism) focus on smaller groups and the construction of meaning.

Sociologists do not agree over whether sociology should be seen as a science or as a non-scientific subject. However, arguably, the best sociology can embrace and overcome these differences – for example, by relating the biography of the individual to the bigger

historical picture, involving major social changes. Understanding the relationship between history and biography is what the great American sociologist **C. Wright Mills** called the **sociological imagination**.

Sociology by Giddens and Sutton Chapter 1:

How did this world come about? Why are the conditions of life today so different from those of the past? Why is the human world riven with such gross inequalities? Where are today's societies heading in the future? If you have ever asked yourself such large questions, then consider yourself a novice sociologist. These and many more are among the prime concerns of sociology, a field of study that has a fundamental role to play in modern life.

Sociology can be simply defined as the scientific study of human life, social groups, whole societies and the human world around us. It can be a dazzling and compelling enterprise, as its subject matter is our own behaviour as social beings in relationships with many other people. The scope of sociology is extremely wide, ranging from the analysis of passing encounters between individuals on the street to the investigation of crime, international relations and global forms of terrorism.

Most of us see the world in terms of the familiar features of our own lives - our families, friendships and working lives, for example. But sociology insists that we take a broader view in order to understand why we act in the ways we do. It teaches us that much of what we regard as natural, inevitable, good and true may not be so, and that things we take for granted are actually shaped by historical events and social processes. Understanding the subtle yet complex and profound ways in which our individual lives reflect the contexts of our social experience is basic to the sociologist's outlook.

What to expect from this chapter

This chapter is the first of a block of three. Taken together, these provide a broad introduction to sociology: what it is, where it came from, how it developed over time, how sociologists go about their work and what kinds of explanations they use. As the opening to the whole book, this chapter provides a brief introduction to what sociology is, how and why it came into existence and what it is used for.

Chapter 2 then covers how sociologists actually ‘do’ sociology. It describes the questions they ask, the wide range of research methods they use to answer those questions and how they assess their findings. It also tackles the thorny issue of whether sociology is a science at all.

Chapter 3 looks at sociological theories. Theories are an essential part of all academic subjects because they allow us to provide explanations rather than simply listing a series of facts. For example, we might find that the proportion of married women in the UK who are in work today is higher than in the 1950s. The bare statistics are certainly useful, but are they crying out for an explanation - why are more married women working today than in the past - and that is what good theories provide. They try to tell us why something has happened or changed and in that way they broaden our knowledge. In chapter 3 you will find some important modern sociological theories such as feminism, functionalism, structuration theory, figurational studies, postmodernism and more. You should not be put off by these apparently difficult terms. They are really just a shorthand way of describing the different ways that sociologists interpret and understand the social world.

In the rest of this chapter we first discuss sociology as a *way of thinking about the world* or as a different way of seeing which, once you have mastered it, becomes very difficult to avoid. In short, once a sociologist, always a sociologist! World events, personal relationships, family life, international politics and much more: you will see all of these in a different light once you have developed a sociological way of seeing and thinking.

Second, we introduce the ideas of some of the very earliest sociological thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries - those who essentially founded modern sociology as an academic discipline. We connect these thinkers to the times they lived through in order to illustrate the new social problems they tried to solve and how they went about them. it. We then discuss some of the approaches to sociology that came afterwards. However, this is not a comprehensive list, and you will need to read chapter 3 on ‘Theories and Perspectives’ for the more recent theories.

Third, we look at some of the uses of sociology. Many students are attracted to sociology because they have a desire to help others and see the subject as a way into a suitable ‘people-centred’ career. For example, sociology graduates find careers in the caring professions, social work, teaching or the criminal justice system. Others use their research skills and knowledge to good effect in management, market research, local and national government administration or research consultancy. Still others (after more study) become professional sociologists working in universities and colleges. Studying sociology can be the first step on the path to a rewarding and satisfying career. However, others study sociology simply because they want to understand better the world we live in. This is sociology as a kind of personal enlightenment, which may or may not lead down a particular career path.

Some sociologists use their training and skills to try to improve the world by intervening to change an existing situation. This is 'applied sociology', and much of the research on social problems such as homelessness, poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, self-harm, and so on, is applied research. Based on their findings, applied researchers may try or propose possible solutions or make recommendations for changes to government policies or service provision.

Finally, the chapter ends with recent ideas of the need for sociologists to engage with the general public and the media if sociology is to have a greater impact on society. We are used to seeing psychologists, historians and political scientists as experts on television news and documentaries, but rarely do we see sociologists. This section discusses why this is so and what sociologists can do about it. However, we begin by outlining what it means to 'think sociologically' – a basic prerequisite to the practice of 'doing sociology'.

The sociological imagination

Learning to think sociologically means cultivating our imagination. Studying sociology is not just a routine process of acquiring knowledge from books like this one. A sociologist has to be able to break free from the immediacy of their personal circumstances to see things in a wider social context. Doing sociological work depends on developing what the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1970), in a famous phrase, called a **sociological imagination**.

The sociological imagination demands that we should 'think ourselves away' from the familiar routines of our daily lives in order to look at them from a new point of view. The best way to illustrate this is with something many millions of people do every day without a second thought, the simple act of drinking a cup of coffee. What could we possibly find to say, from a sociological point of view, about such a commonplace and uninteresting act?

First, coffee is not just a refreshing drink but it has symbolic value as part of our day-to-day social activities. Often the rituals associated with coffee drinking are more important than consuming the drink itself. The morning cup of coffee is often the centrepiece of a personal routine and an essential first step to starting the day. Morning coffee can then be followed later in the day by coffee with others – the basis of a group, not just an individual, ritual. Two people who arrange to meet for coffee are probably more interested in socialising and chatting than drinking coffee. In all social activities, drinking and eating provide occasions for social interaction, and these offer a rich subject matter for sociological study.

Second, coffee contains caffeine, a drug which has a stimulating effect on the brain, and many people drink coffee for the 'extra lift' it provides. Long days at the office or late nights studying sociology – some students do this, we are told – are made more tolerable by regular coffee breaks. Coffee is a habit-forming substance, but coffee addicts are not regarded as 'drug users'. This is because, like alcohol, coffee is a socially acceptable drug, whereas cocaine and heroin, for example, are not. Yet some societies tolerate the consumption of cocaine but frown on both coffee and alcohol. Sociologists are interested in why these differences exist and how they came about.

Third, when we drink a cup of coffee we are unwittingly caught up in a complex set of social and economic relationships that stretch right across the planet. Coffee links people in the wealthiest and the most impoverished parts of the world. It is consumed mainly in the relatively rich countries but grown primarily in relatively poor ones. Coffee is one of the most valuable commodities in international trade, providing many countries with their largest source of foreign exchange. The production, transportation and distribution of coffee require continuous transactions between people thousands of miles away from the coffee drinker. Studying such global connections is an important task for sociologists.

Fourth, sipping coffee is not 'natural' but presumes a long process of social, political and economic development. Along with other familiar items of Western diets – like tea, bananas, potatoes and white sugar – coffee became widely consumed only from the late 1800s, though it was fashionable among social elites before then. The drink originated in the Middle East, but its mass consumption dates from the period of Western colonial expansion more than 200 years ago. Virtually all the coffee we drink today comes from areas such as South America and Africa that were colonized by Europeans. The drink is not a 'natural' part of the Western diet, however normal buying and consuming coffee appears to people today.

Finally, coffee has been 'branded' and politicized within current debates about globalization, international fair trade, human rights and environmental damage. The decisions consumers make about what kind of coffee to drink and where to buy it are political as well as lifestyle choices. Some people drink only organic coffee, decaffeinated coffee or coffee that is 'fairly traded' through schemes pay the full market price to small producers in developing countries. Others patronize 'independent' coffee houses rather than 'corporate' chains such as Starbucks and Costa.

When we begin to develop a sociological imagination, our morning coffee becomes a thing of great fascination which we approach with a new understanding. Indeed, as we will see throughout the book, the best sociological studies always tell us something we did not know before or make us see the familiar routines and patterns of life in new ways.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Sociology deepens our understanding of routine activities such as coffee drinking, but it has been argued that sociological research findings could also lead to changes in behaviour. In what ways might a wider understanding of the 'sociology of coffee' lead individuals to alter their own behaviour?

Studying people and societies

It is often said that sociology is simply the science of society. But what then is 'society'? When sociologists speak of a society, they generally mean a group of people living in a bounded territory who share common cultural features such as language, values and basic norms of behaviour. Hence we can discuss, say, French society, Danish society or Argentinian society. However, 'society' also includes institutions – such as particular types of government, education systems and family types – and the relatively stable relationships between them. The enduring patterns formed by relationships among people, groups and institutions form the basic **social structure** of a society. When we start thinking about social life through the concepts of society, institutions and social structures, we are beginning to use a sociological imagination and to 'think sociologically'.

Adopting a sociological imagination allows us to see that events that affect the individual person actually reflect larger social issues. Divorce, for instance, may be an emotionally traumatic for someone who goes through it, yet what Mills calls a 'personal trouble', but the level of divorce is also a significant 'public issue' that has an impact on pension provisions, welfare benefit systems and housing need. Similarly, losing a job and being unable to find another one quickly may be a personal tragedy for the individual. However, if it is more than a matter of private despair when millions of people find themselves in the same situation; it is a public issue expressing broad economic and social trends.

Try to apply a sociological imagination to your own life. It is not necessary to think only of troubling events. Consider why you are turning the pages of this book at all – why did you decide to study sociology? You could be a reluctant sociology student (surely not?) taking a course to fulfil the degree requirement for a career in law, teaching, journalism or management. Or you might just be enthusiastic to understand better the world you live in. Whatever your motivation, you are likely to have a good deal in common, without necessarily knowing it, with other sociology students. This is because your private decision also reflects your position within the wider society.

Do any of the following characteristics apply to you? Are you young? White? From a professional or white-collar background? Have you done, or do you still do, some part-time work to boost your income? Do you want to find a good job when you finish your education but are not especially dedicated to studying? More than three-quarters of readers will answer 'yes' to all of these questions. That is because university students are not typical of the population as a whole but tend to be drawn from more privileged social groups, and their attitudes generally reflect those held by friends and acquaintances. The social backgrounds from which we come have a great deal to do with the kind of lifestyle choices we make.

On the other hand, none of the characteristics above may apply to you. You might come from a minority ethnic group, from a working-class family or from a background of relative poverty. You may be in mid-life or older. All the same, we can make some tentative assumptions about you. You are likely to have had to struggle to get where you are; you probably had to overcome hostile reactions from friends and others who thought you were quite mad to give up a decent job, take on a large debt or risk failing, and you may well be combining higher education study with full-time parenthood. For sociologists, there is no such thing as the 'isolated individual' who makes choices without any reference to other people.

While we are all influenced by social context, our behaviour is never determined entirely by that context. Sociology investigates the connections between what society makes of us and what we make of society and ourselves. Our activities both structure – or give shape to – the social world around us and at the same time, are structured by that world. The social contexts of our lives are not a mass of completely random events and actions; they are structured, or patterned, in distinct ways. There are certain regularities in the ways we behave and in the relationships that we have with one another.

Although the idea of a 'structure' reminds us of a building, social structures are not really like physical structures, which, once built, exist independently of our actions. Human societies are always in the process of **structuration** (Giddens 1984). That is, they are reconstructed at every moment by the very 'building blocks' that compose them – human beings like us. Consider again the case of coffee. A cup of coffee does not drop into your hands. You choose to go to a particular coffee shop, you choose whether to drink a latte, a cappuccino or an espresso. As you make those decisions, along with millions of other people, you also help to shape the world market for coffee, and that affects the lives of coffee producers in distant countries whom you will never meet.

In recent decades, the malleable character of social structures has been dramatically demonstrated. The communist regimes of Eastern Europe, including the former Soviet Union, collapsed rapidly in the late 1980s and 1990s as ordinary people took to the streets to protest at the lack of freedom and economic development. No one foresaw that the apparently solid and unyielding social structures of communism would wilt as people simply withdrew their legitimacy from the regimes and their leaders. In 2011, countries of the Middle East and North Africa saw numerous uprisings against authoritarian governments in the region as people expressed their dissatisfaction and called for change. In Libya, the 42-year regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was ended and, in Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak was forced from office after protesters took over Tahrir Square in the capital city, Cairo. Such

revolutionary events show us that social structures are always 'in process' and are never set in stone, however solid or 'natural' they may feel.

Recent political developments, including those noted here, are further discussed in chapter 21, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements', and chapter 22, 'Nations, War and Terrorism'.

The development of sociological thinking

When they begin studying sociology, many students are puzzled by the diversity of theories they encounter. Sociology has never been a discipline where a single body of ideas is accepted as valid by everyone, though some theories have been more widely accepted than others. Sociologists often disagree about how to study human behaviour and how research findings should be interpreted. This is quite normal and is an aspect of all scientific subjects. However, unlike physics or chemistry, sociology involves studying ourselves, and this can severely challenge our long-held views and attitudes. Sociology can be very unsettling and disturbing. Nonetheless, we have to make every effort to set aside our emotional and political commitments, at least while we are in the process of 'doing sociology'. If we do not, then there is a risk that we will be misled and our findings will not be valid.

Theories and theoretical perspectives

It is a fact that I bought a cup of coffee this morning, that it cost a certain amount of money and that the coffee beans used to make it were grown in Central America. But in sociology we also want to know *why* things happen, and that means we have to construct theories which explain the bare facts. For instance, we know that many millions of people now use the Internet and social networking sites to stay in touch with friends or maintain an online diary. But this is a very recent development which begs some questions. Why did Internet use spread so rapidly? Why did online social media come about and why do so many people get involved with them? Why are younger people more likely to use social media than older people? What impact is social media having on earlier forms of communication? To address questions such as these, we need to collect and assemble the evidence and engage in theorizing.

Theorizing means constructing abstract interpretations of events using a series of logically related statements that explain a wide variety of empirical or 'factual' situations. A theory about social media, for example, would be concerned with identifying how communications technology has developed over time and what were the prerequisites for their success. In the best sociology, factual research and explanatory theories are closely related. We can only develop valid theoretical explanations if we are able to test them by means of empirical research; sociological theories are not mere speculation. Contrary to popular belief, the facts do not speak for themselves; they need to be interpreted, and interpretation takes place within a set of underlying theoretical assumptions. Many sociologists work primarily on factual research projects, but, unless they are guided by some knowledge of theory, their work is unlikely to explain satisfactorily the complexity they find. This is protest at the lack of freedom and economic development. No one foresaw that the apparently solid and unyielding social structures of communism would wilt as people simply withdrew their legitimacy from the regimes and their leaders. In 2011, countries of the Middle East and North Africa saw numerous uprisings against authoritarian governments in the region as people expressed their dissatisfaction and called for change. In Libya, the 42-year regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was ended and, in Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak was forced from office after protesters took over Tahrir Square in the capital city, Cairo. Such revolutionary events show us that social structures are always 'in process' and are never set in stone, however solid or 'natural' they may feel.

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Without some kind of theoretical approach, we do not even know what to look for when beginning a study or when interpreting results at the end of the research process. But the interpretation of factual evidence is not the only reason for theorizing. Theoretical thinking must also tackle general problems of how social life can and should be studied in the first place. Should sociological methods be modelled on the natural sciences? How can we conceptualize human consciousness, social action and social institutions? How can sociologists avoid introducing personal bias into their research? Should they even try? There are no easy answers to such questions, which have been answered in different ways since the emergence of sociology in the nineteenth century.

Founders of sociology

Human beings have long been curious about the sources of their own behaviour, but for thousands of years attempts to understand people relied on ways of thinking passed down from generation to generation. Before the rise of modern science, 'folkways' – traditional knowledge and practices passed down though generations – held sway in most communities, and these persisted well into the twentieth century. One example is people's understanding of their health or illness. Older people, with a good knowledge of a community's folkways, provided advice on how to prevent illness and cure diseases. Reflecting on his American childhood in Lawrence County, Kentucky, Cratis Williams gives us a flavour of the Appalachian culture of the time (Williams 2003: 397–8):

A plague of head suspended on a string around a child's neck warded off colds and kept witches away while the child was sleeping. Children plagued by nightmares could wear these lead charms to assure themselves of sweet sleep and pleasant dreams; for nightmares were caused by witches and evil creatures that could not operate in the presence of lead. Adults given to snoring and nightmares sought relief by smelling a dirty sock as they went to sleep.

In today's modern societies, very few people advocate such measures or hold similar beliefs. Instead, a more scientific approach to health and illness means that children are vaccinated against previously common diseases and taught that nightmares are normal and generally harmless. Pharmacies do not routinely sell smelly socks to cure snoring either. The origins of systematic studies of social life lie in a series of sweeping changes ushered in by the French Revolution of 1789 and the mid-eighteenth-century **Industrial Revolution** in Europe. These events shattered older, traditional ways of life, and the founders of sociology looked to understand how such radical changes had come about. But, in doing so, they also developed more systematic, scientific ways of looking at the social and natural worlds, which challenged conventional religious beliefs.

The process of industrialization is discussed in chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change', and chapter 6, 'Cities and Urban Life'. Some of the damaging consequences of industrialization are outlined in chapter 5, 'The Environment'.

Auguste Comte

No single individual can found a whole field of study, and there were many contributors to early sociological thinking. However, particular prominence is usually given to Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who invented the word 'sociology' around 1840. Comte had originally used the term 'social physics' to describe the new subject, but some of his intellectual rivals at the time were also using that term. To distinguish his own approach from theirs he coined the term 'sociology' – the systematic study of the social world.

Comte's thinking reflected the turbulent events of his age. He looked to create a science of society that would discover the 'laws' of the social world, just as natural science had discovered laws in the natural world. Although he recognized that each scientific discipline has its own subject matter, Comte thought that a similar logic and scientific method could be applied to them all. Uncovering the laws that govern human societies could help us to shape our destiny and improve the welfare of all humanity.

Comte wanted sociology to become a 'positive science' that would use the same rigorous methods as astronomy, physics and chemistry. **Positivism** is a doctrine which says that science should be concerned only with observable entities that are known directly to experience. On the basis of careful observation, laws can then be inferred that explain the relationships between those observed phenomena. By understanding the causal relationships between events, scientists can then predict how future events will occur. A positivist approach to sociology aims to produce knowledge about society based on evidence drawn from observation, comparison and experimentation.

Comte argued that human efforts to understand the world have passed through three broad stages: the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. In the theological stage, thinking was guided by religious ideas and a belief that society was an expression of God's will. In the metaphysical stage, society came to be seen in natural rather than supernatural terms, with events being explained by reference to natural laws. The positive stage, ushered in by the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, encouraged the application of scientific methods. Comte regarded sociology as the last of the sciences to develop, but he argued that it was also the most significant and complex.

In the latter part of his career, Comte was keenly aware of the state of the society in which he lived and was concerned with the inequalities produced by industrialization and the threat they posed to social cohesion. The long-term solution, in his view, was the production of moral consensus through a new 'religion of humanity' to hold society together despite the new patterns of inequality. Although Comte's vision was never realized, his contribution in founding a science of society was important to the later professionalization of sociology as an academic discipline.

Emile Durkheim

The ideas of another French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), had a more lasting impact on sociology than those of Comte. Durkheim saw sociology as a new science that turned traditional philosophical questions into sociological ones which demanded real-world – empirical – research studies. He argued that we must study social life with the same objectivity as scientists study the natural world, which he summed up in his famous injunction to 'study social facts as things'. By this he meant that social institutions have a hard, objective reality that enables them to be analysed as rigorously as objects in the natural world.

But what is a social fact? Durkheim explains that social facts are all those institutions and rules of action which constrain or channel human behaviour. For the individual, social facts can feel rather like an external force, though most of the time they are simply taken for granted as 'natural' or 'normal' parts of life. For instance, the monetary system is a social fact we rarely think about. We are paid in money, we borrow money from banks to buy a car or a house, and if we have not been good at managing money we will be considered a high risk and may not be allowed to borrow. But the monetary system was already in place before we were born and, as we are forced to use it if we want to take part in our society, we are subject to its rules. In that sense, the system constrains or shapes our actions. This is typical of all social facts; they exist independently of the individual and shape their choices and actions.

In his analysis of suicide rates, Durkheim used the concept of social facts to explain why some countries have higher suicide rates than others (see the 'Classic study', p. 13). Suicide seems to be a purely individual act, the outcome of extreme unhappiness or perhaps deep depression. Yet Durkheim showed that social facts such as religion, marriage, divorce and social class all exert an influence on suicide rates. And, as there are regular patterns across different countries, these patterns must be explained in a sociological not a psychological way.

Durkheim was preoccupied with the changes transforming society in his own lifetime and was particularly interested in social and moral solidarity – what it is that binds society together. Solidarity is maintained when individuals are integrated into social groups and regulated by a set of shared values and customs. In *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (1984 [1893]) argued that the advent of the industrial age also led to a new type of solidarity.

According to Durkheim, older cultures with a low **division of labour** (specialized roles such as work occupations) are characterized by **mechanical solidarity**. Most people are involved in similar occupations and bound together by common experiences and shared beliefs. But the development of modern industry and the enlargement of cities produced an expanding division of labour which broke down mechanical forms of solidarity. With the increasing specialization of tasks and roles, a new type of **organic solidarity** was created. As the division of labour expands, people become increasingly dependent upon one another, because each person needs goods and services that those in other occupations help supply. Like the human 'organic' body, each part or organ depends on all the others if the whole society or body is to function properly.

Nonetheless, Durkheim thought that social change in the modern world was so rapid and intense that major difficulties could arise. As societies change, so do lifestyles, morals, beliefs and accepted patterns of behaviour. But, when change is rapid and continuous, the old values lose their grip on people without any new ones becoming established. Durkheim called such an unsettling condition **anomie** – deep feelings of aimlessness, dread and despair, as many people feel pressured to think that their lives lack meaning and structure without clear guidelines for action. The big question is whether people can ever get used to continuous rapid change as the 'normal' condition of living in conditions of modernity.

Karl Marx

The ideas of Karl Marx (1818–83) contrast sharply with those of Comte and Durkheim, though he too sought to explain the changes associated with the Industrial Revolution. When he was a young man, Marx's political activities brought him into conflict with the German authorities, and after a brief stay in France he settled permanently in exile in Britain, where he saw the growth of factories and industrial production as well as growing inequality. His interest in the European labour movement and socialist ideas were reflected in his writings, and much of his work concentrated on political and economic issues. Yet, since he connected economic problems to social institutions, his work was rich in sociological insights.

Although he wrote about the broad sweep of human history, Marx's primary focus was on the development of **capitalism**: a system of production that contrasts radically with all previous economies. Marx identified two main elements of capitalism. The first is capital – that is, any asset, including money, machines or even factories, that can be used or invested to make future assets. The accumulation of capital goes hand in hand with the second element, wage-labour. Wage-labour refers to the pool of workers who do not own any means of production themselves but must find employment provided by the owners of capital.

Marx argued that those who own capital – capitalists – form a ruling class, while the mass of the population make up a class of wage workers – the **working class**. As industrialization spread, large numbers of peasants, who used to support themselves by working the land, moved to the expanding cities and helped to form an urban industrial working class, which Marx also called the **proletariat**.

For Marx, this means that capitalism is a **class system** in which relations between the two main classes are characterized by an underlying conflict. Although owners of capital and workers are dependent on each other – capitalists need labour, workers need wages – this dependency is unbalanced. Workers have little or no control over their labour, and employers are able to generate profit by appropriating the products of the workers' labour – paying them less than their labour is worth.

Marx saw conflicts between classes as the motivation for historical development; as he put it, they are the 'motor of history'. Marx and Engels (2008 [1848]) wrote at the beginning of **The Communist Manifesto**, 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.' According to Marx, there have been a series of historical stages, beginning with 'primitive communist' societies of hunters and gatherers and passing through ancient slave-owning systems and feudal systems with landowners and peasant farmers. The emergence of a new commercial or capitalist class displaced the landed nobility, and, just as capitalists had overthrown the feudal order, so too would the capitalists be overthrown by the proletariat.

Marx theorized that a workers' revolution would bring about a new society in which there would no be no large-scale division between owners and workers. He called this historical stage **communism**. This does not mean that all inequalities would magically disappear, but society would no longer be split into a small class that monopolizes economic and political power and a mass of people who benefit little from their labour. The economic system would be under communal ownership and a more humane, egalitarian society would slowly emerge.

Marx's ideas had a far-reaching effect on the twentieth century. Until only a generation ago, more than a third of the Earth's population lived in societies whose governments derived inspiration from Marx's ideas. However, since the revolutionary wave that began in Poland in 1989 and swept aside communist regimes across Eastern Europe, ending with the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union itself in 1991, Marx's ideas have lost ground. Even in China, where a communist party still holds political power, capitalist economic development has taken a firm hold. In spite of the spread of capitalism around the world, the working-class revolution that Marx looked forward to seems further away today than it did in Marx's own time.

Max Weber

Like Marx, Max Weber (1864–1920) was not just a sociologist; his interests ranged across many areas. He was born in Germany, where he spent most of his academic career, and his work covered economics, law, philosophy and comparative history as well as sociology. He was also concerned with the development of capitalism and how modern societies differed from earlier types. In a series of studies, Weber set out some of the basic characteristics of modern industrial societies and identified key issues that remain central to sociology today.

Weber recognized class conflict but saw it as less significant than Marx did. In Weber's view, economic factors are important, but ideas and values can also bring about social change. His celebrated and much discussed work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1992 [1904–5]) proposed that religious values – especially those associated with Puritanism – were of fundamental importance in creating a capitalist outlook. Unlike the other early sociologists, Weber argued that sociologists should study **social action** – the subjectively meaningful actions of people that are oriented towards others. The job of sociology was to understand the meanings behind all of those individual actions.

An important element in Weber's sociological approach is the **ideal type**. Ideal types are models that are created to alert us to some social phenomenon and to help us to make sense of it. These hypothetical constructions can be very useful in pointing researchers towards a subject. For example, we could construct a simple ideal-typical 'terrorist group', based on the most striking aspects we have observed in the cases of the IRA in Northern Ireland, ETA in Spain, the Red Brigades in Italy and the global networks of al-

Qaeda. We might not then all these groups operate outside mainstream politics; they use violence against the state and they often target civilians to demonstrate their power. We can then use this ideal type to analyse other real-world instances of political violence.

Of course, in reality there are many differences between our four groups. The Red Brigades were communist, the IRA was an Irish nationalist group, ETA is a Basque separatist organization and al-Qaeda is a global Islamist network. Nonetheless, using our ideal type we can accommodate these differences while also recognizing that they share enough features to be described collectively as 'terrorist groups'. It was important to note that, by 'ideal' type, Weber did not mean that the conception was perfect or desirable. Ideal types are 'pure' or 'one-sided' forms of real social phenomena. But constructing an ideal type of terrorism (or anything else) from common aspects of many observed cases is more effective and useful than using one terrorist group as a template for others.

Weber saw the emergence of modern society as accompanied by important shifts in patterns of social action. People were moving away from traditional beliefs grounded in superstition, religion, custom and longstanding habit. Instead, they engaged increasingly in rational, instrumental calculation that took into account efficiency and the future consequences of action. In industrial society, there was little room for sentiment or doing things just because they had 'always been done that way'. The emergence of science, modern technology and **bureaucracies** was described by Weber as **rationalization** – the organization of social life according to principles of efficiency and on the basis of technical knowledge. If religion and longstanding customs previously guided people's attitudes and values, modern society was marked by the rationalization of politics, religion, economic activity and even music. Weber had major concerns about the future of the rationalization process. He feared that the spread of bureaucracy, which is the most efficient form of administration, would stifle creativity and imprison individuals in a 'steel-hard cage' from which there would be little chance of escape. This bureaucratic domination, although based on rational principles, could crush the human spirit by over-regulating every aspect of life. For Weber, the seemingly progressive agenda of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, of scientific progress, rising wealth and increasing happiness, also brought with it a dark side with new dangers.

Three theoretical traditions

As we have seen, the classical founders of sociology – Durkheim, Marx and Weber – adopted different approaches to their studies. Durkheim emphasized the coercive strength of social forces in generating shared values and consensus. Marx also saw social structures as powerful, but argued that conflict and inequality were endemic in all societies. On the other hand, Max Weber focused attention on the meaningful character of social life and the social actions of individuals. These basic differences have persisted throughout the history of sociology, developing into three broad sociological traditions: functionalism (Durkheim), conflict theory (Marx) and social action or 'interactionist' approaches (Weber).

The three traditions are introduced briefly below, but you will encounter arguments and ideas that draw upon them throughout the book. After a while you should be able to identify which tradition any particular research study you come across is closest to.

We look in detail at more recently developed theoretical approaches, such as feminism, postmodernism and figurational studies, in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Functionalism

Functionalism holds that society is a complex system whose various parts work together to produce stability and that sociology should investigate their relationships. For example, we can analyse the religious beliefs and customs of a society by showing how they relate to other institutions because the different parts of a society always develop in close relation to one another. Functionalists, including Comte and Durkheim, have often used an organic analogy, comparing the operation of society to a living organism. They argue that the parts of a society work together, just as the various parts of the human body do, for the benefit of society as a whole. To study a bodily organ such as the heart, we need to show how it relates to other parts of the body. By pumping blood around the body, the heart plays a vital role in the continuation of the life of the organism. Similarly, analysing the function of a social institution such as the education system means showing the part it plays in the smooth running of a society.

Functionalism emphasises the importance of **moral consensus** in maintaining order and stability. Moral consensus exists when most people in a society share the same values. Functionalists regard order and balance as the normal state of society, and this social equilibrium is grounded in the moral consensus among society's members. For instance, Durkheim argued that religious beliefs reaffirm people's adherence to core social values, thereby contributing to the maintenance of social cohesion.

Until the 1960s, functionalism was probably the leading theoretical tradition in sociology, particularly in the United States. Talcott Parsons (1902–79) and Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) were two of its most prominent exponents. Merton's version of functionalism has been particularly influential. He distinguished between **manifest** and latent functions. **Manifest functions** are those known to, and intended by, the participants in a specific type of social activity. **Latent functions** are consequences of that activity of which the participants are unaware. For instance, Merton examined the rain dance performed by the Hopi tribe of Arizona and New Mexico. The Hopi believed that this ceremony will bring the rain they need for their crops (a manifest function). But the rain dance, Merton argued, also has the effect of promoting group cohesion and Hopi society (its latent function). A major part of sociological explanations, according to Merton, consists in uncovering the latent functions of intentional social activities and institutions.

Merton also distinguished between functions and dysfunctions. To look for the dysfunctional aspects of social behaviour means focusing on features of social life that challenge the existing order of things. For example, it is mistaken to suppose that religion is always functional and that it only contributes to social cohesion. When religious groups disagree with one another the result can be major social conflict, causing widespread social disruption. Thus, wars have often been fought between religious communities – as can be seen in the struggles between Protestants and Catholics in Europe or between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the Middle East.

Since the late 1970s the popularity of functionalism has waned as its limitations have become apparent. Though it is not true of Merton, many functionalist thinkers focused on stability and social order, minimizing social divisions and inequalities based on factors such as class, ethnicity and gender. Functionalism also placed too little emphasis on the role that creative social action can play within society. Many critics argued that functional analysis attributes to societies social qualities that they do not have. For instance, many functionalists often wrote as though whole societies have 'needs' and 'purposes', even though these concepts make sense only when applied to individual human beings. Just as significantly, in the 1960s and 1970s there emerged a wave of so-called new social movements – involving, among others, students, environmentalists and peace movements – which functional analysis seemed particularly ill-equipped to understand and explain.

Conflict theories

Like functionalists, sociologists using conflict theories emphasise the importance of social structures, and they advance a comprehensive 'model' to explain how society works. However, conflict theorists reject functionalism's emphasis on consensus. Instead, they highlight the importance of divisions in society and, in doing so, concentrate on issues of power, inequality and competitive struggle. They tend to see society as composed of distinct groups, each pursuing its own interests, which means the potential for conflict is always present. Conflict theorists examine the tensions between dominant and disadvantaged groups, looking to understand how relationships of control are established and maintained.

Both Marx and later Marxist approaches have been highly influential in conflict theory, though it is important to note that by no means all conflict theories are Marxist. Feminism, for example, is a form of conflict theory which concentrates on gender inequality – the unequal situation between men and women that exists in most societies. For some feminist theorists, gender inequality is more significant than class-based inequality and has a much longer history. Male domination of society continues even today, though women's political activism has made an impact in many areas of life, bringing about a measure of equality (Abbott et al. 2005).

As a conflict perspective in sociology, feminism draws attention to issues that sociologists previously ignored. In particular, feminist research and theorizing looks at the micro level as well as the macro world of large social structures. For example, feminists have studied unequal gender relations in domestic situations and other 'private' spheres of life (such as sexual relations), a controversial move in the 1960s and 1970s (Rahman and Jackson 2010). Feminists have also carried out research into the use of gender stereotypes and language in interactions, pointing out and challenging many taken-for-granted 'malestream' assumptions (favouring men over women) built into the structure of how we describe and think about the world. We can see this in numerous everyday words and expressions, such as chairman, mankind (to discuss humanity as such) and man-made. 'This is a simple illustration of the myriad ways in which women's subordinate position in society is reflected in the unacknowledged male domination of language itself.'

Of course feminists do not ignore the macro level either. Feminist studies have shown that gender inequality is embedded within modern social structures such as legal systems, education and schooling, government and politics, and many more. Similarly, in order to demonstrate the extent and scope of gender inequality, feminist work has made use of official statistics and examined patterns of change over long time periods. Feminist theorizing has continually developed into new areas and types of theory, and these are covered in more detail later in the book.

The conflict tradition in sociology has benefited from feminist research and theorizing. In particular, combining macro- and micro-level studies has shown that evidence of structured inequality can be found in the private sphere of social life every bit as much as in its large social structures. The 1970s slogan 'the personal is political' adequately summarizes why conflict sociology cannot ignore the personal aspects of our everyday lives (Jackson and Jones 1998).

Feminist research and theorizing can be found throughout the various chapters of the book, but there are significant discussions of feminist theory and its development in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives', and chapter 15, 'Gender and Sexuality'.

Symbolic interactionism

Weber's social action approach inspired many 'interactionist' forms of sociology. One of the most influential has been **symbolic interactionism**, which also owes much to the American social philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Symbolic interactionism springs from a concern with language and meaning. Mead argues that language allows us to become self-conscious beings – aware of our own individuality and able to see ourselves 'as others see us'. The key element in this process is the symbol. A symbol is something that stands for something else. For example, words that refer to objects are symbols which represent what we mean. The word 'spoon' is a symbol we use to describe the utensil that we use to consume soup. Non-verbal gestures and forms of communication are also symbols. Waving at someone or making a rude gesture both have symbolic value.

Symbolic interactionism directs our attention to the details of interpersonal interaction and how that detail is used to make sense of what others say and do. Sociologists influenced by symbolic interactionism often focus on face-to-face interactions in the context of everyday life. They stress the role interactions play in creating society and its institutions. Max Weber was an important indirect influence on this theoretical approach because, although he acknowledged the existence of social structures, he held that these were created through the actions of individuals.

While the symbolic interactionist perspective has yielded many insights into the nature of our actions in the course of day-to-day social life, it has been criticized for ignoring the larger issues of power and social structure and how these serve to constrain individual action. However, one very good example of interactionism that does take into account such issues is Arlie Hochschild's (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Hochschild observed training sessions and carried out interviews at Delta Airlines' Stewardess Training Centre in Atlanta, USA. She watched flight attendants being trained to manage their feelings as well as learning other skills. Hochschild recalled the comments of one instructor, a pilot: 'Now girls, I want you to go out there and really smile', he instructed. 'Your smile is your biggest asset. I want you to go out there and use it. Smile. Really smile. Really lay it on.'

Hochschild's research found that, as Western economies have become increasingly based on the delivery of services, the emotional style of the work we do needs to be understood. Her study of 'customer service' training might be familiar to anyone who has worked in fast food restaurants, shops or bars. Hochschild calls this training a form of 'emotional labour' – labour that requires the management of feelings in order to create a publicly observable and acceptable facial and bodily display. According to Hochschild, companies providing services increasingly lay claim not only to workers' physical activity but also to their presentation of emotions.

This research considered an aspect of life that most people took for granted and showed that sociology could deepen our understanding of it. Hochschild found that service workers - like physical labourers - often feel a sense of distance or **alienation** from the particular aspect of themselves that is given up in work. The physical labourer's arm, for example, might come to feel like a piece of machinery and only incidentally a part of the person moving it. Likewise, service workers often told Hochschild that their smiles were on them but not of them. In other words, they felt distanced from their own emotions. Hochschild's book is an influential application of symbolic interactionism, and many other scholars have built on her ideas to expand the interactionist tradition.

Traditions and theories

Functionalism, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism are theoretical traditions - broad, overall orientations to the subject matter of sociology. However, we can make a distinction between these broad **traditions** and the particular **theories** which develop from them. Theories are more narrowly focused and are attempts to explain particular social conditions, events or social changes. For example, feminism is part of the conflict tradition, as feminists see basic conflict in society between the interests of men and women. But feminist sociologists have also devised numerous narrower theories to explain specific aspects of gender relations (patterned relationships between men and women), such as why more married women are entering paid work, why women are still seen as responsible for childcare, or why young men now do less well in education than young women. Many theories of this kind have been developed in the different areas of life that sociologists study.

The fact that sociology is not dominated by a single theoretical tradition might seem to be a sign of weakness, but this is not the case. The jostling of rival traditions and theories is an expression of the vitality of the sociological enterprise. In studying human beings - ourselves - theoretical diversity rescues us from dogma and stagnation. Human behaviour is many-sided, and it is unlikely that a single theoretical perspective could cover all of its aspects. Diversity in theoretical thinking provides a rich source of ideas which stimulate the creative capacities that are so essential to progress in social scientific work.

Levels of analysis: microsociology and macrosociology

One important distinction between different theoretical perspectives involves the level of analysis at which each is directed. The study of everyday behaviour in situations of face-to-face interaction is usually called **microsociology**, while **macrosociology** is the analysis of large-scale social structures and long-term processes of change. At first glance, it might seem that microanalysis and macroanalysis are entirely distinct from each other, but in fact the two are closely connected (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Giddens 1984).

Macroanalysis is essential if we are to understand the institutional backdrop of daily life. The ways in which people live their everyday lives are influenced by social institutions, as is obvious when we consider the impact on our lives of the education system, the political framework and the system of laws by which we live. Similarly, while we may choose to send an acquaintance an email message, we can also choose to fly thousands of miles to spend the weekend with a friend. Neither of these communications would be possible without the amazingly complex global infrastructure of our world and the many people, organizations and institutions required to build and operate them.

Microanalysis is in turn necessary for illuminating the details of such broad institutional patterns. Face-to-face interaction is clearly the main basis of all forms of social organization, no matter how large the scale. Suppose we are studying a business corporation. We can understand its activities by looking at face-to-face behaviour - the interaction of directors in the boardroom, workers in the

various offices, or workers on the factory floor. We may not build up a complete picture of the whole corporation this way, but we could certainly make a significant contribution to understanding how the organization works 'on the ground'.

Of course, people do not live their lives as isolated individuals, nor are their lives completely determined by large social structures. Sociology tells us that everyday life is lived in families, social groups, communities and neighbourhoods. At this level - the meso (or 'middle') level of society - it is possible to see the influence and effects of both micro- and macro-level phenomena. Many sociological studies of local communities deal with the macrosociological impact of huge social changes, such as economic restructuring, but they also explore the ways in which individuals, groups and social movements cope with such changes and turn them to their advantage.

For example, when in the mid-1980s the British government decided to reduce the role of coal in its energy policy, this was disastrous for traditional mining communities, as people's livelihoods were threatened by mine closures and unemployment. However, many former miners retrained with local companies to find work in other industries (Waddington et al. 2001). Similarly, the 2008 financial crisis led to rising unemployment and falling living standards, but this also forced some people to learn new skills or start their own small businesses. Individuals are not simply at the mercy of large-scale social and economic changes but adapt creatively to them. Studying the community level of social life provides a window through which to observe the interaction of micro and macro levels of society. Much applied research (research with a practical aim) in sociology takes place at this meso level of social reality.

In later chapters, we will see further examples of how interaction in micro contexts affects larger social processes, and how macro systems in turn influence more confined settings of social life. However, there remains one fundamental issue to be tackled in this chapter: what exactly is sociology for?

What is sociology for?

Sociology has several practical implications for our lives, as C. Wright Mills emphasized when developing his idea of the sociological imagination. First, sociology gives us an awareness of cultural differences that allows us to see the social world from many perspectives. Quite often, if we properly understand how others live, we also acquire a better understanding of what their problems are. Practical policies that are not based on an informed awareness of the ways of life of people they affect have little chance of success. For example, a white English social worker operating in a predominantly Latin American community in South London will not gain the confidence of its members without being sensitive to the different experiences of ethnic groups in the UK.

Second, sociological research provides practical help in assessing the results of policy initiatives. A programme of practical reform may simply fail to achieve what its designers sought or may produce unintended consequences of an unfortunate kind. In the years following the Second World War, large public housing blocks were built in city centres in many countries. These aimed to provide high standards of accommodation for low-income groups from slum areas. However, research later showed that many people who had moved from their previous dwellings to large apartment blocks felt isolated and unhappy. High-rise apartment blocks often became dilapidated and provided breeding grounds for crime.

Third, many sociologists concern themselves directly with practical matters as professionals. People trained in sociology are to be found as industrial consultants, researchers in 'think tanks', urban planners, social workers and personnel managers, as well as in many other careers. An understanding of society and social relations can also be useful for future careers in law and criminal justice, journalism, business and the health professions.

Fourth, and in some ways most importantly, sociology can provide us all with self-enlightenment or increased self-understanding. The more we know about why we act as we do and about the overall workings of our society, the more likely we are to be able to influence our own future. Sociology does not just assist powerful groups or governments. The knowledge sociologists produce is made available to everyone and is often used by voluntary agencies, charities and social movements to bolster their case for change. However, sociological research findings, in themselves, are 'neutral'. That is, they can tell us what society is like, how it 'works' and how it changes over time, but they cannot advise on whether it should be that way. That is the proper subject of competing political and moral debates involving everyone.

Public and professional sociology

In recent years, some sociologists have argued that sociology has not engaged enough with the public and has concentrated too much on internal professional debates. In 2004, in his presidential address to the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Michael Burawoy argued for a new 'public sociology' that would forge relationships with audiences beyond the narrow confines of universities. He maintains that the professionalization of sociology in the twentieth century has been beneficial, but it also led to sociologists talking more to each other than to the public 'out there' (Burawoy 2005).

Burawoy says there are four types of sociology: professional sociology, public sociology, policy sociology and critical sociology. **Professional sociology** is the conventional, university-based, scientific sociology which generates large research programmes and bodies of knowledge and provides academic careers. **Policy sociology** includes all those studies which pursue goals defined by

clients, such as funding bodies and government departments looking to tackle social problems. **Critical sociology** is 'the conscience of professional sociology', pointing out the assumptions of research projects and professional sociology (Burawoy 2005). Feminist theory is one example of this strand, drawing attention to the lacunae in and unstated biases of the scientific sociology. **Public sociology**, that is, fourth type and is rooted in dialogue. That is, public sociology speaks with social groups such as trade unions, social movements, faith groups and organizations in civil society in a genuine conversation about the future direction of society. In this sense, the suggestion that a more politically engaged sociology is necessary, though this is not something that all sociologists would support.

For Burawoy and others, public sociology still depends on professional sociology, but the two exist in a relationship of 'antagonistic interdependence'. Scientific sociology produces research methods, empirical evidence and theories which are necessary for public sociology's engagement with non-academic audiences. But, unlike professional sociology, the public version opens up a dialogue with those audiences, allowing the discipline itself to be partly shaped by the concerns of non-sociologists.

Critics point out that this is a very stark dividing line. In practice, much of today's professional sociology already tries hard to engage with participants and outside audiences. There is also much more overlap between the four types described (Calhoun 2005; Eriksen 2006). Many feminist studies, for instance, are not simply critiques of scientific sociology but are empirical themselves, using research methods and questionnaires and contributing to professional sociology. Critics also argue that there is a danger that the discipline will become subordinated to the political motives of social movements and activist groups. If the image and reputation of professional sociology is tainted, then it may, paradoxically, have serious consequences for public support for the discipline. And if public sociology really is dependent on the hard-won scientific credibility of professional sociology, it too could suffer. Nonetheless, in spite of such criticisms, the basic argument that professional sociology has not done enough to engage with public concerns has been quite widely welcomed. The lack of a public presence for sociology is seen as damaging to the public awareness of sociological theories and evidence, which leaves a gap to be filled by other disciplines such as political science, history or psychology. Professional associations, such as the British Sociological Association, have taken steps to encourage their members to develop more of a media presence as an initial move towards raising the profile of sociology in society, and we can probably expect this trend to continue.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that sociology has developed as a discipline in which we set aside our personal view of the world in order to look more carefully at the influences that shape our lives and those of others. Sociology emerged as a distinct intellectual endeavour with the development of modern societies, and the study of such societies remains a central concern. However, in an increasingly interconnected global world, sociologists must take a similarly global view of their subject matter if they are properly to understand and explain it. During the founding period of sociology, society's central problems included social class conflict, wealth distribution, the alleviation of poverty and the question of where the process of modernization was headed.

In the contemporary period, though most of these issues remain, it can be argued that sociology's central problems are shifting. Today, societies are grappling with other issues, such as rapid globalization, international terrorism, environmental damage, global risks with potentially high consequences, multiculturalism and gender inequality, to name just a few. This means that sociologists have to question whether the theories designed to grasp the problems of an earlier period have any purchase on the problems of today. If not, then they will need to design new theories that are able to perceive what Karl Mannheim once called 'the secret of these new times'. The ongoing debate about the status and continuing relevance of the classical sociological theories occurs throughout this book.

Sociology is not just an abstract intellectual field, but has practical implications for people's lives. Learning to become a sociologist should not be a dull or tedious endeavour. The best way to make sure it does not become so is to approach the subject in an imaginative way and to relate sociological ideas and findings to situations in your own life. In that way, you should learn important things about yourself, societies and the wider human world.

Now you have read the chapters, based on what you have read answer the following questions. (Feel free to say as much or as little as you like)

(This will be checked so I can get a sense of your writing style)

1. What is Sociology and what is it for?

2. Explain 2 disagreements between sociologists of sociological schools you found in the chapters.

3. Briefly explain 3 of the sociological traditions covered in the chapters.

Task 2: SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Based on your reading you are going to decide which perspectives agree and disagree and which you agree with most.

Functionalism
Marxism
Feminism
Postmodernism
Social action theory / symbolic interactionism
Phenomenology
Positivism

4. Which theory do I think I agree with most? (or find most interesting) Explain why referring to what you like or dislike about the ideas.

5. Which theory do I think I agree with least? (or find least interesting) Explain why referring to what you like or dislike about the ideas.

6. Is sociology what I thought it was?