Principles of sociology

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Undergraduate study in Economics, Management, Finance and the Social Sciences

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to pressure of work the author is unable to enter into any correspondence relating to, or
arising from, the guide. If you have any comments on this subject guide, favourable or
unfavourable, please use the form at the back of this guide.

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Introduction

What this course is about

Welcome to this course – 21 Principles of sociology. Some people worry about sociology; some feel that it is 'too theoretical' or that it does not relate to the 'real world', others suggest that there is too much reading and that it requires great feats of memory. We hope to dispel these myths and introduce you to a subject which is interesting and which will provide a basis throughout your studies.

No formal prerequisites are required to study this course, but you do need to have an enquiring mind and be prepared to read and think. There is a health warning though – if you take this subject you will never see things in the same way again!

Principles of sociology is a ‘100’ course and, as such, provides the essential grounding for further study in the subject and also provides the knowledge and critical skills which are necessary for the degrees in Management and Business. This course is one of the most popular options in the Diploma in Economics programme as it helps students to be critical of the information they receive and encourages them to think logically and consistently.

We have designed this course to provide the necessary grounding in sociological theory and methods of social research. Students will then be required to apply this knowledge to substantive areas of sociology.

You may be taking the BSc Sociology degree or a Diploma for Graduates in Sociology and this course will be the basis upon which all the other courses rest. Students in Business, Management and Information Systems will take this course as a key ‘servicing course’ that will provide you with knowledge of the social world and the key ways in which it can be researched.

In all cases we hope you enjoy studying this subject.

What is sociology?

First we should start by attempting to define sociology. (Chapter 1 in Section A will go into much more detail as to the nature of this subject.)

The most basic view of sociology is that it is about understanding relationships in human societies, but sociologists do not agree about what societies are and how they should be studied and so no one definition will suffice. However, one of the most important things to remember is that sociology is more than commonsense! You will be introduced to the subject of sociology and will be encouraged to think how different it is from other social sciences that you may have studied. You will be introduced to different sociological theories and to the ‘classical’ and more modern sociologists. You will be encouraged to see the development of sociology as it developed from and reacted to the Enlightenment. The relationship between these theories and assumptions of the social world will be investigated and you will see how the techniques of social research are applied in an academic manner. We have introduced globalisation as a compulsory topic to illustrate how sociology can help in understanding and explaining this phenomenon. In Section C you will be able to apply these theories and approaches to particular areas in sociology which are of interest to you.
What skills you will learn from studying this course

By the end of the course you will have gained knowledge and learnt some important skills:

• to be critical of any data and theories that you read or hear about and, of course, to be critical of your own work

• be creative and able to link ideas from this course and the other disciplines you are studying to create new ways of thinking about social phenomena

• to be challenged. This is not an easy subject and it requires you to think deeply about the materials and be able to deal with more than one way of thinking about the social world. Do the best that you can

• to be cooperative and share ideas and materials. It is a good idea to study with other students and friends, and to try to express your ideas with them. (If this is not possible, try thinking aloud.) This is an important skill for the world of work where you are often required to work in teams.

Finally, LSE’s motto is rerum cognoscere causas which means ‘to know the causes of things’. You should not be content with simplistic explanations – you should always look beneath the explanations for a deeper understanding of the social world.

Learning outcomes

At the end of the course, and having completed the Essential reading and Activities, you should be able to:

• describe the nature of the sociological perspective and the major theories of society

• apply the major sociological perspectives to at least two aspects of social life

• read the set texts critically and creatively, and select relevant material cited by the authors selectively in their examination answers

• explain and evaluate the scope of the research process and the approach of different methods of social inquiry and be able to criticise these

• explain the relationship between theory and method in sociology

• outline the debates surrounding sociology as a science and the major theories of knowledge

• evaluate the sociological debates surrounding the processes of modernisation and globalisation and be able to compare and criticise these

• apply the skills and knowledge learnt in sections A and B to a specialist topic in section C

• describe the key sociological debates surrounding the subject matter of the area chosen, especially in relation to the development of key concepts, epistemological concerns and social research.
The structure of the course

Sections A and B are compulsory for everyone and make up 75 per cent of the syllabus. Thereafter you are free to choose one option only from a variety of topics.

Section A: Social theory and research: compulsory

This has been written by Dr Steve Taylor with Rosemary Gosling. It makes up half the syllabus and concentrates on questions relating to the nature of sociology; the methods which sociologists use; methodology and the major sociological perspectives. The key aspects in relation to individuals and society are examined through the concepts of role, socialisation and identity. The chapters in Section A account for 50 per cent of the marks and are examined by a compulsory question, which is subdivided into questions requiring short answers and one longer question relating to a particular sociologist or perspective.

You should spend at least half of your allocated study time on Section A. This is not only because of its length and depth but because the subjects covered are essential for the other sections of the syllabus.

Section B: Globalisation and social change: compulsory

Having obtained some background on the nature of sociology we want you to be able to apply what you know to one of the core sociological problems – social change. Before you start to study this section you should be aware of the major changes that have occurred in the last two centuries and how the growth of sociology is connected with an attempt to explain these changes. Globalisation is an important topic, not just because we are interested in knowing whether we are living in a new age but because there is so much disagreement about the topic. These disagreements have their basis in the fundamental assumptions about what the motors of social change are, and how do we ‘know’ if there has been such a change.

These are not difficult chapters, but you must read around the topic and, of course, read the text allocated. You will be rewarded for your ability to keep abreast of the debates which you will be introduced to in this course. The areas which you should keep abreast of are:

- the reactions to the social or global changes that are occurring – the behaviour of the anti-globalists for example and the financial crises that started in 2008
- whether globalisation has increased inequality between and within nations
- whether the nation state is becoming less or more important.

You will be rewarded if you can demonstrate to the Examiners that you have read widely and can apply what you have read and understood to the theories and explanations provided in these chapters.

This section has been written by Simon Dickason.

Section C: Specialist topics: choose one

How do I choose which topic to take?

To help you choose which one topic from Section C to study in detail we outline here the content of each chapter. You may know already, because of your own personal interests, which Section C topic you want to study, but if you don’t, then this information will help you to think about your interests and how to choose a course which fits well with your future course choices.
The approach taken by the authors in writing these chapters requires you to have a good grounding in sociology before you begin to study one of the chapters. It is an opportunity to use the knowledge of sociology that you will have gained from Section A, especially ontology and epistemology. It is important that you understand that, for most of these chapters, there is a considerable amount of material which relates to a discussion of the ‘essentially contested’ nature of the core concepts used by the authors.

You should be aware of how the sociologists mentioned in the chapters have gathered their data and what theory has guided their research. Knowledge of the key debates that have been discussed in Section A is important, as in all cases you will be expected to use the key debates to inform your reading of your chosen subject area. You will be expected to demonstrate knowledge of the relevant sociological theories when writing your examination answers.

**Gender**
This has been written by Dr Suki Ali of the Department of Sociology at LSE. The reading is directed and draws on the work on epistemology and ontology covered in Section A. You will be required to reflect on what you know in relation to your own society and you will be rewarded in the examination if you do.

**‘Race’ and ethnicity**
This has been written by Dr Claire Alexander of the Department of Sociology at LSE and was updated in 2009 by Malcolm James. The authors address theoretical issues directly and give a fresh approach to the study of this subject. The key texts give an in-depth approach to this subject and will require a careful reading. You will be exposed to different definitions of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ and the different approaches to the issues raised. Dr Alexander’s major research is on ‘identity’ and this topic is examined in this chapter.

**Social inequality and social injustice**
This has been written by Dr Angus Stewart. Although you must choose only one topic to study, if you choose to study this one in depth it would help you if you were to read the Power chapter as well. This chapter leads on from Section B (Chapters 5–8) on Globalisation and social change very well and you should not attempt this chapter without a clear understanding of globalisation.

**Religion and society**
This chapter, which has been written by Dr David Palmer from the Department of Sociology at LSE, puts a strong emphasis on research methods, and considers religion in relation to social integration, social conflict, economic culture, modernisation and globalisation. When taking a sociological approach, it is important not to look at religion in isolation; therefore, if you choose this chapter it would also be helpful, although not required of you, to read some of the other topics for Section C, and to think about how religion intersects with ethnicity, gender, power, inequality and organisation.

**Power in society**
Dr Angus Stewart, who has taught political sociology at LSE for a number of years, has written this chapter, and it is of particular relevance to those of you who are studying for the politics and international relations degree.
There may be some overlap with the Politics Level 1 (or 100) course: **114 Democratic politics and the state**, but the approach will be different. There is a concentration on the key ontological and epistemological concerns as to the nature of power and the possibility of ‘knowing’ who has power.

**The sociology of organisations**

This has been written by Jill Timms and is of particular interest to you when you take **127 Organisation theory: an interdisciplinary approach**, **79 Elements of social and applied psychology** and/or other management subjects. The material is straightforward but the examination questions will not ask you to describe a particular theory without some criticism. You must locate your understanding of organisations clearly within the sociological perspective and be aware of the many different explanations involved. If you are studying **107 Introduction to business and management** at the same time, you should use relevant material on organisations from this chapter in that course and vice versa.

**Reading advice and other resources**

Reading for this course is always split into two types; **Essential** and **Further** reading. You will need to use your textbooks in a slightly different way for Sections A and B than for section C.

You will find a full and detailed reading list for the whole course at the end of this subject guide on p.339. For full details of the editions and ISBNs please check this reading list.

Detailed reading references in this subject guide refer to the editions of the set textbooks listed below. New editions of one or more of these textbooks may have been published by the time you study this course. You can use a more recent edition of any of the books; use the detailed chapter and section headings and the index to identify relevant readings. Also check the virtual learning environment (VLE) regularly for updated guidance on readings.

**Reading for Section A**

We have provided you with a choice of three major textbooks as introductory reading for Section A; you will only need to buy one of them. We suggest that you decide which text to buy in relation to your choice of subject in Section C, as some of the textbooks are also used as key reading for Section C.

Choose one from:

  
  This is an excellent, clearly written text for the theoretical aspects of the course such as Section A. It does not have as much material on globalisation as Macionis and Plummer or Giddens, and, although it is not essential reading for the Section C chapters on race and gender, it will support them well. This book is supported by a website and there are lecturers’ notes online.

  or

Students are very happy using this text. It is written in a clear and simple style. The chapters on globalisation and identity are very useful, however on its own it does not have enough material for the theoretical aspects of Section A, the relationships between theories and methods, and methods of social research.

or


We strongly advise you to buy the fourth edition of Macionis and Plummer; however we have also provided references to the third edition:


This text is easy to read and is well illustrated with many examples, charts and pictures. As indicated by its title, it takes a global approach to the subject and so is an ideal text for students studying this subject on the International Programmes. However, it does not cover many of the theoretical aspects of the course and will not offer much support for your Section C topic.

We then move on to the textbooks which specifically cover the theoretical aspects; we have indicated two texts of which you should buy one.

Choose one from:


This covers all the theories indicated in the reading for Section A. However, although the style is clear, some of the chapters have been organised in an unusual way and so it is very important to make use of the directions to specific reading provided in the subject guide.

or


This contains much more material than is required for this course. However, it approaches the subject historically and therefore it helps students to locate the sociologists clearly within the society and time they were writing. It is clearly written and you should have little problem in reading it. However, as with all texts it should be read in relation to the topic studied. Again we have indicated the relevant chapters in the textbook in reading advice given in this subject guide.

Cuff et al. (2006) and Lee and Newby (2000) are available to view online via the VLE.

Reading for Section B

There is one major text for this Section which you will need to buy or have access to.


You will also need to refer to the relevant chapters in the compulsory textbooks which you have bought for Section A.
Reading for Section C

These chapters are written in an academic sociological style and require students to read the key texts in parallel with the material in this subject guide. They have not been designed to be read as a novel! You need to do the reading as you tackle each section to ensure that you have fully understood it before you proceed to the next section. The authors have provided you with some thinking points; our strong advice is that you should work through your Section C topic slowly and carefully ensuring that you fully understand each section before proceeding to the next. This will help your understanding and provide you with the necessary critical skills required for these chapters.

You are given reading advice at the start of each chapter. At the end of this subject guide we have provided a full list of all reading referred to in this subject guide for ease of reference.

Websites

Websites are increasingly sophisticated sources of information and there is a great deal of material available. However, beware of the ‘sample essays’ and ‘examination tips’ websites – these may not necessarily help you to write and think in the style and manner that will help you for this course on the International Programmes. The websites relating to the classical sociologists are usually very good indeed. We have indicated some in the subject guide. Some web page addresses may change during the life of this subject guide; we have no control over this. If a page is no longer available please try an internet search to find its new location.

Video/DVD

For some chapters we are able to recommend a video/DVD to you, which may help you by giving you a chance to ‘see’ sociologists in action.

Online study resources

In addition to the subject guide and the Essential reading, it is crucial that you take advantage of the study resources that are available online for this course, including the VLE and the Online Library.

You can access the VLE, the Online Library and your University of London email account via the Student Portal at:
http://my.londoninternational.ac.uk

You should receive your login details in your study pack. If you have not, or you have forgotten your login details, please email uolia.support@london.ac.uk quoting your student number.

The VLE

The VLE, which complements this subject guide, has been designed to enhance your learning experience, providing additional support and a sense of community. It forms an important part of your study experience with the University of London and you should access it regularly.

The VLE provides a range of resources for EMFSS courses:

- Self-testing activities: Doing these allows you to test your own understanding of subject material.
- Electronic study materials: The printed materials that you receive from the University of London are available to download, including updated reading lists and references.
- Past examination papers and Examiners’ commentaries: These provide advice on how each examination question might best be answered.
• A student discussion forum: This is an open space for you to discuss interests and experiences, seek support from your peers, work collaboratively to solve problems and discuss subject material.

• Videos: There are recorded academic introductions to the subject, interviews and debates and, for some courses, audio-visual tutorials and conclusions.

• Recorded lectures: For some courses, where appropriate, the sessions from previous years’ Study Weekends have been recorded and made available.

• Study skills: Expert advice on preparing for examinations and developing your digital literacy skills.

• Feedback forms.

Some of these resources are available for certain courses only, but we are expanding our provision all the time and you should check the VLE regularly for updates.

Making use of the Online Library

The Online Library contains a huge array of journal articles and other resources to help you read widely and extensively.

To access the majority of resources via the Online Library you will either need to use your University of London Student Portal login details, or you will be required to register and use an Athens login:
http://tinyurl.com/ollathens

The easiest way to locate relevant content and journal articles in the Online Library is to use the Summon search engine.

If you are having trouble finding an article listed in a reading list, try removing any punctuation from the title, such as single quotation marks, question marks and colons.

For further advice, please see the online help pages:
www.external.shl.lon.ac.uk/summon/about.php

Hours of study and use of this subject guide

You should aim to study this course over eight months and you should spend at least seven hours on this course each week. You will need to read widely and think deeply, discussing the issues raised with other students or colleagues. You should practise answering the short questions in Section A and gradually build up to answering the essays for Sections B and C. You need to make sure that you have clearly understood Sections A and B before moving on to Section C.

We have suggested a study schedule here to help you plan your time; this is based on completing your course in one year, starting in October. You will need to adjust this for your own study year.
The examination and examination advice

**Important:** the information and advice given in the following section are based on the examination structure used at the time this guide was written. Please note that subject guides may be used for several years. Because of this we strongly advise you to always check both the current Regulations for relevant information about the examination, and the VLE where you should be advised of any forthcoming changes. You should also carefully check the rubric/ instructions on the paper you actually sit and follow those instructions.

We have provided you with a detailed examination advice section and a full Sample examination paper at the end of this subject guide (p.335). There is also advice about how the marks are allocated to each style of question in Section A.

The examination structure has been designed in such a way that you will be rewarded for your knowledge of the subject and your ability to demonstrate an understanding of the key issues.

For Section A, we suggest that you might also like to look at the past years’ examination papers.

At the end of Sections B and C, sample examination questions have been included for you to practise on.

You are required to know all the material that has been indicated in the subject guide, but more importantly you should indicate that you can understand this, especially the concepts involved and the perspectives of the relevant sociologists. You can demonstrate understanding by answering the question that you have been asked directly. You will be rewarded if your essays are well structured and if you select and use only material that is relevant to the question. You do not need to mention everything that you have learnt and should answer the question economically, using references and examples which indicate that you are aware of the relative importance of each.

Remember, it is important to check the VLE for:

- up-to-date information on examination and assessment arrangements for this course
- where available, past examination papers and Examiners’ commentaries for the course which give advice on how each question might best be answered.
In Section A, we shall be addressing four key questions:

• What is sociology about? (Chapter 1)
• How do sociologists do research? (Chapter 2)
• What is the relationship between theory and method in sociology? (Chapter 3)
• How have sociologists tried to explain how societies work and change? (Chapter 4)
Chapter 1: What is sociology?

Written by Dr Steve Taylor.

Aims of the chapter

The aims of this chapter are to give you a clearer idea of the following:

• how to approach studying sociology
• what sociology is
• the differences between sociology and commonsense
• what is meant by sociological thinking
• the relationship between the individual and society
• socialisation and identity formation.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter, and having completed the Essential reading and Activities, you should:

• know how to study sociology, what is meant by active learning, and what examiners will be looking for
• be able to describe what sociologists study
• be able to identify some of the key ways that sociology gives us insights that go beyond commonsense understanding
• be able to explain what is meant by thinking sociologically and sociologists' interest in social order, social change and the relationship between the individual and society
• be able to explain how our identities arise from social relationships
• be able to describe what sociologists mean by socialisation and identity, and how Parsons and Mead put forward different explanations of these processes.

Essential reading

For full edition details, please refer to the full reading lists in the Appendix to this subject guide.

Choose one of:

Chapters 1 and 4.


Further reading

It is worth dipping into any of the following classic introductions to help give you a ‘feel’ of sociology and sociological thinking, but note that these books can be a little more difficult to understand than the textbooks. (A reminder: for full details of the editions and ISBNs please check the reading list at the end of this subject guide. It is worth noting that reading lists are updated annually and provided online even when the subject guide is not fully revised that year.)

Websites
www.sociolog.com
This website gives links to a range of other sociology resources.
www.sociology.org.uk
This is a British sociology website, geared towards the British school syllabuses but it has a lot of good introductory material and useful links to specialist sociology websites.

Video/DVD
Introducing Sociology (halo vine, 2004) [www.halovine.com].
A short video/DVD giving some insights into ‘sociological thinking’ by explaining what sociology is about and showing how a sociologist might bring a very different perspective to everyday things like the mobile (or hand) phone and the security camera.

Works cited
Mead, G. Mind, self and society. (University of Chicago, 1934).

1.1 Introduction
We are living in a world of dramatic and unprecedented social change: new technologies and cultural upheavals are transforming our lives. As prosperity grows and cultural taboos break down, millions of people in modern industrialised societies are confronted by more choices than ever about how to live their lives. However, it seems that the drive for ever greater prosperity and new-found freedoms and lifestyle choices come at a price, as rates of crime, mental disorder, drug addiction and self harm continue to rise.

So how did the world become this way? Why are people’s lives today so different from those of their parents and grandparents? What are the possibilities for our lives in the future? These are the questions that sociology asks and attempts to answer. Sociology is about trying to understand the social world, but it is also about trying to understand ourselves, and how societies make us who we are.

This chapter is designed to help you start thinking like a sociologist. It is not about learning theories or facts and figures. It is about understanding what it means to ‘think sociologically’. It is simple and, we hope, you should find it quite easy to follow. Once you start thinking sociologically you will find the later chapters on research and theory and the topic areas covered later in this chapter and in Sections B and C easier to understand.
To make the most of this chapter, take time out regularly to stop and reflect on the points being made and attempt to answer the questions that have been set in the Activities. Do not rush the chapter, but rather ask yourself all the time, ‘What does this tell me about how a sociologist thinks about the world?’

Let’s start with an example. Before reading any further attempt the Activity below.

**Activity 1.1 A changing world**

Write down five ways that your life is different from that of your mother (if you are female) and your father (if you are male) when they were your age. If you cannot compare yourself with a parent for some reason, then choose another relative or acquaintance 20–30 years older than you.

Look at your list. It doesn’t matter what you have written down. Obviously there are all sorts of possibilities. Maybe your aspirations are different from your mother or father? Maybe your values are different? Maybe you have (or hope to have) very different work from your mother or father?

Now try to account for those differences. How would you explain them? Are they just individual differences, or can you relate them to wider changes in your society? For example, have educational opportunities, patterns of work or certain social values changed since your parents were young? Do you think these might have influenced some of the differences you have identified between yourself and your mother or father?

By asking yourself these kinds of questions, by exploring how personal lives may be influenced by wider social changes, you are already starting to think like a sociologist.

### 1.2 Approaching sociology

**Critical thinking**

So how should you approach studying sociology? It’s important to make it clear from the start that sociology is not a subject you can simply learn. You also have to question things, compare different ideas and, sometimes, you have to criticise what you read. So if you find yourself simply trying to remember lists of facts you need to learn in a different way in order to do well in sociology. Lists of ‘learned’ points will not impress examiners.

Sociology is primarily about **understanding** ideas, and examiners will be looking for evidence of this understanding.

More specifically, to do well in sociology, you must be able to:

- **describe** key sociological ideas, theories and studies
- **discuss** and **compare** sociological concepts, theories and studies
- **apply** sociological ideas, theories and studies to different aspects of social life.

All these skills involve active learning and thinking.

**Active learning**

Some people may tell you that examinations are all about memory. This is wrong. Obviously, you have to recall information in all subjects, but the main emphasis in sociology is on testing your thinking abilities rather than your memory. You have to apply your knowledge to the problem, or question, that has been set. This involves actively thinking rather than passively trying to absorb information as a sponge absorbs liquids.
The idea of actively thinking about a problem can be illustrated with an example from everyday life.

Imagine you have returned to your house and found you have forgotten your key and there is no one in. You have to ask yourself some questions and work out the best solution. Is there some other way you can get into the house without a key? How many other people have keys and which one of these people would it be the best to contact? Is there somewhere else you could go and wait? Should you smash a window to get in? Here, you are certainly drawing on your existing knowledge (for example, who else has a key?) but you are doing much more than that, you are also actively thinking about the problem and working out possible solutions.

Stop and think about this for a moment. How can this story help us to tackle questions in sociology?

You certainly won’t be given a question asking you to, ‘Describe three ways to get into your house.’ But you might be asked, for example, to ‘Identify three ways sociologists can study the past’, or ‘Compare the costs and benefits of using structured and unstructured interviews.’

Answering such questions well involves going through the same process described above in relation to being locked out of your house. You have to work out the possibilities, compare and contrast their relative merits and, above all, focus on the problem you are confronted with.

This involves active processes throughout your period of study, such as asking yourself questions, looking for links between different parts of the subject, questioning the things you read about, noting down what you do not understand and looking for the answers from your books or this subject guide.

The first step on the road to understanding sociology is to ask ourselves what the subject is about. Any subject is easier to understand once you have some grasp of its field of inquiry and what it is trying to do.

Let’s begin by introducing some of the key ideas of sociology and the questions it asks.

### 1.3 What is sociology?

**Activity 1.2 What is sociology?**

Before reading any further write down in one sentence what you think sociology is. Try this even if you have never studied the subject before. It is a useful activity to try to think about a topic first before reading something about it.

Now try to develop your definition by attempting two further questions:

- What do you think sociologists study?
- How do you think a sociologist’s understanding of some aspect of social life would be different from a ‘commonsense’ understanding?

**The study of social relationships**

The word sociology comes from a combination of the Latin socius (meaning ‘companion’) and the Greek logos (meaning ‘the study of’), so the word literally means the study of companionship, or social relations.

Sociologists are primarily interested in all that happens to people in terms of their relationships with others. These may be:
personal relationships with people we know well, such as family members, friends and people we know at work or college

• impersonal relationships, such as those we have with people who serve us in shops, take away our rubbish or drive the taxi we are in

• indirect relations with people we neither know nor see, but whose actions influence our lives. For example, a decision by corporate executives in the United States to shut down an overseas plant can affect the working and domestic lives of thousands of people who live nowhere near the USA.

Sociologists are interested in the study of individuals' personalities and behaviour but they are also interested in how they relate to other people. Therefore, the word relationship is very important in sociology. All sociology is about relationships of one sort or another: for example, relationships between different societies, between different parts of a society and between individuals and societies.

The fact that sociology is about social relationships that can take many different forms means that its scope is very wide. It can range from things that affect large parts of the world over long periods of time, such as industrialisation or globalisation, to the study of specific social organisations, such as schools or families, right down to two people having a brief conversation in an elevator.

Thus it is very difficult to give a precise definition of sociology because it operates at different levels. However, the key idea in all sociological research is that people’s lives and behaviour cannot be understood apart from the social contexts in which they participate, directly or indirectly.

From this starting point, sociologists want to know more about these social contexts, how they are produced and how they shape people’s lives.

Social institutions

Social relationships are rarely random. Normally they are organised in various ways. Sociologists refer to these patterns of behaviour as social institutions. Types of family life, education and religious practice are examples of social institutions, where behaviour tends to be regular or patterned. What we loosely refer to as a ‘society’ is actually a complex of many social institutions. In contemporary industrial societies we find, for example, political, family, economic, educational, legal and religious institutions. Although these institutions seem to be separate and distinct they are also related to each other in various ways.

To give a simple example: productive institutions are dependent on educational institutions for a skilled workforce, educational institutions are dependent on the government for their funding, and government institutions, in turn, rely on productive institutions to create the wealth to finance government spending. Sociologists call this institutional interdependence.

![Figure 1.1: Institutional interdependence](image-url)
As a result of this institutional interdependence, many sociologists adopt a structural, or macro, perspective that means looking at societies as systems, and trying to work out how different institutions ‘function’ to produce particular outcomes.

Sociologists in the UK and the USA studying the relationships between the institutions of family and school have found that, on average, children from lower-class or working-class backgrounds have more problems at school and leave with fewer qualifications.

Think about this for a moment. Can you think of some reasons for this?

Two US sociologists, Bowles and Gintis (1976), adopted a structural approach to explore this problem. They argued that schools prepared large numbers of young people, usually from the more deprived backgrounds, for low-paid, subordinate jobs.

However, as we shall see, this ‘structural approach’ tells only part of the story. Sociologists are not only interested in exploring relationships between social institutions, they are also interested in the relationship between individuals and institutions. Exploring this question usually involves adopting a micro, or small-scale, approach and looking at small segments of institutions in much greater detail.

For example, in a famous sociological study called Learning to Labour, Paul Willis (1977; reprinted 1993) made a detailed study of 12 British working-class boys. He found that rather than simply being failed by the school and the society, as Bowles and Gintis suggested, the boys he studied deliberately failed themselves, by refusing to work at school. They had already decided that education was irrelevant to their futures, which they saw as being in manual labour. The only point in going to school was to ‘have a laugh’ and make fun of those who did work. An interesting postscript to this study is that Paul Willis’ services are now very much in demand from the governments of some newly industrialising countries puzzled by the fact so many young students are turning their back on the educational services provided for them. This illustrates how sociological research can help in the formation and analysis of government policy.

**Sociology as a science?**

Another question that is often asked about sociology is whether or not it is a science. We shall be looking at this issue in much more detail in Chapter 3, but it is important to note that there is an important difference between sociology and natural sciences, such as physics or chemistry. The subject of sociological research – social institutions – is cultural rather than natural. This means that social institutions are produced by the conscious activities of human beings, in contrast to things like gravity, the weather and chemical processes within the body, which are natural processes. The result of this is that sociologists are also interested in the subjective aspects of life; that is how people interpret and make sense of the situations in which they find themselves.

Sociology, then, is not just about just about the wider ‘outside’ picture of patterns of social organisation and behaviour. It also explores the ‘inside story’ of people’s lives, how they make sense of social situations, their values, beliefs, prejudices and, if the research calls for it, even their darkest secrets.

**Summary**

Sociology may be generally defined as the study of the social relationships. Sociologists explore different forms of social institutions, the relationships between them and how individuals experience them.
Now read

This is a good place to start reading to develop your understanding of some of the issues raised here, using any one of the textbooks we have recommended by Fulcher and Scott (2007), Giddens (2008) or Macionis and Plummer (2005 or 2008). If you want to read a little more deeply, look at Chapter 1 of Mills (1970), but note that this is more complex. Berger's Invitation to sociology takes a different approach and is very entertaining.

1.4 Sociology and commonsense

In the next three sections your main reading will be this subject guide rather than your textbooks, although I shall suggest some further reading throughout. It is important that you attempt the activities that have been designed to illustrate key points and help give you a 'feel' of the subject.

Are we all sociologists?

It's interesting how many people think that sociology is just commonsense. It's a perfectly fair assumption. After all, we cannot understand the workings of things like atoms, molecules or cells simply from our everyday experiences. They are not directly accessible to us. We can only know about them from expert knowledge. Therefore, it is easy to justify the need for specialist subjects like physics, chemistry and biology.

But we can't say the same about the social world. Much of it is directly accessible to us and we begin learning about it from the moment we are born. In a way, we are all sociologists of a kind because, by the time we are grown up, most of us have developed a number of social skills and an extensive knowledge of the social world around us. We don't just learn about social life from our own experiences, we are also bombarded with information about our own and other societies from newspapers, radio and television and the internet. People also have theories and opinions about their society, what's wrong with it, what's causing these problems and what could, and should, be done to make things better. We call this 'lay', or commonsense, knowledge of society.

So, is the sociologist's understanding of societies any different from everyday, commonsense understanding? Can a sociologist tell you anything about social life that you couldn't have worked out for yourself? It is worth pursuing this question, because answering it is a good way to find out more about what sociologists do and how they think about the world.

But first, look back to the answer you gave to this question in Activity 1.2 on p.14 concerning how you think sociology is different from commonsense.

So, what is different about specialist sociologists?

There are many answers to this question but here we are going to look at three of the most important ones, and I shall use the example of crime to illustrate them. Sociology is different from commonsense because it involves:

- asking distinct sociological questions
- doing research, and
- applying or testing sociological theories.
Asking sociological questions: making the familiar strange

Most people feel they have some understanding of crime and, certainly in countries like the United States and the UK that have high reported crime rates, people spend quite a lot of time talking about it. The conversations you hear are usually about how bad crime is, why it happens and, above all, what can be done to stop or at least reduce it.

Sociologists are also interested in these questions and a number of sociologists work in crime prevention. However, thinking as a sociologist also raises other questions. The famous US sociologist Peter Berger – whose book *Invitation to sociology* we have recommended as further reading for this chapter – says that part of the sociologist’s art is making the familiar become strange. This means trying to see the taken-for-granted world around you afresh, by looking at it with the eyes of a stranger, or a tourist in a foreign land.

Activity 1.3 Making the familiar strange

Try this yourself. If you have travelled to another country for work or a holiday, think back to the first day or two when it was new to you. Recall how much you took in; for example, how different the houses were, the streets, the people, or some of the customs, or whatever. Making the familiar strange means learning to look at your familiar environment in the same way. Select a setting that is very familiar to you, such as your place of work, college or home, and spend a little time pretending you are a visitor from another country and have never been here before. Write down what you notice. What questions spring to mind? What do you find odd, amusing, interesting about this ‘new’ culture? What do you like or dislike about it? Finally, returning to your ‘real life’, is there anything you might now question or do differently as a result of ‘your visit’? But be careful here, some people may not understand that you are ‘doing’ sociology. They may feel that you are playing tricks on them and may take exception to your behaviour.

From this perspective, sociologists question some of the things that most people just take for granted about crime.

For example, why are some actions defined as ‘crimes’ in the first place, whereas other acts that may be equally harmful are seen as quite acceptable? Why do societies change their minds about what is and what isn’t a crime and what should be done about crime? For example, in the UK 40 years ago, it was quite legal for a man to rape his wife but illegal to be a practising homosexual. Now it is illegal for a man to rape his wife, but in many countries, including the UK, the laws relating to the prohibiting of homosexual relationships have been changed and it is not illegal to be homosexual. What this shows is that what is defined as a crime is socially defined. Sociologists are interested in how these definitions are constructed in everyday life. For example, which social groups have the power to define some acts (but not others) as crimes and some individuals (but not others) as criminals? What is considered as a crime, by the legal system, is what the law states is a crime. However laws are changed by people and laws change over time.

Another difference between sociological and commonsense thinking – as we shall see in the next chapter – is that sociologists are interested in how everyday social order is maintained. From this point of view sociologists are not just interested in how crime disrupts social order, they are also interested in how crime contributes to social order. The famous French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), observed that it is only by identifying certain acts as crimes, and labelling certain people as criminals and punishing them, that people are made aware of the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Thus, paradoxically,
crime actually plays a part in maintaining social order. You will be reading more about this in Chapter 3, section 3.2.

So, the first answer to the question of how sociology is different from commonsense is that sociologists see the world differently and ask different questions about it.

Further reading
See Berger (1963) Chapter 2.

Doing research
People in modern societies probably feel they know something about crime – such as whether it’s going up or down or which social groups are committing most of it – because they are bombarded with information about crime from newspapers, magazines and television.

Sociologists are also interested in how the media report crime. However, sociologists studying crime would use many other sources of information.

How do you think sociologists might study crime?

Sociologists:
• examine the official crime rates to see how crime is related to aspects of society, such as geographical region or people's age or social background
• explore how the statistics are produced and how reliable they are
• interview people who have committed crimes
• talk to victims of crime
• observe the police at work
• study the workings of the courts and the legal system
• join criminal gangs
• visit prisons and have even have had themselves locked up to observe prison life from the inside!

In short, sociologists studying crime have access to much wider sources of information than most people who, unless they have been a victim of crime or are criminals themselves, are dependent on what the media tell them.

However, it is not just that sociologists have access to more sources of information, they also collect and organise this information in very specific and systematic ways. The process of doing sociological research, like the process speaking a foreign language or playing chess, involves applying particular skills. In sociology these are called research methods and we shall be looking at these in the next chapter.

So, we can see that a second major difference between the layperson and the sociologist is that sociology involves the systematic study of societies from a wide range of sources.

Applying sociological theories
In everyday life we all draw on our commonsense understanding to theorise about things that puzzle us. For example, I am standing at the bus stop but my bus hasn’t arrived. Why is it not here? I might then begin to theorise about the problem by drawing on my commonsense understanding of why a bus might be late. Maybe it’s because of the traffic. Maybe the bus has broken down. Maybe it came early. My theorising may then influence what I do next, such as carry on waiting or get a taxi.
Sociologists also draw on their commonsense understanding when theorising about human behaviour. However, what makes sociological theorising different from commonsense theorising is that sociologists have another source of knowledge to draw upon. As the subject has evolved, sociologists have developed very general frameworks of ideas called sociological theories that help explain how societies work and change.

The fact that sociologists have access to this specialised knowledge means that they can provide explanations of human behaviour that are different from commonsense.

For example, a key concept in sociology is anomie. A person can be said to be anomic, or deregulated, when they have aspirations, or goals, without any obvious means of obtaining them. A US sociologist, Robert Merton (1910–2003), used the concept of anomie to develop a sociological theory of rising crime in US society. He argued that although the culture of US society encourages everyone to pursue the American dream of achieving wealth, status and power, most people from disadvantaged backgrounds, who do not have access to good educational institutions or useful social contacts, have no legitimate means of achieving these aspirations. Therefore, they are in a state of anomie and more likely to try to obtain their goals by illegitimate means through crime.

So, although commonsense theories tend to explain crime in terms of the characteristics of individuals – they are bad, have had a bad upbringing and so on – Merton’s explanation locates the causes of crime in terms of the organisation of wider society. Although criminals are clearly deviating from society’s norms by committing crimes, they are also conforming to US society’s norms by wanting greater material rewards.

Merton’s theory predicted – quite rightly as it turned out – that as long as Western societies encourage people to want more and more material goods while effectively preventing a large proportion of the population from ever obtaining them legitimately, crime will continue to rise. This does not mean that Merton’s theory was necessarily right – indeed it has been modified and criticised – rather I have used it here simply to illustrate how explanations drawn from sociological theory are significantly different from commonsense explanations. You will be reading more about Merton in the section on structural functionalism in Chapter 4.

**Summary**

Most people have some commonsense understanding of societies simply by living in them. However, sociological understanding is different from commonsense in at least three important respects: sociologists tend to ask different questions, do systematic research and apply sociological theories.

**1.5 Thinking sociologically**

In the previous section I suggested that one way that sociology is distinguished from commonsense is that sociologists think about social life rather differently. In this section we shall look at this sociological thinking in a little more detail.

**Sociological problems**

When most people think about society, or when we hear about social issues in the press or on TV, it is usually about things that people feel are going ‘wrong’ with society, increasing crime, growing ‘disrespectful behaviour’ of young people, conflicts between different groups in society.
Most people – including most people starting sociology – say that sociology is about studying social problems and perhaps helping to find ‘solutions’ to them. This is partly right. Sociologists are interested in social problems and some work for organisations that address some of these problems. However, sociology is about much more than this and its focus is much wider. Although sociologists are interested in things that people feel are ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ in societies, they are just as interested in things that are seen to be ‘good’, ‘right’, ‘acceptable’, ‘normal’, ‘ordinary’ and so on.

For example, sociologists are interested in why people break the ‘rules’ of a society – such as committing crimes or behaving in odd, anti-social ways – but they are more interested in the rules themselves and how they work. As Berger puts it in Invitation to sociology:

> The fundamental sociological problem is not crime but law, not divorce but marriage, not racial discrimination but racially defined segregation, not revolution but government. (p.50)

### Activity 1.4 Social and sociological problems

Which of the following do you think are better described as ‘social problems’, and which do you think are better described as ‘sociological problems’?

- Rising divorce rates in your society.
- The role of educational institutions in modern societies.
- How societies change.
- The organisation of economic production in your society.
- Unemployment.
- Illegal drug use.

Sociological problems, then, are about how societies, or parts of societies, work in the way they do. Thinking sociologically means being curious about the order of everyday social life, how this order changes and its relationship to the behaviour of individuals. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

### The puzzle of social order

Next time you find yourself in a crowded place, such as a busy street, a shopping mall or crowded subway, just take a few minutes to stop and look. Imagine you are seeing it all for the first time. You’ll see evidence of the social order that is all around you.

Pause and write down some examples of social order.

You might have mentioned:

- people queuing at bus stops
- people waiting for others to get off the train before they get on
- cars stopping at a red light
- people paying for the goods they take from the shops.

Most people take this order for granted and the only time they notice it is when someone breaks a rule, by driving through a red light or going straight to the front of a queue rather than the back. However, for sociologists, these rules are the starting point. We begin by asking why the world is this way. Why is there is this order and regularity to social life? How and why do societies hold together? Why do most people seem to follow the rules of a society or social group most of the time? Where does this order come from? Are these rules generally agreed? Or do some groups impose their rules on others?
If we were to dig a little deeper and do some research, we would find more evidence of the regularities of social life.

For example:

- economic data show that the patterns of employment, output, imports and exports of a country are very similar from one year to the next
- demographic data – that is, information about the distribution of populations – show that in any given country roughly the same number of people are born each year, get married and get divorced
- rule breaking – reported crimes, arrests, rates of mental illness and even suicide rates are much the same year in and year out
- social differences – there are significant and consistent variations between different social groups in a society: for example, those from economically poorer social backgrounds – sometimes referred to in sociology as socially deprived or lower social class – are more likely, on average, to end up with lower educational qualifications, work in low-paid jobs, have worse health and die at younger ages.

Sociology is about documenting and explaining these kinds of regularities and patterns. So, whereas journalists, the mass media and to some extent the general public, are more interested in the unusual and troublesome, sociologists are more interested the usual, the everyday, the ‘taken-for-granted’.

**Origins of sociology**

The formal study of sociology began in the nineteenth century as an attempt to make sense of massive changes that were sweeping over Western Europe at that time. European societies were industrialising and there was a mass movement of people from the rural to the urban areas. Traditional institutions of power and control, such as the Church and landed aristocracy, were losing much of their influence. The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were times of reform and revolution and new sources of power, such as the property-owning capitalist class and organised labour movements were beginning to emerge. The fact that societies could be transformed so dramatically in such a comparatively short space of time led scholars to start exploring the sources of social order and change, and the subject we now know as sociology was born.

These early sociologists tried to make sense of this new industrial age by identifying what they believed were its essential characteristics and comparing them with what had gone before. We shall be looking at these theories in more detail in Chapter 4, but we can introduce two of the most influential figures here.

For Karl Marx (1818–1883), whose ideas were later to transform the world, the modern age was characterised, above all, by a new form of free market economy that he called **industrial capitalism**. Marx was very critical of capitalism. He argued that most of the wealth it created remained in the hands of the small owning class who made their profits by exploiting the labour power of the workers. However, capitalist societies were constantly changing, and Marx was optimistic that they were sowing the seeds of their own destruction. The injustices they produced, and people's increasing awareness of them, would lead to revolutionary change and the creation of what Marx believed would be fairer communist societies where resources would be distributed to people according to their needs. See the section on Karl Marx in Chapter 4 for further reading.
Max Weber (1864–1920), another key founder of sociology, took a
different and altogether more pessimistic view. He argued that the
modern age was characterised by a process of increasing rationalisation.
By rationalisation he meant the change from doing things because
they had always been done that way (traditional action) to identifying
outcomes and calculating the most efficient means of achieving them
(rational action). Other examples of the rationalisation of life included
the replacement of religion by science as the major source of intellectual
authority, the displacement of elites based on birth by ones based on
qualifications, and the increasing bureaucratic administration of life.

Weber was concerned that the remorseless spread of rational bureaucracy
was stifling individual initiative, creativity and imagination. He called this
the ‘iron cage’ of rationality. Weber believed that Marx could be right about
capitalism being replaced by communism. However, unlike Marx, Weber did
not think this would be any liberation. In fact he thought it would almost
certainly lead to an even more bureaucratic state having more control over
people’s lives. For Weber there was no way out of the ‘iron cage’.

Activity 1.5 Marx and Weber today: alienation and creativity
You will be reading much more about Marx and Weber later in your studies. It may
seem strange to be asked to read about theorists who were writing about societies in
the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Therefore, it may be worth stopping for
a moment and thinking about one of their key ideas and seeing if it has any relevance
today.

The term alienation means being separated, or estranged from our true selves. For
example, if you really want to be a musician but feel you have to study banking to get a
good job, you might be said to be alienated from your true vocation.

Marx argued that people are naturally creative. However, because the profit motive
predominates above all else in capitalist societies, few people have the opportunity to
realise their creativity. Thus, most people learn to evaluate their lives not so much in terms
of what they do, but in terms of what they own and what they consume. For Marx, they
are alienated from their natural selves. This is ‘caused’ by the way production is organised.

For Weber, modern life is characterised by increasing bureaucratic control and regulation
of people’s lives. The bureaucratic efficiency of the organisation can take away the
creativity of the people working in those organisations. They simply have to ‘follow the
rules’ and lose the ability to think for themselves. This is the effect of rationalisation,
which is also a form of alienation.

Do you think either, or both, of these ideas apply to your society or to your personal
experiences? Can you think of some examples that:
   a) illustrate
   b) contradict Marx and Weber’s views?
You will be dealing with this topic in more detail in Chapter 4, section 4.2.

Most sociologists today are not as ambitious as Marx or Weber. They tend
to focus on particular aspects of societies rather than trying to construct
such large-scale and general theories of social change. However, the
principle that studying societies (or parts of them) involves seeing them
as changing social processes is still an essential element of thinking
sociologically.

For example, I am a medical sociologist and that means I study health and
illness. Now if we just look at our contemporary world, the terms ‘health’
and ‘illness’ seem clear enough. However, looking back shows just how
much our ideas of what constitutes ‘health and ‘illness’ have changed over time. In modern societies many things that were simply seen as part of life a century ago – such as pregnancy, long-term unhappiness and disruptive behaviour by children in school – are now seen as medical conditions requiring treatments. Sociologists use the term medicalisation to describe the process whereby more and more aspects of life are being labelled as illnesses. This raises many questions for the sociologist, such as: why this is happening, how it is happening and whether or not we are gaining or losing out by being persuaded to see more and more aspects of our life as illnesses over which we have no control?

Sociological thinking, then, involves moving to and fro between past, present and developing ideas that help explain societies, or parts of them, as continually changing social processes. Above all, sociologists are interested in how this changing social order shapes our lives as individuals. You will be looking at this topic in more detail in Section B on globalisation.

Summary
Whereas social problems are about things people feel are ‘wrong’ with societies, sociological problems take a much wider focus and ask how societies work and change in the ways they do. Sociologists are particularly interested in documenting and explaining social order and the processes by which this order changes over time.

Further reading

1.6 The individual and society

Commonsense thinking holds that societies are all about individuals. Many social scientists and scientists would agree with this, arguing that as societies are clearly created by individuals, it is the study of the individual – through biology, medicine and psychology, for example – that provides the key to understanding human behaviour.

In questioning this view sociologists are not, as some claim, rejecting the study of the ‘individual’ in favour of the ‘group’. Sociologists are interested in studying individuals, and a lot of sociological research involves talking to and observing individuals. Rather, thinking sociologically involves seeing the relationship between the individual and society as a two-way, rather than a one-way, street. As individuals we obviously create societies but sociologists argue that, in important respects, societies also create us. How does this happen?

We shall start exploring this process here by asking you to look at your relationship to society. Maybe there is more of society ‘in you’ than you realise?

You and society: identity and role

What we would like you to do for this section is to think about yourself and your relationship to the society in which you live. Start by completing Activity 1.6 below. We will come back to this activity again so it is important you take a little time to fill it in now.
Chapter 1: What is sociology?

Activity 1.6 Self and society

Imagine you have 10 words to describe the person you are to someone who has never met you. Write down the 10 words you would use. I am:

1. ...
2. ...
3. ...
4. ...
5. ...
6. ...
7. ...
8. ...
9. ...
10. ...

Check over your list and spend a few moments asking yourself why you have chosen these words. If you can, add a few additional comments to your original list. Ask yourself why you think these words say something about you as a person? What do they tell other people about you?

Now look at the list below compiled by one of my students, Julie. Don’t worry if you put in things that are very different from her. There is no ‘right answer’ to the question: describe yourself. People have different ways of doing it.

Julie’s list

I am:
1. British
2. Afro-Caribbean
3. female
4. hairdresser
5. student
6. wife
7. mother
8. intelligent
9. attractive
10. popular.

Let’s look at Julie’s answers in a little more detail.

Social identity

Julie’s first three answers are British, Afro-Caribbean and female, characteristics she shares with millions of other people. These are familiar, everyday words but, if you think about it, each of them has a social component; that is, they refer to relationships with others. Sociologists usually refer to these things as part of our social identity; that is a label that places people in particular social categories.
Let’s take nationality first. You too may have put down your nationality. This is because, for many people, their nationality is still an important statement of their social identity. To say I am Malaysian, Indian, Singaporean or British is to say much more than I live in a particular region of the world. Most nation states, or countries, not only have their own language, government and laws, they also have their own traditions, customs and generally accepted ways of behaving. Sociologists refer to these as norms. Many of these norms vary over time within a particular country and also vary between countries. For example, smoking in public places or consuming alcohol are legal in some countries but illegal in others. These cultural norms have an important influence on us. They affect how we behave, how we view the behaviour of others and how we ‘see’ the world.

However, although nationality is a very clear and unambiguous source of identity for some people, it’s not the same for others. Many countries are increasingly comprised of different ethnic groups. By an ethnic group, sociologists mean a social group that has certain common characteristics, such as a shared culture, history, language, customs and institutions. For many people their ethnicity may be an equally, or more, important source of identity than their national identity. Describing herself as British and Afro-Caribbean suggests that, for Julie, both her nationality and ethnicity are important sources of identity, as they are for many people. However, whether a person identifies primarily with a nation or with an ethnic group, or with a combination of the two, the same sociological ideas apply. Nationality and ethnicity confer identities on people that influence their relationships, values and behaviour. (See Chapter 10 on ‘Race’ and ethnicity for a further discussion on this point.)

Like Julie, you probably put down your gender as one of the most important ways of describing yourself. Although gender may appear to be purely biological, as we are simply born either male or female, sociologists have shown that gender has important social dimensions. Social and ethnic groups tend to place different expectations on males and females and this then shapes the subsequent behaviour of boys and girls and men and women. For example, in most cultures, boys are expected to be ‘tough’ and ‘masculine’, and boisterous and aggressive behaviour is usually tolerated more in boys than in girls, whereas girls are usually expected to be more mature, show a better standard of behaviour and help around the house more. Thus, for sociologists, gender is not just a biological category. It is also social. We don’t just become men or women. In important respects we learn to be men or women through social interaction.

Activity 1.7 Gender differences

Stop and think about this last example for a minute and write down five ways that you think your life would be different if you had been born male rather than female, or female rather than male.

Which of these differences do you think are primarily due to biological causes (for example, men are physically stronger, women bear children) and which of them do you think are due to the way in which your society is organised (for example its cultural values, availability of employment opportunities, access to public places).

Social roles

Like Julie, you may also have put down some of the things you do. In answers 4–7 she has told us about her occupation, that she is a student and that she is a wife and a mother. These are also common everyday words, but they have also have specific social expectations attached to
them. Sociologists sometimes refer to these as social roles, because it is as if societies are giving people scripts they are expected to follow rather like actors in a play.

Let’s take the ‘script’ of being a student. What do you think that involves? Colleges obviously expect their students to do academic work. But, when you think about it, they usually expect rather more than this. They expect students to conduct themselves in certain ways, attend classes, listen to their lecturers, work without the close supervision they had at school and hand in work that is properly presented and referenced. Colleges, then, are doing more than teaching students academic subjects. They are also presenting them with an identity: ‘this is the sort of person you are expected to be while you are here’.

Similarly, if like Julie, you are a mother, you are given a ‘mothering script’; you are expected to love your child and (in most cases) take the main responsibility for its upbringing and its day-to-day welfare. Of course, like actors, people can interpret their scripts in different ways. One mother may choose to stay at home, another may work part-time, while a third works full-time and arranges childcare. You could even tear up your ‘social script’ and do something entirely different. You may behave like a child at college, shout at the teachers and do no work, or you may neglect your children as a mother. However, social consequences will normally follow, such as being thrown out of college or having your children taken away from you. Whether we conform to social expectations or not (and most of us do most of the time) we have to take into account the expectations others have about how we should behave.

Activity 1.8 Roles

Have you put any of these social roles on your list? If so, make a few brief notes about some of the expectations you think are placed on them.

Personal identity

Like Julie (answers 8–10), you may also have put some personal characteristics on your list, things that say something about you as a specific individual, rather than as a social role you share with millions of others. Sociologists refer to these characteristics as aspects of our personal identity. For example, you may have said that you are hardworking or lazy, outgoing or shy, easy-going or stressed. At first sight these characteristics appear to be purely ‘personal’ rather than social but, when you think about it, they also have social aspects to them.

Julie has said she thinks she’s intelligent. But how does a person know whether or not they are intelligent? If you are a student, for example, there are certain social criteria by which you can judge this. For example, if your teachers praise your contributions in class, give you good marks and write favourable comments on your coursework – or even tell you that with your natural ability you should be doing much better! – then you are more likely to begin to develop an idea of yourself as capable or intelligent. This may then be confirmed by getting good marks in the exams.

Similarly, a person may see themselves as attractive, or beautiful, because their face and body shape fit the cultural norms of attractiveness as defined in magazines, cinema and on television. Other people then confirm and reinforce this identity by looking at the person with approval or admiration, asking them for dates and telling them how lovely they are.
In short, even the ideas we have about ourselves as individual people – such as whether we think we are intelligent or stupid, attractive or unattractive, fat or thin, outgoing or shy - arise from social relationships and socially accepted norms and standards. When we think about what we are, we compare ourselves with these social norms. How do we match up? We also monitor other people’s reactions to us in daily life. How do others see us? This in turn may influence our behaviour in all sorts of ways. For example, we may try to make ourselves more clever, more assertive, or more sociable and outgoing. Or we may go the other way and accept that we can never be any of these things and adjust our behaviour accordingly, perhaps by not working in class, or not trying to make friends.

**Activity 1.9 Personal identity**

Look at your list. Did you put in any of these more personal characteristics?

- If so, ask yourself why you think you have developed this view of yourself.
- What do you think have been some of the most important influences on the way you see yourself?
- Are there any particular incidents that stand out as being particularly important?
- Also ask yourself how much the social expectations and the reactions of other people influence your behaviour.

**Summary**

Here we have asked you to describe yourself as a person and illustrated just how much of ‘yourself’, your ethnicity, gender, occupation and personal qualities are influenced by the society in which you live. For sociologists, individuals and societies are inseparable. You cannot understand one without the other.

**Further reading**

Berger (1963) Chapter 5.

**1.7 Socialisation and identity**

The previous section illustrated just how much your life as an individual is bound up with the social contexts in which you live. In this section we shall introduce some sociological concepts, and theories that help describe and explain this process further.

**Socialisation**

We observed in the last section that a key sociological problem is the relation between the individual and society. But how does this arise?

In very general terms, we are all born into societies where there are already established patterns of organised behaviour that we referred to earlier as **social institutions**, such as speaking a particular language or organising ourselves into small groups called families. Sociologists use the term **institutionalisation** to describe the processes whereby these social practices become accepted ways of doing things in a society or social group. These social practices, and the values and beliefs surrounding them, make up the **culture** of a society, or **sub-culture** of a social group and, as we saw in the previous section, these cultural practices and values place **expectations** on how people should behave.
Sociologists use the term **socialisation** to describe the various processes through which people learn about, and generally conform to, the norms and values of the social groups in which they live. Socialisation processes can be divided into three stages.

- **Primary socialisation** involves the socialisation of the young child by the family.
- **Secondary socialisation** is socialisation by the school. Schools obviously teach us academic skills but, as sociologists have shown, they are teaching us a lot more. It is from school that we learn, for example, punctuality, cooperation, team games, discipline and that good work will be rewarded, bad work penalised. This is sometimes known as the 'hidden curriculum'. So, in number of ways, schools are trying to socialise us for adulthood. However, socialisation doesn't end when we leave school.
- **Tertiary, or adult, socialisation** continues through our lives. For example, as we saw in the previous section, people are socialised into ethnic, gender and work identities. Another example is socialisation into old age. People do not just get old. They also learn what is expected of them when they are becoming old. In some societies growing old gracefully means retreating into the background. Medical sociologists have even shown that terminally ill people are socialised by medical and nursing staff into dying in the 'right way'. So socialisation is a continuous process: it begins when we are born and only ends when we die.

**Self and identity**

It is through socialisation that a person develops a sense of identity: that is an image of who they are as a person. We explored some examples of this in the previous section when you were asked how you would describe yourself.

As we saw, sociologists usually distinguish between social identity and personal identity.

- **Social identity** refers to the ‘public self’, and is constructed around characteristics that are attributed to a person by others and mark them out as a member of a particular group, such as ethnicity, gender and occupational roles.
- **Personal identity** refers to those qualities that mark a person out as unique and set apart from others.

The distinction between social and personal identities is one of the ways that sociologists have documented social change. In premodern or traditional societies, there was relatively little movement, or mobility, of people between different parts of society. Therefore, people's social identities, such as nobleman, or peasant, largely defined who they were throughout their lives. Although social identities are still important sources of identity in modern societies, the increasing opportunities many people now have to change their status and their lives means that personal identities have become much more important statements of 'who we are' than they were in the past.

So identities – especially personal identities – are not fixed but are rather fluid and changing. In sociological terms, they are negotiated in everyday life through social interaction. People have a view of themselves but that view has to be sustained in social interaction by people confirming to us in various ways that we really are who we think we are.
The role of others

Go back to the previous section and look at the list compiled by Julie. Under personal identity she felt she was ‘popular’. However, to sustain ‘being popular’ as part of her identity requires people reacting to her in certain ways, such as wanting and enjoying her company. If these responses were to stop and people started avoiding her, then her idea of herself as ‘popular’ would be threatened and may even break down.

Sociologists who research the area of identity are particularly interested in exploring situations where people are suddenly and dramatically redefined by others, such as when they are labelled as a criminal, bankrupt, unemployed, mentally ill or disabled. People in these situations are confronted with what the US sociologist, Erving Goffman (1922–1982), has called ‘managing a spoiled identity’. (For more on the process of identity formation and labelling, see Chapter 4, section 4.3.)

Activity 1.10 Spoiled identity?

Stop for a moment and ask yourself if there have been times in your life when you have found a person or people suddenly reacting very differently to you. Think about why and how it happened and try to recall if it affected your view of yourself.

The role of the individual

Although the reactions of others are clearly important, we are not simply dealt our identities as if they were cards in a game. Socialisation also gives us skills to exert some control over who we are and how others see us. For example, we can influence the way others see us by buying new clothes, becoming more sociable or driving ourselves on to success in our careers. Some sociologists argue that one of the defining characteristics of contemporary affluent societies is that increasing numbers of people have unprecedented scope to transform their identities. For example, it is now much easier for people to change where they live, how they live, who they live with, how they look and what they believe in.

Activity 1.11 A new you?

Have you tried to change yourself in some way recently, such as changing your appearance, behaviour or lifestyle? Did it work? If so, did you notice other people reacting to you differently? Did this affect the way you thought about yourself?

On stage and off stage

Erving Goffman (1969) brought a new, and some would say cynical, twist to the question of changing social identities. He argued that identities were not so much a part of us – permanently or temporarily – as resources we ‘pick up and put down’ to negotiate everyday life. Identities are things we consciously manipulate, or present, in given situations. So, for Goffman, we are rather like actors ‘playing’ the roles on stage, such as the enthusiastic teacher, the caring nurse or lazy student, and we self-consciously monitor our ‘performances’. However, not all social life is like this. Goffman recognised that, like actors, people have time off stage, or backstage, when they are less obviously presenting an identity. So although people may still be playing roles backstage at home, for example – husband, wife, daughter, etc. – they are doing so less self-consciously, there is less deliberate ‘presentation of self’ and more congruence between how we are seen and how we really are.
Activity 1.12 Presentation of self

Do you think Goffman is right? Do you find yourself self-consciously presenting an image of yourself to your managers at work, or to your professors if you are at college? Are you conscious sometimes of thinking to yourself ‘Here is the identity I am presenting, but I am really a very different person’?

Can you think of recent developments in technology that now give people more scope to present different identities?

Two theories of socialisation and identity

So far, we have been describing and illustrating the processes of socialisation and identity formation that are crucial to helping us understand the relation between the individual and society. But how can we begin to explain them sociologically?

Here we are going to look at two of the most influential theories of socialisation developed by two of the leading figures of twentieth century sociology, Talcott Parsons (1902–1979) and G.H. Mead (1863–1931).

Parsons

Parsons (1951) saw societies as complex systems of parts working together to promote social stability. Social institutions define roles for people and socialisation is about learning these roles and the expectations surrounding them.

For Parsons, these social roles have a purpose. They arise and persist over time because they help societies to function smoothly.

Consider illness, for example. Illness is dysfunctional because when people are sick they do not go to work, look after their children, hand in their essays and so on. In one of the most innovative and creative applications of the idea of role, Parsons argued that in modern societies there is a distinct ‘sick role’ consisting of privileges and obligations. The privileges are that the sick person is not held responsible for their condition and they are allowed exemption from their usual obligations, such as going to work, going to college and handing in essays. However, there are also obligations to the sick role. The sick person must want to get better, follow medical advice and accept treatment when necessary.

The sick role functions as a form of social control; that is, it helps to maintain social order. It enables organisations to distinguish between those who have a legitimate reason for not fulfilling their obligations and those who do not. It also ensures that people do the ‘right things’ when they are ill to enable them to recover as soon as possible. A person not fulfilling the obligations of the sick role may lose the privileges.

Parsons’ insight here was to show that even sickness, which appears to be purely biological, is also a social state surrounded by expectations about how people should behave when they are ill. We don’t just become ill, we are also socialised into sickness. So ‘society’ is influencing us even when we’re sick.

But why do most people conform to these social obligations most of the time? Parsons, following the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim, argued that this happens because societies constrain us to act in certain ways. This constraint is both external and internal.

With external constraint, people simply learn that acting one way (for example, working hard at college and getting a good degree) will probably bring rewards (for example, a good job); whereas acting another way (for
example, not working hard) will more likely bring failure (for example, no degree and not being able to get a good job).

However, for societies to function effectively, there needs to be more than external constraint. People have to want to behave in socially acceptable ways. This happens, Parsons argued, because social norms become internalised through socialisation. They become part of a person's identity and source of morality. For example, a person may work hard at their job and not consider stealing from others not because they want promotion and are afraid of getting put in prison, but because they believe that is the right thing to do. Internalisation of values can even override survival instincts when, for example, people willingly die for their country or their religion.

**Mead**

Although Parsons' theory has been very influential in sociology, one of its limitations is that it tells us very little about the social and psychological mechanisms by which socialisation and identity formation actually take place. For some insight into this question, we can turn to the work of Mead (1934).

For Mead, socialisation was not just a process of learning and internalising the institutional expectations transmitted by families, schools, the mass media and so on. It was rather about learning skills that then enable people actively to interpret the expectations of other people and social institutions and act accordingly. In simple terms, while Parsons' theory was more about **ends** (the desirability of socialisation), Mead's was more about **means** (how it happens).

Mead's focus was on the **social** significance of (verbal and non-verbal) language in both socialisation and identity formation. The crucial insight provided by Mead was to show that we do not just use language to make sense of the world around us, we also use it **reflexively** to monitor our own behaviour. We begin to develop these skills in early childhood when we start pretending to be other people, and over time we learn to see ourselves as we believe others see us. We can then **consciously** monitor our behaviour in social interaction.

In a very important phrase, Mead called this **taking the role of the other**.

**Activity 1.13 Taking the role of the other – Daniel's day**

Taking the role of the other might sound complicated, but it is really quite a simple idea and one which we can easily relate to our own experiences. Here we look at it though a day in the life of Daniel, a young college lecturer.

Morning: Daniel is giving a lecture. He looks round the classroom, it is mid-morning but he sees several of the students yawning, some actually seem to be asleep, others are looking out of the window. The only students who seem awake are the ones texting on their mobile phones. Daniel realises the lecture is not going well, so he decides to finish it early. Anyway, he has an important interview for a new job this afternoon and he wants to think about that.

Afternoon: Daniel is in his interview and a well-known professor has just asked him a question. As he is answering, Daniel notices the professor is starting to frown. Daniel quickly changes his answer.

Evening: Daniel is in a restaurant with a friend. As he is telling his friend about the interview that he thinks did not go well, he suddenly notices the professor who had interviewed him earlier in the day sitting at a nearby table. As their eyes meet, the professor smiles and gives Daniel an encouraging nod. Daniel thinks that perhaps the interview did not go that badly after all and maybe he will get the job.
Can you identify the times in this story when Daniel was taking the role of the other and seeing himself as he thought others were seeing him? How do you think he consciously monitored this and altered his behaviour?

- the students are not enjoying this lecture, I might as well cut it short
- the professor doesn’t like this answer, I must change it quickly
- the professor is smiling, maybe the interview went OK after all?

Notice, also, that communication doesn’t have to be verbal. Each time in the story Daniel was responding to non-verbal communications.

When we take the role of the other we receive information from others about ourselves that, over time, enables us to build up the concept of self that we looked at earlier. Charles Cooley (1864–1929), a colleague of Mead, used the term looking-glass self to describe how the image we have of ourselves is based on how we believe others see us. Just as the mirror (looking-glass) reflects back to us an image of our physical self, so others’ reactions to us reflect back an image of our social self, the kind of person we are.

However, for Mead, this ‘social self’, with its capacity to take the role of the other, was only part of the self. Mead’s view of the relationship between the individual and society was rather different from that of Parsons. For Parsons, society was dominant over the individual. Social institutions confront people with sets of rules and expectations and most people simply conform to them most of the time. However, for Mead, the relationship between individual and society was rather more volatile and problematic. People are obviously shaped by societies but they are not simply the puppets of societies, they are also driven by sudden impulses, instincts and inspirations.

Mead expressed this ‘double centre of gravity’ in his concept of the self, which he divided into the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’.

![Diagram of Mead's concept of the self]

The ‘I’ is the individual, spontaneous, creative and instinctive part of the self that has ideas and imagination, while the ‘Me’ is the social self that takes into account the reactions of others. What we call consciousness is a form of a ‘conversation’ between the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’.

Imagine, for example, you were one of Daniel’s students sitting in his lecture being very bored. ‘I want to get up, leave now and go for a cup of coffee,’ says the ‘I’. ‘Wait a minute,’ says the ‘Me’, taking the role of the other, ‘He’s sure to notice and he will be marking your examination paper! It’s better to wait.’ So you sit quietly in the class. From a Meadian point of view, you have conformed to normative expectations not just because you have internalised the value, ‘It’s rude to walk out of classes’, but because you have actively made a decision to stay. However, on another day if things got really bad, then you might just walk out. For Mead, although
we are social beings, we are never completely ‘taken over’ by society in the manner suggested by Parsons, society is the source of both our conformity and our individuality.

**Activity 1.14 Parsons and Mead**

In this section on socialisation and identity, we implicitly touched on some of the ideas of Parsons and Mead. See if you can identify any of them. It is a good way to help you clarify your understanding and revise the ideas we have looked at here.

**Activity 1.15**

Look back at Activity 1.2 on p.14. Try to answer the questions again. Compare your answers now with the ones you wrote at the start of the chapter. It is a good way of monitoring your progress.

**Summary**

Socialisation describes the processes by which people learn social behaviour. It is through socialisation that people develop a sense of social and personal identity, and these identities can change through social interaction. Whereas Parsons saw socialisation arising from internalisation of social norms, Mead suggested it arose primarily from people’s ability to take the role of the other.

We shall be returning to the theories of Parsons and Mead in Chapter 4, sections 4.2 and 4.3.

**Reading**

Here it is important that you supplement what you have read on socialisation and identity with some textbook reading. The relevant sections from introductory texts are:


This will provide you with some essential building blocks for you to develop your sociological awareness and to give you the necessary support for reading the more difficult work in Chapter 4 and for your chosen topic in Section C.

**A reminder of your learning outcomes**

Having completed this chapter, and the Essential reading and Activities, you should:

- know how to study sociology, what is meant by active learning, and what examiners will be looking for
- be able to describe what sociologists study
- be able to identify some of the key ways that sociology gives us insights that go beyond commonsense understanding
- be able to explain what is meant by thinking sociologically and sociologists’ interest in social order, social change and the relationship between the individual and society
- be able to explain how our identities arise from social relationships
- be able to describe what sociologists mean by socialisation and identity, and how Parsons and Mead put forward different explanations of these processes.
Chapter 2: Sociological research

Written by Dr Steve Taylor.

Aims of the chapter

The aims of this chapter are:
• to explain what social research is and how you will be expected to approach it
• to identify the main criteria by which research is evaluated
• to explain what is meant by a research design, and identify some of the key research designs and strategies in sociology
• to introduce you to the main methods of sociological research.

Note: It is very important that you supplement what you read here with the recommended reading, particularly on research design and research methods.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter, and having completed the Essential reading and Activities, you should be able to:
• describe the nature of sociological research and explain why it is important to know how research is done
• identify the key criteria by which research is evaluated
• explain what is meant by a research design and how the nature of the research design influences the data that is collected
• identify the characteristics of survey, experimental, comparative and ethnographic research designs
• describe the key research methods: interviews, observations, the analysis of official statistics and documents
• approach short questions on sociological research.

Essential reading

One of:

Further reading

21 Principles of sociology

### Works cited


### Video/DVD

It is often helpful to supplement what you read in the subject guide and your Sociology textbooks by watching a video. Some of the famous sociological studies mentioned here have been made into videos or DVDs where the authors talk about the aims of their research, how it was done and what they found. Videos available in halovine’s Classic Collection series are:

- Eileen Barker The making of a Moonie
- Michelle Stanworth Gender and schooling
- Peter Townsend Poverty in the UK
- Paul Willis Learning to labour

All available from halovine: www.halovine.com

Watch a video in the VLE of Rosie Gosling interviewing Professor Eileen Barker, the author of The making of a Moonie, one of the works cited in Chapter 2 (available at time of going to print).

### 2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1 we saw that sociology is about understanding how societies, or parts of them, work, change and influence how people think and act.

In Chapter 2 we shall be looking at how sociologists find out about societies.

The discipline of sociology is based on the claim that sociologists offer some kind of expert understanding of social life. To evaluate this claim, we need to know how this ‘expert knowledge’ is generated, how well it stands up to critical scrutiny and what assumptions it makes about the nature of
the social world. This is why understanding social research is such a central part of understanding sociology.

### 2.2 Some principles of sociological research

#### Some key terms

When you start reading about social research you may find that some of the technical language will make things seem more complicated than they really are.

So we start by introducing you to a few of those terms:

- **research** is simply a process of investigating something systematically and **sociological research** is investigating social life using sociological theories and methods.
- **data** refers to the information researchers collect.
- **research design** is the way research is planned and organised.
- **methods** are the tools sociologists use to collect data.
- **methodology** is the study of sociological research methods.

It is also helpful to remember that although research seems to be something only undertaken by specialists, at various times in our everyday lives, most of us do it.

For example, someone thinking of studying for a degree may do some research before applying for a course. This might involve looking at websites, visiting different departments, talking to some current students and so on. This information may help them make a more informed choice.

Everyday research, then, usually involves a problem or question, the collection of information and the application of this information to the problem.

The process of undertaking sociological research is broadly similar. There are usually three key stages. See Figure 2.1.

1. **Formulation and design**: research begins with questions that then need to be translated into a researchable form.
2. **Data collection**: the research has to be organised and data collected through various research strategies and methods.
3. **Data interpretation**: the information that is collected has to be presented, analysed and related to the question that is being investigated.

#### Choice and reflection in research

Sociological research is about getting out ‘into society’ and exploring it in a number of practical ways. However, this tells only part of the story. Look again at Figure 2.1. It is clear that sociological research also involves a number of particular decisions, such as working out how research questions can be translated into a researchable project, deciding how data is to be collected and organised, and thinking about how it is to be interpreted.

Doing sociological research, then, is a reflexive process. It involves the researcher not only looking out at the part of the social world being studied, but also looking inwards and continually reflecting on the processes by which the research is being undertaken. In planning and carrying out research, sociologists are confronted by a number of choices and each choice brings advantages and limitations. The analysis of these choices and their consequences is what we mean by methodology.
Stop and think for a moment

Can you think of some factors that might influence a researcher’s choice? As I said in Chapter 1, it is helpful to begin thinking about an area before you start reading about it. So try Activity 2.1 below. It is important to look carefully at this example because we are going to be using it in different ways throughout this chapter.

Activity 2.1 Researching students taking sociology

Your local university has asked us to do some research on students studying sociology as part of their degree course. They want some answers to four questions:

• What do students think about taking sociology?
• Why are there such wide variations in the grades of sociology students?
• Is there a relationship between students’ social backgrounds and their sociology grades?
• How do students from different social backgrounds relate to each other in sociology classes?

Write down how you could study these problems. Identify the options that are open to you. Think which ones you might choose and why. Can you see any possible problems with the approach you have chosen?

Some of the most important influences on researchers’ choices of design and method are:

• The nature of the problem being investigated. Some research techniques are more appropriate than others to particular research problems. For example, researching the distribution of income in a whole society will require a different research design and different methods from a project exploring how a particular organisation works.

• Practical considerations. The researcher must work out what is possible in terms of such things as the amount of time and money available, access to sources of data and the requirements of those funding the research.

• Existing research. Much research is undertaken to extend, check or question existing work in the field.

• Theoretical considerations. Sociologists have different theoretical ideas about the nature of human societies and the best ways of generating knowledge about them, and these theoretical preferences influence their choice of research methods.

The consequence of these choices and constraints is that there is no single ‘correct way’ of doing sociological research. Rather there are a number of different ways, each with their benefits and costs and their advocates and critics. Therefore, understanding sociological research, and giving good answers to ‘theory and methods’ questions, involves being able to compare and contrast different approaches. This involves the active learning talked about in Chapter 1.

This critical thinking means that sociology students learn to look for ‘the story behind’ the data. For example, rather than simply taking a set of statistics at face value and trying to explain it, as economists tend to do, sociologists ask questions about how it was collected and how much confidence we should have in it. This critical evaluation of data is not only valuable in sociology, it can also be applied to most of the other subjects you will study. Sociology teaches us that nothing should be taken for granted, nothing is quite as it seems. When confronted by some data, the
person with sociological training should automatically be asking questions. Can I trust this data? How was it collected? What definitions were used? How reliable was the collection? This is a valuable skill that will not only help you on the rest of this programme; it will also help you for the rest of your life.

**Aims and criteria in research**

I have drawn attention above to the importance of evaluating both specific data and sociological research methods. But how are we to do this?

Let me start by asking you a question. What qualities make someone attractive to you as a friend? Stop and think for a moment. Maybe it is intelligence, maybe sense of humour, maybe good looks, maybe kindness, maybe it is just that they look rich! It could be all sorts of things, but whatever you have written down are criteria, or benchmarks, by which you are likely to judge people. Similarly, there are also criteria against which sociological research can be evaluated and we are going to look at some of the most important ones here.

**From subjectivity to objectivity**

The general aim of sociological research (and indeed all research) is to try to move from a subjective understanding to a more objective understanding of what we are studying. Subjectivity and objectivity are very important terms in sociology, so I shall spend a little time explaining them.

**Subjective knowledge** is literally knowledge belonging to the subject. It refers to individual’s perceptions, including their values, opinions and preferences. There is nothing ‘wrong’ with subjective knowledge and understanding. Everyone – including the sociologist – draws on their subjective understanding to make sense of the world around them. However, to justify itself as an academic subject, sociologists have to provide knowledge of societies that is something more than their own opinions and prejudices. This is where objectivity comes in.

**Objective knowledge** is knowledge that is more than personal perceptions; it is knowledge that is free from bias, opinion and prejudice. The scientific laboratory experiment is typically seen as the ideal form of generating objective knowledge. Scientists are emotionally detached from the objects of their research, sociologists should aim to do the same.

There is debate in sociology about whether or not it can provide objective knowledge of societies and we shall be looking at this in Chapter 3. However, even if sociology cannot be truly objective, as most sociologists believe, objectivity remains a goal of sociology and research has to provide an understanding of societies that goes beyond mere subjectivity. As Gordon (1992) observed:

> That objectivity cannot be attained is not a reason for disregarding it. Perfect cleanliness is also impossible but it does not serve as warrant for not washing, much less for rolling around in the manure pile [dirt].

The aim of social research is to move from a subjective understanding to a more objective understanding of how societies work. However, this raises the question of how researchers try to be more objective.

**Standardisation**

Your mother is complaining about your behaviour again and she brings in evidence to support her complaints. She tells you that you’re not working hard enough at college and you’re rude to your father. All that she says
may be true, but her use of evidence is highly selective. She only refers to things that support the point she is making. This is typical of the way we behave in everyday life. We tend to look mainly for things that confirm what we believe.

Sociological research cannot – or certainly should not – be carried out in this way. If sociologists simply grab at evidence that supports their favourite point of view then their accounts of social life would be highly subjective. One way of trying to avoid such subjectivity is to standardise the collection and organisation of data by making research as systematic and consistent as possible. This means that rather than having their views consistently confirmed by the evidence, sociologists may be surprised by what they discover, even to the point of having their favoured theories challenged or overturned.

We can illustrate this point from our earlier example of studying sociology students. The researcher will have to make compromises when doing research. If we use a questionnaire and give it to all students taking sociology, the data collection is standardised: that is, it is done in a consistent fashion. This means there is less opportunity for the researchers simply to take data that suits their own point of view. So if, for example, a majority of students tell me that they dislike sociology and find it ‘very boring’ I am stuck with the results, even though my subjective view is that sociology is a fascinating subject and they should all love it.

However, supposing we choose an alternative method and, instead of giving out questionnaires, we observe sociology classes and talk informally to students. Here, even if we record our observations as systematically as we can, the data collection will be less standardised than the questionnaire data. We won’t be able to remember everything and we can’t even write down everything we do remember. Therefore, there is more risk of our subjective view influencing the data.

However, although this observational approach does not do so well in terms of the criterion of standardisation, it does not necessarily make it the ‘wrong’ choice. It may well bring benefits, such as knowledge of how students actually behave in class, that would not be obtained by a standardised questionnaire-based study.

So, just as a person choosing friends may have to sacrifice one desired criterion, such as kindness, in order to obtain others, such as a sense of humour and lots of money, sociologists may also have to compromise on key research criteria.

Reliability

Reliability is concerned with the question of whether research is repeatable and is most commonly used in relation to quantitative research (see below). The reliability of a test employed in research is the extent to which repeated measurements using this test (under the same conditions) produce the same results. This criterion is important because people have more confidence in research that can be repeated and the results checked out.

If the research is repeatable and produces the same results each time, this suggests that researchers have been able to detach themselves from the object of their research – indicating objectivity.

Replication, which is very close to reliability, is when one researcher chooses to repeat the research of another. There are many reasons for doing this. The findings of the original research may be unusual, or a researcher may want to find out if the same results still apply after a time lag.
Activity 2.2 Reliability and replication

In our research example of what students think about studying sociology, we are trying to choose between three different methods:

• spending time with the students and observing their activities
• using a standardised questionnaire given to all the students
• conducting informal interviews with students at break times. Grade these methods in terms of their reliability, with the most reliable method given 1 and the least reliable given 3.

Can you think of three reasons why another researcher might want to replicate our study in five years’ time?

Transparency

Transparency means that a researcher has shown exactly how the research was done. For example, if interview methods were used, the research methods are transparent if the researcher has provided the questions, explained how they were asked, indicated the numbers of people who replied and so on. If possible, the transcriptions or tape recordings should also be available. It is now common practice for many researchers to leave the various records of their work in research archives for other researchers to examine and possibly replicate. (For example, a lot of original research from British sociological studies is stored at the University of Essex in England and can be accessed at www.data-archive.ac.uk.) For research to be reliable and replicable the research methods must be transparent.

Validity

The textbooks and your Statistics course will list many forms of validity but in everyday language something is valid if it is believed to be reasonable or well founded. In sociology it has a slightly more specific meaning. The issue of validity is concerned with the correspondence between a piece of data and the conclusions that are drawn from it. In other words, how justified are we in drawing these conclusions from this data?

From this basis we can distinguish between construct validity, internal validity and ecological validity.

Construct validity is concerned with whether data represents what it is supposed to represent. At first reading, this may seem a strange criterion. How can data not be what it is? After all, facts are facts, aren’t they? As we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, sociological thinking shows it is not quite that simple. The data that sociologists (and other researchers) collect is not simply ‘discovered’. Rather, it is constructed through the ideas being used by the researcher, and these ideas are open to question.

We can illustrate this problem with a further example from our study of students taking sociology.

Research example: construct validity

The second question we were asked to look at by the university was the wide variation in grading in sociology exams. (By the way, don’t worry, this isn’t really the case!) Supposing, in exploring this question, we wanted to measure the students’ intelligence to see if there was a relationship between natural intelligence and exam results.

We could use standardised IQ (intelligence quotient) tests that are designed to measure people’s natural intelligence. However, some people have questioned the construct
validity of IQ tests, arguing that they do not really measure natural intelligence as they favour middle-class children over working-class children and favour abstract thinking skills as opposed to practical skills. So although IQ data may well be reliable, with researchers using the same methods getting the same results, they may not be a valid measures of intelligence.

Internal validity is concerned with whether the conclusion that is drawn about the relationship between two or more different things is justified. For example, a researcher may claim that (a) causes (b). However, the relationship between (a) and (b) may be the result of something else. Again we can illustrate this with a problem from our study of sociology students.

**Research example: internal validity**

We were also asked to see if there was any relationship between students’ social background and their exam performance. Suppose we find that students from ethnic group A get higher marks on average than students in ethnic group B. We might then conclude that there is a relationship – or correlation – between ethnicity and educational achievement.

However, such a conclusion might not be justified. Further research, might show that students in the ‘underachieving’ ethnic group B are also, on average, much poorer. They have less money for books, less space at home to study and the have to work longer hours outside college to afford the fees. Therefore, we might conclude that differences we observed are the results of relative poverty rather than ethnicity and the original conclusion lacks internal validity.

**Activity 2.3 Reliability and construct and internal validity**

Without looking back:

- Try to explain the difference between reliability and validity.
- What is the difference between construct validity and internal validity?
- Can you think of another imaginary example of how a study might lack either construct or internal validity?

Check your answers with this subject guide and your sociology textbooks. The question you should be asking yourself is not, ‘Have I learned this?’ but rather, ‘Have I understood this?’ This is why attempting the third question is particularly important, because being able to answer it shows understanding.

Don’t worry if you are finding some of this puzzling. We shall be looking at reliability and validity again. Some of you will have sociology teachers. Although they are not there to ‘spoon-feed’ you with the answers, they will help you with things you don’t understand.

You will also have encountered these ideas when you studied **04A Statistics 1**.

**Ecological validity**

The criterion of ecological validity is concerned with whether the results of social scientific research are actually applicable to the reality of people’s everyday lives. This is a criterion that is much more specific to sociology than to the other social sciences.

Again, we can illustrate ecological validity with an example and an activity from our study of sociology students.
Research example: authenticity/ecological validity

We saw earlier that if we give the same questionnaire to all the students taking sociology, the data collection is both standardised and reliable. However, some sociologists would claim that this research has limited authenticity. For example, students may give me the answers they think I want to hear and say nice things about sociology in spite of what they really think, or they may exaggerate the amount of work they do. Therefore, the data we obtain may not reflect how things really are. They lack authenticity.

Activity 2.4 Ecological validity

The final question the university wanted addressing was how students from different backgrounds relate to each other in sociology classes. We could interview students about this issue, but can you think of a problem with using interview methods here?

Students may give us socially acceptable answers. Even if students answer our questions honestly and frankly, the interview method doesn’t really tell us how they really behave in day-to-day classroom situations.

Another way to explore this question is to go into the classes and observe them. This may well give us more ecologically valid data. But, going back to the criteria outlined in the previous section, can you think of some limitations with this method?

We shall be looking at observational methods in more detail later in the section but, as we have noted, it is always helpful to start thinking about things in advance.

Sociological research often involves making choices between the different options. Some methods work better than others for some problems. However, there is not necessarily always a ‘right’ option. Sometimes, it’s just down to the researcher’s preferences. Some think validity is the most important criterion in social research while others argue that standardisation and reliability are more important. We shall be looking further at these differences in Chapter 3, but first we have to look at how research is planned and carried out.

Summary

Research is the systematic investigation of a problem. You will be expected to show both knowledge and critical understanding of some of the main research techniques in sociology and be able to see how sociologists apply these techniques in their research.

Planning and undertaking research involves making strategic decisions and these decisions are influenced by a number of factors. Some of the key criteria by which research studies and research methods can be evaluated are objectivity, standardisation, reliability, transparency and validity.

2.3 Research designs: planning and choice

What is a research design?

It’s very rare just to drop everything and dash off on holiday. Holidays are usually planned in advance. Similarly a sociologist can’t just suddenly start doing research. Research journeys also need to be planned and organised in advance. Although doing sociological research never felt much like a holiday to me, there are similarities between going on holiday and doing research. Both of them usually involve going on a ‘journey’ to somewhere
different. Holidays begin with a desire to take time out and go somewhere, and research begins with the desire to find something out.

Research always begins with questions. Sociologists ask all sorts of questions about social life, such as why societies are different from each other, why social groups within the same society have different life chances, or why societies change in the way they do. It is the researcher’s questions that give research its sense of purpose and direction.

However, the sociologist’s general questions need to be narrowed down into something that can actually be researched. For example, a sociologist who is interested in how a society has changed in the last 25 years cannot possibly study every change. They will have to narrow this down into something manageable by focusing on specific changes in particular institutions, such as family life, work and leisure activities.

What we call a research design is the process of translating a researcher’s original ideas and interests into a researchable ‘journey’. It involves making a number of strategic decisions and provides an overall framework for the research, in the same way as travel itineraries provide frameworks for holidays.

In this section, we start by examining some of the key choices facing researchers and then we look at some of the most commonly used research designs, or approaches, in sociology.

**Concepts and conceptual thinking**

If you were asked to write an account of a particular day at your college, your account would actually be a simplified version of what ‘really’ went on. This is because there are many things you would simply not know about. Your account would also be very different from those of other students. You might choose to write about different things, depending on what you felt was important and, even when you were writing about the same incident, you would probably interpret it differently. Therefore, people’s accounts of things tend to be different because they are selective reconstructions of a set of real events, and the selection process is shaped by people’s subjective views of what they consider to be important and interesting.

It is much the same for researchers. They also have to select evidence in their accounts of social life and, like everyone else, they are influenced by their subjective views. However, as we have already observed, researchers have to move beyond their own subjective views and provide more objective accounts of social life. This means they have to find ways of making the selection process more systematic and standardised. One of the ways they try to do this is by using theoretical categories called **concepts**.

Concepts are the theoretical tools sociologists use to describe and explain the social world. They are clearly defined categories given to aspects of the social world that have significant common features. Concepts are the most important tools of social research. They are the building blocks around which theory and research are organised.

We can illustrate this by looking at researching social and economic inequality through the concept of social class. You will know from your own experience that some groups in your society have more wealth and opportunity than other groups. But how can we study this systematically? Social class is one of the concepts used in sociology to simplify the infinite complexities of social inequalities.

Social classes are groups of people who share a similar economic position in a society. Different social class groupings can be identified in a society
and this can provide a basis for exploring patterns of inequality. For example, sociologists have explored relationships between people’s social class and their values, political beliefs, educational achievements and life expectancy.

However, social class is an abstract, theoretical term and sociologists wanting to do quantitative research have to find ways of measuring, or operationalising, the concept, in much the same way that the mercury in the thermometer measures the concept of temperature. These operationalising devices are called indicators.

For example, a sociologist wanting to explore the relationship between the concepts of ‘class’ and ‘educational achievement’, would have to find indicators of these concepts. As occupation is the major source of income for most people, most sociologists have typically used various forms of ‘occupational ranking’ as indicators of class (see Figure 2.2), whereas attendance, reports and academic qualifications gained at school can be used as indicators of educational success.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social class</td>
<td>Occupational ranking</td>
<td>Operationalising</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.2: Concepts and indicators: measuring social class**

By looking at rates of educational performance in each occupational group, the sociologist is able to examine the relationship between ‘class’ and ‘educational performance’ in a way that is standardised, reliable and potentially replicable. See Figure 2.3.

**Figure 2.3: Conceptual analysis example: social class and educational achievements**

Concepts are the most important aspect of research design. They define what the sociologist studies and provide the basis for organising and presenting data. The important thing to understand here is that concepts do not just reflect data, they shape it and this is one of the main ways that theory is linked to research. In this context, it is important to note that concepts are contested categories. That is, sociologists do not all agree about how things like ‘class’ should be defined or measured.
Descriptive and explanatory research designs

Research designs have many different purposes but an important distinction is whether the research is descriptive or explanatory.

Descriptive research is about trying to construct a much clearer and more comprehensive picture of how something works, often on the basis of earlier exploratory studies. For example, a descriptive study of social change might ask how family life, work and leisure have changed over the last 25 years. Descriptive research studies are more likely to be inductive; this means that a researcher may draw out possible explanations from their observations.

Explanatory research asks why something happens and identifies possible ‘causal mechanisms’. For example, an explanatory research study of social change might ask why family life, work and leisure have changed in the last 25 years. Explanatory research studies are more likely to be deductive; this means that a researcher is testing a theory, or hypothesis, against the data.

Although there are sociological studies that are either purely deductive or inductive, many move between the two. For example, a descriptive study might suggest explanations that are then ‘tested’ by further explanatory research (see Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4: Deductive and inductive research

Quantitative and qualitative research designs

Another important distinction is between quantitative and qualitative research designs. In very simple terms, quantitative data can be measured whereas qualitative data cannot, but the term has much wider implications (see below). Sometimes a researcher’s decision to use quantitative or qualitative designs is shaped by the nature of the problem being researched. For example, studying poverty levels in a society will almost certainly require a quantitative research design, whereas exploring the inner world of a religious cult or a criminal gang will almost certainly require a qualitative design.

However, the decision to use quantitative or qualitative data does not just depend on the nature of the problem being investigated, it can also reflect different theoretical approaches to sociological research (as we shall see later in Chapter 3). Quantitative data is closer to the scientific ideal of research. Quantitative designs usually mean researchers are relatively detached from the people they are studying and it is less likely that their values will influence the research process.

Quantitative research designs have a number of important advantages. See if you can think of some before reading further.
Quantitative research designs:
• enable relationships between variables to be documented systematically
• are more likely to fulfil the key criteria of **standardisation, reliability and transparency**
• give data more authority, especially with government departments and the media.

Stop and think for a moment: if quantitative research designs have all these advantages why isn’t all sociological research quantitative? After all, measurement is synonymous with science and some social sciences, such as economics and psychology, are based almost exclusively on quantitative methods.

The simple answer to this question is that there are many important sociological questions that simply cannot be answered with quantitative methods. We can illustrate this point by returning to our earlier example of the relationship between social class and educational achievement.

A quantitative research design using concepts and indicators in the way described above can provide valuable data about relationships between class background and education. But when it comes to trying to explain this relationship there are some questions that cannot be answered very well by quantitative research designs. For example, what is it actually like to be brought up in relative poverty or in relative affluence? How do pupils and teachers interact with each other in the classroom? These kinds of questions can really only be examined by qualitative research designs and strategies – such as making detailed observations of school life or interviewing people at great length – that bring researchers into much closer contact with those they are studying.

Qualitative research also allows us to examine the processes by which individuals and groups come to understand their roles and identities. It can also be used to criticise the use of statistics in social research to see how they are socially constructed – see Chapter 4, section 4.3.

Can you think of some of the strengths of qualitative research designs?

**Qualitative data:**
• is more ecologically valid
• provides knowledge of how people behave in their natural contexts
• enables researchers to explore people's experiences and the meanings they give to their actions and how they develop over time.

**The expected and the unexpected in social research**

We conclude this section where we started it by comparing the holiday and the research project. There is usually a sense of adventure about going on holiday. You may be going to an unfamiliar place and unexpected things can, and often do, happen. Much the same is true of research. You are often surprised by some of the things you discover.

However, by planning a holiday and deciding to stay in a particular place at a given time of year, most holidaymakers narrow the possibilities of what might happen. Therefore, the holiday experience is a product of the unexpected and the expected. The plans made in advance provide a framework for what actually happens. Much the same is true of research. Sociologists' research designs provide the framework for the things they find out about social life. So just as the holidaymaker expects certain things from their holiday, such as sandy beaches or snowy mountains, sociologists usually have some idea of what they are going to find from their research.
The really important lesson to learn from this comparison is that researchers are not just giving us information about what is happening in the social world. They are doing much more than this. They are shaping and organising it for us. Our brief trip through research designs has shown that what emerges as data in a research project is a product of the relationship between the researcher’s design and the intrinsic nature of what is being researched. (See Figure 2.5.)

![Figure 2.5: How research data is constructed](image)

**Sociological thinking teaches us always to look behind the data to find out how it was produced.**

### 2.4 Major research designs in sociology

Here we are going to develop the ideas of the previous section by introducing you to four of the major research designs, or approaches, in sociology.

**Surveys**

In everyday language to survey something is to take a general view. In geography, for example, surveys map out a landscape or a town. Similarly, in social sciences, surveys try to map out aspects of the social world. Surveys offer breadth of view at a specific point in time, rather like a photograph of a landscape or townscape from a distance. Surveys are usually - but not necessarily - quantitative. They are used for simply collecting information, testing peoples’ opinions or attitudes and mapping out relationships between things in a quantifiable form.

Survey data are most commonly collected by asking people questions, usually administered by questionnaires or face-to-face interviews. However, the survey is a research design or strategy and not a research method, and survey data can be collected through other methods such as using documents or making observations.

**Sampling**

Survey research is usually undertaken in relation to large populations, and researchers cannot collect data from everyone in the population. Therefore they use a sample: this is a part of a population being studied. You will have studied this in **04A Statistics 1**.

**Probability sampling** means that the sample has been selected randomly.

**Simple random sampling** means that everyone in the population has an equal (non-zero) chance of being selected.
**Stratified random sampling** is a special case of sampling, which means that every member of a population being studied has an equal chance of being selected in relation to their representation within the general population. For example, if females outnumber males by four to one in a population then stratified random sampling will ensure that 80 per cent of those sampled are female. The more the sample surveyed represents the population being studied, especially in terms of key variables such as age, class, ethnicity, gender and professional status, then the more confident the researcher will feel in generalising from the results.

**Non-probability sampling** means that the sample has not been selected using a random selection method and cannot be taken to represent the population as a whole. The main reason for non-probability sampling is that the researcher doesn’t have enough information about the population being studied to construct a sampling frame as, for example, in studies of drug use, crime and self-harm. In non-probability sampling researchers will simply contact whom they can and this is known as **convenience sampling**.

Snowball sampling is a form of convenience sampling that is often used in research into very sensitive areas such as health problems or criminal activities, where a researcher makes contact with a small group, gains their confidence and uses that to make further contacts and enlarge the sample. (Figure 2.6.)

A quota sample represents a group of people that a sociologist wants to make statements about. They divide the population into parts on the basis of the population. Therefore if we were researching a school and we knew the population of the school contained 55 per cent of girls and 44 per cent of boys we would select a sample in proportion to these percentages, for example choosing any 110 girls and 88 boys.

The subject guide for **04A Statistics 1** has more material on sampling, validity and reliability.

**Figure 2.6: Types of sampling**
Activity 2.5 Sampling

Look at the four research topics listed below. Which ones do you think a researcher would be able to study through probability sampling?

- The future career ambitions of management students at the local university.
- Homeless people in your town or city.
- Victims of domestic violence.
- The lifestyle choices of footballers registered at your local football club.

Is a national census a sample?

- No. A national census is a survey of the total population but it is not a sample because everyone is asked to provide information. So, here the sample is the sample frame.

Longitudinal approaches

A longitudinal research design involves collecting data from the same source at intervals over time. It is not really a design in itself but is rather an addition to an existing design and is most frequently used in survey research when the samples being investigated are interviewed at different times. Taking a longitudinal approach is one of the ways sociologists document changes in individuals and organisations over time and is most frequently used in areas like child development, health and educational research.

We conclude this section with a real example of sociological survey research to illustrate some of the points that have been raised.

Research example: Townsend (1979) on measuring poverty

By the middle of the twentieth century it was widely believed that poverty had been virtually eliminated in Britain. Peter Townsend and his associates set out to find out if this was really the case.

To study poverty a researcher has to have a concept of poverty. Townsend defined poverty in relative terms as the inability of people to participate in a substantial number of the activities and customs followed by the majority of the population. This concept was measured by a number of indicators, including the lack of a holiday in the last year, lack of fresh meat on a regular basis and an absence of household amenities such as a refrigerator or a bath.

Townsend and his researchers then made a stratified random survey of over 6,000 adults living in 2,052 households. They calculated that almost 20 per cent of the population were living in poverty, which was much higher than the government's official figure of six per cent. This was not because the government statisticians made a 'mistake' and miscalculated their figures; it is because Townsend and the government statisticians were using different concepts of poverty. The government statisticians were using an absolute definition — that is, being poor is having an income less than a certain level, while Townsend was using a relative definition — that is, being unable to afford things that most people in a society consider normal.

The level of poverty in the UK was highly embarrassing to the government of the time and the book was credited with forcing the issue of poverty back onto the political agenda, illustrating how sociological research can influence public opinion and public policy.
Experimental and evaluative research

The laboratory experiment is the key method in scientific research. In the experiment a possible causal influence, called an independent variable, is manipulated under controlled conditions to see if it produces a change in another factor, called a dependent variable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Smoking</th>
<th>Cancer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent variable</td>
<td>Dependent variable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Laboratory experiments are rare in sociology. Nonetheless the classic experimental design is seen by some researchers as an important yardstick against which other methods can be assessed. Field, or ‘quasi-experimental’, research designs that attempt to explore relationships between independent and dependent variables in more natural settings are becoming increasingly common in sociology, particularly in evaluative research. The aim of evaluative research is to examine different social programmes, such as crime prevention strategies or health promotion policies, to see if they ‘work’ or to find out if one works better than another.

The most common type of experimental research design uses a control group. This involves establishing two broadly similar populations and introducing an independent variable to one group (the experimental group) but not to the other (the control group). The aim is to see if there are differences in the behaviour of the experimental group and the control group. Here is an example.

**Research example: Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) on teacher expectations**

In this famous study the researchers were interested in whether teachers’ expectations influenced students’ performance. Teachers were told that 20 per cent of students (the experimental group) had been identified as highly intelligent through intelligence tests whereas the rest (the control group) had ordinary abilities.

In fact no such test had been done, and students had just been randomly assigned to the ‘highly intelligent’ group. However, as a result of increased teacher expectations, the intelligence scores of the experimental group really increased in the short run. The study showed how much teacher expectations influenced students’ educational performance.

Experimental research designs give researchers much greater control of the research situation. They also fulfil the criteria of reliability and transparency.

However, there are some criteria that they do not usually fulfil so well. Can you think of any? If necessary, turn back to the criteria outlined in section 2.2. (Looking back like this helps both understanding and revision.)

- One criticism of field or quasi-experimental methods is that the data collection is often difficult to [standardise](#).
- Another criticism is that experiments may lack full [ecological](#) validity because although they usually take place in ‘real settings’ – such as the classroom in Rosenthal and Jacobson’s research – researchers actually change those settings so that they are not completely authentic.

One way round this problem is to use a ‘natural experimental design’ where a researcher makes use of some naturally occurring event that creates a quasi-experimental situation. A natural experimental design has the disadvantage that the researcher has much less control over events, but it has the advantage of high ecological validity as the events are occurring naturally. Here is an example.
Research example: Charlton et al. (1998) on the coming of television

Many people blame television, and particularly violence on television, for producing anti-social and violent behaviour in children. The introduction of television to the island of St Helena in the south Atlantic in the 1990s provided natural experimental conditions to explore the effects of television on the island’s child population. Would the violence they would see on television cause them to behave more violently? Charlton and his associates monitored the viewing habits and subsequent behaviour of a large sample of children. To date there is no evidence from the study that the introduction of television has caused more antisocial behaviour in children.

Activity 2.6 Experiments and ethics

Laboratory experiments are rare in sociology, give two reasons why you think this is so. (Again, if necessary, look back at the criteria discussed in section 2.2.)

1. _________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________

2. _________________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________________

Look again at the famous school study by Rosenthal and Jacobson outlined on the previous page.

It was obviously a very valuable study, but can you think of any reasons why some might argue it should not have been done?

• The teachers were being deceived about the true nature of the experiment.
• The children’s educational environment was changed just to accommodate the experiment.

The concerns expressed above are examples of ethical issues in social research. Ethics refer to responsibilities researchers have to the researched. Ethical guidelines state that the subjects of research should not be harmed or have their lives disrupted in any way and, unless it is unavoidable, they should be fully informed about the purpose of the research. Research ethics have to be balanced against the importance of the research findings and the possibility of doing the research in another way that doesn’t involve compromising ethical guidelines.

Ethical considerations apply to all research, but are most commonly raised in connection to experimental designs that often set out to manipulate people’s behaviour in various ways. Most people would consider Rosenthal and Jacobson’s research ethical because of its contribution to educational research and because the deception was unavoidable. However, ethical guidelines mean that researchers cannot do anything they want in the name of research, and ethical considerations have to be taken into account in planning research designs.

Comparative research

Another limitation of experimental research designs is that they are invariably small-scale, or micro. This means that many of the large-scale, or macro, questions that interest many sociologists – such as why societies change, why societies are different from each other, or why rates of health and illness, crime, or suicide vary between societies – cannot be studied by experimental designs. To examine these larger cultural and historical questions, researchers are more likely to use what is called a comparative, or cross-cultural, research design.

Comparative research is much wider in scope than other research designs, because the units of analysis are often whole societies, or even groups of
societies, such as Western society or Latin America. Comparative research does not just mean comparing different societies or the same society over time. It involves searching systematically for similarities and differences between the cases under consideration. For example, in his comparative study of crime, the Australian sociologist John Braithwaite (1989) looked for similarities between countries with particularly high rates of crime, such as the USA and UK, and at how they were different from societies with low rates of crime, such as Japan. Braithwaite found that crime was lower in societies that tend to place collective interests over individual interests.

Although comparative research usually uses secondary sources, such as historical documents or official statistics, research designs can still be organised in ways that resemble the logic of experimental comparisons between dependent and independent variables. This can be illustrated by looking at one of the most famous sociological studies of all time, Emile Durkheim's comparative study of suicide.

**Research example: Durkheim (1952) on suicide rates**

In his study of suicide, Durkheim used official suicide rates - that is the number of people per 100,000 committing suicide - as an indicator of different forms of social solidarity. Different countries and different social groups consistently produced different levels of suicide.

But the data still had to be organised and analysed systematically. For example, the statistics showed that European countries that were predominantly Catholic, such as Italy, had much lower suicide rates than countries that were predominantly Protestant, such as Germany. But was this due to religion or national culture?

In order to find out, Durkheim then looked at the suicide rates of Catholic and Protestant regions within the same countries. The fact that the Catholic rates were still much lower, even with nationality ‘controlled’, led him to conclude that the relationship between religion and suicide was real rather being an artefact (i.e. the result of some other cause).

**Ethnography**

The key idea behind ethnography is that as human behaviour is intentional, research should be orientated towards understanding the reasoning behind people's actions. This is sometimes referred to as ‘verstehen’, a German word meaning empathetic understanding.

Ethnography is usually based on detailed case studies of particular groups, organisations or individuals, and uses methods such as observations, long conversational interviews and personal documents, that bring researchers into close contact with the everyday lives of those they are studying. Research reports are in the form of a narrative, with key evidence, such as detailed descriptions of particular episodes being reproduced to illustrate the point the researcher is making.

**Research example: Taylor (1982) on suicidal behaviour**

Taylor's ethnographic study of suicide can be compared with Durkheim's statistical and comparative approach. For Taylor, the flaw in Durkheim's brilliant study was his assumption that suicide could be explained sociologically without reference to the intentions of suicidal individuals. Using a combination of interviews with people who survived suicide attempts and documentary sources, Taylor attempted to piece together a picture of the context of suicidal actions from the victim's point of view. So, whereas the units of analysis in Durkheim's comparative study were populations, such as nations or religious groups, the units of analysis in Taylor's ethnographic study were individual case studies.
This research suggested that we should change the way we think about suicide. Most suicidal acts were not attempts to die so much as desperate gambles with death where suicidal individuals were uncertain as to whether they wanted to live or die. Therefore, the question was not just why do people kill themselves, but why do so many more risk their lives in these ‘games’ of chance. Observations about how people actually think and behave in real situations can only come from ethnographic research.

Summary

Here we have looked at four of the main research designs, or approaches, in sociology. Survey research is the systematic gathering of information about individuals and groups at a given time. Experimental designs attempt to manipulate one variable to examine its effect on another. Comparative research focuses on similarities and differences between different societies or social groups. Ethnography focuses on how people think and act in their everyday social lives. There are, of course, other research designs and sociologists often combine different aspects of the different approaches. However, the main point here has been to show you that not all sociologists take the same approach in their research.

2.5 Research methods

What are research methods?

Research methods are techniques used for collecting data. There are many different types of data in sociological research, but an important distinction is between primary and secondary data. Primary data is information that researchers collect for themselves by, for example, interviewing people or observing them. Secondary data is information that is already in existence before the research starts. For example, a researcher may make use of government statistics or monitor the content of newspapers, magazines or TV programmes.

Although some sociology textbooks use the umbrella term ‘Methods’ to describe the entire research process, it is important to distinguish between research design and research methods. Sociologists have a range of research methods to choose from, each with their advantages and limitations, and they have to work out which methods best fulfil the aims of their research design.

Methods are about the practical part of research, and sociologists don’t just have to work out what method they are going to use. They also have to work out how best to implement it. For example, suppose I have decided to use an interview method. I still have to decide if I’m going to do it by telephone or face-to-face. If it’s face-to-face, I still have to work out how to record the data. If I’m constantly scribbling notes or using a tape recorder it may intimidate interviewees and prevent them from saying what they really think. But if I conduct the interview more like a natural conversation, it may be difficult to recall enough of what the interviewees say.

However – and this is important and less obvious – sociologists’ decisions are not just influenced by practical or technical concerns. They are also influenced by theory. This is because methods are not simply neutral research tools, as if they were methodological hammers or screwdrivers. As we shall see, each of them involves making theoretical assumptions about the nature of the social world and how we understand it. We shall be examining this in more detail in Chapter 3.

Therefore, sociologists not only have to work out which methods will work best for which research problems, they also have to decide which methods
best fit their theoretical views of what societies are and how we should be finding out about them.

When you write about methods you will be expected to know:

• the key sociological methods and their relationship to research design
• their strengths and limitations taking into account both practical and theoretical considerations
• how they are linked to different theoretical viewpoints in sociology.

In this section we shall be more concerned with explaining and evaluating research methods.

**Primary research methods**

**Asking people questions in social research**

One of the ways sociologists try to find out about the social world is to ask people questions. This can be done by:

• asking people to fill in questionnaires
• telephone or internet
• formal face-to-face interviews
• asking questions informally in the context of field work.

There are many different types of interview methods in sociology but the most important distinction is between structured and unstructured interviews. Although sociologists sometimes use a combination of interview methods in their research, we shall look at them separately to clarify the distinctions between them.

**Structured interviews and questionnaires**

The structured question format is the most popular method of asking questions in sociological research and is the most commonly used method in survey research. In the structured interview, or questionnaire, interviewees are asked a set of identical questions in exactly the same way. They are usually asked to select their answers from a limited range of options, and these are known as ‘closed’ questions (see Figure 2.7).

![Figure 2.7: Structured interview for a class studying sociology](image)

Q. How would you rate your sociology lecturer? Tick the answer closest to your view:

- Excellent
- Quite good
- Don’t know/neutral
- Quite poor
- Useless.

Structured interviews have a number of advantages over other methods of asking questions. Information from a large number of people can be obtained relatively quickly and cheaply, the data can be quantified and the researcher is more detached from the process of data collection.

**Activity 2.7 Structured interviews**

Data from the structured interview fulfils some of the key criteria outlined in the first part of this section. Look back to section 2.2 and see if you can identify which ones they are.
However, in spite of its benefits, some sociologists are very critical of the widespread use of structured interviews in sociology. Why do you think this is?

- **The meaning problem.** The main reason for questioning the structured interview is found in what I’m doing now, using language. To write an interview question I have to use words, and a major problem with the structured interview method is that the same word can mean different things to different people.

  Stop and look again at the question reproduced above (Figure 2.7). Some of the students may have said that their teacher is ‘excellent’. Try to think of some different meanings the word ‘excellent’ could have in this context.

  For example, my lecturer:
  - is inspiring and makes the subject interesting
  - is easy-going and doesn’t mind if you don’t hand in any essays
  - is a nice person
  - looks good.

  The problem here is that people who might mean very different things by ‘excellent’ would still be included in the same percentage figure. Therefore, the data will lack construct validity. It does not represent what it is supposed to represent – that is – a consistent and similar set of responses.

- **The problem of depth and ecological validity.** Another limitation of the structured interview method is that it lacks depth. As researchers are detached from the people they are studying, it is difficult for them to explore what their subjects actually mean and it is impossible for them to know how they actually behave in real situations. In sociological terms, this means that it is low in ecological validity.

### Unstructured interviews

One way round some of the limitations of the structured interview is to use an unstructured interview. Unstructured interviews are more like ordinary conversations; there is no set interview structure and interviewees answer in their own words. Unstructured interviews are sometimes used in survey designs, but they are most frequently used in ethnographic research.

The effectiveness of unstructured, qualitative interviews often depends on the rapport and trust that is built up between researcher and respondent. The aim of such interviews is to allow respondents to reconstruct their experiences in as much detail as possible, giving the researcher, and ultimately the reader, an insight into how they experienced particular events. You will see in Chapter 4, section 4.3 that unstructured interviews can allow the researcher to understand the processes by which people came to understand social situations.

Unstructured interviews have more depth and flexibility than structured interviews. They are also normally more valid as they give greater insight into the meanings of a subject’s experiences. However, they also have important limitations. The data collection is not standardised and is thus hard to generalise from and, as there is usually far too much data to reproduce in full, readers are dependent on the researcher’s selection of data. Unstructured interviews are also less reliable than structured interviews as the results cannot be quantified and re-tested.
Limits of all interview methods

Some sociologists use a combination of structured and unstructured interviews in their research on a ‘horses for courses’ principle, using structured questions to obtain factual information, such as age or income, and unstructured questions to probe deeper into people’s experiences. Alternatively, they may use semi-structured interviews where the questions are closed, but interviewees are given space (in questionnaires) or time (in face-to-face interviews) to elaborate on their answers.

However, despite their many benefits, there are certain limitations with all interview methods.

- People may simply have problems in recalling information accurately. A great deal of psychological research has shown just how unreliable memory can be.

- There is something known as the interview effect. This means that interviewees may give the more ‘socially acceptable’ answer, or they answer a question in the way they think the interviewer wants.

- With all interviews (structured, unstructured or semi-structured) researchers are dependent on what people tell them. If researchers want to find out how people really behave in their daily lives, then they have to go and take a look.

Observational methods

Watching people is another important way that sociologists find out about social life. Researchers using observational methods do not have to rely on what people say they do. They can see for themselves.

Like interviews, observation can be structured or unstructured, or semi-structured, that is, it uses a combination of both. Structured observations are most commonly associated with experimental or evaluative research designs. For example, subjects may be given certain tests or tasks to do as part of an experiment and the researcher systematically records the results. Structured observation can also take place in naturalistic settings. For example, as part of her research on gender and schooling, Michelle Stanworth (1983) systematically recorded the amount of direct contact time teachers give to male and to female students.

However, the vast majority of observational research studies in sociology are unstructured, and most of them use a method called participant observation where the researcher participates directly in the life of the people being studied.

This technique was first used by Western anthropologists who joined tribal societies, learning their language and customs in order to document ways of life that were disappearing with colonisation and the relentless advance of industrialisation. Like anthropologists, sociologists have to find ways of getting into the groups or organisations they wish to study and this may take a lot of friendly persuasion, persistence and the cultivation of helpful contacts. Once established, the research work involves detailing observations, listening to what is being said and asking questions. This is easier said than done. It requires both an attachment to and a detachment from those you are studying.

As a student of child abuse, I regularly encountered forms of cruelty to children I hardly thought were possible. I watched, amazed, as children who had been brought into care because
they had been abused, ran with open arms to hug the ‘abusing’ parents who had been allowed to visit them. I have seen social workers and police having to drag screaming children away from their parents. While a ‘lay’ person witnessing such things would probably react emotionally, the professional social workers remained detached and unemotional. It was as if nothing that happened to children could surprise them any more. Neither of these reactions is suitable for the sociological observer. On the one hand, the researcher should take nothing for granted, but rather be surprised and intrigued by what is observed. On the other hand, while it is impossible to keep your values out of research, the more you let your own values and feelings take over, the more you will write about your own values and reactions, and the less you will see of what is going on around you.  

Participant observation is the method most commonly used in ethnographic research designs and you will find that some textbooks treat ethnography and participant observation as if they were the same. However, this is not strictly accurate. Participant observation can be used in experimental designs and ethnographic research can, and sometimes has to, be done by other methods, such as unstructured interviews or documents.

There is a richness of detail in participant observation research that tends to be lacking in other methods and I have to confess it has always been my favourite research method. Some of the most vivid and interesting studies in sociology have used participant observation. For example, sociologists have worked in factories, offices, schools, prisons and mental hospitals; they’ve made observations in clinics, clubs, call centres, on street corners and in public toilets; and they’ve joined political parties, criminal gangs and religious cults, all in the name of research.

In participant observation sociologists are able to see for themselves how people behave in their natural contexts. This authentic knowledge and the depth and detail it provides mean that data from participant observation usually fulfils the key criterion of validity far better than data obtained from other methods. It also offers flexibility and can provide the basis for inductively generating new theoretical explanations.

The famous ‘Chicago School’ of sociology, which encouraged observational work and despatched its sociologists into every corner of the city, used to claim that participant observation ‘tells it like it is’. We will be discussing the Chicago School in Chapter 4, section 4.3.

Activity 2.8 ‘Telling it as it is’

Stop and think for a moment about the claim that being somewhere allows you see things as they are. Do you think participant observation always ‘tells it like it is’ or do you think there may be some problems with this view? Can you think of times in your life when you have found yourself participating in social situations without really knowing what is going on? If so, try to identify some of the reasons. Maybe you were missing the cues or maybe people were deceiving you?

Take a moment and write down your answers to these questions before moving on.

The idea that participant observation ‘tells it like it is’ is challenged by something known as the observer effect. In essence, this means that those being observed may change their behaviour simply because they are being studied. If this happens, and the researcher is not seeing the subjects

of the research as they really are but as they want to be seen, then the ecological validity of the research is compromised. Sometimes researchers try to get round this problem by using covert observational methods and concealing their true identity from the group being studied. For example, in his classic study of a state mental hospital in the United States, Goffman (1987) worked as a games teacher in the institution, while Holdaway (1983) made a study of the police force he was serving in at the time. This ‘undercover’ research raises ethical issues, as those being studied have not given their consent to the research, and it has the limitation that the researcher is unable to ‘stop the action’ and ask questions freely and openly.

Participant observation methods also tend to be unreliable, data collection is not standardised and, like the unstructured interview, selection of data is very much dependent on the researcher’s subjective views of what should (and should not) be included. It is also time consuming and, because it is often based on a single case study or a small and non-representative sample, it is hard to generalise from the results. Furthermore, there are many areas of social life – domestic violence, sexuality, suicide and childhood experiences – that cannot usually be studied in this way.

Secondary sources

A great deal of sociological research involves the analysis of secondary data; that is, data not generated by the researcher. This may include data from previous research but it is mainly material that is not specifically produced for research and this has important implications for the sociologist. Two of the most important sources of secondary data are official statistics and documents.

The analysis of official statistics

The term official statistics refers to the mass of data collected by the state and its various agencies. For example, a national census is held in developed countries, usually every 10 years. This provides information about the composition of the population in terms of factors such as births, marriages, divorces, ethnicity and the structure of families. State sources also regularly produce economic statistics on patterns of employment and unemployment, income and expenditure, as well as publishing rates of crime, illness, suicides and the like. In addition to state-generated data, other organisations such as hospitals, economic organisations and voluntary agencies provide important sources of statistical information.

Official statistics are a major source of information for sociologists and are widely used, especially in large-scale comparative research designs. They are plentiful, cheap and available; they can provide a picture of a society at a given time, enable comparisons to be made and help document important changes in societies and social groups over time.

However, sociologists have to approach the analysis of official statistics cautiously. They are not self-evident ‘facts’ simply waiting for researchers to use. They are social constructions that reflect the conceptual categories and bureaucratic procedures through which they are collected. A problem for sociologists wanting to use official statistics is that classification and collection procedures can vary both between different societies and within the same society over time. For example, some governments often change the way in which unemployment is classified, and a comparative study of unemployment based on official statistics that have been compiled in different ways will be neither standardised nor valid.
Another problem with official statistics may be under-reporting. It is generally accepted that official statistics - such as those recording people's incomes, personal assets, companies' profits, rates of immigration, crime, illness and suicide - are far lower than the real levels. Therefore, an increase in the official crime rates, for example, could mean either that crime has risen or it could simply mean that more crime has been reported and recorded.

These observations do not mean that sociologists cannot, or should not, use official statistics.

- Not all official statistics have the problems of classification and under-reporting outlined above. For example, in many societies, birth rates, death rates and murder rates are taken to be accurate representations of the true numbers.
- If a researcher who is comparing different sets of official statistics is sure that they have been compiled in much the same way, then the data will still be valid.
- Researchers have access to different data sets, some of which can offset the limitations of the others. For example, many governments undertake annual victim surveys, where a random sample of the population are asked if they have been the victims of crime. These statistics give a much more accurate estimate of the level of crime than the official crime rates.

Therefore, when writing about the limitations of official statistics, do not simply state, for example, that they 'lack validity'. It is much better to say they 'may lack validity' and then go to explain why this could be the case.

**Activity 2.9 Official statistics**

Critically evaluate the following statements:

- Government statistics have shown that there has been a sharp rise in crime this year.
- Sociologists should never use official statistics, because they are not valid.
- Townsend’s research on poverty showed that the official statistics were wrong. (Look back to the example of Townsend’s research on p.50)

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**The analysis of documents**

In its widest sense a document simply means anything that contains text. Official reports, records from schools, hospitals, law courts, films, photographs, reports from journals, magazines, newspapers, letters, diaries, emails, and even graffiti scrawled on a wall, are examples of documents.

The analysis of documents is the major method used in comparative and historical research designs, but documents are also widely used in ethnographic research. Documents are used when subjects cannot be observed or interviewed, but it would be wrong to see them merely as a substitute for primary data. For example, what you write in your diary or in letters to friends might be a more valid representation of how you think and act than what you tell me in an interview.

Documents can be classified in many ways but a useful classification is:

- **official documents**: for example, government reports, legal reports, company accounts
- **cultural documents**: for example, newspapers, magazines, TV programmes, films, art works
• **personal documents**: for example, letters, diaries, emails.

A key question in documentary research is the **authenticity** of the document. Researchers generally prefer first-hand accounts, written by people who witnessed something personally, rather than documents derived from earlier sources. Another important question in the context of authenticity is whether or not a document is a forgery. Even with relatively recent documents this is not always clear. For example, in 1983 the German magazine Stern paid seven million marks (£2 million) for 60 volumes of Hitler’s diaries after they had been ‘authenticated’ by several eminent historians. The diaries were being sold round the world when it was revealed that they had not been written by Hitler, but by a former waiter and window cleaner called Konrad Kujau!

Another question researchers have to consider is the **validity** of the document’s content. A document may be both authentic and first hand but, for various reasons, the content may be distorted, exaggerated, or simply false. Therefore, researchers usually examine a number of documentary sources looking for accounts that confirm, or corroborate, each other.

Like interviews and observational methods, documentary methods can be structured or unstructured. In structured, or content analysis sociologists systematically analyse documents in terms of certain pre-determined criteria. For example, researchers might monitor the output of TV stations at regular intervals to calculate the proportion of violence, sexuality or stereotyping in programmes.

### Activity 2.10 Content analysis

Imagine you are doing a content analysis study of the news programmes on your local TV stations, looking at the proportions of time given to:

a. local
b. national
c. international news stories.

Using the criteria outlined in Section 2.2, and any other material you think is relevant here, write down what you think are the advantages and limitations of this approach.

Unstructured, or textual, documentary methods use qualitative techniques to explore the meanings of texts. This may involve examining the literal meaning of the document, or it could mean looking beneath the actual words or images, to interpret the contexts that give them meaning. To illustrate this latter approach, look at the following news item from a British newspaper.

**Dad of 5 Turns Down First Job**

A jobless teenager about to become a dad for the fifth time was offered a job yesterday – and turned it down. Mike B., 19, who has never done a day’s work, said he would not take the job in case his state benefits were cut. Mike and his wife Kathleen, 23, receive £1,150 a month in state benefits and live rent free. They are now demanding a bigger house when their new baby arrives in October.

On the surface this is simply an account of a young man with four children who turned down a job. But what else do you think the story is saying? Can you see a hidden meaning, or sub-text?

The story is not just about Mike and Kathleen. It is possible here to interpret an underlying sub-text of statements and questions that help to give the story a framework and a much wider meaning. Look back at the
story again. Who do you think it is aimed at? What else do you think it is ‘saying’ other than what is in the text? What questions do you think it is raising?

Here are some suggestions below.

Audience:
• People who work for a living and pay taxes.
• People who ‘really’ need state benefits because they cannot work.

Underlying text:
• Look how much money people on state benefits are paid!
• If you have more children the state will find you a bigger house when other people have to earn more money to move to a bigger house.

Questions raised:
• Do you think this is fair on people who work hard for a living?
• Do you think the benefits system is encouraging some people not to work?

Activity 2.11 Textual analysis
Take a story from your local newspaper and see if you can interpret its underlying subtext.

Many studies in sociology, particularly historical studies, are based almost exclusively on documents. Vast amounts of information are held in documents, many of which are easily accessible and in a form that can be examined and checked out by other researchers. Documents can also be used when observational or interview methods are not possible because people cannot be contacted or observed. For example, the autobiographical accounts by adults who have tried to harm themselves, been anorexic or been abused in their childhood provide an invaluable source of information for sociologists researching these areas.

Selection of methods
In practice sociologists will select the methods that best fulfil the aims of the research design and there are usually clear relationships between research designs and research methods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research design</th>
<th>Typical subjects</th>
<th>Typical methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>Samples of large populations</td>
<td>Structured interview questionnaire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental/evaluative</td>
<td>Small groups of subjects</td>
<td>Structured observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative/cross cultural</td>
<td>Institutions, societies, groups of societies</td>
<td>Official statistics, documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnographic</td>
<td>Case studies</td>
<td>Participant observation, unstructured interview, personal documents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.8: Research design and research methods (or the research design-method relationship)

Although I have looked at the major methods separately in order to explain them, researchers will usually use more than one method to fulfil different aims of the research design. Often methods will be combined in a
way where the strengths of one method can be used to offset some of the limitations of another. This is known as **triangulation**, a term borrowed from navigation where the position of a ship is plotted from two fixed points. Eileen Barker’s study *The Making of a Moonie* (1984) is a classic example of the use of multiple methods in research.

**Research example: Barker (1984) on the Moonies**

The Moonies, or Unification Church, have followers and business interests all over the world. The founder, the reverend Moon, tells followers, ‘I am your brain, when you join you do everything in utter obedience to me’. Eileen Barker wanted to find out what sort of people join the Moonies, whether they are different from ‘ordinary people’ and if they are ‘brainwashed’ by the organisation as many people believed. She explored these questions using three different methods.

1. She carried out detailed interviews with a **random sample** of Moonies to explore their motivations for joining.
2. She explored possible differences between Moonies and non-Moonies by giving **structured questionnaires** to a large sample of Moonies and to a **control group** of non-Moonies.
3. She carried out **participant observation** research in a number of Unification Church centres over a period of six years to see for herself the ways in which Moonies were controlled within the organisation.

In spite of so much criticism of the Moonies in the press, Barker found that there were no significant personality differences between Moonies and non-Moonies and also little evidence of ‘brainwashing’. She found that the Moonies chose to be members of the group. The sociological question she asked, which is the subtitle of her book, is ‘... choice or brainwashing?’; she found that the Moonies had actively chosen to be Moonies.

**Activity 2.12 Revision check**

In the above example there are four terms in bold type:

- random sample
- structured questionnaire
- control group
- participant observation.

Write down what you understand by these terms and then check your answers by looking back at the subject guide and using your textbooks.

As I observed above, choice of research methods is influenced primarily by the aims of the research design. However, they are not always simply decided by what the researcher would like to do. Sometimes, there are external factors that also have to be taken into consideration in planning and undertaking research. Some of the most important ones are:

- **Access**: sometimes sociologists cannot get access to the documents they want from an organisation or to the social group they want to observe, so they have to find alternative methods, such as interviewing people who worked for the organisation or were members of the social group under consideration.

- **Time and money**: lack of time or funding means that researchers sometimes have to select the cheaper option; for example, using questionnaires instead of detailed unstructured interviews.

- **Ethics**: as we have already observed, ethical considerations might constrain research.
• **Funding body:** sometimes the organisation funding the research will expect the research to be done in a certain way; for example, some organisations have a preference for quantitative rather than qualitative research.

The various factors influencing selection of methods are summarised in Figure 2.8. Although it is important to mention the influence of external influences on research, they should not be exaggerated. Most of the time, most researchers have choice and discretion about most aspects of a research project. However, there is one thing about which they have no choice, and that is that all research involves making theoretical assumptions about the nature of the social world. This is what we shall be examining in the next chapter.

### Summary

Research methods refer to how data is collected. Here we have looked at four of the major research methods: interviews, observation, official statistics and documents. It is important to appreciate the strengths and limitations of each method. Researchers’ selection of methods is influenced by the nature of the problem, theoretical preferences and by external constraints.

If you would like to understand more about the history of sociology before you begin working on the subject in more detail, you can turn to Chapter 4 now.

### A reminder of your learning outcomes

Having completed this chapter, and the Essential reading and Activities, you should be able to:

• describe the nature of sociological research and explain why it is important to know how research is done
• identify the key criteria by which research is evaluated
• explain what is meant by a research design and how the nature of the research design influences the data that is collected
• identify the characteristics of survey, experimental, comparative and ethnographic research designs
• describe the key research methods: interviews, observations, the analysis of official statistics and documents
• approach short questions on sociological research.
Chapter 3: Theory and research

Written by Dr Steve Taylor.

Introduction
So far, we’ve looked at the questions sociologists ask about human societies (Chapter 1) and how they do research (Chapter 2).
In this chapter we’re going to dig deeper and look at some of the different theoretical ideas underpinning sociological thinking and social research. The key idea here is that there is no such thing as ‘theory-free’ research, as the very act of doing research involves making contested – that is, theoretical – assumptions about the nature of social reality and how we obtain knowledge of it.

Aims of the chapter
The aims of this chapter are to:
• develop the idea of methodology introduced in Chapter 2
• introduce you to ontological and epistemological issues in sociology
• outline the key aspects of positivism
• outline the key aspects of interpretivism
• outline the key aspects of realism.

Learning outcomes
By the end of this chapter, and having completed the Essential reading and Activities, you should be able to:
• explain how research is underpinned by theoretical ideas
• describe what is meant by an ontology/epistemology problem in sociology
• identify the key aspects of positivist theory
• describe the interpretivist critique of positivism and the key aspects of interpretivist approaches in sociology
• explain what is meant by realism in sociology and how realism is different from both positivism and interpretivism.

Essential reading
The essential reading for this chapter of the course is the subject guide, but you must also supplement it with reading from your textbook. The key pages in the textbooks we have recommended are:


Further reading
It would also be helpful if you referred to:
Other relevant textbooks are:


Video/DVD

‘Theory and methods’ [from www.halovine.com]. This video/DVD may be helpful to you as it explains and illustrates the three major theories considered here: positivism, interpretivism and realism.

3.1 Methodology revisited

In Chapter 2 we introduced methodology as the study of the methods used by sociologists to find out about societies. Here we are going to ‘unpick’ the idea of methodology and look at it in a little more detail.

As Pawson (1999, p.20) has observed, the assertion that sociology provides some authoritative understanding of the working of the social world is based on usage of some special tools of inquiry. The ‘special tools of inquiry’ involve a combination of thinking skills and practical skills. Methodology is the analysis of these skills. The practical skills - which we looked at the previous chapter - involve things like gaining access to research sites and selecting the right methods for the research problem. The thinking skills - that we shall be more concerned with in this section - involve things like excavating the underlying theoretical assumptions on which research is based, subjecting them to critical scrutiny and considering alternatives.

Methodology, then, is about developing the principles and practice of social research (see Figure 3.1).

Methodology = Principles + Methods

Figure 3.1

The middle term, ‘Principles’, can be divided into two further categories called ontology and epistemology (Figure 3.2).

Methodology = Ontology + Epistemology + Methods

Figure 3.2

Ontology and epistemology are very important concepts in sociology (and in any other discipline) because they involve exploring the ‘core’ ideas and assumptions of the subject.

Ontology

The term ontology originated in philosophy and is concerned with the essential nature of what is being studied. Therefore, an ontological question in sociology addresses the essential nature of human societies. It is concerned with what societies are, what units make them up and how these units relate to each other.
As we observed in Chapter 1, sociology is about the relationships between individuals and societies. However, sociologists have different ways of conceptualising these relationships. For example, one key difference (that we shall be looking at in more detail in Chapter 4) is between sociologists who see societies as social structures and those who focus on social action.

Sociologists who favour structural approaches conceptualise societies primarily as networks of social institutions and patterns of social relationships that are comparatively long-lasting. Sociologists adopting this approach try to show the ways that different social structures shape the behaviour of the individuals living within them. Thus the focus tends to be on large-scale, or macro, social processes.

From this point of view, there are similarities between the natural world and the social world. Both are ‘external realities’ that constrain people’s actions in various ways. Just as gravity limits our power of movement, the societies in which we live influence and constrain how we think and act. For example, the wealth of a society, its productive processes and its customs and values shape people’s life experiences irrespective of their conscious wishes.

Many of those whose work helped to ‘found’ sociology in the nineteenth century viewed societies as social structures. (You will be reading about these sociological theories in more detail in Chapter 4, section 4.2). For example, Marx and Durkheim conceptualised societies this way. For Marx, the key to understanding societies lay in their economic structures. This is known as a materialist view of societies. Marx claimed that social change was caused primarily by changes and resulting tensions in the underlying economic structures of societies rather than by the outcomes of battles or the decisions of a few powerful people, as history books led people to believe.

Durkheim took a different view of social structures. He saw the morals and values of a society, transmitted from one generation to the next, as social forces that regulate people’s behaviour and bind them to each other through shared membership of social institutions. Sociological approaches that see values and beliefs as the ‘core’ elements of societies are called idealist.

Durkheim’s famous study of suicide – looked at briefly in Chapters 2 and 4 – was an attempt to demonstrate that social groups with more integrating social structures (that is, where people are bound more closely together) have lower suicide rates. From this point of view differences in suicide rates were a consequence of different social structures rather than of the characteristics of individuals.

However, despite the differences between Durkheim’s idealist theory focused on cultural values and beliefs and Marx’s materialist theory based on economic production, both viewed people’s behaviour as the product of the structural organisation of societies.

A cluster of approaches in sociology, loosely described as social action theories, view the relationships between the individuals and societies rather differently. Action theorists argue that as societies are produced by the intentional activities of people, sociologists should begin by studying individual social action and the meanings people give to these actions. Action theorists sometimes suggest that structural theories reduce people to the mere puppets of societies. (We will be going into more detail into the theories when we look at Weber in Chapter 4, section 4.2.) For example, Weber disagreed with Marx that the rise of industrial capitalist
society in Western Europe could be explained merely by changes in economic structures. He argued that this theory did not explain the motivation behind a new, more disciplined work ethic and the tendency of so many of the early industrial capitalists to work long hours and reinvest, rather than spend, their profits. Weber used economic statistics and other documentary sources to suggest that an important factor in the success of many early capitalists was a religious conviction, arising from the Protestant doctrine of predestination where economic (or worldly) success came to be interpreted as a sign of God’s favour. By focusing more on the actions of individuals, Weber was able to highlight something absent in Marx’s theory – the relationship between religion and the rise of modern capitalism.

So we can see that there are differences in the way that sociologists view the social world. This will affect the way that they believe that they can understand and know about the world.

**Epistemology**

Epistemology is another term from philosophy. An epistemology is a theory that presents a view of what can be regarded as knowledge rather than belief. In more simple terms, it explores the basis for knowledge – how we know what we know.

Therefore, it follows that epistemological questions in sociology are investigations into how sociologists justify the knowledge they are providing of social life.

Again, sociologists have different views on this. A major epistemological debate in sociology concerns the similarity of sociological knowledge and scientific knowledge.

On the one hand, there are those – sometimes referred to as naturalists – who argue that the best way for sociology to transcend subjectivity and produce more objective knowledge of social life, is to follow the logic and procedures of the natural sciences.

This point of view holds that, as far as possible, sociology can develop methods of investigation based on the logic of experimentation and measurement found in the natural sciences.

On the other hand, there are those – sometimes referred to as anti-naturalists – who argue that because nature and society are completely different from each other, the principles and methods of the natural sciences have little or no application to the study of social life. Sociologists study people and, unlike the matter studied by most natural scientists, people are reflective and try to make sense of the situations in which they find themselves. Therefore, sociology requires a very different approach from that of the natural sciences, one where researchers transcend their subjectivity by interpreting the subjectivity of the people they are studying. In between these extremes there are a variety of positions that accept the principles of scientific inquiry to a limited degree in relation to specific research questions.

Another related epistemological question concerns what is called the subject/object dilemma, which we looked at briefly in Chapter 1. Whereas some sociologists argue that researchers should remain as detached as possible from the subjects of inquiry, others argue exactly the opposite, that valid knowledge of social groups comes from researchers immersing themselves as closely as possible in the lives of those they are studying. Another, more extreme, version of this epistemological position holds that you actually have to be a member of the social group being studied, or at
least have shared the same kind of experiences personally, to provide valid
knowledge of their behaviour. In simple terms you cannot really understand
people without having ‘been there’ yourself. (This epistemological position
would, incidentally, create problems for me, as its logic suggests I can only
‘really’ understand suicide by committing suicide myself!)

So, in summary, there are many different views in sociology about what
societies are and the best ways of obtaining knowledge of them. In the
following sections we shall try to simplify matters to some extent by
identifying three of the most influential theories of knowledge in sociology:
positivism, interpretivism and realism.

However, before looking at these theories, it is important to put them into
perspective, as it would be quite wrong to see sociology as divided into
three distinct and entirely separate approaches.

• First, few sociologists would describe themselves as a positivist,
  interpretivist or realist. These are terms used primarily by
  methodologists and social theorists to try to describe and evaluate the
  theoretical assumptions underlying different approaches to research.

• Secondly, many studies in sociology use a combination of positivist,
  interpretivist and, more recently, realist ideas, just as they use different
  research methods.

• Thirdly, positivism, interpretivism and realism are very general
  descriptive terms and there are many different theoretical approaches
  within the general framework of each one.

For example, some interpretivists (following Weber) believe that
understanding the meanings that people give to their actions is the first
step towards explaining their behaviour. However, others (following
Schutz) argue that sociology cannot move beyond people’s subjective
meanings. We will be examining these approaches in more detail in
Chapter 4, section 4.3.

3.2 Positivism

Now read


Positivism originated as a philosophy of science. Its key idea is unity of
scientific method. This means that although the content of the various
sciences is obviously very different, the form of all scientific enterprise
is essentially the same. Scientific inquiry is based on the systematic
accumulation of ‘facts’ rather than on belief, opinion, tradition or divine
revelation.

Many of the early sociologists writing in the nineteenth century, such as
Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) believed
that by applying the principles and practices that had worked so well in
natural sciences (especially physics, chemistry and biology), sociology
could discover the ‘laws’ that explained how societies worked and changed.

Most modern sociologists do not have such grand ambitions and tend to
write about ‘trends’ or ‘probabilities’ in particular societies rather than
‘scientific laws’ of social development of all societies. However, a great
deal of research in sociology (and other social sciences) is underpinned
by positivist assumptions, so it is important to identify some of the most
important ones.
Causality

Positivism sees the social world – like the natural world – as comprising phenomena (which is just a complicated technical way of saying ‘things’) that are causally related to each other. In more simple language, this means that something (a cause) makes something else (an effect) happen and an effect of one thing can then be the cause of something else. For positivists, science – and good social science – involves describing and trying to explain these causal relationships.

For example, an economic recession in a society may cause higher unemployment and poverty in some sections of a society, and this may then be a cause of increasing rates of crime (Figure 3.3).

![Figure 3.3: How an effect may become a cause](image)

Determinism

Another positivistic assumption underlying much sociological research is a deterministic view of the relationship between the individual and society. This means that the organisation of the societies in which people live causes them to think and act in the way they do, irrespective of their free will, or choice. For example, in the case of crime given in Figure 3.3 increasing unemployment and poverty and not free choice ‘causes’ the increase in crime.

Researchers adopting a positivist point of view may still be interested in finding out about people’s subjective views. For example, they explore things such as attitudes and opinions through survey research. However, they see the task of sociology as explaining why people behave in the way they do. How people really feel about things cannot be explained scientifically and is the proper subject for ‘arts’ subjects, such as literature or poetry.

In spite of its determinist views, positivism does not necessarily lead to a fatalistic acceptance of the way things are. Just as scientists can intervene in nature – for example, by finding the cause of a certain disease and developing an effective treatment – so sociological research into the causes of people’s behaviour can, in principle, be used to engineer social change. For example, understanding the causes of crime can lead to the development of policies that might reduce crime rates.

As you will have seen in your reading, Comte argued that it was possible to know (about the world), to predict (what would happen in the future) and to control (what they discovered was wrong in the world). In fact, he went as far as suggesting that, as sociological expertise developed, future societies would be run on the advice and guidance of sociologists!

Activity 3.1 Determinism and free will

Write down some characteristics of your own behaviour.

Do you feel that you behave in the way that you do because you make a free choice? Or do you think that, to some extent at least, some of your behaviour has been determined by things outside your direct control?

If so, what things (or factors) do you think have influenced your life?
Empiricism

Another characteristic of positivist approaches is the distinction researchers make between ‘theories’ (ideas) and ‘observations’ (empirical knowledge). Empirical, or factual, knowledge is that which can be directly perceived.

This is known as an empiricist concept of knowledge, or epistemology. Empiricist epistemology holds that the only valid source of knowledge is that based on experience. For example, if you are reading this, you know the chair exists because you can see it and feel it.

In scientific terms, an empiricist epistemology means that research has to be grounded in concrete evidence that can be checked out. The positivist view is that science (and ‘good’ social science) involves constructing theories that express relations between observable phenomena (or things). Theories are then tested out in research designs to see if the phenomena behave in the way predicted by the theory. Theories may then be proven, partly proven, or even falsified.

The important consequence of this sociologically is that positivist research is confined to relationships between observable social phenomena. According to this view, science and (good) social science, provides objective knowledge that is, as far as possible, value free. What proves a scientific ‘truth’ is the empirical evidence, not the researcher’s subjective values or arguments. We do not have to take the researcher’s word for it. The theory can be tested and it is the evidence that shows whether or not it works. This view can be summarised in the phrase ‘the facts speak for themselves’.

Methods

There are clear links between positivist theory and the research designs and methods that we looked at in Chapter 2.

Before reading on, ask yourself what research designs and methods you think would be most common in positivist research. If you cannot begin to answer this, go back and reread about sociological research designs and methods in Chapter 2.

The links between positivist theory and research can be worked out logically from what we already know.

For positivists, the goal of sociology is to produce an objective understanding of societies by following the principles of the natural sciences.

Therefore positive research is guided primarily by the ‘scientific criteria’ of the measuring instruments of quantification, systematic collection of evidence, reliability and transparency. Positivist research designs tend to be those that are closest to the logic of natural science research: surveys or experimental designs.

Favoured methods are those that are more likely to produce testable and quantifiable data, such as structured interviews, structured observation and analysis of official statistics (Figure 3.4).

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Research design (most common)</th>
<th>Research methods (most common)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td>Official statistics</td>
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Figure 3.4: Theory, design and method
Positivist ideas are very important because they still underpin a great deal of research in sociology, and almost all research in psychology and in economics. However, they have been subject to a great deal of criticism. Some sociologists, as we have seen, argue that scientific methods have little or no application in sociology. Others suggest that the positivist interpretation of science is flawed. We shall look at the alternative sociological theories of knowledge arising out of these critiques below.

**Activity 3.2 Positivism**

Can you write down three characteristics of positivist theory? Look at your list. Now make of few notes to explain how these points are linked to each other.

Which of the following research projects is more likely to be underpinned by positivist theory?

- An in-depth analysis using unstructured interviews to find out how the victims of crime really felt about their experiences.
- A statistical study of crime rates amongst a city's different ethnic populations.

Can you think of any other criticisms of positivist theory? (For a clue, go back and look at the relation of theory to research on p.37, particularly the second point on theory and data collection.)

**Summary**

Positivist theory argues that the methods of the natural sciences are applicable to the study of societies (naturalism). In the positivist view, sociology involves the search for causal relationships between observable phenomena and theories are tested against observations. Although very few sociologists today would describe themselves as positivists, positivist assumptions are important because they still underpin a great deal of empirical research.

**3.3 Interpretivism**

**Further reading**


The interpretivist tradition in sociology developed largely as a criticism of the dominant theory of positivism. Interpretivist sociologists do not necessarily reject the positivist account of scientific knowledge, but what they do question is the idea that the logic and methods of natural science can be imported into the study of societies. Max Weber (1864–1920) was one of the main influences on the interpretivist tradition in sociology. For him, ‘natural science’ and ‘social science’ are two very different enterprises requiring a different logic and different methods.

**The humanist question**

At the heart of interpretivist critique of positivism is a humanist viewpoint. Some of those favouring an interpretivist view of sociology have long argued that in their quest for a scientific explanation of social life, positivist sociologists have sometimes forgotten that they are studying people, and to study people you need to get out and explore how they really think and act in everyday situations.
The same question is now being raised in other social sciences, some of which you may be studying at some time on your programme. For example, there is now a flourishing humanist movement in psychology. Economics, traditionally the most complacent and self-consciously scientific of the social sciences, is starting to ask itself some similar questions. A group of economists is now arguing that one of the weaknesses of economics has been its failure to get out into the world and see how people really behave in economic situations. Consumers, for example, often make very ‘irrational’ choices.

The key idea of interpretivist ontology is that there is a fundamental difference between the natural world and social world. The social world is meaningful.

As Schutz (1899–1959), one of the most important influences on interpretive sociology, argued:

The world of nature, as explored by the natural scientist, does not ‘mean’ anything to molecules, atoms and electrons therein. The observational field of the social scientist, however, namely the social reality, has a specific meaning and relevance structure for beings living, acting and thinking therein. (Schutz, 1954)

As people engage in conscious, intentional activities and attach meanings to their actions, human societies are essentially subjective realities. Social institutions – the subject matter of sociology – cannot be divorced from the subjective understanding that people (including sociologists) have of them.

Interpretivists argue that the positivist idea of a chain of causation is quite logical in the natural world where a particular stimulus consistently produces a given effect, but does not apply in the social world. People do not merely react to stimuli. Rather, they actively interpret the situations in which they find themselves and act on the basis of these interpretations, as we illustrate below.

A problem at work

Imagine you are working in a bank and your manager comes in and starts shouting at you about how bad your work is. What you would do next depends on how you interpret his action. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Action</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He is quite right. I have been making mistakes and causing him problems.</td>
<td>You apologise and promise to do better in the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He is out of order and has no right to talk to me like that – the mistakes were mainly his fault anyway.</td>
<td>You argue back and threaten to report him for bullying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is so unlike him to get angry like this, but I know he has problems at home and this is why he has lost his temper.</td>
<td>You stay quiet and accept the criticism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are two points here that illustrate the interpretivist position:

• The same stimulus – the angry manager – can produce different responses depending on how his anger is interpreted (i.e. there is not necessarily a consistent cause–effect relationship).

• Whatever your response, a researcher cannot really make sense of your behaviour without interpreting the meaning that you attributed to your manager’s actions, for it is this meaning that explains your response.
Activity 3.3 Your week

Write down three experiences you have had in the past week.

How to do you think a sociologist researching you could interpret and ‘make sense’ of these experiences?

What do you think the limitations of such a study would be?

Verstehen

A key concept here (also described in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, section 4.2) is verstehen, a German word meaning ‘understanding’. The idea of verstehen is that researchers, as far as possible, place themselves imaginatively in the position of those they are studying and ask how they see the world and what ends they believe are served by their actions.

Phenomenology is another important concept in interpretivist epistemology, associated particularly with the work of Alfred Schutz. A phenomenological approach means studying everyday life, focusing on people’s states of consciousness and ‘bracketing off’ judgments about what may be causing their behaviour. Phenomenology argues that it’s not enough simply to interpret the meanings people give to their actions, sociology has to show how people come to construct these meanings for their actions. We will be looking at phenomenology in more detail in Chapter 4, section 4.3.

Sociologists adopting an interpretivist approach to study crime, for example, would not begin by asking what causes criminal behaviour. They would start by trying to interpret criminal behaviour from the criminals’ point of view (see Activity below). This does not mean, of course, that sociologists have to agree with those points of view but rather that they have to interpret them in order to understand crime.

An important issue raised by Max Weber is that behaviour that seems the same ‘from the outside’ can have very different meanings when examined from the ‘inside’. This is elaborated in Activity 3.4 below.

Activity 3.4 The social meanings of actions

Car theft is a growing crime, particularly in Western societies. But the act of breaking into someone’s car and driving it away can have different meanings for different people. For example:

- financial gain: the car can be changed and sold
- revenge: people who have expensive cars deserve to have them taken and wrecked
- convenience: ‘borrowing’ someone’s car to get somewhere else
- danger: the motivation is the risk of getting caught and being chased by the police.

Interpretivist sociologists argue that these different meanings require different explanations.

- Ask yourself what meaning the degree programme you are now taking has for you.
- Can you think of some different meanings that other students taking your degree programme may have? If you have time, you could do a little research and ask some of them.
- How do you think these different meanings might influence students’ motivation for the degree programme?
Methods

The aim of interpretivist approaches in sociology is to understand the subjective experiences of those being studied, how they think and feel and how they act in their natural contexts.

Therefore, although interpretivists still try to be objective and systematic in their research, the key criterion in interpretivist epistemology is validity. The favourite research design is ethnography and the main methods are ones that help researchers understand social life from the point of view of those being studied, such as unstructured observation, unstructured interviews and personal documents (Figure 3.5).

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<td>Interpretivism</td>
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<td>Participant observation</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unstructured interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal documents</td>
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Figure 3.5: Theory, design and methods

Interpretivism has provided a powerful critique of many of the taken-for-granted ideas of positivism that are widely used in sociology and in other social sciences. It has also influenced a whole field of research illuminating people’s everyday life experiences.

However, interpretivists’ accounts are criticised by some sociologists for not providing testable hypotheses that can be evaluated. This can lead to relativism where one theory, or study, is seen as just as good as any other.

Activity 3.5 Interpretivism

- Identify three key characteristics of interpretivist theory.
- Make some notes explaining how these characteristics are linked to each other.
- Identify three research methods that are more likely to be favoured by interpretivist sociologists.
- Can you think of any criticisms of interpretivist theory other than the two mentioned above?

Activity 3.6 Sociology and science

- Write down some arguments in favour of sociology as a science of society.
- Now write down some arguments against this view.
- Which view do you find more convincing and why?

Summary

Interpretivists argue that there are fundamental differences between the natural world and the social world and that the logic and methods of the natural sciences are not applicable to the study of societies. Sociological methods are primarily about investigating and understanding the meanings that people give to their actions.
3.4 Realism

Further reading

Parker (2003) Chapter 11 is also relevant to this section but it is not essential reading.

Realist theory, like positivism, holds that sociology can, and should, follow the logic and methods of the natural sciences. Where realism differs from positivism is in its interpretation of science.

Realists question positivism’s empiricist interpretation of the basis of scientific knowledge. (If you cannot remember what empiricism means go back and remind yourself, using section 3.2.)

They argue that no form of science relies exclusively on observable empirical evidence. There are always aspects of any form of reality that remain hidden beneath the surface of what can be observed. According to realists, the aim of scientific work - rather than looking at relationships between observable phenomena as positivists argue - is to uncover the underlying causal mechanisms that bring about observable regularities.

The idea of medical viruses was originally constructed to explain infections that could not be explained as a result of bacteria or germs. Thus, while the causal mechanisms were unobservable or ‘hidden’ they were nonetheless real and observable in the effect of the viruses. This is where the term realism comes from (Figure 3.6).

```
Observable regularities

underlying

generative

mechanisms
```

Figure 3.6: Hidden causes

Realism has become quite fashionable in sociology. However, like positivism and interpretivism, it has a long history. For example, there were strong realist elements in the work of Karl Marx.

Marx was particularly interested in the analysis of capital accumulation and the process of change. However, he argued that the observable features of capitalist society, such as economic fluctuation, capital growth and massive inequalities, could only be explained in terms of something called the mode of production; that is the relationship between how goods are produced and how production is organised. (However, the mode of production was a theoretical construct that could not be observed directly. Thus, for Marx, to understand how capitalism worked, you had to look beneath the surface.)

In Chapter 4, section 4.2, we will be examining Marx’s theories in more detail and you will need to know why he has been described as a realist to be able to understand the idea of a mode of production which can only be seen by its effects.

The development of a clear, realist epistemology is comparatively recent in sociology and owes much to ‘new realist’ writers like Bhaskar (1986) and Pawson (1989). The key to realist epistemology is that it is theory-driven and non-empiricist.
Realists do not make the clear separation between theory (‘ideas’) and observation (‘facts’) found in positivism. In positivist research theories are tested against observations and found to be ‘true’ or ‘false’ or somewhere in between. In simple terms, the ‘facts’ are the judge of the theory.

Realists do not make this clear-cut separation because they do not believe that ‘observations’ can be separated from ‘theories’. For realists, all data is theory-dependent.

Before reading on, try Activity 3.7 below.

**Activity 3.7 The ‘facts’?**

Do you agree with the realist argument that there are no such ‘things’ as facts without theories?

Can you find some examples of data that you think are theory free?

As theory comes before data collection, theoretical concepts impose a frame of reference on the data rather like the way in which the rules of a game set parameters for the players. Theory thus orders data. However, if theory and observation cannot be separated, this raises the question of how theories can be evaluated.

Realists address this question by looking at what happens in the natural sciences. They argue – in contrast to the positivist view – that data collection in science is also theory-dependent and that explanation does not involve testing theories against observations, but rather generating data to test theories against each other.

Realists argue that this is what should happen in social sciences. As data never speak for themselves but can only be interpreted through theory, research should be about developing, refining and comparing theories in the following way:

- a research problem is formulated
- the most plausible theories are identified
- research designs are constructed to compare the explanatory power of rival theories in given circumstances.

As Pawson (1999, p.47) observes:

Data analysis whether quantitative or qualitative is about utilising evidence to choose between theories. The principle skill of data analysis is the refinement of theory.

Although realists see the structure and logic of scientific inquiry as being applicable in the social sciences, they recognise two important differences between the study of the social world and the natural world:

- The social world is an ‘open system’ and the social contexts enabling (or preventing) the operation of causal mechanisms are subject to rapid and sometimes unpredictable change. This severely limits the scope for prediction and generalisation in social science compared to most natural sciences that can operate under experimental, or ‘closed’, systems.
- The causal mechanisms in social life only operate through people’s intentions and thus, in contrast to positivists, realists argue that sociology involves the attempt to understand subjects’ interpretations of situations.
Methods

Realists, like positivists, see research being guided primarily by ‘scientific’ criteria, such as the systematic collection of evidence, reliability and transparency. However, because they recognise the importance of the subjective dimension of human action, they also include methods that document the validity of people’s experiences. Research designs are more likely to be experimental or comparative in realist research, but there is no particular commitment to either quantitative or qualitative methods.

The focus of realist methodology, however, is on theory. Realists argue that as there is no such thing as theory-free data: sociological methods should be specifically focused on the evaluation and comparison of theoretical concepts, explanations and policies (Figure 3.7).

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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realism</td>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>Non-specific, but methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td>are theory-focused</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.7: Theory, design and methods

‘New realism’ has provided a different – and what most commentators believe to be a valid – interpretation of science and its relationship to social sciences. It has also provided a (developing) alternative to the dominant theories of positivism and interpretivism and laid the foundations for a non-empiricist epistemology in social science. However, realism is also criticised for exaggerating the dependence of science and social science on theory, and realist epistemology offers, at best, very limited truths about the social world.

Summary

Realism holds that sociology involves trying to uncover the underlying mechanisms that generate observable events. It suggests that rather than testing theories against the ‘facts’, data is generated to evaluate theories against each other.

Conclusion

All sociological research designs and methods make certain assumptions about the nature of the social world and how knowledge is generated. One of the ways that research can be evaluated and improved is to make these assumptions more explicit. For example, one of the questions we have addressed here is about the nature of scientific knowledge and whether or not it is applicable to societies. As we have seen, positivism, interpretivism and realism give different answers to this question. However, while these theories have been separated out here in order to explain them more clearly, it is important to repeat a point made earlier in this section: that a great deal of sociological research contains elements of all three.
A reminder of your learning outcomes

Having completed this chapter, and the Essential reading and Activities, you should be able to:

• explain how research is underpinned by theoretical ideas
• describe what is meant by an ontology/epistemology problem in sociology
• identify the key aspects of positivist theory
• describe the interpretivist critique of positivism and the key aspects of interpretivist approaches in sociology
• explain what is meant by realism in sociology and how realism is different from both positivism and interpretivism.