

Defining Sociology

Anthony Giddens ("Sociology", 1989) provides the following general definition:

"Sociology is the study of human social life, groups and societies. It is a dazzling and compelling enterprise, having as its subject matter our own behaviour as social beings.

The scope of sociology is extremely wide, ranging from the analysis of passing encounters between individuals in the street up to the investigation of world-wide social processes".

As you will no-doubt note, Giddens - in this particular extract - is more-concerned with describing the sociological enterprise in very general terms than with trying to nail-down a specific definition...

In "The Complete A-Z Sociology Handbook" (1996) **Tony Lawson** and **Joan Garrod** - two writers with recent experience of being an AQA Chief Examiner - provide the following definition:

"Sociology is the study of individuals in groups and social formations in a systematic way, which grew out of the search for understanding associated with the industrial and scientific revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. It is now an established discipline in post-16 education and has offered generations of students insights into the social world they inhabit. Often accused by the right of being left-wing, it includes individuals of every political opinion who are united by a commitment to search for knowledge and understanding through providing evidence for the theories and insights they offer".

The **British Sociological Association** (<http://www.britisoc.co.uk>) examines the question of defining sociology by considering it in terms of three basic categories.

- [What is Sociology?](#) involves thinking about it's academic origins and history.

In the Beginning...

The origins of Sociology lie in [the](#) 19th century when, the BSA notes: "advances in science and technology encouraged people to believe there could be a rational explanation for everything and that scientific study could lead to the solving of all of the problems faced by human beings".

With this sense of opportunity and optimism "Auguste Comte, who gave the name to sociology, confidently expected it would provide the highest level of scientific explanation in establishing laws of human society itself".

In terms of teaching and academic sociology, [modern sociology](#) was "first taught in Britain at the beginning of this century but the expansion here took place much more recently and was at first greatly influenced by US sociology. During the 1960s, especially, it became a major social science subject, taught in universities and colleges, and with the development of the sociology 'A' level during the 1970s it became a major subject in schools too".

Modern Sociology

The BSA notes: "From its original purpose as the 'science of society', sociology has moved on...to understand how society works. It seeks to provide insights into the many forms of relationship, both

formal and informal, between people. Such relationships are considered to be the 'fabric' of society.

Smaller scale relationships are connected to larger scale relationships and the totality of this is society itself. Human beings have wants, needs and desires but the form these take is related to attachments to social groupings and participation in social institutions. The latter are patterns of human interaction which become 'instituted' over time. People therefore recognise them and orientate their actions towards them.

Alternatively, people may react against social institutions. Either way it is the actions of people that serve both to reproduce society and to effect the changes that are a constant feature of the [process](#)".

- [How is sociology research conducted?](#)

This, as you might expect, looks at how sociological research is carried-out.

Sociological research (what sociologists do when we're not contemplating the Meaning of Life) broadly proceeds, according to the BSA, in two basic ways:

1. Sociology is conceptual. That is: "Ideas [about society] are devised as 'concepts' to describe and explain the workings of society. In this way the forms of social organisation and the resulting social institutions which people create and reproduce in the course of everyday life become defined in sociological terms".

2. "Concepts are tested through 'empirical' research; that is. research involving the investigation of particular aspects of society and the way people interact with each other. This provides a check as to whether sociological concepts actually correspond to the way social life is conducted by real life people".

In other words, sociological research consists of the identification, development and testing of theories.

- [What do Sociologists do?](#) identifies examples of the variety of behaviours - both individual and institutional - sociologists are interested in studying and explaining.

Sociologists actually do quite a lot - as the BSA puts it:

"Sociology is the one social science which embraces the whole range of human activities and this makes it a very wide field of study. As a result, it offers many opportunities for specialisation and these are reflected in the work of sociologists". These specialisations include the study of:

- Economy, Work and Organisation.
- The Conjunction of Biological and Social Relationships: the Family and Gender.
- Social Identity: Age, Class, Gender and Race.
- Poverty, Welfare and Social Inequality.
- Social Norms, Crime and Deviance.
- Religion and Belief Systems.
- Organisations and Bureaucracy
- Society and the Environment.
- People, Health and the Sociology of the Body

Summary

The BSA suggests, therefore:

- "Human society involves people entering into relationships with each other" and that "such relationships take many forms".
- "Patterns of human relationship become institutionalised in the course of their reproduction over time and may therefore be referred to as social institutions".
- "To participate in society human beings maintain an understanding of their relationships with others and of the institutions in which they participate".
- "The task for sociologists is to capture this understanding in a more systematic way and provide explanations which nevertheless are understandable in terms of everyday life".

American Sociological Association

"Sociology is the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behaviour. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies, and how people interact within these contexts. Since all human behaviour is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mob; from organized crime to religious cults; from the divisions of race, gender and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture; and from the sociology of work to the sociology of sports.

Sociology provides many distinctive perspectives on the world, generating new ideas and critiquing the old. The field also offers a range of research techniques that can be applied to virtually any aspect of social life: street crime and delinquency, corporate downsizing, how people express emotions, welfare or education reform, how families differ and flourish, or problems of peace and war".

Tony Fitzgerald (Sociology Online) has a personal view of Sociology...

"It seems to me that sociology is to be defined as the 'study of social order'.

Sociology is a subject made up of competing theories on society. All the differing theories within sociology are best described as basically involved in the project of describing and explaining 'social order'.

In other words sociology has always sought to understand how the components of society, the social relationships and the social institutions, contribute to, or deflect from the continued existence of 'society'.

This is not to suggest that sociology is not concerned with social conflict and social change too. However these concerns are essentially one's which derive from, and supplement, the major objective of understanding social order".

David Kessel, an American academic, offers the following point-of-view:

"Sociology is the study of us...people...living together. While this definition isn't much, its a lot better than saying its the "scientific study of society." What's that actually tell us? Nothing more than saying Medicine is the study of health and illness (It also gets wet when it rains!!).

Sociology is the study of the issues, concepts, investigations, and results of individuals living together. While Sociology's focus is on groups, this focus should not exclude an emphasis on

individuals. After all, individuals constitute groups and groups produce individuals. How can we study and fully understand one without the other? Nor can we study them as if they were merely in competition with each other. Rather, as a study of people...by people...Sociology is a personal encounter with the Social Forces which shape our lives, especially those that affect our awareness (and ignorance) of how we create, maintain, and change those very Social Forces".

Wikipedia, an on-line encyclopaedia, has this to say:

"Sociology is the study of the social lives of humans, groups and societies. It concerns itself with the social rules and processes that bind and separate people not only as individuals, but as members of associations, groups, and institutions.

Sociology is interested in our behaviour as social beings; thus the sociological field of interest ranges from the analysis of short contacts between anonymous individuals on the street to the study of global social processes".

Max Weber ("Sociological Writings". edited by Wolf Heydebrand, 1994) is generally considered to be one of the Founders of Sociology as an academic discipline - and he had this to say about the subject:

"Sociology (in the sense in which this highly ambiguous word is used here) is a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects.

In "action" is included all human behaviour when and insofar as the acting individual attaches a subjective meaning to it. Action in this sense may be either overt or purely inward or subjective; it may consist of positive intervention in a situation, or of deliberately refraining from such intervention or passively acquiescing in the situation.

Action is social insofar as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual (or individuals), it takes account of the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course".

Loren **Demerath** and Michelle **Wolkomir** - two American College lecturers, make the following observations:

"A technical definition of sociology: the systematic study of human beings, human groups, and humanly constructed institutions and organizations. Sociologists strive to understand how humans interact with one another to create the lasting institutions and organizations that link generations in civilization. In addition, sociologists devote serious attention to the manner in which those institutions and organizations influence human interaction. Finally, sociologists are interested in promoting social change to resolve problems of society they find in their research".

What Is Sociology?

The definitions at which you've just looked (unless, of course, you've just jumped to this Summary page because you can't be dealing with loads of descriptive text) are useful for a couple of reasons:

Firstly - and perhaps most obviously - they tell us something about the [subject matter](#) of Sociology.

Subject matter

What you should have discovered here is that Sociology is "about" the relationship between people "as individuals" and people "as members" of social groups.

In this respect, the sociologist is interested in discovering how people's membership of social groups (such as families) influences, shapes and, in some respects, determines their individual self-perception (how people "see" themselves) and, most importantly perhaps, their behaviour.

Sociology in general, therefore, is the study of social groups and, more-specifically, it involves the attempt to identify and explain the various ways our behaviour both influences - and in turn, is influenced by - the personal and impersonal relationships we necessarily form with others.

Secondly, however, the fact we can identify different definitions by different writers tells us something interesting and important about the [subject itself](#).

Perspectives

Leaving to one side the question of how useful (or even, at this early stage of your course, understandable) you found these definitions, their existence tells us something interesting about both Sociology (as a subject) and its subject matter (people and the social groups to which they belong).

- On the one hand we have a range of individual definitions of "Sociology" (each saying something slightly different, in slightly different ways, about the same thing).
- On the other hand, it's possible to identify a number of "core beliefs" and themes running through these different, individual, definitions.

In other words, although there are a wide range of different definitions available - each, in their own way, unique - it's possible to identify [broad areas of agreement](#) between these individual views.

This tells us something very important about both Sociology and the social world in general, namely that although individual human beings are fairly unique (it's arguable whether or not any two human beings can ever be exactly the same), we live in social groups. That is, in order to be "individuals" we need to define common ground between us that allows us - to greater or lesser extents - to express our "individuality".

This concept of "common ground" (which, as you will discover, sociologists call culture) is the subject-matter of Sociology since it reflects the common-belief amongst sociologists that in order to understand "people" we need to understand how and why they live together in groups (such as families); in other words, we need, as sociologists, to understand how social order is created, maintained and policed - a set of ideas that, I would argue, gives Sociology a unique place in the academic world.