

1. Introduction to sociology

INTRODUCTION

For most students reading this book, AS level is probably a first introduction to sociology in any serious way. This is not to say you do not have some idea about the subject, but it is probably true that the extent of your knowledge is somewhat limited. In the normal course of events this is not a problem although, as with any new subject, you will have to become familiar with the particular ways in which sociologists like to look at things and the 'technical language' they use.

Leaving aside any positive or negative preconceptions you have, the idea of 'learning a new language' is actually a useful way of starting to think about sociology, since it involves approaching things that are familiar to us – people and their behaviour – and looking at them in a new and different way. As **Peter Berger** (*An Invitation to Sociology*, 1962) puts it: 'The fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives . . . '.

This idea is both *important* (if sociologists had nothing new to say about the social world there would not be much point to the subject) and, I think, *interesting*, mainly because it suggests there are different ways of looking at and understanding human behaviour.

We need to do some initial preparation work as a way of sensitising you to the idea of looking at human behaviour sociologically. This introduction, therefore, is designed to help you identify the subject matter of sociology and to do this we will be looking at three main ideas:

- an initial definition of sociology
- the difference between facts and opinions
- the sociological perspective – how sociologists look at the social world.

WARM UP: ASKING QUESTIONS

Sociology, at its most basic, is the study of people, their life and their relationships, and you can find out a great deal about people if you ask them the right questions. In pairs, therefore, discover as much as you can about your neighbour by asking them about their life. You might, for example, try asking them about their:

- family relationships (do they have brothers and sisters?)

- education (what subjects are they studying and why?)
- work (what they do, what they hope to do in the future).

You could develop this questioning by asking them what they feel about the people and relationships in their life (how do they get on with brothers, sisters, work colleagues and so forth?).