

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?).



Defining sociology

Preparing the ground

In basic terms, sociology is the study of human societies. In other words, its subject matter is both human behaviour and, most importantly, human relationships. It is usually, as you may be aware, classed as one of the social sciences along with subjects like psychology. It was largely established as a discipline in the late eighteenth century through the work of writers such as **Auguste Comte**.

As an academic *subject*, sociology developed in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries through the work of writers such as **Emile Durkheim**, **Max Weber** and **Talcott Parsons** (all names that, for the present, probably mean nothing to you). One name you may have heard – **Karl Marx** (1818–84) – has probably done more to stimulate interest in the subject than anyone else, even though he wrote in a period before sociology became fully established as a discipline. Sociology, therefore, has a reasonably long history of development (150–200 years), although in Britain it has only achieved prominence as an examined subject in the last 30 to 40 years.

Definitions of the subject are not hard to come by, although for our purposes we can restrict ourselves to just a couple to give you some idea about what sociologists study and, equally importantly, how they study it.

- **What sociologists study:** A useful starting point is **George Ritzer's** (*Sociology*:

Experiencing a Changing Society, 1979) observation that: 'Sociology is the study of individuals in a social setting that includes groups, organisations, cultures and societies. Sociologists study the interrelationships between individuals, organisations, cultures and societies'.

In this respect, sociology involves studying human beings (which you probably knew) and, perhaps more importantly, their *patterns of behaviour* (which you may not have thought about). To do this, we focus on the relationships people form and how these connect to each other. In other words, the focus of the sociologist's attention is group behaviour and, more specifically, how our membership of social groups (such as families, friends and schools) impacts on individual behaviour.

- **How sociologists study behaviour:** Barry Sugarman (*Sociology*, 1968) suggests: 'Sociology is the *objective* study of human behaviour in so far as it is affected by the fact that people live in groups.'

For the moment, the idea of **objectivity** can be taken to mean that sociologists try to create factual knowledge, rather than knowledge based on opinion and, in this respect, sociologists – as they study group behaviour and relationships – try to avoid personal bias intruding into their research. To achieve this, they try to be **systematic** in their study of people's behaviour. This means that when collecting information about behaviour, sociologists use research methods (questionnaires, observations, experiments etc.) governed by certain **rules of evidence** – rules which tell sociologists how to go about the task of



collecting and making sense of evidence. One example of this is that a sociologist will try to test their ideas in some way, rather than simply assuming something is either true or false.

Concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ are always significant for many reasons, not the least being that sociologists – like most people – want the information they produce to be considered true. Assessing these concepts is, as we will consider at various points in this course, not always simple and straightforward, but for the moment we just need to consider the distinction between two types of information closely related to these ideas, namely **facts** and **opinions**.

- **Facts** are things that are true, regardless of whether or not we would like them to be true. For example, it is a fact that AS Sociology courses currently involve public examinations; you may not like this fact but if you want to achieve an AS Sociology qualification you will have to sit exams to determine your final grade.

One major characteristic of factual knowledge, as I have suggested, is that it is considered true because we have tried to test it in some way (for example, through observing something over time) and found we cannot prove it false. This is a nice though initially somewhat confusing distinction that will be increasingly useful as your course develops. For example, I have observed various Advanced Level Sociology courses over time and found it to be true that there is always an examination of some kind involved. This is not to say facts are true for all time (in the future, sociology grades may not be awarded on the bases of tests) but, given certain

specified conditions, a fact is a statement that is true while those conditions apply.

- **Opinions** on the other hand can be generally defined as ideas that may or may not be factual or true. An opinion, in this respect, is simply a statement we make that we believe to be true (or not as the case may be), regardless of whether or not we have any evidence to support it. For example, I may hold the opinion that I am the most intelligent person in the world, but the only way to assess the truth or falsity of this opinion is to test it.

The main purpose of this little detour from the path of sociological enlightenment is to suggest sociologists try to create factual knowledge about human behaviour. That is, we try (not always successfully it has to be said) to produce statements about human relationships that are not only true, but demonstrably true – in other words, we are able to demonstrate such statements are not false on the basis of testing and evidence.

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

Sociologists, however, are not simply interested in facts for their own sake; rather, we are (possibly more) interested in how facts are produced. In other words, how is factual knowledge created? The deceptively simple answer is that factual sociological knowledge is created by asking **theoretical questions**. Theory, for our purpose here, is something that explains the relationship between two or more things. For example, it



is a fact that in 1995 approximately 160,000 marriages in Britain ended in divorce. Sociologically, we would like to know why this happens – what are the causes of divorce?

We can only explain facts by constructing possible explanations (theories) and then testing our theory against other, known, facts (or ‘reality’ as we sometimes like to call it). For example, a very basic theory in this instance might be that ‘If a man and a woman are both in their teens when they marry, they are more likely to divorce’ (something that, statistically, happens to be true).



Digging deeper

So far we have looked at a couple of basic definitions of sociology, in terms of what sociologists study and how they study it. Before we move on to look at some important introductory sociological concepts, we need to step back for a moment to consider some of the basic beliefs shared by most sociologists.

Basic beliefs

Sociologists, like any social group, share a number of beliefs about the enterprise in which they are engaged (which, for those of you with very short memories, is to understand human behaviour). This is not to say sociologists are a group of like-minded individuals, always in complete agreement with each other; on the contrary, sociologists rarely agree with each other – but that is a story we will develop throughout this book. However, it is true that to be a sociologist means to subscribe to a set of principles that govern our basic outlook on ‘Life, the Universe and, indeed,

almost Everything’ to paraphrase **Douglas Adams** (*The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, 1979). In other words, if you do not or cannot agree with any of the following then, at best, you are going to find sociology difficult and, at worst, very frustrating indeed. Let us begin, therefore, by noting the following basic beliefs.

- **Human beings are social animals:** Not a particularly controversial opening statement, but one that needs to be noted. Sociology stems from the idea that ‘the human animal’ lives, works and plays in groups and this group behaviour involves the requirement to cooperate with others to produce the social world in which we live.
- **Human beings belong to social groups:** To understand human behaviour we focus on the groups to which people belong. This follows from the above in the sense that, if people form social groups (such as a family), it makes sense to examine and try to understand how these groups influence our behaviour. You might, for example, like to briefly reflect on how your family or friends have influenced your personal development (or, then again, you might not – we will need, at various points, to think about how the choices we make affect both our own behaviour and that of the people around us).
- **Human beings learn:** A fundamental idea for sociologists is that social behaviour is learned, not instinctive. This, of course, is a rather more controversial statement (for reasons we will develop in a moment), but it expresses the basic sociological belief that there is nothing in our biological or genetic make-up that



forces us to behave in particular ways (to be, for example, selfish, aggressive or caring – to mention just three of my many human characteristics).

This is not to say human biology and genes are unimportant; you only have to look around to see they are – as a species, human beings are, for example, genetically different from cats and we are all, in various significant and insignificant ways, biologically different from each other. However, in terms of the relative influence on our behaviour, ‘learning’ is considered the most important for sociologists.

It is important you understand and, to some extent, accept these ideas and, in order to encourage such acceptance, we can briefly outline some of the reasons why sociologists see social behaviour as **learned behaviour**.

Although it is not a particularly hard concept to grasp, one difficulty students tend to have at the start of a course is overcoming a lurking belief that, deep down, human behaviour really does have some sort of instinctive basis. This is not too surprising (and is really nothing to be ashamed about) given two things.

- **Teaching:** Firstly, we tend to be taught that animal behaviour is guided by instinct (by which, for the moment, we generally mean to be some sort of genetic programming that tells animals how to behave without them having to think about such behaviour). Since people are essentially animals too, it is only a short step to believe that some – if not necessarily all – of our behaviour has a similar instinctive basis.
- **Language:** Secondly, the concept of

instinct is frequently used in everyday language. For example, we hear or use phrases like ‘The striker’s instinct for goal’ or ‘She seemed to instinctively know they were talking about her’. This everyday usage gives the impression that instinct commonly influences behaviour and enters the realm of ‘what everybody knows’. It becomes, in effect, part of our common sense store of knowledge.

Instinct

To understand why sociologists often question the usefulness of thinking about human behaviour in terms of instincts, we need to be clear about its meaning. Instincts have three main features: they tell an animal, for example, *what* to do, *when* to do it and, finally, *how* to do it. To clarify these ideas, consider this example from the bird world.

- **What:** Every year for as long as I can remember, blue tits have nested in the bird box I have so thoughtfully provided for them in my garden (except, I should add, when my garden was being redesigned and I took the box down – they nested in my barbecue instead). This is evidence of instinctive behaviour because the adult blue tits know what they have got to do each year.
- **When:** Aside from nesting every year, the blue tits also know at what point in the year to start nest-building, egg-laying and chick-rearing. Again, this is instinctive behaviour because it does not have to be taught or learned – they just seem to know when to start nesting.
- **How:** Without fail, these birds build exactly the same sort of nest each year (a single-storey ‘everyone-in-it-together’



affair). This, yet again, is instinctive behaviour because the adult birds have no choice in the matter – they build the type of nest they have been genetically programmed to build.

In terms of the above, human beings do not behave instinctively in the way we understand some animals or birds to.

However, we can qualify this slightly by noting a further concept, frequently confused with the idea of instinct, namely **biological drives**. These are things that are biologically desirable or necessary, examples of which might include eating and sleeping. We should note that even though such drives are part of our biological make-up, they can be regulated through our social experiences (in other words, we may exercise some degree of choice about when and how we do them). Eating, for example, can be regulated through dieting, and sleep patterns can be fairly easily adjusted, depending on social circumstances.

WARM UP: INSTINCTIVE BEHAVIOUR?

In the following exercise we are going to test whether or not it is possible to identify human instincts. As you may imagine (given what you have just read), this is not very likely; nevertheless, it is a useful exercise, not simply to test this idea, but also because it leads into the main part of this chapter, a discussion of learned behaviour.

Firstly, make sure you understand the concepts of *instinct* and *biological drives* and the difference between them.

Secondly, make a list of anything you think could conceivably be instinctive human behaviour (for example eating or sleeping, crime, looking after children).

Next, remove from your list any biological drives.

Finally, for each of the remaining things on your list, remove it if we have a *choice* about whether or not to do it – which will put paid to things like crime (many people never break the law) and looking after children (many people choose to remain childless, or they employ other people to look after their children).

You should be left with a suspiciously blank list – and if it is not blank then you have either cheated, have a chronic inability to follow simple instructions or have listed things that are too trivial to have any real impact on people's behaviour).

Before we start to look at sociological ideas about learned behaviour, we can note that sociologists are sceptical about the idea of instinct as the basis for human behaviour, for three main reasons.

- **Choice:** Instincts, by definition, involve a lack of choice (their purpose, after all, is to create order by explicitly removing choice from the agenda). Human behaviour, on the other hand, involves an almost limitless set of choices, some of which are fairly banal ('Should I do my sociology homework or watch TV?') and some of which are not ('Should I buy this very interesting book or steal it from the bookshop?').
- **Diversity** of our behaviour: One of the fascinations of sociology is the fact different people develop different (or diverse) ways of doing things. If human behaviour was simply based on instinct, we would expect to see much the same sort of behaviour wherever we were in the world – and while there are, as we will see, many similarities and continuities in human behaviour, there is also a vast



range of differences that stem from our ability to make choices.

- **Adaptation:** We live in a vast and complex world, one that seems to change increasingly rapidly. People have to be able to adapt to changes in their world and instinctive behaviour is, by its very nature, not well-suited to change.

Having suggested our behaviour is based on experience rather than instinct, what we need to do next is look at how sociologists consider social behaviour to be a learned process.

Learned behaviour

Preparing the ground

The first point to note is that if behaviour is learned, it follows it must also be taught – which leads to the idea that our membership of social groups is the initial

key to understanding behaviour sociologically. We need, therefore, to understand the concept of a social group and how belonging to groups affects our behaviour. As you probably appreciate, there are various types of social group we can identify, such as:

- **Family groups**, consisting of people related to each other through **kinship** (a direct biological relationship – such as mother and daughter) or **affinity** (their relationship is by marriage or some other living arrangement).
- **Educational groups**, which could include people studying together in the same school/college or class.
- **Work groups** – people who do the same type of job, for example.
- **Peer groups**, consisting of people of roughly the same age (teenagers, for example) who share a number of common interests, such as music and fashion.

Our individual lives, therefore, are surrounded by social groups – some of which we actively join and others which we may



Growing it yourself: social groups and their effects

Identify a group to which you belong (if done as a class, split into small groups, and each group identify a different social group). Examples of groups you could use are: family, education, work, friends and peers. Draw a table such as the one below and provide examples that answer the two questions (I've given you a couple of examples to get you started).

Group	How has my behaviour been shaped by this group?	How has the behaviour of group members been shaped by my behaviour?
School class	I sit quietly and listen	I am a style icon – they look to me for fashion advice



merely observe. Their significance to us, however, needs to be considered in terms of how membership of these groups affects two things:

- how we think about the social world (our personal ‘sociological perspective’)
- how we behave – in other words, how our behaviour is both learned from and shaped by the behaviour of others.

This exercise will have demonstrated two things: firstly, that we all belong to a wide variety of social groups and these groups shape our behaviour in some way; and secondly, as a member of these groups we are involved in shaping the behaviour of others.

In other words, this is a two-way process – my behaviour towards you affects your behaviour towards me which, in turn, affects how I behave towards you. The significance of this idea, if it is not immediately apparent, will be made clear in a moment. However, rather than explore these ideas further now, what we need to do is to briefly examine one of the largest groups to which we all belong, namely a **society**. This is useful for a couple reasons.

- **Common behaviour:** Membership of a society is something we have in common – we are all aware (because we have been taught such awareness) that we live in a particular society. Since it is a familiar concept to us, we should already have some basic idea about what it involves.
- **Sociological problems:** Examining this idea will help us understand some of the problems sociologists face in their study of social behaviour, mainly because, as we will see, it is not easy to pin down exactly what we mean by the ‘thing’ (society) we are supposed to be studying.

When we think about the concept of a ‘society’ we tend to characterise it in terms of ideas like:

- **Geographical area**, which is marked by either a physical border (such as a river), or a symbolic border (for example, an imaginary line marking where one society ends and another begins).
- **System of government**, which may involve things like a monarchy, parliament and civil service, for example.
- **Language, customs and traditions** which people within a society share (speaking the same language, for example, or celebrating a particular religious festival).
- **Identity:** we develop an awareness that ‘our society’ is different from other societies and ‘We’, in turn, consider ourselves different from ‘Them’ (for example, the English may see themselves as different from French or American people).
- **Culture:** What we are starting to develop, in very general terms, are ideas about distinctive ‘way of life’ characteristics of different societies. This concept is one to which we will necessarily return in a moment, since it involves the need to learn certain things.



Digging deeper

One of the problems sociologists have is that the ‘thing’ we want to study doesn’t have a physical existence. ‘Society’, in other words, cannot be sensed – seen, smelt, touched, tasted or heard. This, as you might expect, creates a couple of immediate problems.

- **Arguments:** Our inability to point to something solid and say, ‘This is society’



means sociologists have developed different opinions about the nature of society – how it's organised or how it affects our behaviour, for example. In addition, not all sociologists agree about how to define 'society' or, indeed, how it can be studied.

- **Knowledge:** Sociologists are often accused of not being 'real' scientists (such as physicists, for example). Whether this matters probably depends on how important you consider this status to be. However, it does tend to mean the value of sociological knowledge is generally downgraded, mainly because sociologists seem incapable of *predicting* human behaviour. Whether this 'unpredictability' is a quality of sociology or of human behaviour is a matter for debate.

For the moment, we can note that there are plenty of things in the natural world that can be studied without the scientist being able to see them. Gravity, electricity, radiation and oxygen, for example, are all things we know exist, but they are not things you could easily pick up and physically examine.

The important point here, therefore, is that we know these things exist (or, if you prefer, we can *theorise* their existence) not because we can physically sense them but because we can feel their effects. This is an important idea because it gets us thinking about something like society in terms of it being a *force*, rather than a physical object – in the same way that gravity is a force rather than an 'object'. We can't see it, but we know it's there because we feel its effect. In a similar way, if we think about society as an invisible force, it should be possible to study its effects and, by so doing, demonstrate its existence.

If we view society in this way, it would be helpful to think about how this force is created and, to do this, we can use the idea of society as an **imagined community**.

Benedict Anderson (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983), for example, argues that society 'is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.'

In other words, society exists for us in our thoughts – each of us, in some way, imagines we belong to that community we call 'our society', just as we imagine we belong to social groups (such as a family) within that society. This may seem a complex idea to grasp (especially this early in the course), but we can simplify it by thinking about how and why we imagine ourselves to be part of a community, based on the idea of relationships.

Relationships

Whenever we enter into a relationship with someone – either through choice or necessity – we create an invisible *bond*. For example, when you say something like, 'That person is my friend', you recognise some kind of special relationship between the two of you. This relationship is different from the one created when you say something like, 'That person is my mother'.

There are hundreds (probably, I haven't counted them) of different social relationships we could identify. Some of these relationships are *personal* ('This is my lover') and some are *impersonal* (such as when you watch television), but the important thing is they all affect your



behaviour in some way. You might like to think about this in terms of the way you classify the people around you – and how this classification system affects your respective behaviours.



Growing it yourself: classifying people

Next time you walk around your school or college, think about the different ways you classify people and how this classification affects your behaviour towards them. To help you, think about the following classes of people and how you're expected to behave towards them:

- strangers (people you don't know)
- acquaintances (people you recognise, but don't really know very well)
- friends
- close friends
- best friends.

If you think about this exercise, the relationships we form are significant to us because of the **meanings** we give to them. In a way, it is as if we are involved in an elaborate game, where we convince ourselves that the relationships we form are real, in the sense of having some sort of physical existence. We can think about this in terms of **behaviour**. How would a stranger be able to identify the different types of relationship in your life? How, for example, would they know which person was your father or sister, employer or lover? The simple answer is that, merely by looking, they wouldn't. They could only guess at these relationships by the way both you and these people behave towards each other.

Discussion point: using your imagination

What would happen if you imagine a relationship exists and the people around you deny that it does?

What would happen, for example, if you went up to a complete stranger and started behaving towards them as if they were your boy/girlfriend?

What should be clear from the above is that relationships and their meanings are important to us – not just on an individual level, but also in terms of the various ways we imagine our connections to other people. What we need to do next, therefore, is to explore in more detail the various ways we construct our social relationships.

Culture and socialisation



Preparing the ground

In this section we can develop some of the ideas we have touched upon in relation to the idea that social behaviour is learned. In particular, we can look more closely at two central ideas, namely, *what we learn* and *how we learn it*.

As we have just seen, the idea of being born into – and living in – a society is an important one, not simply because this happens to be true (everyone is born into an existing society), but also because it suggests



'a society' involves some sort of organisation. In other words, for a society to exist it must have *order* and *stability* and for these to exist people's behaviour must display *patterns* and *regularities* – ideas we can initially understand in terms of **culture**. At its most basic, a culture is, as I have already noted, a 'way of life'. It consists, in other words, of the behaviour and beliefs that characterise people of a particular society, and we can start to explore this idea in the following exercise.

WARM UP: BEHAVIOUR AND BELIEFS

This exercise involves identifying behaviours and beliefs characteristic of British culture. It can be done individually, but it is more fun if you do it as a class.

I have provided one example of behaviour and beliefs in each section to get you started. What further examples could you add to each of the categories?

In this exercise we have identified three main aspects of culture we can develop in the following way:

- **Social institutions:** We can think about 'our culture' (or indeed any culture) in terms of general patterns of behaviour

based around four different categories: politics, economics, family life and culture (which includes areas like education and religion). The technical term for these large-scale, persistent (long-term) patterns of behaviour is 'social institution' – an idea we will develop in more detail in a moment.

- **Norms:** When we think about 'typical' forms of behaviour (such as going to school or working) we are referring to *norms* (short for 'normative' or 'normal') These can be defined as expected forms of behaviour in a given situation. For example, it might be a norm in our education system for students to sit quietly and listen when their teacher is talking to the class.
- **Values:** When we think about beliefs associated with institutions and norms (such as the belief someone is 'innocent until proven guilty') we are expressing a *value* – a belief about the way something should be. Thus, when you catch yourself saying what you believe someone should or should not do, you are expressing your values.

Aspect of Culture	Behaviour typical of British culture	Typical beliefs of British culture
Politics	Legal system – law abiding	Fair trial
Family	Marriage/cohabitation	Romantic love
Economic (Work)	Employer/employee	Work for money
Education	Attending school (5–16)	Qualifications important
Media	Watching TV	Private/public ownership
Religion	Prayer	Christianity/Islam
Science	Medical surgery	Keeping people alive as long as possible



Digging deeper

So far we have seen that a society has a culture that consists of a combination of social institutions, norms of behaviour and values. Before we examine these ideas in more detail, however, we can dig a little deeper around the concept of culture to identify some of its most important aspects and suggest why culture (rather than instinct) is the basis for human behaviour. Let's begin, therefore, by noting that culture consists of two basic elements, **material culture** and **non-material culture**.

Material culture

This aspect of culture consists of the physical objects (cars, telephones, computers, etc.) a society produces to reflect their knowledge, skills, interests and preoccupations. These objects do, of course, have meaning for the people who produce and use them, adding a further dimension to the concept of culture which we can illustrate in the following way.

If you think about a mobile phone it is fairly easy to see these two dimensions of material culture:

- **Technology:** On the one hand, the mobile phone is an object that allows you to communicate with anyone who has access to a telephone, wherever you may be.
- **Meaning:** On the other hand, your mobile has certain cultural meanings; it says something, in other words, about who you are.

For example, your ringtone, the functions your mobile can perform and so forth, all say something about you. Whether or not it's

Discussion point: cultural meaning

Look at the picture and describe what it means to you.



These are the very latest mobile phones from Nokia

Now look at the following picture and describe what it means to you.



This picture of Alan shows him using an early mobile (a word I use loosely) phone

What do the two pictures tell us about:

- how meanings change
- how changes in technology may change the meaning of something?



what you intend them to mean is, of course, something other people will decide – perhaps that Cliff Richard ringtone you intend to be an ironic comment on popular culture is just seen as totally naff by people who have to listen to it.

The Discussion Point has started you thinking about the idea of **social status**, which involves ideas about how you are viewed by others and, most importantly, the level of respect they give you on the basis of their understanding of your status. Another aspect to status, in this particular context, is that a mobile phone is an example of a **status symbol** – an object that partly functions to tell other people something about you (which, in terms of the second picture at least, may or may not be what you intended). This, in turn, leads us to think about the concept of **function**: Robert Merton (*Social Theory and Social Structure*, 1957) argued that the purpose of something (its *function*) can always be considered on two levels, namely in terms of:

- **Manifest function**, which relates to an apparent or obvious purpose (the manifest function of a mobile phone, for example, is to communicate with people)
- **Latent function**, which involves the idea something may have a hidden or obscured purpose (for example, the idea of a mobile phone being used as a status symbol).

A further example of manifest and latent functions might be when a teacher takes the register at the start of a class. The *manifest* function of this behaviour is to see who is present and who is absent. However, this behaviour also serves a latent or hidden function – one that demonstrates to students

who is in charge of the class (since only the teacher is allowed to mark the register).



Growing it yourself: finding functions

In the following table I have identified some examples of behaviour in our society. In small groups, reproduce the table and suggest manifest and latent functions for the actions I have left blank.

As a class, if you have the time (and the inclination), suggest some further actions and their associated manifest and latent functions.

Action	Manifest function(s)	Latent function(s)
Taking the register	To see who is present or absent	To establish authority of the teacher
A teacher standing at the front of the class		
Going to school		
A school assembly		
Wearing an engagement ring		
A wedding		

Non-material culture

The second aspect of culture we can usefully note is non-material culture, which consists of the knowledge and beliefs that influence people's behaviour. For example, in our



culture, behaviour may be influenced by religious beliefs (if you are a Christian or a Muslim, for example, the teachings of these religions may exert a powerful influence over your behaviour) and/or scientific beliefs – your view of human biological development, for example, has probably been influenced by Charles Darwin's 'Theory of Evolution'.

Having outlined these two basic dimensions of culture, we can develop the concept of non-material culture further by examining a number of related ideas.

Roles, status, values, norms



Preparing the ground

So far we have touched on the idea of societies and cultures being characterised by certain behavioural patterns or regularities. The main question to address next, therefore, is that if we are all individuals, unique in our own small ways, and without instincts to guide us, how is it possible for these patterns of behaviour to exist?

For sociologists, the answer to this question is behaviour patterns are culturally created; that is, individual behaviours are shaped by the groups – and culture – to which we belong and with which we identify. To understand this idea, we need to introduce a couple of new concepts and revisit some we have already (briefly) met.

Social roles

These are one of the main ways the 'invisible hand' of culture reaches out to influence people's behaviour. Roles are the

parts we play in our relationships with others – an idea similar to that of an actor in a play. Just as an actor may play many parts during their career, each of us plays many roles during our lifetime; teacher, student, mother, son, employer and employee are just a few examples we can identify.

Roles are an important part of culture because they are the basic foundations for behaviour; without instincts to guide us we are forced to develop a sense of how we are expected to behave in particular social situations. This means that roles have some interesting features worth noting.

- **Sharing:** A role is always played in relation to other roles. My role of teacher, for example, would be meaningless if it wasn't played out in relation to students (standing at the front of an empty classroom patiently explaining the concept of social roles would probably be interpreted as a sign of insanity).
- **Expectations:** Because roles always involve certain expectations (I expect to teach, you expect to learn) they create a sense of order and predictability in our relationships. This is because role-play is governed by certain rules of behaviour (sometimes termed a *prescribed aspect* of a role – expectations about how you *should* behave when playing a particular role), which links to the concept of:
- **Norms:** As I have suggested earlier, these are expected, socially acceptable ways of behaving when playing a role. For example, as a teacher, it's a norm for me to arrive on time for my classes, mainly because my students expect their classes to start on time and it would be unacceptable for me to turn-up an hour late.



Similarly, there are a variety of norms associated with the student role; I expect my students to listen to my words of wisdom, ask intelligent questions, pretend to look interested, laugh at my ‘jokes’ and so forth. Norms, in this respect, are *specific guidelines*, designed to govern our behaviour in various situations; they are, if you like, the basic rules of behaviour we develop and use to perform roles predictably and acceptably.

One further point to note is that norms are frequently open to negotiation; it may be possible to play the same role (such as a student) differently in different situations. For example, when attending one class the teacher may interpret their role narrowly, enforcing all kinds of rules and restrictions (working in silence, for example). However, in a different class the teacher may interpret their role very broadly, allowing their students to behave in ways unacceptable to the first teacher. This idea leads us neatly into a discussion of a related concept, that of values.

Values

As we have briefly seen, values are beliefs about what is important, both to us and to society as a whole. We can, however, develop this idea by noting three further points.

- **Interpretations:** Our values influence how we interpret and play a particular role and, in turn, influence the norms we associate with that role. For example, if, when playing the role of ‘father’, you believe ‘Children should be seen but not heard’, you’re not likely to bother asking your kids about where to go on holiday.

- **General Guidelines:** If norms are specific behavioural guidelines, values provide very general behavioural guidelines. As Thio (*Sociology: A Brief Introduction*, 1991) puts it: ‘While norms are specific rules dictating how people should act in a particular situation, values are general ideas that support the norm’.
- **Judgements:** Values, by definition, always involve judgements about behaviour; whenever we think about – or express – the values we hold we are choosing to believe one thing rather than another.

Social roles

Digging deeper

The different roles we play can be neatly grouped into two main categories.

- **Achieved:** These are roles we choose – or are allowed – to play and they are ‘achieved’ because we have to do something to earn the right to play them (a doctor, for example, will have worked to gain the qualifications necessary to play this role). The majority of roles in our society are achieved.
- **Ascribed:** These roles are ones we’re forced to play by other, more powerful, people. For example, between the ages of 5 and 16 in Britain, the government gives everyone the *ascribed role* of ‘schoolchild’. Although, in our society at least, ascribed roles tend to be in the minority, they are nevertheless still significant – think, for example, about the possible consequences of being male or female, young or old, rich or poor.

As I have suggested, role-play is a source of order and predictability in both our



individual and institutional relationships – which is one of the reasons we develop and play roles. Without them the social world would be a very confusing place – imagine, for example, a situation in which you could not remember what your relationship to everyone around you was supposed to be.

One benefit of role-play, therefore, is that once we've learned what's expected of us, we use that knowledge whenever we play that role – it helps us accomplish certain tasks. The teaching and learning process, for example, is made easier if both teacher and student behave towards each other in ways considered appropriate for their roles (think how difficult it is to learn if the teacher is unclear about what they're teaching or if students misbehave in the classroom).

Another aspect of social order, therefore, is that role-play helps us regulate both our behaviour and that of others. Role-playing is a way of controlling people's behaviour, for example, because the norms associated with each role give us *boundary markers* against which to judge acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. This idea of *social control* is important enough for us to consider in more detail in a moment.

One feature of role-play, as we've seen, is each role is played out in relation to other roles; a group of roles relating specifically to the role we're playing is called a **role-set** and an example of a student's role set might be:

- other students
- your class teacher
- other teachers
- caretaking staff
- administration staff
- your parent(s)/guardian(s).

This idea leads us inexorably to a further concept related to roles and role-sets, called **social status**. As I have suggested, social status involves the 'level of respect we're expected to give someone playing a particular role'. Every role has an associated status and we can, for example, measure the status of a student against the status of a teacher. Alternatively, we could measure the status of a teacher against the status of the Queen. As with the concept of role, social status has two basic forms.

- **Achieved status** involves doing something to earn that status – a teacher's status is earned, for example, because they have achieved the level of qualification and training necessary to play this role.
- **Ascribed status**, on the other hand, is given to you, whether or not you want it. You may not, for example, have wanted the status of 'pupil', but you were given it regardless.

The way we feel about our status in relation to others affects the way we behave in certain situations. This is because status is closely related to a further concept, that of **power**. This involves the ability to force people to do something, regardless of their ability to resist. A teacher, for example, probably believes that, because their status is greater than that of their students, they are justified in:

- setting students work do outside their class
- telling a noisy student to be quiet
- making an unruly student leave the class.

One final idea to note here is that, for all the advantages they give us in the



organisation of our lives, the wide number and variety of roles we play occasionally causes us problems, one aspect of which we can note in terms of **role conflict**, which occurs when the norms consistent with one role prevent us from behaving in accordance with the norms consistent with another role. Imagine, for example, you play two different roles in your life:

- **Student role:** For this, one norm is you have to be in class at 3 pm on a Friday.
- **Part-time employee role:** When a crisis occurs at work your employer demands you start work 3 hours earlier than usual on a Friday. Instead of starting at 5 pm, they ask you to start at 2 pm.

This is a no-win situation for you. If you follow the norms associated with one role (student), you break the norms associated with the other (employee). The fact that it's not your fault and that whatever you choose will mean getting into trouble, merely makes you an innocent victim of role conflict.

Norms



Digging deeper

Although you're probably not aware of it (and why should you be?), norms come in a variety of shapes and sizes which we can note as follows.

- **Folkways** (or informal norms) are a weak kind of norm; if you break them, the sanctions (penalties) involved are fairly minor. Folkways relate mainly to social politeness and customs. For example, when you meet someone you know it's

polite to greet them ('Hello') and expect them to respond in kind. Similarly, it's customary in our culture to send people birthday cards. In many ways folkways are examples of *situational norms* – they only apply in specific situations. Your failure to send me a birthday card is unlikely to worry me unduly, for the deceptively simple reason that I don't know you (it might have been nice if you'd made the effort, however); your failure to remember a loved one's birthday, on the other hand, is likely to result in some sort of penalty ...

- **Mores** (pronounced 'more-rays') are stronger norms and a failure to conform to them will result in a consequently stronger social response from whoever resents your failure to behave appropriately. In some ways it's useful to think of them as rules relating to particular situations – for example, a no-smoking policy in an office. Another example might be a rule that bans cheating in an exam.
- **Laws** (legal or formal norms) are the strongest norms in any society. They are expressions of moral feelings and exist to explicitly control people's behaviour. Punishment for breaking legal norms varies in terms of their perceived seriousness. In our society, punishments vary from things like community orders and fines to life imprisonment (although in some societies, such as the USA or Saudi Arabia, capital punishment may be the most extreme sanction for breaking this type of norm).



Discussion point: exploring norms

Exploring personal and cultural norms can be an interesting and sociologically rewarding experience because it helps us understand the nuts-and-bolts of cultural life.

In small groups, or as a class if you wish, choose one of the following to think about and discuss:

- the norms of window shopping
- when and how to kiss
- the gender norms of public lavatories
- personal space.

So far we have talked in general terms about the concept of culture, outlined in terms of a society having general beliefs that apply to the majority of its members. While this is both true and useful, it is interesting to note how this sense of belonging to the same culture can be broken down into more specific values and norms since, although we share many things with others, not every group has exactly the same values and norms – and this is where the concept of **sub-cultures** comes into its own. This concept refers to the idea of some (smaller) groups within a general culture sharing a particular way of life. Some examples that show the wide range of sub-cultural groups in our society might be:

- football supporters
- train-spotters
- orthodox jews
- travellers
- A-level students.

We can use the last example – being part of a student sub-culture – to illustrate the

possible relationship between cultural and sub-cultural groups.

A student is part of a sub-cultural group with its own particular ‘way of life’ (attending classes, and doing all the things students are supposed to do.). However, just because they are part of this sub-culture doesn’t mean they can’t be part of other sub-cultural groups or, indeed, the culture of society as a whole.

While some of the values of a student sub-culture (wanting to get an A-level qualification, for example) and the norms associated with these values (such as gaining a qualification by passing examinations) may be different from the values and norms of other sub-cultures, they can still be part of the wider culture of society. Indeed, the reason you might value an educational qualification is precisely because it has a value in wider society. A prospective employer, for example, might offer you a job on the basis of your qualifications.

So far we have looked at the things we need to learn (roles, values, norms and so forth) in order to take our place in society. What we need to do next, therefore, is to look at how we learn these things – through a process called socialisation.

The socialisation process

Preparing the ground

Learning how to behave in ways that accord with the general expectations of others (in



short, to be socialised) is a process that begins at birth and continues throughout our life. We never stop learning how to behave, mainly because society is always changing and we are continually faced with learning how to behave in new and different situations (especially in terms of our individual relationships). When we start to look at socialisation as a process, therefore, we can begin by identifying two basic types.

- **Primary socialisation** occurs between the individual and those people in their life with whom they have *primary relationships*; that is a relationship involving close, personal and face-to-face interaction with the people responsible for doing the socialising. For most of us, the first primary relationship we form is with our parent(s); as we grow older, we form primary attachments with people we call friends and, eventually, perhaps, with other adults.
- **Secondary socialisation**, on the other hand, occurs, as you can probably guess, between the individual and those people with whom they have secondary relationships – situations where the individual doesn't necessarily have close, personal and/or face-to-face contacts with the people responsible for the socialisation process. This form of socialisation represents the way we learn about the nature of the social world beyond our primary contacts, mainly because in our society we have to learn to deal with people we meet, the majority of whom are not emotionally close to us.

Given that the socialisation process – whether primary or secondary – involves both teaching and learning, we can talk about those responsible for teaching us roles,

norms, values and so forth as **agents of socialisation**. For most of us, the first agency responsible for primary socialisation is our family, and the main agents of socialisation are a child's parents (although brothers, sisters and wider relations – such as aunts, uncles and grandparents – may also be involved). The family group initially takes responsibility for teaching the basic things we need to learn as part of growing-up – how to walk, talk and use culture-appropriate tools (such as knives and forks), among other things.

Parents don't just teach the basics of 'becoming human', however. They are also influential in teaching basic values, such as their perception of right and wrong behaviour, how to relate appropriately to other people such as family, friends, strangers and so forth.

Although this socialisation process is lengthy and complicated (there's a great deal to learn), it is important not to see it as a situation where a socialising agent, such as a parent, simply teaches behaviour that is then copied without question. Although part of a child's socialisation does involve copying the behaviour they see around them (children frequently copy adult roles through their play, using games such as 'Mothers and Fathers' or 'Doctors and Nurses' to both mimic and practise behaviour), the child is also actively involved in the socialisation process.

Children, for example, don't always obey their parents and even at an early age, conflicts occur – the socialising efforts of parents, relatives and friends, for example, don't always neatly coincide. In addition, while the child is learning how to adapt to their environment they are changing the way the people around them behave (think,



for example, about how parental attitudes to your behaviour have changed as you have grown older).

Finally, perhaps, as we get a little older we start to make decisions for ourselves, based upon our experience; we learn, in effect, how to deal with other people by understanding the behaviour they expect of us.

Many of the things we learn during our initial, family-based, primary socialisation stay with us for life. This is because we learn the basic principles of 'being human', rather than simply a set of things we must or must not do. This is important because it means we can apply these principles to new and different situations. For example, we don't just learn how to relate to adults, we learn how to distinguish between different types of adult on the basis of their status and relationship to us – we don't, for example, behave towards a parent in the same way we behave towards a teacher or a complete stranger.

Young children, when introduced to unfamiliar adults, frequently become quiet and shy. This is because they are unsure about how they are expected to behave towards the stranger. The same process happens in any new situation. Teenage males and females, for example, may be initially shy and awkward in each other's company (for about 30 seconds, anyway). One of the main things socialised into us during this particular period of primary socialisation is a knowledge of *gender roles*; that is, what it means, in our society to be either masculine or feminine – something we will return to at a later point.

In terms of secondary socialising agencies, these may include schools, religious organisations, the mass media and so forth.

Associated agents of socialisation here would, therefore, include people like teachers, priests, television personalities and pop stars. In some cases, such as in school, we are in daily, face-to-face contact with the people socialising us without ever developing a primary attachment to them. In other cases, such as when admiring a particular film star, we may never meet them, yet we can still be influenced by what they look like, what they do and how they do it.



Digging deeper

Before we examine examples of socialising agencies in more detail, we need to say a couple of things about the purpose of socialisation.

Firstly, primary socialisation is necessary because human infants require the assistance of other members of society to develop as both human beings (the walking, talking bit) and as members of a culture (the learning roles, norms and values bit). In terms of secondary socialisation, this is also necessary because, as **Talcott Parsons** (*The Social System*, 1951) argued, its main purpose (or function) is to 'Liberate the individual from a dependence upon the primary attachments and relationships formed within the family group.'

What Parsons meant by this is that, in modern societies, the vast majority of the people we meet are strangers and it would be both impossible and undesirable to relate to them in the same way we relate to people for whom we have great affection. We have, therefore, to learn **instrumental relationships**, or how to deal with people in terms of what they can do for us and what we can do for them in particular situations.



For example, think about what life would be like if we only knew how to deal with people on the basis of primary social attachments (love, trust, affection and so forth).

Whenever we went shopping, the assistant would deal with us as if we were a long lost and very dear friend. We might find this quite nice at first, but imagine having to deal with this sort of behaviour *every* time you passed someone in the street.

Secondly, although one purpose of socialisation is clearly to teach, it also has a further purpose, namely **social control**. The ideas we have examined so far have been largely concerned with the various ways people attempt to create order, stability and predictability in their own and other people's behaviour. In this respect, we have been indirectly talking about the way any society attempts to control the behaviour of its members. These controls affect not just the way people actually behave, but also the way they think about the nature of the world (both social and natural) in which they live. We can start to bring these ideas together under the general heading of social control and look a little more closely at the various forms of control in any society.

At its most basic, social control involves all of the things we do or have done to us that are designed to maintain or change behaviour. The primary socialisation process, for example, involves social control because it attempts to shape the way a child is raised. When we develop certain values and adopt particular norms, this too is a form of control since we are placing limits on what we consider to be acceptable (or normal) behaviour. Role-play is another a form of control because we are acting in ways people consider appropriate in certain situations. We can think about social control, at least

initially, in terms of **rules**. Social life, in this respect, is a life-long process of rule-learning. We may not always agree with those rules (nor do we always obey them, come to that), but the fact remains they exist and we have to take note of their existence. People, therefore, create behavioural rules as the basis for social organisation and since we always have a choice as to whether or not we obey these rules, they are supported by **sanctions** – things we do to make people conform to our expectations and which can be one of two types.

- **Positive sanctions** (or rewards) are the nice things we do to make people behave in routine, predictable, ways. Examples here might be things like buying a child an ice cream to make it stop crying (an odd example of the way breaking a norm can actually bring a reward) or awarding a student a valuable qualification if they pass an AS-level exam.
- **Negative sanctions** (or punishments) are the not-very-nice things we do to try to make people conform. There are a vast range of negative sanctions in our society, from not talking to people if they annoy us to putting them in prison. The ultimate negative sanction, perhaps, is to kill someone.

Social controls are, as I have suggested, closely related to norms and just as there are two basic types of norm (informal and formal), we can talk about there two basic types of social control.

- **Formal social controls** may be based on the idea of legal norms (laws). That is, written rules of behaviour that, theoretically, apply equally to everyone (although not all societies apply formal



rules equally). Where laws are involved we usually find people (normally employed by the government), whose job involves enforcing such laws. In our society, the main agencies of formal social control are the police and the judiciary (the legal system), although the armed forces can, on occasions, be used to perform this role.

Not all formal norms are laws, however. In a workplace, for example, there are formal rules governing behaviour while at work – if you are repeatedly late for work you may be punished in some way. In general terms, formal rules and social controls exist to tell everyone within a social group what is – and is not – acceptable behaviour. Such formal controls usually exist where a group is very large and its members are not necessarily all in day-to-day contact with each other.

- **Informal social controls**, like their formal counterpart, exist to reward or punish people for acceptable or unacceptable behaviour ('deviance') and cover a vast array of possible sanctions that may differ

from individual to individual, group to group and society to society. Such controls apply to informal norms and include things like ridicule, sarcasm, disapproving looks, punching people in the face and so forth.

As an example, at a Women's Institute gathering a disapproving look may be enough to tell you people think it's inappropriate to flirt with the vicar. Among members of a criminal gang, however, it's unlikely a disapproving look would be used as a means of informal social control should you tell them you intend to inform on their activities to the police.

To complete this section on socialisation, it might be helpful to look a little more closely at some examples of agencies of socialisation, partly to provide a flavour of the wide range of actions and behaviours involved and partly to firm-up the work we've done previously. In this respect, we can identify a range of significant agencies and outline selected roles, values, norms and social controls (both positive and negative) involved in each.

WARM UP: AGENCIES OF SOCIALISATION

Either individually or in groups (each group can look at one agency), and using the following table as a guide, identify examples of the roles people play, values they might develop and norms they are expected to obey for your chosen agency. In addition, identify examples of positive and negative sanctions employed by agents of socialisation within each agency.

Agency of socialisation	Roles	Values	Norms	Positive sanctions	Negative sanctions
Family					
Peers					
School					
Work					
Media					
Religion					