

another. Women are likely to have smaller pensions in old age because they have not worked full-time for as long, due to family responsibilities.

- 1 Suggest two reasons for social class differences in death rates.
- 2 Suggest two reasons why women earn less than men.
- 3 Suggest two reasons why members of ethnic minority groups are more likely than whites to be unemployed.

How do sociologists study society?

As we saw earlier, sociologists create theories to explain society and human behaviour. To be of any value, these theories must be based on evidence about the real world.

Sociologists have to collect this evidence. To do so, they carry out research using a variety of methods and sources of evidence. These include:


- **social surveys**, which involve asking a sample of people a series of questions in an interview or a written questionnaire
- **participant observation**, where the sociologist joins in with the group they are studying in order to gain deeper insight into their lives
- **official statistics** compiled by the government (for example on educational achievement, family size, unemployment and crime rates).

When choosing a method of research, sociologists need to be aware that every method has its particular strengths and limitations.

For example, a social survey can usually gather information from a large cross-section of the population, but often the results will lack depth and detail, compared for example with a study using participant observation. However, research that uses participant observation can usually only study small numbers of people.

QuickCheck Questions

- 1 What do the examples of 'feral' children show about human behaviour?
- 2 Explain what is meant by:
a culture; b norms; c socialisation.
- 3 Explain the difference between ascribed status and achieved status.
- 4 What is the difference between the structural and social action views of society?
- 5 According to Marxists, what is the cause of class conflict?

Check your answers at www.sociology.uk.net 

Summary

Sociology is the study of society and human behaviour. Sociologists construct **theories** – general explanations of social patterns. They conduct research to collect **evidence** to support their theories. Governments may use sociologists' findings to develop **social policies**.

Human behaviour is not instinctive, but **learned** through contact with others, as the examples of feral children show. **Culture** includes all those things learned and shared by a group, including knowledge, beliefs, norms and values. **Values** are general principles. **Norms** are specific rules of behaviour. Complex societies may contain many **subcultures**. **Socialisation** is the process of learning one's culture. Sociologists distinguish between **primary** and **secondary** socialisation.

Society is made up of **statuses**, some of which are **ascribed** (fixed at birth) while others are **achieved**. A **role** is the set of norms that govern how a person in a particular status should act.

The **structural view** sees society as shaping the individual. The **social action view** sees individuals as having choice, creating social reality through their interactions. **Functionalists** see society as based on **value consensus**, with interdependent parts performing functions for the good of the whole. **Marxists** see society as based on **class conflict**, in which the bourgeoisie exploit the proletariat. **Feminists** see society as **patriarchal** or male dominated.

Postmodernists believe we have moved to a more **fragmented** society in which there are diverse sources of identity. Critics argue that they ignore important **class**, **gender**, **ethnic** and **age inequalities**. These have a powerful effect on people's **life chances**.

Sociologists use a variety of **methods** and sources, such as surveys, participant observation and official statistics to gather evidence to test their theories.

What does AS and A level sociology involve?

AS and A level sociology gives you an understanding of important aspects of society, and of how sociologists study and explain people's behaviour. Studying sociology will enable you to discuss social issues in a more informed and systematic way and it will help you to make sense of your own and other people's experiences.

The skills you develop will help you to think logically about the world. AS and A level will give you a firm foundation if you want to study sociology at degree level.

Topics and exams

If you are doing AQA AS sociology or the first year of A level sociology, you will study the following topics: education, families and households, research methods, and methods in context.

If you are taking the AS exams at the end of the year, you will sit two papers:

- AS Paper 1** Education plus Methods in Context
- AS Paper 2** Families and Households plus Research Methods

If you are taking the A level exams at the end of your second year, you will sit three papers:

- A level Paper 1** Education, Methods in Context, and Theory and Methods*
- A level Paper 2** Families and Households plus Beliefs in Society.
- A level Paper 3** Crime and Deviance plus Theory and Methods*.

*Theory and Methods includes the topics you have studied under Research Methods in your first year, plus the study of sociological theories.

What the examiners are looking for

When you sit an exam, your work is marked in terms of three aims or 'assessment objectives':

- Assessment Objective 1 (AO1): Knowledge and Understanding
- Assessment Objective 2 (AO2): Application
- Assessment Objective 3 (AO3): Analysis and Evaluation

Knowledge and Understanding means you need to know and understand some of the main ideas and methods sociologists use, and what they have discovered as a result of their studies.

Application involves linking ideas, theories and studies to the set question, clearly showing their relevance to what you have been asked about.

Analysis involves explaining things in detail, showing how ideas fit together, comparing and contrasting, organising answers logically and drawing conclusions.

Evaluation involves judging something, such as the advantages and disadvantages of different research methods, or the arguments for and against a sociologist's views.

For more about the exams and assessment objectives, see Chapter 5.

Developing your knowledge and skills

Developing your knowledge and understanding of sociology and your skills of application, analysis and evaluation is a gradual process and something you will need to work at throughout your course. There is no quick fix. However, here are some pointers that will help you:

Keep up with your course Attend regularly, do the work your teacher sets you, pay attention to the feedback you receive, keep your folder well organised.

Work with others Join in class discussions, form study groups with classmates, discuss sociology topics outside class, revise together, talk to friends who have already done sociology.

When you don't understand, ask your teacher or classmates, or look it up. Don't be shy – you're probably not the only one who doesn't get it.

Use your textbook It contains thorough coverage of the topics you're studying and detailed guidance on exam success.

Apply what you learn Sociology is about the real world, and you'll find lots of examples of sociological ideas all around you – in the news, on the street, at home, in school or college. Use examples in your writing. This will help you with the skill of Application.

Be critical When you come across new information, don't take it at face value. Look for the strengths and weaknesses of ideas; ask what evidence there is for someone's argument. This will help you develop the skill of Evaluation.

Take ideas apart to see how they 'tick'. Try to make comparisons and contrasts between the different ideas, theories and methods you study. This will help you develop the skill of Analysis.

Answer the question When doing written work, keep focused on what you've actually been asked. Make a plan, and keep checking back to it and the question. Make it clear why you're including the material.