1 INTRODUCING SOCIOLOGY

Chapter contents

Sociology is the study of people in groups. Think of the groups you are a part of. You probably belong to a family and a friendship group. You are a member of an ethnic majority or an ethnic minority group. You are a member of a social class group and you belong to a national group. And you, and everybody else, are a member of global society.

Think how your membership of these groups has influenced your life. What has your family taught you? What have your friends done for you? How has your ethnicity affected your outlook on life? How has your social class shaped the way you behave? Has your nationality influenced your view of the world? And what effect might being a member of a global society have on your future?

Sociologists study all these groups and more. They ask how does group membership influence behaviour, shape experience, and construct a view of life?

This chapter introduces some of the main sociological theories which claim to explain how society works and how human beings behave.

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PART 1 CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Different societies have different ways of living, different ways of behaving and different views of the way the world works – they have different cultures. A **society** consists of a group of people who share the same culture, who live in the same area and who feel part of that group.

This part looks at **culture** – the learned, shared behaviour of members of society. It asks: What is culture? How do we learn culture? How do we share it? How does culture shape our behaviour? How does culture influence our identity? These are fundamental questions. Without culture, human society would not exist.

Culture

Most of the time we take our culture for granted. We are not aware of how much of our behaviour is learned and how much of it is shared with other members of our society. The following picture illustrates these points.

Activity

It takes meetings such as this to reveal how much of our behaviour is shaped by culture and how much is taken for granted.

1. Why do the two men feel uncomfortable about their conversation?

2. How might this affect their relationship?

The picture shows a man from the USA with his back to the wall. He has retreated backwards down a hall 40 feet long. He is talking to a man from Brazil who has pursued him all the way down the hall. For the American man, the Brazilian comes too close to him for a normal conversation. And for the Brazilian man, the American is too far away. Each of them is trying to establish the normal conversation distance defined by their culture (Hall, 1973).

Culture, norms and values

Culture is the learned, shared behaviour of members of society which is passed on from generation to generation. It consists of ways of behaving which are seen as normal. It is the way of life of a particular society.

Norms are an important part of culture. A **norm** defines appropriate and acceptable behaviour for particular people in particular situations. For example, there are norms of dress which state the type of clothing appropriate for each gender (male and female), age group and social situation – for the workplace, party, wedding or funeral.

As part of culture, norms are learned and shared and vary from society to society. This can be seen clearly by comparing the traditional norms of eating amongst the Bedouin of North Africa with those in the West. The Bedouin, which translates as 'desert people', eat with the fingers of their right hand from a shared tray of food while sitting on the ground. People eat from the section of the tray directly in front of them. It is bad manners to lick your fingers then continue eating. Men and women eat separately. Men are served first.

Norms provide order in society. Imagine a situation in which 'anything goes'. The result is likely to be confusion and disorder. Norms help to make social life predictable and comprehensible. If there were no norms stating how people should express pleasure or irritation, warmth or hostility, it would be difficult to understand how others felt, to predict their behaviour and respond in appropriate ways.

Values are much less specific than norms. They are general guides for behaviour. A **value** is a belief that something is important and worthwhile. A value states what is right and wrong. Values are translated into behaviour by a range of norms. Take the value placed on human life in our society. It is reflected in a thousand and one aspects of normative behaviour

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Activity

Bedouin men in Egypt

1. How might this example differ from Western norms of eating?

2. How might a man from Western society feel if he joined them for a meal?

from highway regulations, to ways of settling an argument, to rules for the preservation of food. In each case the norms are designed to protect human life.

Some sociologists see shared values as essential for the wellbeing of society. They argue that shared values produce **social solidarity** – the cohesion and unity necessary for society to run smoothly. Without shared values people would be pulling in different directions. The result might be disruption and conflict.

Like norms, values vary from society to society. This can be seen from a comparison of some of the traditional values of the Cheyenne, a Native American tribe who lived on the Great Plains of the USA, with the values of today's Western society.

The Cheyenne believe that wealth, in the form of horses and weapons, is not to be hoarded by the owner. Instead it is to be given away. Generosity is highly regarded and people who accumulate wealth and keep it for themselves are looked down upon. A person who gives does not expect an equal amount in return. The greatest gift they can receive is prestige and respect for their generous action.

Bravery on the battlefield is one of the main ways a man can achieve high standing in the eyes of the tribe. Killing an enemy, however, does not rank as highly as a number of other deeds. Touching or striking an enemy with the hand or a weapon, rescuing a wounded comrade, or charging the enemy alone while the rest of the war party looks on are amongst the highest deeds of bravery.

Status and role

Every society has a number of positions or **statuses** which people occupy. For instance, in Western society a person would usually have an occupational status, for example as a doctor or a bricklayer, and a family status, for example as a sister and/or a mother. Each status is accompanied by a **role** – a set of norms which outline appropriate and expected behaviour for a particular status.

Statuses and roles allow us to order our behaviour and predict the behaviour of others. For example, the statuses and roles of doctor and patient spell out their behaviour and direct their relationship.

Statuses and roles are culturally defined and vary from society to society. Take the example of gender statuses. In Western societies most people recognise only two gender statuses – male and female. Some other cultures identify three or more gender statuses. For example, some Native American tribes traditionally recognised a third gender – a 'two-spirit' person who is doubly blessed with the spirit of a man and a woman. The picture on page 4 shows We'wha, a two-spirited person from the Zuñi tribe of New Mexico (Williams, 1991).

Socialisation and social control

Socialisation is the process by which people learn the culture of their society. The most important part of this process probably takes place during a person's early years. Known as **primary socialisation** it usually takes place within the family. By responding to the approval and disapproval of family members and copying their example, the child learns the language and many of the basic behaviour patterns of their society.

Secondary socialisation is the socialisation received in later life. In **peer groups** – groups whose members share similar circumstances and are often the same age – children play games and learn that social life is based on rules and norms of behaviour. At school they learn lessons for life and more specialised aspects of culture such as maths and science (see the next chapter). The mass media and social media can provide role models and ways of communicating which continue into later life. And in their adult occupations young people soon learn the rules of the game and the tricks of the trade.

Without socialisation, an individual would bear little resemblance to a human being defined as normal by the standards of their society. This can be seen from the example of Ssabunnya who spent part of his early life with a troupe of colobus monkeys, as described in the activity on page 5.

3

Contemporary issues: How many genders?

In 2011, Australian passports changed to three gender options – male, female and indeterminate. According to the Australian government this was to remove discrimination against transgender people and intersex people – those born with a sexual anatomy which does not fit the standard definitions of male and female. This was an important step for travellers at airports who are questioned or detained because their appearance does not seem to fit their gender status. The option of a third gender follows similar decisions in Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In 2014, the Hijras, India's transgender minority, finally achieved full legal recognition as a third gender. This means for the first time there are quotas of government jobs and college places for Hijras (*The Guardian*, 16.04.2014).

Members of the Hijra community in India.

In the UK Maria Miller, who chairs the Women and Equalities Committee, says that passports and driving licences should be gender neutral – they should not mention gender (*The Guardian*, 02.01.2016).

We'wha (1849–1896), a 'two-spirit' person

Questions

1. Should we legally recognise additional genders?

2. If so, why and how many more genders? If not, why not?

3. Two-spirit people were highly respected. Why do you think this was?

Culture and instinct

To what extent is the behaviour of living creatures directed by instinct and to what extent is it directed by learning?

The behaviour of some creatures is based on instinct – it is directed by their genes. Bees provide an example. The closer we get to human beings, the less important instincts are for directing behaviour and the more important learning becomes. For example,

studies of Japanese macaque monkeys show how they can learn brand new behaviours, for instance how to swim.

Sociologists see learned behaviour as the key to understanding human society. Culture – norms and values – is seen as directing human behaviour. And socialisation is seen as vital for learning culture. The importance of learned behaviour can be seen from the experience of John Ssabunnya outlined in the following activity.

Activity – An unusual socialisation

Walking through a Ugandan forest, a woman spotted a group of monkeys. To her astonishment, she realised that one member of the group was a small boy. Local villagers 'rescued' the boy and identified him as John Ssabunnya who had been abandoned as a two-year old.

For the past three years, John had lived with a troupe of colobus monkeys. He had learned to communicate with them – with chatters, shrieks, facial expressions and body language. He shared their diet of fruit, nuts and berries, he became skilled at climbing trees and, like those who adopted him, he walked on all fours. He was terrified of his 'rescuers' and fought to remain with his family of monkeys.

John was washed and clothed – much to his disgust – and taken to an orphanage. He gradually learned to behave like a human being. Slowly but surely, he began to sing, laugh, talk, play, dress and walk like children of his age.

Today, John is a member of the Pearl of Africa Choir which has successfully toured the United Kingdom.

John, aged 14.

Based on an article in BBC News online, 06.10.1999

Questions

1. How does the example of John Ssabunnya indicate that human behaviour is learned rather than based on instinct?

2. Culture is not fixed, it can and does change. How does John's experience support this statement?

Social control

Socialisation is closely linked to **social control** – the ways in which people's behaviour is kept in line with the norms and values of society. Every society has various methods for ensuring that its members conform with – act in terms of – the accepted and approved ways of behaving. For example, in many traditional hunting societies such as the Inuit, the hunter has a moral duty to share his kill with other members of the community. If he does not, he is ostracised – shunned by and cut off from the group. Without some form of social control, it is difficult to see how the socialisation process could be effective and how standardised and predicable behaviour could be maintained. And without such behaviour human society could not operate.

In every society the family is a major agency of social control. Children are born helpless – they are totally dependent on adults. This gives parents enormous power both to teach and enforce what they teach. They are able to apply a battery of positive and negative sanctions – rewards and punishments – to ensure conformity. These range from words and expressions of approval and disapproval through to physical violence.

In every area of social life there is a variety of mechanisms of social control – for example, the promise of promotion or the threat of dismissal in the workplace, and the encouraging smile or disapproving glance within a circle of friends. In many societies certain aspects of behaviour are defined as crimes. Officials are appointed to deal with such behaviour and apply punishment to those who have broken the law. However, most mechanisms of social control are much more subtle than the heavy hand of the law. For example, religion is a major instrument of social control in many societies. Religious beliefs often encourage people to conform to accepted ways of behaving. They may offer rewards such as an afterlife of everlasting happiness for those who follow the straight and narrow and punishments such as eternal damnation for those who do not.

Culture and identity

A society's culture provides individuals with a major part of their identity – it tells them who they are and where they've come from. Take this culture away and they are left in a vacuum, they are lost. In recent years, many Aboriginal Australians and Native Americans have attempted to recapture their traditional cultures, restore a sense of who they are and where they've come from, and to socialise their children to recognise their cultural heritage and identity. This looking back and moving forwards can be seen in the activity below.

Colonial powers sometimes attempt to destroy the cultures of those they conquer in the belief that this will produce willing and obedient citizens. Separating children from their parents, removing them from their way of life, banning them from using their language, from following their norms of dress, from practising their religion, and from performing their music are seen as ways of destroying existing identities and creating new ones.

Activity – Cultural identities

The Stolen Generations

Australia's Aboriginal people have the world's oldest living culture, a culture that has existed for at least 60,000 years. From the 19th century through to the 1970s, Australian governments have attempted to systematically eradicate Aboriginal culture.

From 1910 to 1970 some 20,000 to 50,000 Aboriginal children, depending on the estimate, were forcibly removed from their parents and placed in 'care homes', 'schools', missions or with White foster families. In many of these institutions their possessions were taken away, they were officially referred to by a number, forbidden to speak their own language and locked in at midnight. Those who broke the rules or tried to escape were severely punished – beaten or placed in solitary confinement. Boys were usually trained as agricultural labourers and girls as domestic servants. In order to make them into Australian 'citizens' they were cut off from their families, language, art, music, customs, ceremonies and their cultural identity.

And reports indicate that in the 21st century the numbers of Aboriginal children placed into 'care' by welfare officials is greater than for any similar time period in the 20th century.

Based on Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, 1997; Pilger, 2014; Behrendt, 2016.

'Killing the Indian in him'

During the late 19th and first half of the 20th century, the United States government attempted to transform Native Americans into 'American citizens'. Part of this policy involved transporting children to White-run boarding schools often hundreds of miles from their homes. The intention, in the words of Captain Richard H. Pratt who founded the Carlisle Indian School in 1879, was to 'kill the Indian in him and save the man'.

At these schools, children were stripped of all outward appearances that linked them to their Native American past. Their clothing was taken away from them, their long hair was cut, and they were dressed in uniforms and Victorian costumes. They were banned from speaking their tribal languages. Their own people were depicted as 'evil', 'heathenish', and 'savage'. Most lost self-esteem and turned against, or came to doubt, their own identity. The memories of Sun Elk, a Taos Pueblo, were typical.

'We all wore White man's clothes and ate White man's food and went to White man's churches and spoke White man's talk. And so after a while we also began to say Indians were bad. We laughed at our own people and their blankets and cooking pots and sacred societies and dances.' Some tried to resist. Lone Wolf, a Blackfoot, describes his experiences.

'If we thought that the days were bad, the nights were much worse. This was the time when real loneliness set in. Many boys ran away but most of them were caught and brought back by the police. We were told never to talk Indian and if we were caught, we got a strapping with a leather belt.'

Based on Josephy Jr, 1984 and 1995.

Questions

1. Many people have condemned the Australian and American governments for the way they have treated the original populations. What are your views?

2. Why do you think the governments acted as they did?
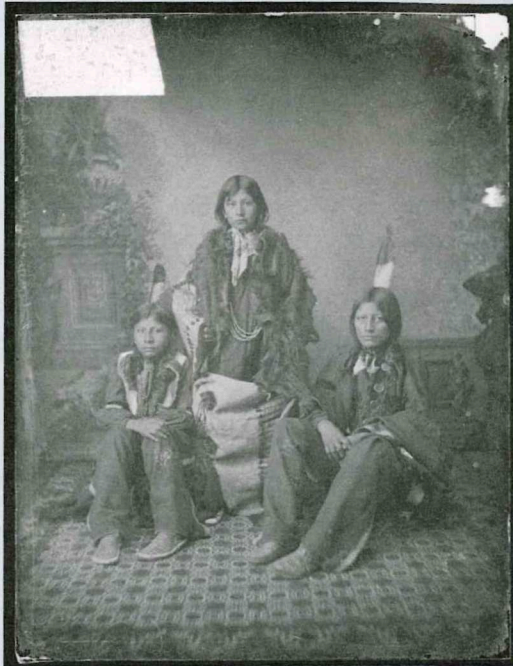
Sioux Native American boys as they entered Carlisle Indian School in 1883.

The same boys three years later.

Key terms

Culture The learned, shared behaviour of members of society.

Norm A guide to appropriate behaviour for particular people in particular situations.

Value A belief that something is important and worthwhile, right or wrong.

Social solidarity Social unity, social cohesion, sticking together.

Status A position in society.

Role A set of norms which defines appropriate behaviour for a particular status.

Socialisation The process by which culture is learned.

Primary socialisation The earliest and probably the most important part of socialisation.

Secondary socialisation The socialisation received in later life.

Peer group A group in which members share similar circumstances.

Instinct Behaviour directed by genes.

Social control The methods designed to ensure that members of society conform to approved ways of behaving.

Summary

1. Norms provide order in society. They make social life predictable and comprehensible.

2. Shared values produce social solidarity and social cohesion.

3. Statuses and roles define who a person is and orders their behaviour.

4. Socialisation is essential for individuals to learn the culture of their society.

5. Social control encourages people to act in terms of society's norms and values.

6. Culture provides individuals with a sense of identity.

PART 2 SOCIAL GROUPS AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

This chapter began by defining sociology as the study of people in social groups. This part looks briefly at three of the most important groups in Western society – social class, ethnic groups and gender groups. A theme running through sociological studies of these groups is inequality. For example, research has shown that the higher your social class position the more likely your chances of educational success, of obtaining a high status, well-paid job, and of living a long and healthy life.

Studies of the inequalities which divide social groups raise important questions. Do we live in a fair and just society? Should steps be taken to reduce social inequality?

Social class

Social class is a system of social inequality containing various levels in which people are grouped in terms of income and wealth, power and prestige. Occupation is often used as the main measure of people's class position. Table 1.1 shows the Office for National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) developed from sociological classifications. It shows a five class version of the class system in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2005).

Table 1.1 The NS-SEC class system

Class 1 Managerial and professional occupations – business executives, lawyers, doctors
Class 2 Intermediate occupations – clerical workers, secretaries
Class 3 Small employers and self-employed – shopkeepers, taxi drivers
Class 4 Lower supervisory and technical occupations – plumbers, train drivers
Class 5 Semi-routine and routine occupations – hairdressers, cleaners, labourers

Sociologists sometimes identify an 'upper class' which is not included in the Office for National Statistics classification. This is because it is very small – around 1 per cent of the population – and it is difficult to classify in terms occupation. For example, it includes the aristocracy who sometimes own vast areas of land and enormous amounts of property. For instance, the Duke of Northumberland owns over 100,000 acres of land and the Duke of Westminster's property and land was valued at £9 billion in 2016 (*Independent*,12.08.2016).

Sociologists focus on the middle class and the working class. The middle class refers to class 1 and 2 and part of class 3 and the working class to the other part of class 3 plus classes 4 and 5.

Social class inequalities

The social class structure tends to shape people's experiences and influence their behaviour. The lower people are in the class system the more likely their experiences are to be negative. For example, the more likely they are to suffer from physical and mental illness, to live in sub-standard housing, to be a victim of crime, to be unemployed, to be unable to afford a holiday, to lack educational qualifications and to have a relatively short life expectancy. Here are some instances of class inequalities.

Income and wealth Income refers to money from wages, investments and rent, wealth refers to ownership of land, buildings, stocks and shares. In the financial year ending 2016, the average income of the richest fifth of UK households before taxes and benefits was £85,000. This was over 12 times greater than the poorest fifth who had an average income of £7,000 (Office for National Statistics, 10.01.2017). In terms of wealth, the top 1 per cent own about 20 per cent of household wealth, the top 5 per cent around 40 per cent and the top 10 per cent over 50 per cent (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 19.04.2016).

Life expectancy Figure 1 shows that life expectancy closely follows the social class gradient. Those in Class 1, professionals such as accountants and lawyers, can expect to live longer than those in Class 2 and so on down steadily to Class 5 which includes 'unskilled' workers such as labourers and cleaners.

Class 3 is divided into 3N skilled non-manual and 3M skilled manual.

Health As the figures on life expectancy suggest, the richer you are, the better your health is likely to be.

Figure 1.1: Life expectancy at birth for men and women by social class, 2002–2005 in England and Wales
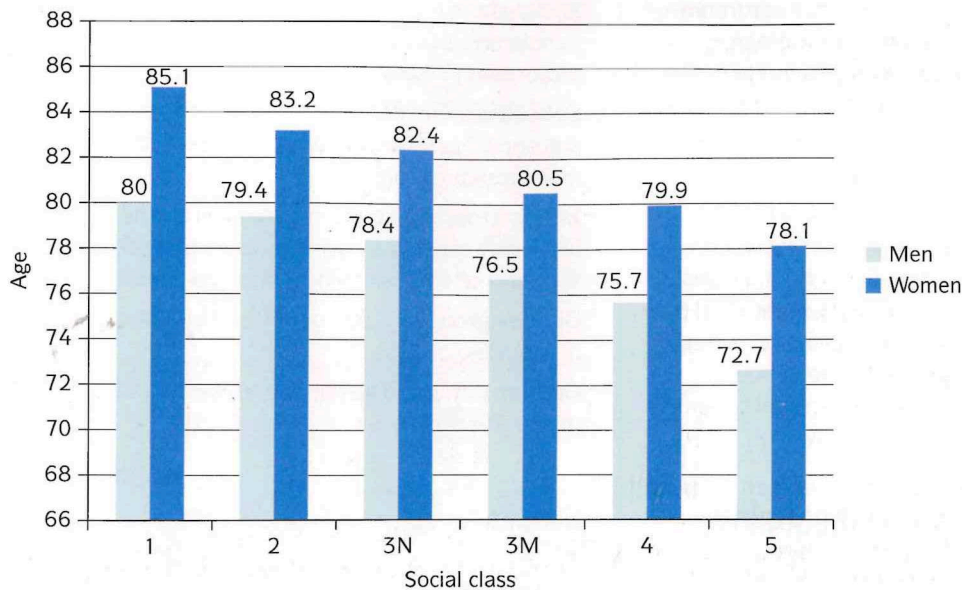
Source: Office for National Statistics

There is a social class gradient in health. The lower a person is in the class system, the more likely they are to suffer from a variety of illnesses and, as they grow older, the more rapidly their hand grip tends to weaken and their memory declines (Marmot, 2015).

Education As the following chapter shows, social class is the most significant factor affecting educational attainment. Performance at every level of the educational system reflects social class position. In Key Stage tests, GCSEs, A-levels, university entrance and degree level, the higher a person's class position, the more likely they are to do well.

Social class inequalities The distribution of many of the things which people value – a long and healthy life, a decent house and educational success – mirror the distribution of income and wealth and reflect the class system. Clearly class has a significant influence on people's lives, but it does not determine them. For example, many people from Class 5 go to university, but members of this class are least likely to do so.

Ethnic groups

An **ethnic group** is a group within society who are seen by themselves and/or by others as culturally distinct, as having their own **subculture** – certain distinctive norms and values – and who have a common origin. They often have their own group identity. They may see themselves as White, Chinese, Pakistani, and so on.

Membership of an ethnic group may influence people's lives. For example, in terms of educational attainment at GCSE, the top two ethnic groups are Chinese and Indian and the bottom two are White British and Black Caribbean. Possible reasons for these differences are examined in Chapter 2 Education.

Members of ethnic groups may experience negative discrimination and disadvantages due to their ethnicity. For example, a study by the Institute for Social & Economic Research shows that ethnic minority British graduates are at a disadvantage in the labour market (Zwysen and Longhi, 2016). Compared to White graduates they are significantly less likely to be employed six months after graduation. And students who are unemployed after graduation can expect to earn 20 per cent to 25 per cent less in later life than those who find jobs soon after leaving university.

Gender groups

Gender groups refer to female and male groups. There are significant differences between these two groups. For example, at every level of the educational system from GCSE to degree level, girls and women outperform boys and men. However, this success is not transferred to the job market. Women do not have equal access to higher level jobs and the gender pay gap in favour of men, though narrowing, still exists. It appears that part of this inequality in the job market is due to discrimination against women.

Gender, jobs and pay At the close of 2015, women made up only 29 per cent of British MPs, 25 per cent of all judges and less than 9 per cent of boardroom business executives. In 2014, only four women, Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Pink and Rihanna made it into the top 20 in the music charts. Among the top 100 films of 2014, only 11.2 per cent of the writers and 18.9 per cent of the producers were women (*The Guardian*, 30.12.2015).

In 2016, women's average hourly wages were 18 per cent less than those of men, down from 23 per cent in 2003 and 28 per cent in 1993 (Allen, 2016). According to the World Economic Forum, more than a third of the **gender pay gap** is due to gender discrimination (Annese, 2016). In this respect, women are paid less simply because they are women.

Social groups and social inequality

This part has indicated the importance of social groups to the lives of their members. It has shown that each of the groups discussed above is divided by significant inequalities. Those who make up social classes, ethnic and gender groups are far from equal. This information is essential for judgements about what should be done to bring about a fair and just society.

Key terms

Social class A system of social inequality in which people are grouped in terms of income, wealth, power and prestige.

Subculture The distinctive norms and values of a group which shares many of the aspects of the mainstream culture.

Ethnic group A group who are seen by themselves and/or by others as having a distinctive subculture and who often have their own group identity.

Gender group A group composed of males or females.

Gender pay gap The gap in the average wage of men and women.

Summary

1. The higher a person's class position the more likely they are to have positive experiences.

2. Members of minority ethnic groups tend to experience negative discrimination and disadvantage.

3. Women do not have equal access to higher level jobs. Their average pay is below that of men.

PART 3 SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

This part provides a brief introduction to four sociological theories – functionalism, Marxism, symbolic interactionism, and feminism. A theory is a set of ideas which claims to explain something. A sociological theory claims to explain how society works.

Functionalism

Emile Durkheim The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), one of the founders of modern sociology, is often seen as the first functionalist. His main focus was an analysis of the **functions** of the various parts of society – that is the contribution the parts make to society as a whole.

Durkheim argued that the main function of society's parts is to provide 'the essential similarities which collective life demands'. These similarities provide the basis for cooperation, order and social unity.

They include shared moral beliefs and shared norms and values. Without these essential similarities self-interest would be 'the only ruling force' and each individual would find themselves 'in a state of war with every other'. To prevent this, Durkheim argues, 'society has to present in the individual' – society's morality, norms and values must be part of the individual's consciousness.

The major function of society's parts is to instil, to implant, these essential similarities. Thus, the family socialises children in terms of society's norms and values. And the education system continues this process. This provides a 'collective conscience' – shared moral beliefs – and shared norms and values which are necessary for cooperation and order.

Talcott Parsons Functionalism was developed by the American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). Like Durkheim, Parsons began with the question of

how social order was possible. His answer was **value consensus**, an agreement of members of society about values – what is desirable, worthwhile and worth striving for. Values define right and wrong, they support social norms, they provide the basis for social control. Value consensus is therefore essential for order in society.

Activity
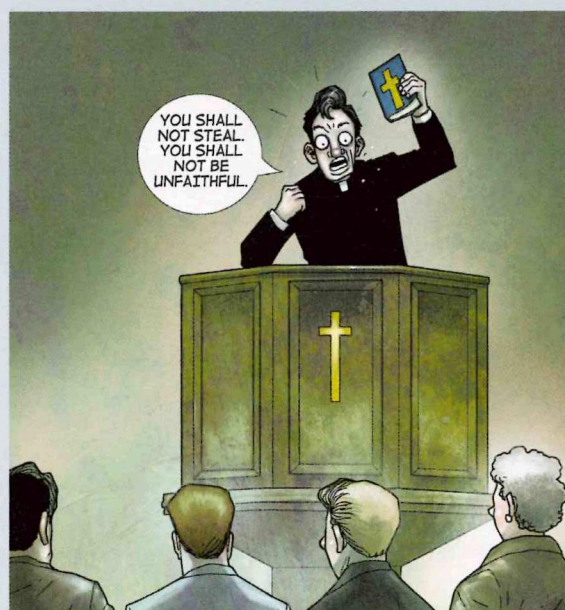
1. How do parents teach norms and values?
2. How can religion reinforce value consensus?

A vital function of the parts of society is to transmit – pass on – and reinforce – back up – shared values. The family is therefore a vital social institution as it transmits value consensus to each generation. The education system performs a similar function. And, in Parsons' view, 'the values of society are rooted in religion'. Religious beliefs often reflect and reinforce society's values with the authority of supernatural power.

Functionalists see society as a system of interconnected parts. In Western society, these parts include the family and the educational, legal and political systems. Each part is seen to contribute to the maintenance and wellbeing of the social system as a whole.

Functionalism became the dominant theoretical perspective in sociology during the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in the USA. From the mid-1960s onwards its popularity steadily declined, due partly to damaging criticism, partly to competing theories which appeared to provide superior explanations, and partly to changes in fashion.

Marxism

Marxist theory became increasingly influential in sociology during the 1970s. Marxism takes its name from its founder, the German-born philosopher, economist and sociologist, Karl Marx (1818–1883). The following account is a simplified version of Marxist theory. It must also be seen as one interpretation of that theory. Marx's extensive writings have been variously interpreted and, since his death, several schools of Marxism have developed.

Ruling and subject classes Marxist theory begins with the simple observation that in order to survive, humans must produce food and material objects. In doing so, they enter into social relationships with other people – the **relations of production**. Production also includes a component known as the **means of production.** These are the things used in the production of goods and services. In today's society, they include raw materials, tools and machinery, factory and office buildings, land and mines.

Marx maintained that, with the possible exception of the societies of prehistory, the relations of production in all societies consisted of two main classes – a **ruling class** and a **subject class**. The ruling class own the means of production and the subject class produce the goods and services. Marx believed that the ruling class oppressed and exploited the subject class – they used the subject class for their own gain.

According to Marx, in industrial society the means of production are owned by a rich and powerful capitalist ruling class. The workers – the subject class – produce the goods but their wages are only a part of the value of those goods. Some of the value is taken away in the form of profits by the capitalist ruling class. Marx saw this as exploitation. Marx called the ruling class in capitalist society the bourgeoisie and the subject class the proletariat. (Capitalism is an economic system in which businesses are privately owned – by capitalists – and run, using wage labour, for the purpose of profit.)

Infrastructure and superstructure Taken together, the relations of production and the means of production form the economic base, the **infrastructure**, of society. Marx believed that the infrastructure largely shapes the rest of society, the **superstructure**. This means that the economic relationships between the ruling and subject class will be reflected in the superstructure. For example, the state will support the ruling class passing laws to legalise the private ownership of industry and the right of owners to take any profits which might be made. Other parts of the superstructure will also reinforce the position of the ruling class. The education system will produce the kind of workers that capitalism requires. And religion, which Marx called the opium of the people, will produce false happiness and delusions of pleasure. In doing so, it will ease the pain of exploitation and this will keep the subject class in their place.

Ruling class ideology As part of the superstructure, Marx saw the beliefs and values of society as justifying and reinforcing ruling class power. For Marx, ideology is a false view of reality. **Ruling class ideology** is a set of beliefs which present a false and distorted view of society. In doing so, it disguises the true nature of class society and conceals the exploitation on which it is based. In Marx's words, it produces a **false class consciousness** – a false picture of their class position.

The revolution Marx believed that the workers would eventually see society as it really was. They would overthrow capitalism and replace it with communism – an equal society in which the forces of production were communally owned (owned by all the people). Eventually, after communism replaced capitalism, there would be no need for the state. The state would 'wither away' and people would govern themselves.

Key terms

Theory A set of ideas which claims to explain something.

Function The contribution a part of society makes to society as a whole.

Value consensus An agreement about values.

Ruling class The class who own the forces of production.

Subject class The class who are exploited by the ruling class.

Relations of production The relationships people enter into to produce food and material objects.

Means of production The things used to produce goods and services, for example raw materials.

Infrastructure The economic base of society.

Superstructure The rest of society which is largely shaped by the infrastructure.

Ruling class ideology A set of beliefs which present a false picture of society and justify the position of the ruling class.

False class consciousness The false picture of class society which conceals the exploitation on which it is based.

Summary

1. Functionalism sees society as a system of interconnected parts.

2. The function of the parts is the contribution they make to the wellbeing of society.

3. Durkheim argues that their main function is to provide the 'essential similarities' needed for order and unity in society.

4. Talcott Parsons argues their main function is to provide value consensus.

5. Marx argues that societies are based on the exploitation by a ruling class of a subject class.

6. This exploitation is disguised by ruling class ideology.

7. Marx argues that the economic relationships in the infrastructure are reflected in the superstructure.

Symbolic interactionism

Functionalism and Marxism tend to look at society as a whole. Symbolic interactionism usually looks at small groups and the interaction between members of those groups.

Meanings

This section introduces **symbolic interactionism**, one of the sociological theories which focuses on the meanings people use to direct their actions. Meanings, in terms of this theory, refer to the way people see, interpret, define and make sense of the social world.

Symbolic interactionism asks how meanings are constructed and where they come. It looks at the way meanings direct action – for example, how people act towards others if they see them as friendly or hostile, happy or sad.

People and situations can be given many different meanings. Look at the picture of the bandaged figure. It illustrates some of the many ways that people can make sense of her or his situation. And the way they interpret the bandaged figure can affect the way they behave towards her or him.

Activity

'The invisible person'.

Suggest reasons why individuals might interpret the person's appearance in different ways.

The American philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is one of the founders of symbolic interactionism. According to Mead, human beings interact – act with each other – in terms of meanings. Symbolic interactionists tend to focus on small-scale interaction situations rather than society as a whole.

Key ideas

Definition of the situation This refers to the meanings people give to situations. People define situations in particular ways and act in terms of their definitions. Picture the following situation. A man is lying on the pavement, apparently unconscious. On another occasion, the same man is in the same position with an empty whisky bottle beside him. Why might people respond differently to the two situations?

People respond in terms of the meanings they give to situations. In the first instance, they will probably see the man as ill, feel sympathetic, try to revive him and maybe call an ambulance. In the second situation, they may define him as drunk, show little or no sympathy, and walk on by. The two situations are likely to be defined differently. As a result, the response is likely to be different.

Role-taking involves putting yourself in the position of others and interpreting their actions. For instance, if you observe someone smiling, laughing, waving a hand or shaking a fist you put yourself in their place in order to interpret their meaning and intention. A similar gesture can be interpreted in different ways. For example, shaking a fist can be seen as indicating hostility or a bit of fun.

Self-concept and looking-glass self A person's self-concept is their view of themselves. Role-taking helps to develop a self-concept. It allows people to observe themselves from the standpoint of others. A person's picture of self comes in part from their perception of the way others see them. This is known as their looking-glass self. It's as though others are holding up a mirror to you.

Self-fulfilling prophecy A person's looking-glass self can produce a self-fulfilling prophecy – a prediction that comes to pass. They tend to act in terms of the way they believe others see them.

Performance According to the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982) social interaction has many similarities with acting in a play. He sees social interaction as a series of 'theatrical

Activity

THEY THINK I'M FUNNY.

Seeing herself as others respond to her.

How might this thought result in a self-fulfilling prophecy?

performances' – we present ourselves to an audience in an attempt to give a believable performance, use suitable props, and adopt appropriate mannerisms. In these respects, we are like actors in a play.

Activity

The props of the courtroom.

1. What might the props in this picture 'say' to an audience?

2. What props might you use for a) an interview b) a party c) spectating at a Premier League football match?

Props are the clothes and objects used in stage performances. Goffman applies the term to social interaction in real life. Props can help to make a performance believable by setting a tone, giving an impression, and defining a situation. Clothing provides an example – for instance, uniforms immediately indicate the part a person is playing – as a nurse, police person, soldier and so on.

Impression management refers to creating and managing the impression of self given to others. For impression management to work requires an effective performance and appropriate props.

Symbolic interactionism looks at the meanings developed and applied in interaction situations. It focuses on small-scale interactions rather than society as a whole. It sees people constructing meaning rather than responding to the social system.

Feminism

In 1974, *The Sociology of Housework* by the British sociologist and feminist Ann Oakley was published. She saw women's traditional domestic roles as limiting and oppressive. Her male colleagues were puzzled that she chose to study something so 'insignificant' at a time when no self-respecting male sociologist would even consider studying housework. Despite some resistance and ridicule Oakley opened the door to feminism in sociology.

Feminists brought women into mainstream sociology. They catalogued the inequalities between women and men, provided explanations for them and suggested routes to equality. There are three main feminist perspectives in sociology – radical feminism, Marxist feminism and liberal feminism.

Radical feminism Radical feminists see society as based on **patriarchy** – male dominance, rule by men. They see male dominance extending to every part of society and culture – from the job market to the home, from beliefs and values to day-to-day behaviour. In order to end the subordination and oppression of women, every aspect of life must be questioned from, in Sylvia Walby's (1990) words, 'who does the housework, or who interrupts whom in conversation'. Radical feminists see sweeping and fundamental changes in society as essential to end patriarchy, to end in Elizabeth Stanko's words 'men's physical and sexual intimidation and violence' and to bring about a society based on gender equality.

Marxist feminism Where radical feminists blame men for women's oppression, Marxist feminists blame the capitalist system. They see women's labour as essential to capitalism. First, as mothers, women provide and socialise new generations of workers at no cost to the capitalists. Second, as housewives, they provide domestic services and support for male workers, again at no costs to capitalists. Third, they provide a reserve army of labour which can be called upon when needed by capitalist employers – for example, if there is a shortage of workers in a time of rapid economic expansion. Since women's work is seen as secondary to that of men, they can be paid less and channelled into and out of low-status and part-time work as required. Women's position is justified and reinforced by ideologies praising their role as a loving mother and a caring and selfless wife. Marxist feminists argue that the first and most important step to end women's exploitation and oppression is the destruction of the capitalist system.

Liberal feminism Liberal feminists demand equal rights for women. They believe that this can be largely achieved by laws providing equal opportunities and banning gender discrimination, and by changes in attitudes. In the UK, the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) went some way to meeting their demands. Liberal feminists look for reform to the existing system to produce gender equality unlike radical feminists and Marxist feminists who look for revolutionary change.

Contemporary issues: Donald Trump and women's rights

Reproductive rights

President Donald Trump has surrounded himself with men who are opposed to abortion. The picture shows him, with cabinet members and advisers in attendance, signing the Global Gag Rule on 23 January, 2017. This rule withdraws American government funding from any international organisation which even discusses abortion with women and girls overseas. Trump states he is 'totally against abortion' except in cases of rape, incest and when the mother's life is in danger. His vice-president, Mike Pence (on the left of the picture) vowed to consign the ruling which allows American women to have an abortion 'to the ash heap of history where it belongs' (quoted in Boland, 2017).

Trump has promised to repeal the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, which provides around $1.4 billion of contraceptive funding to American women each year. This would result in many women being unable to afford effective contraception (Boland, 2017; Fenton, 2017).

The Women's March

This was a worldwide protest by women (and some men) against Donald Trump's policies. Estimates place the number of demonstrators at 5 million globally and 500 000 for the Women's March on Washington. One of the main messages was 'Women's rights are human rights' which must be advanced and defended. This can be seen from the statements on placards and posters carried by the demonstrators:

> KEEP YOUR POLICIES OFF MY BODY

> ABORT PATRIARCHY, REPRODUCE DIGNITY

> KEEP ABORTION LEGAL

> WE WILL FIGHT TO PROTECT REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS OUR MOTHERS WON

> TRUMP DEMEANS WOMEN

> MY BODY MY CHOICE

> GIRLS JUST WANT TO HAVE FUN-DAMENTAL RIGHTS

> DOWN WITH MISOGYNIST TRUMP

(Taken from pictures on Google Images.)

Questions

1. Trump is wealthy and male. Those who suffer most from his policies will be poor and female. Discuss.

2. Trump, his cabinet and his advisers are examples of patriarchy. Discuss.

Key terms

Symbolic interactionism A theory which argues that people interact in terms of meanings.

Definition of the situation Defining and giving meaning to situations.

Role-taking Putting yourself in the position of another person.

Self-concept A person's view of themselves.

Looking-glass self A person's perception of the way others see them.

Self-fulfilling prophecy A prediction that comes to pass simply because it has been made.

Performance The way people act in front of an audience.

Props The clothes and objects used in performances.

Impression management Managing the impression of self given to others.

Patriarchy Male dominance of society.

Summary

1. Theories focusing on meanings see human beings interpreting, defining and making sense of the social world.

2. Symbolic interactionism examines the meanings developed and applied in interaction situations.

3. Radical feminists see women's oppression based on patriarchy.

4. Marxist feminists see women's oppression based on capitalism.

5. Liberal feminists look to legal reforms within the existing system as the way to produce gender equality.

PART 4 VIEWS OF SOCIETY

This part looks at some of the ways sociologists have pictured the past 250 years. The term **modernity** has been used to describe this stage of the development of society. More recently, some sociologists argue that the West has entered a **postmodern era**, a period after modernity. Other sociologists refer to this period as **late modernity**, **second modernity** or **liquid modernity**, seeing it as an extension of the modern era.

Modernity

According to Lee and Newby (1983), modernity involved four major transformations of society:

1. **Industrialism** The industrial revolution which started in the late 18th century, transformed Britain, and later other societies, from mainly agricultural to mainly manufacturing economies.

2. **Capitalism** Closely connected with industrialism was the development of capitalism – privately owned businesses run for profit in a market economy employing wage labour. New classes emerged – a class of business owners and a working class of wage labourers.

3. **Urbanism** A large population movement from rural to urban areas accompanied the development of industry. In Britain in 1750, before the industrial revolution, only two cities had populations of over 50,000 – London and Edinburgh. By 1851, 29 British cities had a population of more than 50,000 with people increasingly concentrated in the centres of capitalist industry.

4. **Democracy** The overthrow of the monarchy in France by the revolution of 1789 and the American War of Independence (1775–1783) indicated that people were increasingly demanding a say in the way they were governed. This led to the development of political parties and democratic systems of government.

Modernity also involves a new ethos – new perspectives, new outlooks on life. These include beliefs in the possibility of human progress; in rational planning to achieve objectives; in the superiority of reason over emotion, faith and tradition; in the ability of technology and science to solve human problems and of industry to improve living standards; in the right and capability of humans to shape their own lives.

Postmodernity

Some sociologists believe that we have now entered a postmodern era which involves fundamental changes in outlook and circumstances. Here are some of the changes they suggest.

Loss of faith in science and technology People are losing faith in the ability of science and technology to solve problems. For example, they are increasingly aware of the damaging effects of pollution, the threat of global warming, the dangers of nuclear power and nuclear war. All point to science and technology gone wrong. They have become more sceptical of the benefits of rational thought and planning. For example, many people doubt whether rational bureaucratic organisations such as the National Health Service can meet human needs. And they have lost faith in politics and in grand theories which claim to provide answers to human problems. As a result, more people are turning to spirituality, alternative medicine and a variety of therapies.

A diversity of images and values Postmodern society is dominated by new information and communication technologies which bring the world into our homes and into our consciousness. Computer generated images, websites, social media, computer games, and terrestrial, satellite and cable TV bombard us with sounds, symbols and images from across the globe. They expose us to an increasingly diverse range of ideas and values, many of which have little connection with our present or past lives. This can cut us off from our past, make our present seem rootless and unstable, and our future unpredictable.

This myriad of diverse images and values is constantly changing. New lifestyles come and go, new styles of music and fashion and new types of foods and drink are regularly appearing. Everything appears fluid – nothing seems permanent and solid. The mainstream culture of modern society is replaced by the fleeting, unstable, fragmented culture of postmodern society.

Postmodern identities In modern societies, people's identities were usually drawn from their class, gender as male or female, occupation and ethnic group. In postmodern society, people have more opportunity to construct their own identities and more options to choose from. For example, a woman can be heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian or transgender, a business executive and a mother, she can be British, a Sikh and a member of Greenpeace.

With all the choices on offer, it is fairly easy for people to change their identities, or to have several identities which they put on and take off depending on their social situation. As a result, postmodern identities are more unstable and fragile. They offer choice, but they don't always provide a firm and lasting foundation.

Late modernity

Some sociologists reject the idea of a postmodern society. They argue that society has entered a later stage of modernity rather than a brand new era. The British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991, 2009) takes this view, arguing that we are now living in **late modernity**.

Giddens sees late modernity as a 'world of rapid change'. It is like 'a juggernaut, a runaway engine of enormous power which we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of our control'. The ride can be exhilarating but never entirely secure as it is 'fraught with risk' and uncertainty. We recognise the risks of living in late modernity – financial crises, climate change, nuclear catastrophes. We question the trust we are expected to place in the agencies who deal with such matters, in people we don't know or never meet.

The second modernity

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992, 2009, and with Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim 2001) believes we have moved into a new phase of modernity. He calls this phase **second modernity**. It is characterised by risk, uncertainty and **individualisation**.

Risk and uncertainty characterise personal relationships and the job market. The job market is increasingly unstable with job changes, short-term contracts and retraining more frequent. And personal relationships are more fragile with rising divorce and separation rates.

Risk is magnified by the process of **globalisation** – the increasing interconnection of parts of the world. This can be seen from the global nature of financial crises, terrorism, nuclear accidents, depletion of fish stocks and deforestation, all of which cross national boundaries.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim see individualisation as a key characteristic of the second modernity. In their words, 'Individualisation is becoming the social structure of second modern society itself'. People

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are increasingly seeing themselves as individuals rather than members of social groups. This reduces the control of traditional roles and social structures over their behaviour. As a result, people have greater freedom to select and construct their own identities and design their own lifestyles. For example, they have greater freedom to choose and design their relationships – to marry, to cohabit, to divorce, to live in a heterosexual or a gay or lesbian relationship, and so on.

Activity

How does this person reflect risk, uncertainty and individualisation?

Liquid modernity

Born in Poland, Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) was Professor of Sociology at the Universities of Leeds and Warsaw. He calls the latest stage of modernism **liquid modernity**. It is fluid, flowing and flexible. 'Change is *the only* permanence and uncertainty *the only* certainty' (Bauman, 2012).

Modern society has moved from 'solid' to 'liquid'. Change is constant. In Bauman's (2007) words, 'social forms … decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them'. As a result, uncertainty is constant. This generates anxiety, insecurity and fear.

Like other social commentators, Zygmunt Bauman sees individualisation as central to 21st century Western society. He sees the bonds between couples in liquid modernity as fragile. There is a conflict between the desire for individual freedom and the need for security. This means that the bonds have to be 'loosely tied, so that they can be untied again, with little delay' should relationships prove unsatisfactory. The result is 'semi-detached couples' in 'top pocket relationships' – people can pull their partner out of their pocket when required. 'Liquid love' is frail, insecure and often temporary.

Individualisation is a mixed blessing. It gives freedom to create identities. But it can place blame for failure on individuals. Especially for the poor and powerless, the loss of a job or a partner can result in self-blame and 'broken, loveless and prospectless lives' (Bauman, 2012).

Activity
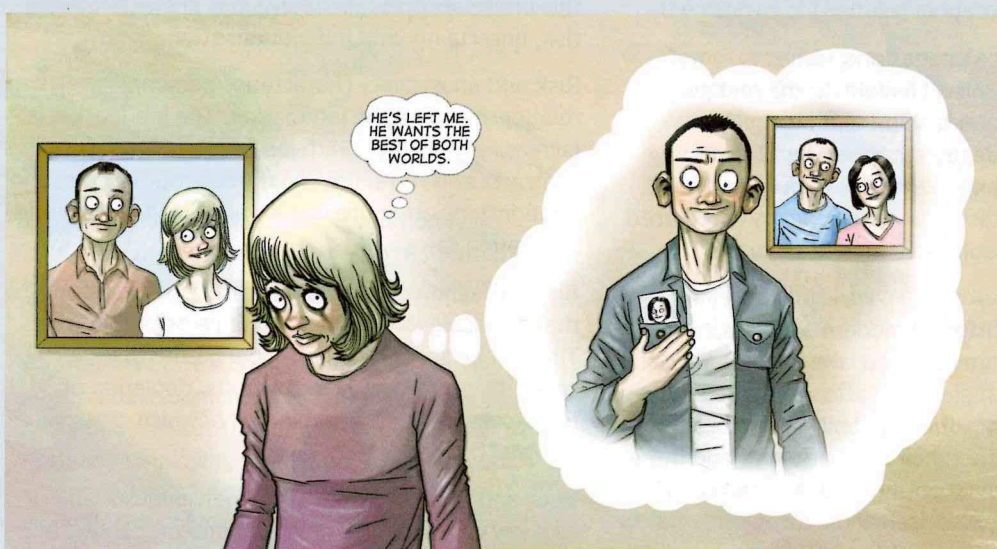
How can individualisation and 'liquid love' add to the uncertainty and insecurity of liquid modern society?

Activity – What use is sociology?

The sociological imagination

The American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962) coined the term 'the sociological imagination'. He defined it as 'the vivid awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society'. It is the ability to connect 'personal troubles to public issues'.

Mills gives the example of unemployment to illustrate the connection between the personal and the public, between the individual and the wider society. If only a small number of people are unemployed then their personal troubles probably lie in 'their character, their skills and their immediate opportunities'. However, if 10 per cent of the workforce is unemployed, then personal troubles are also public issues and we must look to 'the economic and political institutions of society' for their solution.

Think of the personal problems associated with living in poverty, the experience of racism, and life with a physical disability. Assuming these problems are widespread, how can they be reduced? For Mills, the solution lies in applying the sociological imagination, seeing personal problems as public issues and making changes to the wider society – for example, reducing inequality, passing laws against racism and improving facilities for disabled people.

For Mills, 'It is the political task of the social scientist – as of any liberal educator – continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning… It is his task to display this kind of sociological imagination.'

(Source: C. Wright Mills, *The sociological imagination, 1959*)

Questions

1. According to C. Wright Mills, what is the 'political task of the social scientist'?

2. Apart from the examples mentioned above, suggest other personal troubles which are also public issues.

3. The AQA Sociology course focuses on topics such as Education and Family, things that you have some experience of. How might this help you to develop your sociological imagination?

Key terms

Modernity A term often used to describe the period from the industrial revolution to the present day.

Postmodern A term used by some sociologists for what they see as a new period after modernity, from the late 20th century onwards.

Late modernity, second modernity, liquid modernity Terms used by sociologists to describe the period from the late 20th century onwards which they see as a late phase of the modern era.

Individualisation An increasing emphasis on the individual rather than the group.

Globalisation The increasing interconnection of parts of the world.

Summary

1. Modernity involves industrialism, capitalism, urbanism and democracy.

2. Postmodernism involves a lack of faith in science and technology and a diversity of values and identities.

3. Late modernity involves rapid change, risk and uncertainty.

4. The second modernity is characterised by risk, uncertainty and individualisation.

5. Liquid modernity involves constant change which generates anxiety, insecurity and fear.