Sociology A level

Course plan

This plan shows the structure of the course and gives an outline of the contents. Sections 1–5 cover the requirements of the AS and Part 1 of the A level; Sections 6–10 cover Part 2 of the A level. You need to do Sections 1–10 to prepare for the A level.

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A level Sociology Course guide

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Topic 1

Introduction to Sociology

Introduction

As we consider the various subjects in this course we will meet a range of key sociological ideas and theories. This topic will introduce some of the key ideas: culture and identify; roles; social norms, values and control; social class; and ethnicity and gender.

We will go on to introduce the main sociological perspectives of functionalism, Marxism, social action, feminism, the new right and postmodernism. In the exam you will need to demonstrate your understanding that while these theories do have a lot in common, they are also very different in some ways.

You will probably need 4 hours to complete this topic.

Objectives

When you have completed this topic you should be able to:

- define the key sociological ideas of culture and identity,
- roles, social norms, values and control, social class and ethnicity and gender
- describe the structuralist perspectives of functionalism and Marxism
- explain what is meant by social action theories

■ outline the contribution made to sociology by feminist, new right and postmodern perspectives.

Key sociological ideas

A number of ideas are central to sociology and we will meet them throughout the course. It is important to be clear about what these terms mean, so this section will introduce some of the key ideas:

■ culture and identity

■ roles

■ social norms, values and control

■ social class

■ ethnicity and gender.

Culture and identity

Absolutely central to sociology are the ideas of culture, identity and socialisation:

■ Culture is the term used to describe the overall way of life of a society. The textbook states that culture is made up of a range of aspects including 'language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, dress, diet, roles, knowledge and skills'. Within an overall culture there will be a range of subcultures; for example, within our community, ethnic group, school or workplace

■ Identity is the term used to describe how we see ourselves and how other people see us. Our identity is partly formed by our culture; but we may seek to develop our own identity within this. We may see ourselves as European, British, Welsh or Lancastrian; as Black, White or Asian; as a worker, artist or parent; and so forth

■ Socialisation is the process by which we learn the culture of our society, and is therefore crucial to our identity. The family is a crucial 'agent' of socialisation; but so are a number of other institutions in society that help to pass on the values and customs of our culture.

In the textbook Chapter 1 read the short section 'Socialisation, culture, and identity'. There is no need to do the activity in the textbook; instead complete Activity 1 that follows.

> **Study hint**
>
> Sociologists use a lot of terms like these; you may like to make up your own glossary of terms as you go along. To help, words in bold are defined in the 'Key words' list at the end of topics.

Activity 1 (Allow 10 minutes)

1 Suggest three other institutions in society that may play a role in socialisation.

2 Thinking back to your time at school, suggest two ways in which your own socialisation took place.

1 You may have suggested, in addition to the family, institutions such as education, friendship groups, religious organisations, the mass media, the criminal justice system, etc.

2 Within a school, socialisation can take place in several ways: by the influence of teachers; by peer pressure from other pupils; by disciplinary procedures; in playground games; through bullying and so forth.

Roles

We all play a number of roles in society. As I write this topic I am playing the role of writer or teacher; this evening I may pick up my guitar and go out to play the role of artist or musician; I am also a parent. I have in the past been a child and a student.

Chapter 1 of the textbook goes on to discuss two key ideas around roles: role models and role conflicts. Later on in this topic you will listen to a discussion about the work of Erving Goffman, a sociologist who looked closely at the roles people play within society and institutions.

Social norms, values and control

Social norms, values and control are central parts of a culture:

■ **Norms** refer to the rules that we are expected to follow. Norms can take the form of laws – for example, not to steal or to drive

while drunk. They are usually more subtle than this, e.g. not interrupting while someone is speaking

- **Values** are more general than norms. The sociologist Michael Haralambos (2004) defines a value as 'a belief that something is good and desirable. It defines what is important, worthwhile and worth striving for.' Values include respect for other religions or minorities, politeness to others, the importance of a career, etc.

- **Social controls** are the ways in which a society seeks to make sure that its members follow the norms and values of the society. They may include 'sanctions' or punishments for people who break the rules; but they can also include more subtle processes such as public opinion, peer pressure and embarrassment.

Read the sections in Chapter 1 of the textbook on 'Values and norms' and 'Social control'.

Then, instead of the activities in these sections, carry out the following activity.

Activity 2   (Allow 10 minutes)

Begin thinking about what these ideas may mean for education.

1   In your own school, how were the formal roles defined?

2   Which values were important for the school?

3   Give an example of a norm that was in place in the school.

4   Give an example of social control in the school.

1   Formal school roles are likely to include head teacher, head of department, teacher, pupil, etc.

2   Schools often seek to promote values such as the importance of education, the value of going to university, respect for each other, hard work, etc. As we shall see in Topic 3, there may well be pupil 'subcultures' in a school with very different values such as a lack of respect for authority.

3   Norms may include attending school each day, punctuality for lessons, completing homework on time, behaviour in class, etc.

4   Social control may have included sanctions such as detentions or being sent to the head teacher; and more informal controls such

as the opinion of teachers or classmates, or the sense of embarrassment if you entered the classroom late.

Social class

In everyday life we are familiar with the idea of **social class** and may well talk about people as being middle class, working class, upper class, etc. Social class is a key concept for many sociologists, especially those in the Marxist perspective that we look at next.

However, different sociologists may define social class in different ways. For some, it is possible for people to move from one class to another – this is called **social mobility** .Other sociologists regard class as more fundamental than this, and are more sceptical about whether it is actually possible to change class.

Other sociologists prefer to use the term **status** to describe the role someone plays in society, and the value placed on them by other people.

Read the section in Chapter 1 of the textbook on 'Social class, social mobility and status'. Look in particular at the diagram in Figure 1.1.

Ethnicity and gender

Read the section in Chapter 1 of the textbook on 'Ethnicity and gender'. If you would like to try the activity at the end, please do, but you may find the self-check that follows sufficient.

Self check

In the exam you will be asked a number of short answer questions, each carrying two marks. Here are some examples – write a sentence or two in answer to each.

1   Define the term 'culture'.   (2 marks)

2   Using one example, briefly explain what an agent of socialisation is.   (2 marks)

3   Define the term 'norm'.   (2 marks)

4   Using one example, briefly explain what is meant by social control.   (2 marks)

5   Using one example, briefly explain what is meant by a sanction.
                                                                    (2 marks)

You will find feedback to self checks at the end of the section.

Different sociological perspectives

Different sociologists look at the world from very different points of view. We call these points of view 'sociological perspectives'.

The principal perspectives are:

■ the structuralist perspectives of **functionalism** and **Marxism** which focus on society as an overall system which shapes individuals through the processes of socialisation that we have just looked at

■ the **social action** perspective which focuses instead on how individuals and groups act and interact with each other

■ other perspectives including the **feminists** , the **new right** and **postmodernists**.

We will explore these in turn.

In Chapter 1 of the textbook turn to the start of the section on 'Sociological perspectives' and read this and the short section on 'Structuralism' up to but not including 'Functionalism'. It's not essential to do the activity in the textbook.

Study hint

When you meet complex sociological theories like these, don't be discouraged if you don't understand everything first time round. We will meet them again in the next two topics when we look more specifically at education, and you should then start to get a better picture of how they work. You can always come back to this section again – or ask your tutor when you submit Assignment 1 if you feel you haven't understood something**.**

Functionalism

A good listen?

If you would like a break from the written word, there is quite a good introductory talk about the first perspective, functionalism, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_EgCBf_mrkg**.** The talk is just over ten minutes long but you may prefer just to listen to the first 4 minutes.

Functionalist sociologists see society as being a social system made up of interrelated and interdependent institutions such as education, work, religion, law, the family, and so on. The function of these **social institutions** is to maintain the social order and stability of society by encouraging consensus or agreement between the people who belong to the society.

Functionalist sociologists suggest that social institutions, such as schools or the family, have certain purposes (or functions) and these include the following:

- to socialise new members into the culture of society by teaching them shared norms and values. This should mean that people feel part of wider society (i.e. they experience social integration) and identify with the society they live in (i.e. social solidarity)

- to exercise social controls over society's members in order to ensure that they don't stray from the value consensus, i.e. that they follow the norms; this is done through the use of positive and negative sanctions (i.e. rewards and punishments)

- to ensure the specialised division of labour by making sure that people take on economic roles – jobs – that are appropriate to their abilities and skills.

In order to gain an overview of functionalist thinking, go back to Chapter 1 of the textbook and read the short section headed 'Functionalism'.

Emile Durkheim

The French Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) is considered by many to be the founding figure both of sociology and of the functionalist perspective. Durkheim believed that people's desires are potentially damaging and need to be held in control by social forces. If social controls break down, then people experience what Durkheim called anomie, without moral guidance. In one of his most important books, On suicide (1897), Durkheim looked at how anomie could be a factor in people taking their own lives.

Durkheim also introduced some other ideas that have become major concerns of sociologists, including the division of labour, which has benefits for organising work but also helps to create a sense of solidarity between people.

There is much more about Durkheim at:
http://durkheim.uchicago.edu/

Marxism

Marxism also looks at the overall structure of society. However, in contrast with the consensus-based functionalism, it is a conflict theory. Marxist sociologists see capitalist societies like the UK as being characterised by class inequality and conflict rather than by social order.

They argue that the economic base of society – its i**nfrastructure** – is dominated by a relationship between two social classes:

- **the bourgeoisie** or ruling class (sometimes referred to as the capitalist class) who own and control the means of production (factories, technology and so on), and
- the **proletariat** or working class, who sell their labour-power to the bourgeoisie in return for a wage

Marxists argue that the bourgeoisie is able to exploit the labour of the working class by paying low wages because the number of workers outstrips the demand for them. The infrastructure is therefore characterised by both class exploitation and class inequality.

Why does the working class not oppose such exploitation and inequality? It's controlled through ideology: Marxists argue that the ruling class controls the **superstructure** of capitalist society – institutions such as the education system, the legal system and the mass media. These institutions promote capitalist ideology, convincing the working class that the inequality they experience is a

natural outcome of the type of society they live in and that they should accept their lot.

In order to gain an overview of Marxist thinking, go back to Chapter 1 of the textbook and read the section headed 'Marxism'.

Karl Marx

Unsurprisingly, the founder of Marxism was Karl Marx (1818–1883). Probably most famous for books like The Communist Manifesto and Capital , it was in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 that he first set out one of his key concepts, that of alienation. Alienation has something in common with Durkheim's anomie, but for Marx it is not a breakdown in social control, but a crucial element of capitalism. Marx saw people as creative beings; however, under capitalism they are separated from the products of their own labour, so that what they produce is 'alien' to them, and adds to their oppression.

Activity 3   (Allow 10 minutes)

1   Which types of sociologist might make the following statements?

Statement	Functionalists	Marxists
a) Socialisation helps people belong to society		
b) People in society are exploited for the benefit of the rich		
c) Education prepares people for the most appropriate job for their talents		
d) Education persuades people that their low position in society is justified		
e) Education and the mass media have an ideological role		

2   How might functionalists and Marxists view the role of the family?

1   Statements a) and c) are more likely to be made by functionalists; Statements b), d) and e) are more likely to be made by Marxists.

2   Functionalists tend to see the role of the family as vital to the survival of society and the primary agent of socialisation. Marxists see the role of the family as being to transmit capitalist values to children who will grow up to become the next generation of exploited workers.

This has been a very brief introduction to the complex ideas of functionalism and Marxism. We will look in more detail at what they have to say about education in the next topic, and about the family in Section 4.

Social action theories

The social action perspective – also commonly called the interpretivist or interactionist perspective – is rather different from the structuralist perspectives of functionalism and Marxism. Rather than focusing on the big picture of the overall society, interactionists focus instead on the way that people behave and interact with each other.

Social action researchers spend time looking at what actually happens within organisations. Here are some examples that we will look at in more detail in Topics 3 and 4:

■ Mairtin Mac an Ghaill (1994) researched the subcultures of male pupils in schools. He discovered a number of different subcultures with different attitudes to school and qualifications. He identified a 'crisis of masculinity' with 'complex inner dramas of individual insecurity and low self-esteem'

■ Heidi Mirza (1992) studied 62 young Black women in two comprehensive schools in London. She found that their attitudes to educational achievement were more positive than people had tended to think.

In order to gain an overview of social action thinking, go back to Chapter 1 of the textbook and read the section headed 'Social action or interpretivist theories'.

Self check

(Allow 10 minutes)

Again, these questions are similar to the short answer questions in the exam. Write a sentence or two for each:

1   Using one example, briefly explain what, for functionalists, is the role of socialisation.   (2 marks)

2   Define the term 'specialised division of labour'.   (2 marks)

3   Using one example, briefly explain what is the main function of education for Marxists?   (2 marks)

4   Using one example, briefly explain how Erving Goffman characterises the way we behave in society.   (2 marks)

You will find feedback to self checks at the end of the section.

What next?

We hope this sample has helped you to decide whether this course is right for you.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us using the details below.

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