Chris Livesey

Cambridge International AS and A Level

Sociology

Coursebook

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Contents

Introduction

Cambridge International AS and A Level Sociology has been designed and written to reflect the changes to the Cambridge International Syllabus (9699) introduced in 2013 for first examination in June and November 2014. In this respect, the text has two broad aims:

1 To help you understand exactly what is required by the structure of the new syllabus in terms of content and skills.
2 To provide content clearly focused on this structure; a central feature of the text is complete coverage of the AS and A Level syllabus.

This book aims to provide you with the knowledge and understanding required to succeed at both AS and A Level. To this end, the text can be used both for individual work or if you are part of a larger teaching group.

Content

With one or two minor exceptions, the structure of each chapter reflects the order of information as it appears in the syllabus. This allows you to track your progress through the syllabus in a logical way. Slight adjustments have been made in the order of the AS chapter 'Methods of research' and the A Level chapter 'Global development' to provide a more logical teaching and learning flow. However, the syllabus is still fully covered in these sections.

Although the chapter structures follow that of the syllabus, you may find that the units are taught in a different order. Unit 2 ('Theory and methods') provides a basic grounding in sociology that is useful for students who are new to the subject. It introduces a range of perspectives and concepts that can be helpful in understanding other parts of the syllabus. For this reason, coverage of Unit 2 appears first in this book.

AS Level consists of two compulsory units:

Unit 1: The family (Chapter 5). Here, the content focuses on three related areas: the family and wider social change; changing family roles and relationships; and the social construction of age.

Unit 2: Theory and methods (Chapters 1–4). For convenience, this unit has been divided into four chapters. Together, these cover the syllabus requirements for the complete unit and are examined in a single paper.

A Level consists of four optional units. You must study at least three of these:

Unit 3: Education (Chapter 6). First, this unit looks at education systems as part of wider social, economic and political contexts (for example, this section explains how education is linked to the economy and the state). The second part of this unit looks at what happens inside schools – the structures and processes that shape education itself and individuals within the education system.

Unit 4: Global development (Chapter 7). This unit investigates how and why societies around the world develop at different rates. In addition, the chapter examines different forms of inequality, based on concepts of class, age, gender and ethnicity. It also looks at the role of transnational organisations in cultural systems, and issues such as poverty and population growth.

Unit 5: Media (Chapter 8). This unit examines the development and role of both old and new media, from newspapers, through television and film to social networking. The chapter focuses on the significance of changing trends in ownership and control. It also looks at how different media represent social groups and the effect these media might have on personal and social behaviour.

Unit 6: Religion (Chapter 9). This unit studies religion in a social context, investigating different perspectives on religion and its relationship to social change. A range of religious organisations, from churches through new religious movements to new age and fundamentalist movements, are also examined. The chapter also includes an overview of secularisation and the debates that surround it.

Chapter 10 offers tips and techniques for exam preparation. These range from basic revision through assessment techniques, to exam structure, timing and planning. The chapter also identifies some common errors and suggests how to avoid them.

Features

In addition to providing complete coverage of the 9699 syllabus, this book includes a range of features designed to enhance your understanding of the subject. These include:

- Key terms: key concepts for the Cambridge syllabus are highlighted in green when they first appear in the text. Definitions of these terms are provided in boxes throughout the book.

- 'Test yourself' questions are short comprehension questions designed to consolidate your understanding of the topic. They could also be used as revision aids. If you are not sure of the answer, you could look back through the text, discuss with a classmate or ask your teacher for support.

- Activities appear at the end of each section within a chapter. They are mainly intended to be group exercises to encourage discussion, apply learning to specific problems and introduce different forms of learning, such as visual memory techniques.

- Exam-style questions also appear at the end of each chapter. You can use these to familiarise yourself with the new exam format and to check your overall understanding and progress.

- Summary points are listed at the end of every chapter as a reminder of the key concepts that have been covered and a useful guide to revision topics.

- Bibliography: an extensive bibliography covering all the references in the text is included to enable you to explore studies in more depth.

Chapter 1:
The sociological perspective

Learning objectives

The objectives of this chapter involve understanding:

- the origins of sociology as a reasoned and rigorous study of social life
- sociology as the scientific study of social behaviour
- the uses of sociological knowledge; the role of values in sociology
- the meaning of science and different sociological approaches, positivist and interpretivist, to generating knowledge about the social world
- the difference between social and sociological problems
- the relationship between sociology and social policy
- the diversity of people⊠ behaviour within and between societies
- different sociological explanations of social order, social control and social change.

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the idea of sociology as the study of social order, from its origins in the works of Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber to modern, often competing, sociological perspectives. These writers take as their starting point different conceptions of the relationship between the individual and society. The chapter also introduces ideas about cultural similarities and differences within and across societies. It explores how the research process can broaden our knowledge and understanding of the social world. This section leads to a consideration of the different uses of sociological knowledge, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between sociology and social policy.

Sociology as a reasoned and rigorous study of social life

Sociology is the study of how membership of social groups, from families through schools to workplaces, influences people's behaviour. Sociologists create factual knowledge about how and why people behave in particular ways. Facts are true, regardless of whether we believe them to be true; opinions, however, may or may not be true. The crucial difference is that factual knowledge is supported by evidence that has been systematically created and tested.

Sociologists are not interested in facts for their own sake. They are interested in how facts are:

- created: how to produce knowledge that is superior to simple opinion
- linked: how one fact connects to another to create an overall picture of ⬚social reality⬚

This involves developing theories that explain how and why things are connected. We can only explain facts by constructing possible explanations (theories) and then testing those theories against *known* facts.

Origins

The end of the 17th century was notable in Europe for great **cultural** upheavals. At this time, intellectuals and scientists such as Sir Isaac Newton (1643–1727) began to question the prevailing view of the world, which was based on religious faith, magical superstition, custom and tradition. This period is called 'The Enlightenment' and it marked the first attempt to challenge traditional **beliefs** through reason and science. Enlightenment thinkers believed that scientific knowledge could help society develop from its superstitious past to a reasoned future. Alongside these cultural challenges to the established religious and academic order, the French Revolution (1789) provided a strong political challenge. The monarchy and the aristocracy that ruled one of the most powerful nations in the world were overthrown by republican forces.

A third source of disruption was the economic changes introduced by the Industrial Revolution. These changes included the development of factories and machine-based production processes that began around the middle of the 18th century in Britain and parts of Europe.

Comte

It was against this background of change that the French philosopher and mathematician Auguste Comte (1798–1857) raised the question of how **social order** was created and maintained. Comte argued the case for a **scientific method** (**positivism**) through which the 'laws of social development' could be discovered.

> 🔑 **KEY TERMS**
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> **Culture:** the ⬚way of life⬚ of a particular group. This is normally defined in terms of material culture, or the objects people produce, and non⬚material culture ⬚ the ideas and beliefs they create.
>
> **Beliefs:** ideas that are accepted as true, whether or not they are supported by evidence.
>
> **Social order:** the behavioural patterns and regularities established by societies that make social action possible.
>
> **Scientific method:** a way of generating knowledge about the world through objective, systematic and controlled research. The hypothetico⬚deductive model is an example of a scientific method.
>
> **Positivism:** a methodology based on the principle that *it is possible* and *desirable* to study the social world in broadly the same way that natural scientists study the natural world.

In this respect, Comte (1830) argued that all human societies passed through three stages:

1 the theological, where order was based on religious beliefs and controls
2 the metaphysical, a ⬚transition phase⬚ characterised by upheaval and disorder, where the old religious order was challenged by the emergence of science

2

3 the positive, where science and reason revealed the nature of the social world and replaced religion as the basis of social order.

Auguste Comte (1798–1857)

Comte stated that the scientific basis of social order could be revealed through a new science of social development called *La Sociologie* (sociology). Similar 'positivist' principles had been successfully applied in the natural sciences, such as physics and chemistry, to understand development in the natural world.

Marx

Comte adopted a 'consensus' perspective, which stressed that social order was created and maintained through co-operation. However, Comte's contemporary, the German philosopher and economist Karl Marx (1818–83), had a different perspective on the question of social order. For Marx, order was created and maintained by conflict, not co-operation. He argued that social development had passed through four epochs or time periods:

- primitive communism
- ancient society
- feudal, or pre-industrial society
- capitalist or industrial society.

Each time period was characterised by a different type of economic relationship. In feudal society the relationship was between lord and peasant, while under **capitalism** it

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Capitalism:** an economic system based on the pursuit of private profit. Capitalism's defining relationship is between employer and employee (owner and non-owner).

was between owner/employer and non-owner/employee. These relationships were always characterised by conflict because they were based on the domination of one group over another. In capitalist societies, for example, the dominant group was the bourgeoisie – those who owned the means of economic production, such as land, factories and machines. The proletariat, the vast majority, owned nothing but their ability to work (their labour power), which they exchanged for money.

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Suggest one way people co-operate to create order in your society.

The class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat was one of many ideas that Marx introduced that remains significant in sociology today. Marx also believed that social order is maintained through a mixture of force and persuasion. For example, people can be controlled through violence and the threat of imprisonment or even death. People can also be persuaded to behave in an orderly way through, for example, religious teachings that encourage belief in a higher power and an individual's predetermined place in the world.

Another significant idea that flows from class conflict is class inequality. This is the idea that in capitalist societies one small group owns most of the wealth, while the vast majority owns little or nothing. The idea of class inequality re-emerged recently in the various Occupy movements around the world, where the wealth and power of the 'top 1 per cent' was contrasted with that of the 'bottom 99 per cent'. The Occupy movements involved protests against social and economic inequality in countries around the globe, from the USA to China, Mexico and Nigeria, and sought to distribute power and wealth more evenly.

Marx believed that inequality was inextricably linked to stratification – the ranking of different social classes in order of their wealth, power and influence. In this respect, power is a significant sociological concept. For Marx, power came primarily from economic ownership. Those who controlled economic resources were also powerful across all areas of society, from politics to religion to the media.

One strength of Marx's work is the contribution it makes to understanding the role of conflict in bringing about social change. Marx also showed how competition for scarce economic resources can have a significant influence on the way societies are organised. However, Marx has

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been criticised for placing too great an emphasis on the role of economic factors in shaping social institutions and the way people behave. Writing primarily about class conflict, Marx fails to recognise the importance of other forms of conflict that may divide a society and lead to social change, such as conflict between religious groups and between the sexes. Marx's ideas can also be seen as 'deterministic'. The behaviour of the individual is explained in terms of the impact of wider social forces and Marx gives little consideration to the idea that the individual might choose to act in ways that are different to those directed by the economic structure of society.

Weber

A third major theorist is the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920), who was concerned with **social change** in the form of how societies modernised. For example, **Weberian theory** examined how and why pre-industrial societies based on agricultural production, powerful feudal lords and a relatively powerless peasantry developed into industrial societies based on manufacturing and various forms of political democracy.

> ### KEY TERMS
>
> **Social change:** on a macro level, social change involves a major shift in the political, economic or cultural order (such as the change from feudalism to capitalism or pre-modern to modern society). On a micro level it can refer to everyday changes in political, economic or cultural relationships.
>
> **Weberian theory:** a sociological perspective, deriving from the work of Max Weber, focused on understanding and explaining social action. Contemporary forms of Weberian sociology are usually expressed as interactionist sociology.

Weber (1905) argued that social development, once started, followed a process of modernisation. Features of this process included:

- industrialisation
- urbanisation
- rationalisation: behaviour and social organisation based on bureaucratic scientific principles.

Weber's theory of social action (1922) stated that social change is the result of individuals and groups acting purposefully. For example, change could be brought about by the behaviour of charismatic leaders, such as Jesus Christ (Christianity) or Mohammad (Islam), who influence others through the strength of their personality. In a wider context, Weber (1905) argued that modernisation in Europe was fuelled by the ideas and principles of the Calvinist (Protestant) religion.

Weber's ideas can be seen as a useful counter to the economic determinism in Marx's work. Whereas Marx felt that social change was driven primarily by economic forces, Weber stated that other factors also contributed. For example, political struggles, ideas and belief systems, demographic changes, and developments in science and forms of government could all have an influence in transforming society. Weber argued that each social change has to be analysed separately in order to identify its causes; he rejected the idea that economic forces are always the most significant factor in social change. Like Marx, Weber saw that conflict is of great importance in understanding how societies are organised and operate. He believed that social class is often a source of conflict – particularly in capitalist societies – but that economic relations are not the *only* source of conflict in society.

Durkheim

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1857–1917) followed in the general consensus tradition established by Comte. Durkheim's ideas remain influential in the theory and practice of sociology to this day, for two reasons.

Firstly, Durkheim argued that societies could only be fully understood in terms of the relationship between their various institutions. These institutions are patterns of shared behaviour that persist over time, such as families, the workplace, religion, education and politics. Understanding the relationship between institutions might, for example, involve looking at how and why the family is connected to the workplace. Durkheim felt that all forms of sociological analysis faced a fundamental problem: understanding what holds a mass of individuals together as a society. His solution was to regard social systems as 'moral entities' – something to which people feel they belong and to which they owe allegiance.

In Durkheim's view, society is an entity that exists in its own right, beyond the ideas, hopes and desires of its individual members. Order is based on common agreement about the things a society, and by extension every individual in that society, thinks are important. (Later functionalist sociologists called this type of agreement '**value consensus**'.) For Durkheim (1895), therefore, societies did not just 'exist'; people had to develop social solidarity, a belief they belonged to a larger group:

> ### KEY TERM
>
> **Value consensus:** agreement about the things a society, and by extension individuals within that society, thinks are important.

- In pre-modern or **traditional societies**, **mechanical solidarity** prevails: people are bound together by who they *are*, as part of a family or some other kinship group such as a clan.
- In modern societies, **organic solidarity** predominates. People are bound together by what they *do*, such as paid work. This type of solidarity allows the formation of much larger groups than mechanical solidarity. However, organic solidarity is more complicated to create. It requires integrating mechanisms – ways of making people feel they have things in common, such as a shared belief in democracy or pledging allegiance to a flag that symbolises the society to which they belong.

KEY TERMS

Traditional society: type of society in which behaviour is characterised by and based on long-standing customs, habits and traditions.

Mechanical solidarity: type of social solidarity characteristic of pre-industrial/tribal societies, in which people are bound together by who they are rather than what they do.

Organic solidarity: type of social solidarity characteristic of industrial societies, in which people are bound together by what they do.

A Hispanic family pledges allegiance to the US flag. How does this behaviour make people feel they belong to a society?

The second reason for Durkheim's continued influence is his significant contribution to the development of sociology as a science. Durkheim (1895) showed that sociologists could both produce objective knowledge about social behaviour – facts that prove or disprove certain arguments – and explain behaviour as the result of something more than just the psychological choices made by individuals. In this respect, Durkheim (1897) set out the basic principles through which human

behaviour could be scientifically studied. He applied these principles to the study of suicide to demonstrate how suicide had social causes, not simply biological or psychological ones.

For Durkheim, the transition from societies based on mechanical solidarity to those based on organic solidarity represented a major social change. However, his writings lack a clear explanation of why this change occurs and his ideas are based on only a limited amount of historical evidence. Durkheim's ideas also imply that social order comes about mainly through the existence of shared interests and values, which connect the different members of society to one another. Durkheim makes no systematic attempt to examine how social order is maintained in societies where deep conflict exists. Both Marx and Weber recognised that order is often imposed by powerful groups using resources such as the police, the military and various means of ideological control. Ideological control refers to the ability that powerful groups have to shape important ideas and ways of thinking in a society. This can include control over religious ideas, for example. The lack of an adequate theory of power is often cited as one of the major weaknesses in Durkheim's sociology. While his conclusions about suicide helped make a strong case for adopting a scientific approach to the study of society, critics have suggested that the statistical data on which the work was based was unreliable. Some have even argued that this data was wrongly applied by Durkheim. Using statistical data as a basis for sociological research may be more problematic than Durkheim imagined, and this is a view that is linked with the interpretivist perspective that will be considered later in the chapter.

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TEST YOURSELF

Suggest one difference between consensus, conflict or action approaches to understanding how social order is maintained. Also suggest one strength and one limitation of each approach.

ACTIVITY

1 *Schools and colleges are institutions that need to integrate a diverse range of individuals. Identify some of the integrating mechanisms schools use to promote a sense of social solidarity. How does this illustrate Durkheim's notion of societies as 'moral entities'?*

2 *Working in pairs, identify three ways in which class conflict might be expressed. Also suggests ways in which conflicts between social classes might be resolved.*

Sociology as a science: positivist, interpretivist and postmodernist perspectives

One way in which sociologists try to develop factual information is to adopt a scientific approach to evidence (*data*) collection, testing and analysis. This section outlines three perspectives relating to sociology as a science, but before looking at these perspectives, it is important to understand what we mean by 'science' in this context.

Defining science

Science is a way of producing a particular kind of knowledge, one that is factual and objective rather than based on opinion, guesswork or faith. Popper (1934), for example, argues that science 'involves identifying a problem to study, collecting information about it and offering an explanation for it. All this is done as systematically as possible.' Science, therefore, is a methodology – a way of producing knowledge that has two main qualities:

1   It is reliable. This refers to the idea that it is possible to check the accuracy of a piece of research by repeating (*replicating*) it to see if we get the same, or very similar, results.

2   It is valid. Data is only useful if it actually measures or describes what it claims to measure or describe. It is possible to measure the extent of crime using government crime statistics. However, the validity of these statistics may be limited if they only record crimes that are reported to the police because many crimes go unreported.

So, a scientific methodology encompasses certain procedural and ethical rules that should be followed in order to 'do science'.

Procedural rules

Scientific knowledge is created by following a set of *procedures*, agreed by the scientific community, that govern how data can be collected and analysed. Popper's (1934) **hypothetico-deductive method** is a standard example of a scientific procedure. A scientific procedure generally begins with a **hypothesis** or research question. This question must be tested or answered by the systematic

KEY TERMS

Hypothetico-deductive method: positivist research design based on the development and systematic testing of hypotheses.

Hypothesis: statement or question that can be systematically tested.

collection, presentation and analysis of data. A crucial idea here is that any conclusions drawn from scientific research have not been disproven or shown to be false in the course of testing them against the available evidence. This procedure gives scientific knowledge greater plausibility because it is based on tested facts rather than untested opinions. It also gives this knowledge a crucial quality: the ability to make predictive statements. Scientific knowledge means we can say with a level of certainty that something will happen in the future.

TEST YOURSELF

Suggest one reason why testing is important for the generation of scientific knowledge.

Ethical rules (a scientific ethos)

To ensure that scientists follow the procedures outlined above, rather than making up their results, Merton (1942) argued that a scientific ethos is required. There must be rules governing the general conditions that research must satisfy in order to both attain and maintain scientific status. Science has to be:

1   Universal: knowledge is evaluated using objective, universally agreed, criteria. Personal values play no part in this process and criticism of a scientist's work should focus on the **falsification** of their conclusions or identifying weaknesses in the research process.

KEY TERM

Falsification: the principle that scientific theories should be framed in such a way that they can be disproved (falsified).

2   Communal: scientific knowledge is 'public knowledge' that must be freely shared within the scientific community. Scientists must, for example, be able to build on the work done by other scientists. This inspires scientists to develop new ideas based on those of other scientists, causing scientific understanding to advance on a *cumulative* basis. By making their work available for peer review, scientists also accept that scientific knowledge cannot be taken 'on trust'. Other scientists must be free to replicate their work, which requires detailed knowledge of the original research.

3   Disinterested: the main responsibility of the scientist is the pursuit of knowledge. While scientists should be recognised for their achievements and rewarded for their efforts, they should not have a personal stake,

financial or otherwise, in the outcome of their research. If the researcher was not disinterested, there would be a risk of **researcher bias**, calling the validity of the research into question.

4   Sceptical: nothing is beyond criticism. The scientific community must continually evaluate knowledge because this questioning process contributes to the development of human understanding. For Merton, this 'sceptical attitude' represented the main way in which scientific knowledge differed from other forms of knowledge, such as religious faith. Science is 'true' only because it has not yet been disproved. Faith, however, is considered by believers to be self-evidently true; it cannot be disproved.

We can develop these general ideas about how sociologists produce scientific knowledge by outlining two different perspectives: positivism and **interpretivism**.

KEY TERMS

Researcher bias: condition in which the presence or behaviour of the researcher introduces uncontrolled variables into the research, making it unreliable or invalid.

Interpretivism: methodology based on the principle that social behaviour can only be understood subjectively, by understanding how people interpret situations and, by so doing, give them meaning. Participant observation is a classic interpretivist method.

How is scientific knowledge different from non-scientific knowledge?

Positivism

Positivism is based on the idea that it is both *possible* and *desirable* to study the social world in broadly the same way that natural scientists study the natural world. Positivist methodology (the rules governing how we should study social behaviour) has a number of features.

Knowledge is created by constructing and testing hypotheses, which are broadly defined as questions to which answers are required. Such questions take the form of a testable relationship between two or more things. A simple example is the question; 'Does poverty cause crime?' Testing is crucial because the objective is to *disprove* a hypothesis ('poverty *does not* cause crime'), because if a hypothesis cannot be falsified, it might be true.

The purpose of science is to discover objective knowledge, so sociologists must be personally objective. The research process must not be influenced by the researcher's values, beliefs, opinions or prejudices. This is the idea of **value-freedom**. To avoid biasing the data-collection process, the scientist should not participate in the behaviour being studied but merely observe it.

KEY TERM

Value-freedom: general principle that the conduct and findings of the research process should not be influenced by the values of the researcher.

In general, the positivist approach involves the ability to quantify (express in numerical/statistical form) and measure behaviour. Therefore, scientific knowledge is:

- factual
- objective
- evidence-based
- testable.

Non-scientific knowledge is based on:

- opinion
- guesswork
- untested assumptions
- faith.

Interpretivism

Interpretivism is sometimes called 'anti-positivism' because it involves a different approach to research. Interpretivists argue that different people in different situations understand, or 'interpret', the social world in different ways. As a result, sociologists can only describe reality from the viewpoint of those who create and define it.

Harris (2005a) captures the difference between the two methodologies when he notes that positivists use terms such as 'cause', 'law' or 'fact' to convey the idea that human behaviour is governed by forces that the individual social actor is powerless to resist.

Interpretivists, however, argue that people are different from inanimate objects because they have consciousness – an awareness of both themselves and the world in which they live. The ability to think, reflect and act, rather than simply *react*, makes people very different from inanimate objects. This means that people cannot be studied in the same way we study plants or rocks. The scientific study of living, thinking beings, therefore, requires a more subtle and flexible approach, in which social behaviour is described in terms of the meanings and interpretations people give to behaviour.

Essentially, positivism explains people's behaviour 'from without' (not interacting with the people and behaviour being studied). In contrast, interpretivist explanations are developed 'from within' (how people understand the behaviour in which they are involved). Interpretivism suggests that sociologists should take advantage of the human ability to empathise – to 'take the role of the other' and experience the world in the way it is experienced by those being researched. For example, to truly understand what it means to be homeless, the researcher should become homeless. This practice allows sociologists to gain a vital insight into why people behave as they do.

Interpretivists argue that sociology cannot predict the behaviour of conscious human beings in the same way that physics can predict the changes that affect inanimate objects. Interpetivism states that the behavioural rules in a society are determined by context – they change depending on the situation in which people find themselves. For example, if a teacher tells a student to 'be quiet', the student's response will vary depending on whether the instruction was given in the classroom or in the street. How people react to the behaviour of others depends, therefore, on their understanding of the social context in which that behaviour takes place.

Interpretivism focuses on the collection of qualitative data – information that tells the researcher something about the experiences and feelings of the people being studied. Qualitative research is less reliable than its quantitative counterpart, because it is impossible to replicate accurately. However, it has potentially much greater validity because it can reveal much more about how and why people live their lives in particular ways.

For these reasons, interpretivist research follows a different set of methodological rules than positivist research. It uses what Oberg (1999) characterises as an 'emergent research design' built around four ideas.

1 Planning: a research issue is identified and a research question takes shape.

2a Data collection: this research design is non-linear; it does not begin with a hypothesis and end with confirmation or rejection. The researcher is not looking for definitive answers, so a research question is explored from different perspectives, such as those of the people being researched or of the researcher themselves. If, as Firestone (1987) suggests, reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation the researcher must use a research design that offers the greatest opportunities to capture this subjective sense of reality

Where positivist research is 'goal-based' – the objective being to test whether a hypothesis is true or false – Lindauer (2005) argues that interpretivist research is 'goal-free'. The researcher can explore whatever they or the people they are studying feel is important or interesting. In this respect, interpretivist research is emergent: it 'takes shape as data collection and analysis proceed'. Positivist research design is rigid, strong and directs the researcher through every stage of the process. In contrast, the exploratory framework is flexible, weak and bends to take account of new research ideas and developments.
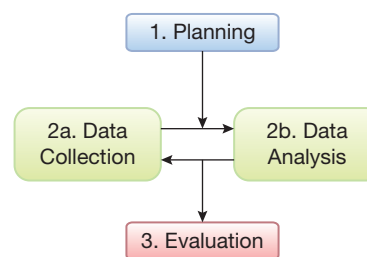
Emergent (exploratory) research model

2b Data analysis: while attempts may be made to categorise data or sort it into a logical, descriptive story (*narrative*), Schultz et al. (1996) argue that data analysis actually takes place *throughout* the research process, rather than *after* data has been collected. This involves a feedback loop where the analysis of collected data is used to inform *further* data collection, which in turn informs *further* analysis. Where there is no requirement to collect data to test a hypothesis, analysis is both descriptive and seen from the viewpoint of both researcher and researched.

3 Evaluation: where positivist research involves the researcher making judgements about what data to collect and drawing conclusions about whether a

hypothesis is true or false, interpretivist research is generally non-judgemental. The reader is left to draw their own conclusions. As Firestone (1987) suggests, the main objective is to 'help the reader understand' how people *see* their world and situation, or, as Schwandt (2002) puts it, social research involves not so much a 'problem to be solved ' as a dilemma or mystery that requires interpretation and self-understanding'.

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Identify two differences between positivist and interpretivist approaches. Also suggest one strength and one limitation of each approach.

Postmodernism

Both positivists and interpretivists believe that it is possible to collect objective data and, by so doing, to make reliable and valid statements about behaviour. **Postmodernism** is slightly different in that it is not a scientific methodology. As Usher and Edwards (1994) argue, it is 'a different way of seeing and working, rather than a fixed body of ideas, a clearly worked out position or a set of critical methods and techniques'. Postmodernism is a critical worldview based on the idea that people construct stories (*narratives*) through which to make sense of the world. These personal narratives are neither true nor false; they simply *are* and can, of course, be revealed by sociological research. However, of greater interest here is the associated concept of metanarratives – the 'big stories' a society constructs to explain something about the nature of the world. Examples of metanarratives include religions (such as Buddhism or Islam), political philosophies (such as socialism or conservatism), nationalities (Pakistani, Mauritian or Nigerian for example) and science.

> **KEY TERM**
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> **Postmodernism:** microsociological perspective that rejects the modernist claim that the social world can be understood rationally and empirically. Focus is on understanding how people construct personal narratives (stories), through which they make sense of the world.

At different times and in different societies, different metanarratives explaining 'how the world works' come to the fore. In pre-industrial (or pre-modern) societies,

religion is the dominant metanarrative. In industrial (or modern) societies, science is increasingly prominent as it challenges, and in some respects replaces, religious explanations of the world. Postmodern societies (those that develop 'after modern societies'), however, are characterised by what Lyotard (1979) calls an 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. For a variety of reasons, people stop regarding these 'big stories' as believable or sustainable.

It is important to note that postmodernism is not 'anti-science'; rather, it argues that the significance of metanarratives in not whether they are true or false, but how people view them. From this position, postmodernism examines 'science as metanarrative' – as a worldview struggling to establish its leadership (*hegemony*) over other metanarratives. Accordingly, postmodernism suggests a range of practical and theoretical criticisms.

Theoretical criticisms focus on ideas such as **objectivity**. For example, Polyani (1958) argues that 'all observation is theory-dependent'. What he means is that to understand what we are seeing, we must already know what it is. To observe a table we must already have a theory that describes what it looks like. This casts doubt on positivist versions of science, in which theoretical explanations are *produced* by observations tested during the research process. Postmodernism also questions positivist conceptions of social reality as something waiting to be discovered (just as something like electricity or gravity existed before science discovered it). Postmodernism, like interpretivism, argues that knowledge about the social world is actively created by people going about their daily lives; the world cannot exist independently of their activities.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Objectivity:** freedom from personal or institutional bias.

Postmodernists do, however, include interpretivism in this criticism. Interpretivists claim to actively *create* knowledge rather than merely revealing its existence. This follows because according to postmodernists, it is impossible to study people in small groups without changing their behaviour in some way. The act of 'doing research' – whether it involves asking people questions (positivism) or participating in the behaviour being researched (interpretivism) – changes that behaviour.

Does participating in the behaviour you are studying change that behaviour?

Sociological research is not, therefore, getting at 'the truth'; it merely presents different *versions* of truth. The only way to decide between them is by making subjective judgements. To decide if one version is superior to another – i.e. that it has a greater claim to 'truth' or 'validity' – we must measure each version against certain criteria. For example, based on the criteria of 'objective testing and proof', science is superior to religion. However, if we change the criteria to 'faith', then religion is a superior truth to science. For postmodernists, therefore, concepts such as truth are inherently subjective because they are based on power relationships. Those with the power to define the criteria against which the status of knowledge is measured effectively decide what is true.

Postmodernists have also criticised the association between scientific knowledge and 'progress' – the idea that science improves people's lives. These critics claim that science is not necessarily a dispassionate, objective 'search for truth'. As Campbell (1996) has suggested, science can also be seen 'as the vanguard of European exploitation, a discipline run amok, instigators of nuclear and other weapons systems, the handmaiden of big business and the defilers of nature'. These ideas force us to consider the notion of a scientific ethos, with Prelli (1989) questioning the extent to which scientists actually conform to a 'community of values'. As Martinson et al. (2005) discovered, scientific fraud appears widespread; 33 per cent of 3,200 US scientists 'confessed to various kinds of misconduct – such as claiming credit for someone else's work, or changing results because of pressure from a study's sponsor'.

The uses of sociological knowledge: the role of values in sociology

The role of values

Earlier in this chapter, we suggested that sociological knowledge differed from other forms of knowledge – from journalism, through personal experience to everyday conversation and thinking – because it deals in facts. To establish sociological knowledge, data is collected and then analysed or tested objectively. In other words, the data collected and presented is 'value-free' – it has not been influenced by the values, beliefs or prejudices of the researcher. More correctly, it is value-neutral, since it is not possible to truly 'act without values'. The best we can do is recognise the various points at which values potentially intrude into the research process and adjust our research strategy to limit or neutralise their effect. It is possible to outline a range of points at which values potentially intrude into the research process.

Research considerations

To carry out research, sociologists have to make certain practical choices. Researchers must choose a topic, and decisions about who or what to study are influenced by their personal values. For example, while Goffman (1961) chose to study inmates in an asylum, Caplan (2006) chose to study changes in food consumption in Tanzania and Chennai in southern India. These values will also determine whether a researcher studies the activities of the powerful – as in Pearce's (1998) study of corporate criminality in the chemical industry – or the relatively powerless. Davis (1985), for example, studied the social processes involved in becoming a prostitute. In addition, these choices are influenced by personal views about danger and difficulty. For example, powerful people tend

to value their privacy, so gaining access to their world may not be easy.

Topic choice is also influenced by funding considerations. Those paying for the research may not only influence *what* is studied but also *how* it is studied. This situation raises ethical questions (see below) about whether a researcher should be held responsible for the purposes to which their research is put. For example, 'Project Camelot' was research funded by the US government and military in the 1960s, designed to influence internal politics and development in Chile. Solovey (2001) argues that the proposed involvement of sociological researchers in the project was ethically questionable.

Decisions about the method of research used are also influenced by values because they inform a researcher's beliefs about how best to achieve reliability and validity in sociological research. As we have seen, different sociologists have different ideas about the respective value of quantitative and qualitative data. Where questions are asked of a **respondent**, judgements are made about who to question, what to ask and how that person is permitted to respond. Positivists may prefer to limit respondent choice by giving them a list of answers from which to choose – perhaps closed questions, where the answers are easy to quantify. Interpretivists may encourage a respondent to answer in their own words by asking open-ended questions. Values also influence data analysis: the researcher must make decisions about what data to include and what to exclude from the completed research.

KEY TERM

Respondent: a person who is the subject of a research process or who responds to the research.

Coser (1977) argues that while choice is always value-relevant (influenced by values), once choices about what to study and how to study it have been made, value-neutrality involves the researcher *acknowledging* their values. Sociologists should clearly state the value-relevant assumptions in their work and make explicit the values they hold so these assumptions may be questioned, challenged or changed by other researchers.

TEST YOURSELF

What is the difference between value-freedom and value-neutrality?

The uses of sociological knowledge

The uses of sociological knowledge are many and varied. The section below looks at some of the contrasting ways in which this knowledge has been applied.

In classical sociology, knowledge involved the development of grand theories that sought to explain ideas such as social order and change:

- Marx (1867) developed theories about capitalism, economic and social exploitation and inequality.
- Weber (1905) developed theories of modernisation.
- Durkheim (1893) explored the social forces that produced and inhibited change.

More recently, the focus has moved onto a range of *social issues*:

- **Feminism** highlighted the effects of patriarchy on **gender** relationships – work that indirectly contributed to the development of social policies in Europe and North America relating to issues such as sexual (and, for black feminists in particular, racial) discrimination and equal pay.
- Townsend and Abel-Smith (1965) UK poverty research also changed the way governments defined poverty. There was a move away from definitions of an absolute poverty line based on minimum nutritional needs, towards a relative definition that took account of minimum expected living standards in a particular society.
- In a global context, research has started to focus on areas such as the social and environmental costs of development. In 1984, for example, a gas explosion at the US-owned Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, caused nearly 4,000 deaths. More widely, there is an increasing sociological interest in the issues raised by economic, political and cultural forms of globalisation. Examples of this include the convergence of global (capitalist) economic systems, the development of large-scale political communities, such as the European Community, and the various forms of changes that arise from the meeting and mixing of different cultural ideas and behaviours.

KEY TERMS

Feminism: a broad range of approaches dealing with male-female relationships from the perspective of the latter.

Gender: the social characteristics different societies assign to individuals based on an understanding of their biological or social differences. Where biological sex refers to ideas like male and female, gender refers to ideas about masculinity and femininity.

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In this respect, the uses of sociological knowledge have evolved to encompass things such as contributing to and informing public debates – making people aware of social issues and highlighting different perspectives. For example, Cohen's (1972) concept of moral panic and Wilkins' (1964) description of a deviancy amplification process – whereby relatively minor deviant acts can turn into criminal social problems – have arguably become part of mainstream discussions about crime and deviance over the past 50 years.

TEST YOURSELF

Summarise the change in focus of ideas about the uses of sociological knowledge over the past 150 years.

One contemporary use of social knowledge is in relation to **social policy** (see below). While sociology does occasionally make direct inputs into policy through research commissioned by government departments and agencies, its contribution is more frequently felt indirectly. Sociological research can, for example, highlight particular social issues. Townsend and Abel-Smith (1965) challenged the accepted belief that poverty had been largely eradicated in the UK; indirectly, their research led to a range of policy initiatives designed to limit the extent of poverty. A further indirect area of influence is the way in which sociological knowledge can inform how governments define and measure particular issues and ideas. In recent years, for example, criticism of the validity of official crime statistics has led to the development of measures with greater validity, such as the UK British Crime Surveys.

KEY TERM

Social policy: a set of ideas and actions pursued by governments to meet a particular social objective. A housing policy, for example, sets out the various criteria required to solve a perceived social problem.

By collecting comparative evidence about different societies, sociologists may also help to influence social policy. For example, Stephens (2009) compared the UK and Nordic (Scandinavian) welfare models to explore ideas about social inclusion and exclusion reflected in a range of UK government policies over the previous 10 years, from childcare to welfare benefits

and care of the elderly. Another indirect role involves the testing of social policies through sociological research. The intention here is to monitor and evaluate the success of the policies in tackling particular issues. A further contribution sociology makes to the evaluation process is an understanding of the intended and unintended consequences of social policy. Stephens, for example, states that an intended consequence of recent developments in the UK welfare model has been to use means-testing to allocate help where it is most needed, which largely excludes the middle classes. However, an unintended consequence has been to increase feelings of social exclusion among both the very poor and the middle classes by reducing contact between them.

ACTIVITY

In small groups, identify possible examples of sociological research that you think are always, sometimes or never unethical. Each group should share its examples with the other groups and briefly justify its categorisation of each research example. What conclusions can be drawn from this about the role of values in sociological research?

Sociology and social policy: the differences between sociological problems and social problems

Sociological and social problems

The difference between a 'social' and 'sociological' problem is significant. It affects how we understand the sociological enterprise, the nature and purpose of social policy and the contribution of sociologists to such policies.

A variety of behaviours, including crime, poverty and unemployment, have the potential to be considered **social problems**. However, Carter (2001) suggests that behaviour

KEY TERM

Social problem: behaviour seen to cause public friction and/or private misery, usually involving some form of public outcry or call for action (Stanley, 2004). A social problem is always defined from the perspective of the powerful.

is only 'a problem' when it is defined as such 'according to the beliefs and values of some influential or dominant group in society'. A social problem, therefore, is behaviour of which powerful social groups disapprove. This suggests that it is a relative concept – what may be considered a social problem by one group may not be seen as such by another.

Sociological problems fall into two broad categories. The first is the idea that societies have to solve certain fundamental problems – for example, food, shelter, socialisation – if they are to survive. Issues such as the nature of social order, social control and social change are, therefore, *sociological* problems but not necessarily *social* problems. Some sociologists apply a different definition to sociological problems. Willis (2011), for example, suggests that a sociological problem is simply a question 'that demands explanation'. By this definition, social problems and sociological problems can sometimes be the same (synonymous). In general terms, though, sociological problems are considered in light of how and why behaviour comes to be defined as a social problem in the first place.

An example of this distinction is provided by the concept of 'disability'. Adomaitiene (1999) notes how 'the disabled' face a number of *social problems*, from discrimination and lack of facilities to unsuitable building environments. In addition, 'the disabled' are frequently labelled, especially in the media, as a social problem in themselves. A sociological problem here might be why discrimination occurs or how disability is constructed as a social problem. If sociologists simply accepted that their role was to provide solutions to social problems and a social problem was whatever powerful people said it was, then the role of sociology would be fundamentally different.

It may not be the sociologist's job to solve social problems, but sociological research can have practical, real-world applications that help us understand and deal with social problems. Painter and Farrington's (1997) study of the relationship between street lighting and crime pointed out that the better lit an area the less crime it experienced. This not only addressed the sociological problem of how changes to the physical environment alter individual behaviour, it also suggested solutions to a social problem.

How is the social problem of crime different from the sociological problem of crime?

Sociology and social policy

Calvert and Calvert (1992) define social policy as 'the main principles under which the government directs economic resources to meet specific social needs', such as housing, education, crime prevention and help for the elderly.

Social policy is an area where social and sociological problems frequently meet. However, the distinction between social and sociological problems is not simply academic. If sociologists think only in terms of social problems they risk over-identifying with a particular social group – those to whom certain types of behaviour are problems. This potentially affects value-neutrality. If sociologists simply accept the 'definitions of the powerful' they risk failing to investigate the possible role of these groups in *creating* social problems.

In over-identifying with the interests of the powerful, sociologists can be accused of being agents of **social control**, researching ways to uphold the *status quo*. This reduces the study of human behaviour to a narrow, 'problem-based' perspective and raises questions about the

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TEST YOURSELF

Briefly explain the difference between a social and a sociological problem.

KEY TERM

Social control: the various mechanisms, such as rewards and punishments, that individuals and societies use to maintain order.

scope of sociological research. For example, Mills (1959) argued that an 'unimaginative view' of sociology as 'solving social problems' reduces sociology to 'the accumulation of facts for the purpose of facilitating administrative decisions'. Sociologists, therefore, need to be constantly aware of their relationship to both powerful and powerless groups.

TEST YOURSELF

Suggest two arguments against using sociological research to solve social problems.

Feminist theory

In recent times, feminist research has focused on a range of policy issues and practices designed to highlight the inequality faced by women all over the world. Pascall (1997), for example, has charted how social policies that reduce the state's welfare role result in a rise in 'women's unpaid work' as carers. In addition, Misra (2000) highlights how social policies relating to employment, poverty reduction and child birth in the USA have been influenced by women's activism. Misra also points out that these social policies are connected. For example, the development of 'family friendly' employment policies can be linked to areas such as poverty, where single parents are often unable to take advantage of the new employment policies. Although feminist theory mainly tries to identify and address the social disadvantages experienced specifically by women, other sociologists have pointed out that 'disadvantaged groups' are often the target of social policies (the 'social problem' approach) or politically marginalised. In this respect, Becker (1967) argues that it is impossible to achieve value-neutrality when it comes to social issues. Sociologists should make a choice about how and why their research is used – to promote the interests of the disadvantaged or to support the activities of the state.

From a left-wing perspective, Tombs and Whyte (2003) argue that rather than conducting research to inform social policy, the sociologist's role is to empower the powerless by providing the information required to challenge policies that do not benefit them. Sociologists should 'take the standpoint of the *underdog* [and] apply it to the study of the *overdogs*'.

From a new-right perspective, Marsland (1995) argues that sociology should address 'social problems' as they are defined and identified by the political consensus in democratic societies. He states that 'sociological research has a necessary, important, and constructive role to play in relation to policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation'. In this respect, Marsland believes that a 'fully engaged' sociology is one that takes a commitment to social policy seriously. A sociology that refuses to become involved in social policy allows other social sciences, such as psychology and economics, or powerful vested interest groups, to go unsupported and unchecked by objective research.

ACTIVITY

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (www.jrf.org.uk/) publishes research on welfare and poverty that can be used to illustrate how sociological studies can contribute to social policy. Choose one piece of research from the site and write up to:

- *150 words identifying the key arguments in the research*
- *150 words explaining how the research could contribute to the development of social policy.*

The diversity of human behaviour and cultural variation

Murdock (1945) argued that one feature of human societies is that they share a large number of 'cultural universals'. By this he was referring to behaviours that are common to all societies, past and present, such as groups defined by:

- age
- family
- language
- status
- symbols
- beliefs
- practices.

While these features may be universal, it is evident that different societies interpret them in different ways.

- When European people meet, it is often acceptable to shake hands. In Japan, it is more acceptable to bow.

- In the Arab world, shaking hands with someone of the opposite sex may be unacceptable.
- To beckon someone with the palm facing upwards and crooking your index finger is an acceptable way of calling someone towards you in the USA. In India this action is an insult.

In this respect, while we may be able to talk on one level about cultural uniformities, we also need to think about cultural diversity in two main ways: cross-cultural and intra-cultural.

Cross-cultural diversity refers to differences *between* societies. For example, broad cultural differences between the UK and Mauritius include things such as language, political organisation (while both are democracies, the UK has an unelected monarch as head of state, while Mauritius is a republic with a president elected by parliament), and different social, political and economic histories. We could, of course, note many other differences, ranging from cuisine, through cultural products such as music, dance and literature, to religious festivals.

Another example of cross-cultural diversity involves personal space:

- Germans like to maintain a circle of space of that extends roughly 60 cm around the body. People feel uncomfortable if others enter this space uninvited.
- In Hungary, personal space extends around 40 cm.
- In Argentina personal space can be so small as to be almost non-existent.

Attitudes to relationships between people of a different sex and those of the same sex also vary. For example, in Saudi Arabia, a man holding another man's hand in public is a sign of mutual respect. In Europe, if two men were holding hands, people would assume that they were (sexual) partners. In countries where homosexuality is a criminal offence, they might be arrested and imprisoned.

While most societies recognise only two sexes – male and female – some recognise a 'third sex' (transgendered individuals). In some Native American tribes certain males (*berdache*) take on the gender identity and social status of females.

TEST YOURSELF

Identify two cultural differences between your own and any other society.

Mauritius is a republic with a president elected by parliament

Intra-cultural diversity involves differences *within* the *same* culture. We can consider this using examples from a range of social categories.

Class

We can identify distinct class groupings in **modern industrial society** (working, middle and upper class, for example). Each of these classes has its own cultural characteristics. In relation to work, manual occupations (plumber, road sweeper) are working class, while professional (non-manual) occupations (dentist, accountant) are middle class. Different classes also typically have different levels of educational achievement. Middle-class children, for example, are much more likely to attend university than their working-class peers, while middle-class cultural lifestyles are more likely to include leisure activities such as opera, theatre and fine dining.

KEY TERM

Modern industrial society: type of society characterised by particular forms of political, economic (mass production, manufacturing) and cultural (science, reason) beliefs and practices.

Lifestyles are related to income differences that come from higher levels of education and work – for example, the middle classes occupy more middle and senior managerial positions. Lifestyles are also based on cultural tastes. High culture, for example, refers to the idea that some cultural products and practices are

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superior to others: classical music, opera and the works of Shakespeare are *high cultural* forms, whereas pop music, cinema and the works of J. K. Rowling (e.g. Harry Potter) are not. As Gans (1974) puts it, high culture relates to 'The art, music and literature … that were (and are) preferred by the well-educated elite'. Katz-Gerro et al. (2007) suggest that this view of high culture sees societies as 'culturally stratified'. It indicates a basic division between a small, cultured elite at the top and a large mass of people at the bottom who embrace popular culture. Giddens (2006) defines popular culture as 'entertainment created for large audiences, such as popular films, shows, music, videos and TV programmes' (the very opposite of high culture). This is the 'culture of the masses' – a term used to suggest a shallow, worthless and disposable form of culture.

Country	Male⊠Female	Male⊠Male	Female⊠Female
Canada	14	18	14
Chile	14	18	18
France	15	15	15
Guyana	13	Illegal	Illegal
Iran	Must be married	Illegal	Illegal
South Korea	13	13	13
Saudi Arabia	Must be married	Illegal	Illegal
Spain	13	13	13
Tunisia	20	Illegal	Illegal
UK	16	16	16

Table 1.1   Age of consent in selected societies

While an elite could, even in the past, separate itself from the masses physically and culturally, in many countries today it is increasingly difficult to distinguish someone's status on the basis of how they speak, behave or dress. However, it might still be possible to identify differences based on a person's cultural products and ideas. The cultural elite claims that 'taste' cannot be bought or learnt – it is bred over several generations.

TEST YOURSELF

Identify three types of television programme that are likely to be watched by the working class and three that are likely to be watched by the middle class.

Age

Cultural diversity, both within and between societies, is expressed through age in a number of significant ways: firstly, in the notion of different biological age groups (child, youth, adult, elderly) and, secondly, in the cultural characteristics associated with biological age. This includes different assumptions about how people of a particular age should behave.

Childhood, for example, involves a range of cultural differences. These differences relate to issues such as permissions – children are allowed to exhibit behaviours, such as play, that are discouraged in adults – and denials: children are not allowed to do things, such as have a sexual relationship, that are open to adults. Table 1.1 highlights the cultural differences between societies in relation to ideas about sexual maturity and sexual orientation.

Youth includes a range of cultural categories, such as pre-teens ('teenies'), teens and young adults, that reflect differences in things like consumption. Not only do different categories of youth have different cultural tastes, but young people also tend to have different tastes from both children and adults in areas such as music, fashion, food and language. Youth lifestyles are also more likely to be played out in public, in the street or pubs and clubs, whereas elderly lifestyles are generally played out in private – inside the home.

Adulthood involves cultural differences constructed around *rights* – such as marriage and full-time work – and *responsibilities*, such as childcare. These characteristics set adulthood apart from other age groups. Although there are cultural variations in how old age is perceived in Western societies such as the UK, Europe and the USA, it is frequently seen as a diminished identity. This means that it has 'lost something' – such as the ability to earn an independent living because of compulsory retirement – in the transition from adulthood. In this respect, old age is frequently regarded as undesirable and problematic. Gianoulis (2006) argues that the 'medicalisation' of old age contributes to this process: 'Instead of viewing the disorientations of older people as being the result of personal and social change, they are viewed as symptoms

of "senility".' Many people, therefore, see old age as an inevitable process of decline, senility, helplessness, withdrawal from society and loneliness. In some non-Western societies, such as Tamil Nadu in India, the (illegal) practice of *thalaikoothal* is perhaps an extreme example of such 'undesirability'. In this practice, elderly family members may be murdered (*senicide*) by their relatives when they are considered to be an economic burden.

This process of decline in old age is not, of course, inevitable. Cultural variations within societies mean that, for some, old age brings changing patterns of consumption and leisure, especially among the wealthier members of society. Others might have a different interpretation of 'being old' and the elderly might refuse to conform to conventional stereotypes of old age. Barrett et al. (2003) also argue that different societies produce different subjective experiences of ageing. Americans and Germans, for example, 'tend to feel younger than their actual age … but the bias toward youthful identities is stronger at older ages, particularly among Americans'.

However, in some non-Western societies old age is viewed differently. Kagan (1980) notes how in Columbia (South America) the elderly are valued for the knowledge and experience they are able to pass on to younger members of society. For the Sherbro of Sierra Leone, increasing age brings the individual 'closer to God' and is something to be welcomed.

Gender

People of different classes, ages and ethnic backgrounds may display widely different cultural behaviours even though they share the same gender.

One way of considering gender is in terms of 'life chances'. Dahrendorf (1979) defines this as an individual's *relative chances* of gaining the kinds of things a society considers *desirable*, such as a high standard of living, and avoiding those that society considers *undesirable*, such as low social status. A working-class woman's life chances are lower than an upper-class man's. Equally, an upper-class woman has greater life chances than a working-class man. Conversely, Stanworth (1984) argues that the life chances can vary even between men and women of the same class, age and ethnicity. Within families, for example, men in many different cultures take the greater personal share of 'family' resources.

While some obvious gender differences exist in most societies – men and women dress differently, have different attitudes to cosmetics, body decoration and so on – there is also a range of less obvious differences. Some of these are related to patriarchal ideologies

(ideas that support the domination of women by men), which result in differences in how men and women are treated, both by each other and by society as a whole. For example, in many societies a range of gender inequalities exist within families. These range from women doing more domestic labour, through having greater responsibility for care of the children, the sick and the elderly, to suffering higher levels of domestic violence. There are also differences in attitudes to children. In the UK, for example, Self and Zealey (2007) report that around 20 per cent of women remain 'childless by choice'.

Some technologies have specifically gendered associations in many societies. An iron and ironing board, for example, are typically associated with female domestic labour

In terms of education, girls in the UK generally outperform boys at every level, although class and ethnic factors also play a part. Asian boys, for example, outperform both white British and Afro-Caribbean girls. For women, however, better educational performance does not automatically mean better employment options. In the USA, there are no restrictions on women taking on paid employment, but in Saudi Arabia a woman must have permission from a male guardian to work outside the home. Eitzen and Baca-Zinn (2003) argue that while 'women perform 60% of work world wide', they earn '10% of income'. Scott (2004) suggests that one explanation for this is that female life chances are affected by asynchronies. This means that family responsibilities restrict the opportunities women have to 'synchronise' their life with other social requirements, especially work. Childcare, for example, does not fit easily with full-time work; responsibilities in the home also limit a woman's chances to develop the social networks that help many men to promotions throughout their careers.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to cultural differences between social groups that, as Winston (2005) suggests, involves people 'seeing themselves as being distinctive in some way from others' on the basis of a shared cultural background and history. Song (2003) states that ethnic groups have a 'common ancestry' and 'memories of a shared past' constructed around a variety of 'symbolic elements … such as family and kinship, religion, language, territory, nationality or physical appearance'. Examples of ethnic groups are many and varied. In India it is possible to identify around 2,000 distinctive ethnicities based on religion (such as Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Christian and Sikh) and language.

Another example is noted by Self and Zealey (2007): 'Historically the population of Britain has predominantly consisted of people from a White British ethnic background'. However, this does not mean that the majority ethnic group is all the same (*homogeneous*). This main group is actually made up of a range of ethnicities – English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish – some of which could be seen as minority ethnicities within the white majority. In terms of wider ethnic diversity, immigration over the past 50 years has produced a range of distinct ethnic minorities (Table 1.2).

Minority group	Percentage
Other white	2.5
Indians	1.8
Pakistanis	1.3
Mixed ethnicity	1.2
Black Caribbean	1.0
Black Africans	0.8
Bangladeshis	0.5

Table 1.2   UK ethnic minorities

This pattern of ethnic diversity is further complicated by 'other ethnicities', such as Chinese, and people who live and work in the UK but are officially resident elsewhere. Favell (2006), for example, estimates that around 200,000 French people live and work in and around London. As he notes, 'London is now the fourth largest French city after Paris, Lyon and Marseilles.' As another example, Mauritius consists of four major ethnic groups: Indo-Mauritian, Creole, Sino-Mauritian and Franco-Mauritian.

Religion

There are wide variations in religious beliefs, practices and organisation both within particular societies and between different countries. For example:

- Christianity, Judaism and Islam involve the worship of a single god (monotheism).
- Other forms of religion (such as paganism) involve the worship of many different gods (polytheism).
- Some belief systems do not involve a ⬛god⬛at all; the North American Sioux understand the world in terms of *Waken* ⬛Beings or Powers ⬛the expression of anything incomprehensible.

In terms of practices, some religions allow direct communication with their god(s) through prayer, but others do not. McGuire (2002) suggests that cultural variations exist because all religions have a 'dual character'. On an individual level they involve a diversity of beliefs, practices and ways to 'be religious', some of which include communal practices, such as attending religious ceremonies, while others do not. It is possible, for example, to be Christian without ever setting foot inside a church. Different religions also require different levels of personal commitment, such as attendance at services or praying a certain number of times each day.

On a wider social level, religions perform particular **functions** – such as socialisation (into a range of moral beliefs and values, for example), social solidarity and social control. This last may involve both direct control – what people may wear or eat, for example – and indirect control, such as providing a moral template for how people should lead their life 'in accordance with God'.

KEY TERM

Functions, manifest and latent: manifest functions are the intended consequences of an action; latent functions are the hidden or sometimes unintended consequences of that same action.

In a global context, religious diversity exists at three main levels:

1   There are differences *between* religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Shinto.
2   There are differences *within* religions: for example, Islam has three major belief systems (Sunni, Shia and Sufi).
3   There are differences of belief, practice and organisation within this second level. Protestant Christianity, for example, *includes* groups such as Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists, while within Islam there are groups such as Wahhabi and Alawite.

A further dimension involves religion and ethnic identity. Winston (2005) notes that many ethnic groups are 'defined mainly in terms of religion (e.g. Jewish or Muslim people)'. This combining of religious and ethnic identity may be strengthened or weakened by an ethnic group's geographical location. O'Beirne (2004) suggests that religion is a relevant factor 'in a person's self-description, particularly for people from the Indian subcontinent' living in the UK. She suggests that immigrant groups use religion as a way of maintaining a sense of cultural and ethnic identity when moving to a different country.

Analysis of the UK Census (2001) shows that:

■   Christians ranked religion the 7th most important aspect of their identity, while Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus ranked it 2nd.
■   White Britons ranked religion as the 10th most important aspect of their identity, but South Asians ranked it 2nd.

It is important to note that even when comparing two apparently similar ethnic groups (such as Indian and Pakistani, often grouped as 'South Asians'), differences of affiliation exist. The various forms of affiliation (Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, for example) found among Indian ethnicities suggests a higher level of religious *fragmentation* among this group than among their Pakistani counterparts.

TEST YOURSELF

Identify two cultural differences between groups in your society. To what extent do these cultural differences reflect differences in status and power?

Global culture

A wider dimension to diversity involves the idea that all societies are increasingly characterised by a globalised culture. This refers to the rapid global movement of cultural ideas, styles and products that can be picked up, discarded and adapted to fit the needs of different cultural groups.

There is a great variety of cultural products to choose from and people are no longer limited to local or national cultural choices. In this respect, cultural products are malleable (open to manipulation and change), and where people are exposed to a range of cultural influences and choices, a 'pick-and-mix' approach to culture may develop. This can result in the creation of something new, different and unique – a process known as cultural hybridisation.

Global cultural forms have been expressed in two main ways:

1   **Globalised** culture reflects how local or national cultural developments can spread, to be picked up, shaped and changed to suit the needs of different groups. The driving force here is information technology ⊠the development of cheap personal computers and mobile phones as well as with the evolution of the internet.
2   An alternative interpretation suggests a process of convergence and similarity *within* cultural groups; cultures are becoming more alike:

    ■   sharing the same language (English)
    ■   doing the same kinds of things (watching American films, wearing American clothes, visiting similar websites)
    ■   consuming similar products (from film and television, through social networking websites, to food and drink ⊠Big Macs, Pepsi, Coke ⊠.

KEY TERM

Globalisation: various processes ⊠economic, political and cultural ⊠that occur on a worldwide basis.

Alongside this cultural globalisation, we find diversity *between* cultural groups: like-minded individuals share cultural similarities across national boundaries, but these groups are many and varied. In this way, cultures resemble 'strands of influence'. For example, some young people in the USA, Japan and India may develop *common cultural bonds* based on a shared interest in sport, music or computer games. Others may develop cultural bonds based on Pokemon cards or Manga comics.

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How are social networking sites such as Facebook evidence of global cultural convergence?

Sklair (1999) argues that to understand global cultural development we need to think about three processes:

1 Localised globalism means that some forms of globalised culture are adapted and changed by particular (local) cultural behaviours. Regev (2003), for example, suggests that 'rock music'—a global product of US origin – is now consumed and filtered through many different cultural influences, which has resulted in new 'local varieties of rock'

2 Globalised localism involves some features of *local* cultures, parts of their uniqueness and individuality, becoming part of globalised cultures. Rather than seeing the globalisation of culture as making everything *the same*, globalisation creates new and diverse cultural forms.

3 Global cultural convergence is, for Bryman (2004), demonstrated by what he calls the 'disneyisation' of culture: 'the process by which the principles of Disney theme parks dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world'. While disneyisation celebrates diversity in consumption, lifestyle and notions of freedom and choice, it presents standardised, homogeneous versions of these ideas – just like Disney World itself presents a sanitised version of things like 'the Wild West'. In this respect, the global trend is for cultural differences to gradually disappear as all societies start to adopt ideas and attitudes broadly similar in style and content.

Plumb (1995) argues that the process of globalisation is accelerated because culture has become a commodity – something to be bought and sold. Similarly, Lechner (2001) suggests that the economic power of global companies such as Coca-Cola, Nike and McDonald's creates a consumer culture where standardised commodities are promoted by global marketing campaigns to 'create similar lifestyles'.

Ritzer (1996) calls this the 'McDonaldisation of self and society'; cultural products are *standardised* and *homogenised*. Wherever you are in the world, if you buy a Big Mac you will get the same basic product. Global economics means that consumer products must be created to appeal to the widest possible range of tastes across the widest possible range of cultures – from Britain to Bosnia and Bangalore. Berger (1997) characterises this as 'McWorld culture'; the idea that global culture is increasingly Americanised: 'Young people throughout the world dance to American music, wearing T-shirts with messages about American universities and other consumer items. Older people watch American sitcoms on television and go to American movies. Everyone, young and old, grows taller and fatter on American fast foods.'

ACTIVITY

Find examples from your society to illustrate each of the three processes noted by Sklair. Do you think that these examples represent problems for society, or its healthy development?

The nature of social order, social control and social change

At the start of this chapter we suggested that concepts of social order were at the heart of sociology's development. Now we are going to look at how two contrasting approaches – **functionalist theory** and **Marxist theory** – provide different interpretations of how order and control are created and maintained. Both perspectives are **structuralist** (or **macrosociological**), and argue

KEY TERMS

Functionalist theory: major, if dated, sociological theory that argues that consensus is the overriding principle on which societies are based. Focus is on institutional relationships and the functions they perform for the individual and society.

Marxist theory: philosophy or social theory based on the ideas of Karl Marx.

Structuralist: form of sociology, such as functionalism and Marxism, that focuses on analysing society in terms of its institutional relationships and their effect on individual beliefs and behaviours.

Macrosociology: large-scale sociological approach where the focus is on social structures and institutions.

that how societies are organised at the level of families, governments and economies (the institutional or system level), determines how individuals view their world and behave within it (structural **determinism**). This perspective presents society as a powerful force that controls and shapes how people think and behave.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Determinism:** the claim that human behaviour is shaped by forces beyond the immediate control of individuals, such as social structures or society.

Consensus structuralism

Functionalism

For functionalists, any explanation of how order and stability are created and maintained involves looking at how societies are organised at the level of the social system. This involves the idea that the various parts of a society (family, education, work, etc.) function in harmony. Each part is dependent on the others. Just as the different parts of the body – such as the heart, lungs and brain – work together to form something more complex than the sum of their individual parts (a living body), the different

parts of a society work together to form a social system. Parsons (1937) argues that every social system consists of four 'functional sub-systems' – political, economic, cultural and family. Each of these sub-systems performs a different but related function that addresses certain 'problems' faced by every society.

The connections between the various parts of the social system – family, culture, work and government – are created by institutional purposes and needs. For a *family institution* to exist (and perform its *functions*) its members *need* to survive. The *work institution* performs this survival function by allowing family members to earn money to buy the food (among other things) that they consume; conversely, to fulfil this *purpose*, work *needs* families to produce socialised human beings.

While order is created at the institutional level through these relationships, Parsons (1959a) explains how *individuals* fit into the overall structure of society on the basis of functional prerequisites – things that *must* happen if society is to function properly. For individuals to survive and prosper, they need to be part of larger co-operative groups – they must *combine* to solve fundamental problems. Every social institution, from families to schools to workplaces, must develop ways to ensure that individuals conform to the needs of

Exists to solve the problem of *social integration* – how to make people feel they have things in common (such as a shared culture). Cultural institutions (like schools, churches and the media) exist to develop and foster the common cultural values and norms that, for functionalists, are the basic building blocks for integration.

Exists to solve the problem of *physical survival*; how, in short, to organise people into work-based relationships to produce the things (food, shelter, etc.) necessary for survival.

Exists to solve the problem of *order*, which involves finding ways of governing and controlling people (through political parties, the police, etc.) In other words, this sub-system attempts to ensure the 'rules and values of society' are maintained and applied.

Exists to solve the problem of *socialisation* – how to ensure that children are raised in ways that allow them to grow into fully functioning adult members of society.

Economic Sub-system

Cultural Sub-system

Social System

Political Sub-system

Family Sub-system

Functional sub-systems

Source: Parsons, 1937

both the institution and society as a whole. For Parsons, institutions do this by developing ways to solve 'four problems of their existence'. We can illustrate this using the example of education.

1 Goal maintenance: institutions must provide people with goals to achieve, such as academic qualifications.
2 Adaptation: to achieve institutional goals, people need a co-operative environment, such as a classroom and teachers, within which people can work.
3 Integration: people must be motivated to achieve (educational) goals, and one way to do this is to encourage a 'sense of belonging' to both wider society, where educational qualifications are used to sift and sort (differentiate) adults in the workplace, and to the education system itself. A school, for example, makes people feel they 'belong' to the institution and that they have things in common with other pupils and teachers.
4 Latency: conflicts within an institution must be managed and rules created to encourage desirable behaviour and punish rule-breaking (deviance). In schools these rules cover things like attendance, behaviour and dress. They are designed to maintain a particular way of life in the institution.

Societies and their institutions can only function if people feel they are part of a much larger community. If millions of individuals simply acted in their own selfish interests, things would quickly fall apart. We must, therefore, be compelled to behave in ways that are reasonable, consistent and broadly predictable if social order is to be maintained for the benefit of everyone. Control of behaviour involves people sharing similar beliefs, values and behaviours so they are effectively working towards a common goal. As we have already noted, institutions must also find ways of making people conform. People can be encouraged to conform willingly by convincing them that following certain rules is in their best interests. If that fails, however, institutions might use agents of control. These could be 'soft' (for example, teachers) or hard (the police or armed forces).

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Briefly explain the meaning of the term 'functional prerequisite'.

Conflict structuralism

From this perspective, societies are generally considered stable because powerful groups impose order on relatively powerless groups. Although conflict is at the heart of all

social relationships, Marxism theorises this in *economic* terms (such as **economic determinism**), with different social classes battling against each other. Feminism expresses this conflict in *gender* terms: men and women battling against each other.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Economic determinism:** idea that the form taken by economic relationships (such as master and serf in feudal society or employer and employee in capitalist society) is the most significant relationship in any society. This determines the form taken by all other political and cultural relationships.

Marxism

For Marxists, work is the most important activity in any society because no other social activity (politics, family or culture) can exist without people first having found a way to survive. Thus, how work is socially organised (who does it, what they do and who benefits from it) is the key to understanding how all other social relationships are organised. Marxists refer to a relationship between 'base and superstructure'. By this they mean the relationship between economic, political and ideological institutions, which they claim is the basis for social order and control:

- The economic base is the foundation on which society is built. It is the world of work and involves particular types of *relationships* (the **relations of production**), such as owner, manager, wage labourer and *organisation*. The capitalist workplace is organised hierarchically, one group above another. Those further up in the hierarchy had more power and control than those lower down.
- The political and ideological superstructure 'rests' on the economic base and involves political institutions, such as *government* and agencies of social control (the police, judiciary and courts) and *ideological institutions* including religion, education and the mass media.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Relations of production:** in Marxist theory, the social relationships into which people *must* enter in order to survive, to produce and reproduce their means of life. In capitalist society, the main relations of production involve owners and non-owners.

Political and Ideological Superstructure

Government

Mass Media

Police

Religion

Judiciary

Education
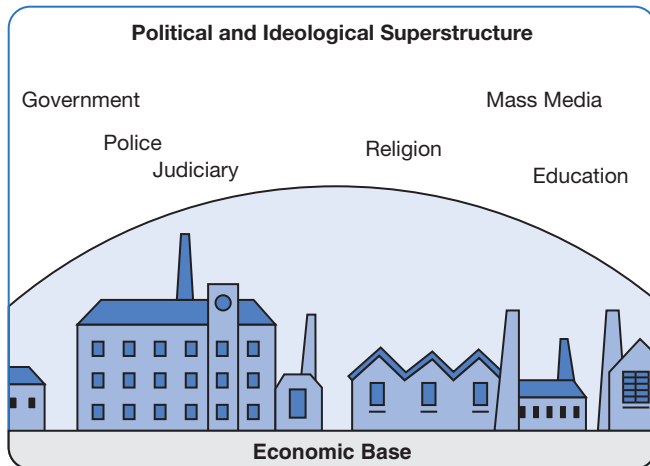
Economic Base

The relationship between base and superstructure in capitalist society

The workplace is a key area of conflict because of its organisational structure. In capitalist society, the 'means of economic production' – the tools, factories and machines that are used to create wealth – are owned by one class (the bourgeoisie, or ruling class). The majority own little or nothing and so are forced to sell their ability to work. This ability is known as their labour power. It is part of what Marxists call the **forces of production**: how labour power is organised to produce wealth by harnessing it to various forms of technology – from simple tools to advanced machinery.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Forces of production:** in Marxist theory, this refers to how everything ⊠ from raw materials, through labour power to machinery ⊠ is organised in the productive process.

In capitalist societies, members of a small bourgeois class become very rich because they keep the profits made from goods and services and most people own nothing but their ability to work for wages. The emphasis on conflict suggests that capitalist societies are inherently unstable. However, this is not the case – Marxists argue that the ruling class is not only economically powerful but also politically powerful. It controls what Althusser (1972) calls 'repressive state apparatuses' (RSAs) or ways of compelling people to conform by force. This can range from hard policing (the police and armed forces as agents of social control) to soft policing (social workers and welfare agencies 'policing' the behaviour of the lower classes).

Ownership and control of institutions such as the media also allow the ruling class to influence how others see the world. Althusser calls these institutions that deal in ideas 'ideological state apparatuses' (ISAs). The education

system, for example, does not just teach knowledge and skills, it also teaches values of competition, individualism ('educational success' is measured by how successfully pupils compete against each other) and respect for authority. All these ideas fit neatly into a capitalist economic system that most benefits the bourgeoisie.

Order and stability are maintained at a system level through the institutions that make up the political and ideological superstructure. These, in turn, are controlled by a ruling class whose power comes from ownership of the economic base. Most people are locked in to capitalist society by the need to earn a living for themselves and their family. They are also locked in by a range of ideas that support the status quo, which are spread by the media, education, religion and other institutions.

Socialisation, therefore, is an effective form of control – a type of ideological manipulation that seeks either to convince people that the interests of the ruling class are really the interests of everyone or to present society as impossible for the individual to influence or change. Socialisation may be more effective in the long term because people incorporate the basic **ideology** of capitalism into their personal value system. However, also involves making economic and political concessions to the lower classes to ensure their co-operation.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Ideology:** a system of related beliefs.

Feminist theory

Although there are many forms of feminist theory, they all share the belief that contemporary societies are patriarchal to some degree; the interests of men are always considered more important than those of women. In basic terms, therefore, order and control are based on male power, expressed in two ways. *Interpersonal power* refers to things like physical violence or the various ways female labour is exploited within the family group. *Cultural power* focuses on how male-dominated societies are structured to oppress and exploit women. Men dominate the highest levels of economic, political and cultural institutions.

Different types of feminism emphasise different forms of control as the way to understand a male-dominated social order. For **liberal feminism**, the key form of control

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Liberal feminism:** type of feminism that promotes gender equality.

is sexual discrimination, while for **Marxist feminism**, class inequality provides the context in which female oppression, exploitation and discrimination occur. In a competitive, capitalist society men are encouraged to exploit any 'weaknesses' in women's market position (the fact that women may be out of the workforce during and after pregnancy, for example) to their own advantage.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Marxist feminists:** type of feminism that focuses on challenging capitalism as a route to freeing women from oppression and inequality.

For **radical feminism**, patriarchy is the source of female oppression. Patriarchy is a feature of all known human societies and results in men dominating the social order in two spheres: the *public* – such as the workplace, where women are paid less and have lower status, and the *private* – the home, where women carry out the majority of unpaid domestic work.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Radical feminism:** form of feminism that sees female oppression in terms of patriarchal relationships.

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Suggest two differences between consensus and conflict approaches to explaining social change. Also identify one strength and one limitation of each approach.

Action approach

This general approach, also called interactionism, claims that order and control are created 'from the bottom up'. It is based on the idea that people create and re-create 'society' on a daily basis through their daily routines. People constantly, if not always consciously, produce and reproduce social order through their individual and collective behaviour. From this viewpoint, 'society' is merely a term people use to explain the limits they place on behaviour. Although society does not exist *physically*, it does exist *mentally*. People act as though society is a real force having an effect on them, limiting and controlling their behaviour. This creates order and stability.

To understand how order is maintained, therefore, we must examine the *socio-psychological* processes through which social groups and a sense of society are constructed. From this perspective, social life involves a series of *encounters* – separate but linked episodes that give the appearance of order and stability; they exist for as long as we *act* in ways that maintain them. Garfinkel (1967) demonstrated the fragile nature of our beliefs about social order by disrupting people's daily routines and observing how agitated, confused and angry people became.

Order is more psychologically desirable than disorder, and people strive to impose order through the meanings given to behaviour in two ways:

1. To interact, people must develop shared definitions of a situation. In a school classroom, if a teacher defines the situation as a period of time for teaching, but her students define it as a time for messing around and having fun; this will almost certainly result in disorder.
2. Where meanings are negotiated they can easily change. The identities associated with masculinity and femininity have changed dramatically over the past 30 years.

If society is not a 'thing' acting on behaviour – if it has no *objective reality* beyond social interaction – it becomes a convenient label applied to the pressures, rules and responsibilities that arise from social relationships. The idea of labelling (or naming) is important because it shows how order is created through interaction. For example, labelling theory argues that when something is named, such as categorising people as 'young' or 'old', the label is associated with a set of characteristics. Knowledge of these characteristics is used to influence or control behaviour. The characteristics assigned to the label 'student', for example, lead people to expect certain things from that person. In the same way, they would expect different behaviour from someone labelled as a 'criminal'.

Social change

As with explanations of order and control, there are different perspectives when it comes to explaining social change. Functionalism, for example, explains major forms of social change using what Parsons (1937) called structural differentiation. This is the idea that where social systems consist of connected sub-systems, changes within one causes changes in the others.

In the UK in the 18th century, cultural changes began with the rapid development of scientific ideas that revolutionised the workplace through the introduction of machines and industrial forms of production. These

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changes meant employers needed literate and numerate workers – which the family institution could not supply. This led to what Merton (1938) calls social strains – tensions and pressures build up in society when the needs of one institution, in this instance the workplace, cannot be met by another institution, the family. This tension was released by the intervention of government (the political sub-system) and the development of a new cultural institution – education – in the late 19th century, to provide the skills required by more advanced work processes. As we can see, major social changes such as moving from a pre-industrial to industrial society are the gradual result of changes within and between institutions. Structural differentiation also means that some institutions, such as the family, lose functions while others, such as education, gain new ones.

How is the development of education systems evidence of structural differentiation?

Marxism and social change

For Marxism, social change comes about through conflict and the clash between the contradictory interests inherent in capitalist forms of economic production. While conflicts exist everywhere in a society – between different ethnic groups, age groups and genders – Marxists believe that the existence of different classes is the main source of conflict. Capitalism is a competitive economic system. Businesses compete against other businesses for customers, workers compete against other workers for jobs – and competition leads to conflict. Owners want to keep as much of their profit as possible – the less they pay in wages, the more houses, cars and mobile phones they can buy. At the same time, non-owners also want the desirable things society has to offer; it is in their interests, therefore, to demand more from employers. Therefore, conflict is expressed at all

levels of society, from the small-scale, everyday (micro) level, where workers may strike for more money, to the large-scale (macro) level, where conflicts lead to wider political and economic changes.

Feminism and social change

Different forms of feminism have slightly different explanations of social change. For liberal feminism, change can be created through the legal system. Liberal feminists in the UK and the USA have promoted a range of *anti-discriminatory* laws which, they argue, redress the historical gender imbalance. In the UK, legislation such as the Sex Discrimination Act (1975, updated in 2003), which made discrimination in the workplace illegal, and the Equal Pay Act (1970), are examples of this approach. In addition, female inequality can be addressed by changing male attitudes to family life and through the continued development of anti-discriminatory laws and practices.

Marxist feminists link gender inequality to economic or class-based inequalities. They argue that the development of patriarchal ideas, attitudes and practices (such as sexual discrimination) are the product of cultural differences in the way males and females are raised. Men are not naturally exploitative of women. Rather, it is the economic system (capitalism) that encourages and rewards sexist attitudes and behaviour. Improving the position of women, therefore, requires a radical change at the economic level – capitalism needs to be transformed.

For radical feminism, capitalism is not the whole problem. If all known societies are patriarchal, a change in female lives can only come about by overthrowing the ideas and practices on which male domination is based. One form of change, therefore, involves overthrowing the ruling sex class (men). Men are defined as the 'gender enemy' because they have always exploited women. Women must establish a *matriarchal society,* in which the current (patriarchal) roles are replaced by equality and mutual respect between males and females.

Action theory and social change

From this perspective, social reality is not something fixed and unchanging but rather fluid and malleable. This follows from the various ways in which people negotiate reality through meanings that are open to change.

On a micro level, evidence of relatively small-scale social change includes things such as changing attitudes to gender. For example, Western societies have seen recent movements towards greater gender equality in areas such

as employment and education. Globalisation has also produced a wide range of cultural changes, as increasing contact between different societies has led to the exchange of ideas and practices and their incorporation into different cultures. Enjoying Indian, Chinese and American food, for example, has become a major feature of European culture over the past 50 years.

While change at the macro level is harder to explain, the focus on meanings has led to an examination of the role of cultural institutions – and religion in particular – in the process of change. Weber (1905), for example, argued that Calvinism, a 16th-century offshoot of Protestant Christianity, helped promote a strong and lasting social transformation in the shape of capitalism. More recently, Robinson (1987) has argued that there are 'six conditions that shape the likelihood of religion becoming a force for social change':

1 a religious worldview shared by the revolutionary classes
2 a theology (religious teachings and beliefs) that conflicts with the beliefs and practices of the existing social order
3 a clergy closely associated with revolutionary classes
4 a single religion shared by the revolutionary classes
5 differences between the religion of the revolutionary classes and the religion of the ruling classes (such as one being Catholic and the other Protestant)
6 channels of legitimate political dissent blocked or unavailable.

Examples of change resulting from these conditions being met include the Iranian Revolution in 1979, where the (secular) regime of the Shah of Persia was overthrown and the Civil Rights Movement in the USA where, from the 1960s onwards, social change was promoted and supported by black religious activists and leaders such as Martin Luther King.

ACTIVITY

One way to gain an understanding of how different sociological perspectives view society is by analogy – likening them to something familiar. For each of the following perspectives and analogies, list five characteristics (such as five characteristics of a human body for functionalism).

For each characteristic, briefly explain how it can be applied to society (for example, just as a human body has connected organs that work together, the different parts of society, such as families and schools, are connected and work together):

1 *Functionalism – human body*
2 *Marxism – league table (e.g. school exam results)*
3 *Action theory – a play*
4 *Feminism – war*
5 *Postmodernism – theme park.*

Summary points

- **Sociology evolved to answer two key questions:**
  - How is social order created and maintained?
  - How and why do societies change?

- **Three key sociological perspectives are based around:**
  - consensus: functionalism (Comte and Durkheim)
  - conflict: Marxism (Marx)
  - social action (Weber).

- **Science is a way of producing a particular type of knowledge, one that is:**
  - reliable
  - valid.

- **The production of scientific knowledge is governed by:**
  - procedural rules, such as the hypothetico-deductive method
  - ethical rules, such as Merton's scientific ethos.

- **Two major types of sociological methodology are:**
  - positivism
  - interpretivism.

- **Postmodern approaches are critical of positivist and interpretivist conceptions of science as metanarrative.**

- **The role of values in sociological research relates to areas such as:**
  - choice of topic
  - choice of method.

- **The uses of sociological knowledge relate to:**
  - large-scale theories that seek to explain social order and social change
  - smaller-scale theories used to explain a range of social issues.

- **Sociological and social problems may not be the same:**
  - A sociological problem is a question that demands explanation.
  - A social problem involves behaviour that creates a public outcry or call for action to resolve the problem.
  - Social problems are not necessarily sociological problems.

- **In terms of its diversity, human behaviour always varies in terms of:**
  - class
  - age
  - gender
  - ethnicity.

- **Three key sociological concepts include understanding:**
  - social order
  - social control
  - social change.

- **These can be understood in terms of three major sociological perspectives:**
  - consensus: functionalism
  - conflict: Marxism and feminism
  - social action: Weberian and interactionist (neo-Weberian).

Exam-style questions

a What is meant by the term 'sociological problem'? [2]

b Describe how any two uses of sociological knowledge may be linked to social policy. [4]

c Explain the concept of cultural diversity in relation to class, gender or ethnicity. [8]

d Assess functionalist explanations of social order. [11]

Total available marks 25

Chapter 2:
Socialisation and the creation of social identity

Learning objectives

The objectives of this chapter involve understanding:

- the difference between structuralist and interactionist views of the relationship between the individual and society

- how individuals become competent social actors – the nature–nurture debate and concepts of Self, Other, 'I', 'Me' and the presentation of self

- sociological, biological and psychological explanations of how individuals become competent social actors

- the process of socialisation and the contribution of socialising agencies: the family, education, peer group, media and religion

- the contributions made by culture, roles, norms, values, beliefs, ideology and power to the social construction of reality

- the social construction of identities based around social class, gender and ethnicity

- modernist and postmodernist theories of identity formation.

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is the relationship between the individual and society, initially in terms of structuralist and interpretivist perspectives. This leads into an analysis of how the individual becomes a competent social actor in the general context of the **nature versus nurture debate** ⌧ the extent to which human behaviour can be satisfactorily explained by cultural influences. This involves looking at what people need to learn, such as **roles**, **values** and **norms**, as well as the socialisation process through which they learn it. This process is further examined through the contributions made by socialising agencies such as the family and the media. The chapter concludes by examining the concept of identity based on social class, gender and ethnicity, and how modernist and postmodernist perspectives interpret the process of identity formation.

> ### KEY TERMS
>
> **Nature versus nurture debate:** a debate in the social sciences about whether human behaviour can be explained in biological/genetic (*nature*) or cultural (*nurture*) terms.
>
> **Roles:** expected patterns of behaviour associated with each status that we hold, such as friend, pupil or teacher.
>
> **Values:** beliefs or ideas that are important to the people who hold them. A value always expresses a belief about how something *should* be.
>
> **Norms:** socially acceptable ways of behaving when playing a particular role.

Structuralist and interactionist views of the relationship between the individual and society

In the previous chapter we looked at different ideas about the relationship between the individual and society based on concepts of structure and action. These concepts are part of the **domain assumptions** (or key ideas) of the structuralist and **interactionist** perspectives. In this section, we examine the concepts of structure and action in more detail before looking at how the structuralist and interactionist perspectives can be combined.

> ### KEY TERMS
>
> **Domain assumptions:** fundamental assumptions on which a particular perspective or ideology is based. The domain assumptions of Marxism, for example, include economic exploitation and class conflict.
>
> **Interactionist:** an approach focused on the behaviour of individuals that refers to three related perspectives (phenomenology, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism), based on the concept of social action.

Structuralist theories originated in the work of Durkheim and Marx. From a structuralist perspective, social action is the product of deep, underlying forces in society that reach beyond the level of individual consciousness and control. These structural forces shape our behaviour and have a major influence on our thought processes. Marx claimed that the capitalist relations of production were the main structural force in modern industrial societies. The way in which capitalist production of goods and services is organised, with the workers separated from ownership of land and factories, can be seen as an invisible mechanism that controls the way in which all other aspects of a society operate. By contrast, the functionalist perspective sees the structure of society more in terms of the institutional arrangements required to ensure the smooth running of society. So, for example, institutions such as the family, education and government are associated with established patterns of behaviour that together create an order and structure in society.

For structuralists, the established social order represents a powerful force that the individual has little or no freedom to oppose. For various reasons, people accept the established institutional patterns of behaviour as if they were a hidden force controlling their actions. By conforming to social rules in this way, each person's actions reflect the dominant influence of the social structure. For structuralists, therefore, sociology should be the study of the effects of the structure of society on social life. In other words, sociologists should adopt a macro, or large-scale view. The actions of the individual should be explained in terms of the influences of the overall structure or organisational arrangements of a society. For example, a structural explanation might identify poverty (which can be seen as part of the structure of society) as the cause of an increase in the crime rate. Likewise, differences in suicide rates might be explained in terms of differences in beliefs and practices between religious groups (religious institutions being part of the structure of society).

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Is society, like gravity, an invisible force acting on us all?

The idea of social structure becomes a little clearer if we think about the different ways in which behaviour is governed by informal rules or norms that define expected behaviours in any given situation:

- Every relationship we form, such as making a new friend, becoming a parent or getting a new boss, involves playing a role – an idea that refers to people 'playing a part' in society. Just as an actor performs a role in a play, people take on and perform various roles (such as student, sister, brother, friend and employee) in their day-to-day life.
- Each role has certain associated values or beliefs about how something *should* be. For example, we may believe that friends *should* keep the secrets we tell them. There are also norms associated with each role, such as friends helping us if we are in trouble.

Every time we play a role, therefore, we experience the *effect* of social structures – rules that shape our behavioural choices. This suggests that social structures exert a significant influence on how we behave.

TEST YOURSELF

Identify two values associated with any two roles that you play.

Interactionism

Interactionism is a general term for a **microsociological** approach that focuses on the behaviour of individuals. Interactionism refers to three related perspectives (**phenomenology**, **ethnomethodology** and **symbolic interactionism**) based on the concept of social action – an idea we can illustrate using a distinction drawn by Weber (1922).

KEY TERMS

Microsociology: type of sociology focused on the study of individuals and small groups.

Phenomenology: interactionist approach that argues that the social world consists of *phenomena* whose meaning is both negotiated and interpreted through interaction.

Ethnomethodology: sociological approach that argues that all social interaction is underpinned by a search for meaning; if we can understand the meanings people give to a situation we can understand their behaviour in such situations. In this respect, it is possible to discover the nature of social order by disrupting it.

Symbolic interactionism: interactionist perspective that analyses society and situations in terms of the subjective meanings people impose on objects, events and behaviours.

Behaviour becomes action when it is directed towards other people in ways that take account of how those people act and react. In other words, social action involves a knowledge of how our behaviour might affect the people at whom it is directed. Whenever we have a conversation, for example, we are engaging in social action; how we behave is influenced by how the other person behaves, and vice versa.

If the concept of structure focuses on how behaviour is governed by constraints that control or, at times, determine how we behave, social action focuses on our ability to make choices about how to act. Interactionists therefore reject the determinist tendencies of structural approaches.

Interactionists argue that to explain human behaviour we need to study people's interactions at the micro level – that is, as they go about their daily lives – because, as Schutz (1962) argues, 'subjective meanings give rise to an apparently objective social world'. Societies are constructed through social interaction and this, in turn, is based on meanings. We live in a complex, symbolic world in which the meaning of our actions, our choice of clothes or the

language we use is always open to interpretation. The meaning of something, whether a physical object such as a mobile phone or a symbolic system such as language, is never self-evident and its meaning can be changed by the social context in which it appears. Wilson (2002) argues this point from a phenomenological perspective, claiming that 'we experience the world with and through others'. In other words, the social world – with its 'social artefacts and cultural objects' – consists of *phenomena* whose meaning is both negotiated and interpreted through interaction.

To understand how social context can determine or change the meaning of something, consider two people fighting:

- If the fight occurs in the street we might interpret this as unacceptable and call the police.
- If the two people were fighting in a boxing ring rather than disapproving, we might cheer and encourage our favoured fighter.

While this example demonstrates that meanings must always be interpreted, it also suggests that interaction is based on shared definitions of a situation, which themselves may be the product of negotiation. Social interaction, therefore, does not simply involve obeying rules without question, because the meaning of behaviour can change depending on its social context. Wrong (1961) criticises what he calls an '**over-socialised conception of man**'. He rejects the idea that human behaviour is governed entirely by the effects of socialisations. For Wrong, people are able to exercise a degree of freedom from the influences of their social environment.

KEY TERM

Over-socialised conception of man: criticism of the claim that human beings are simply the product of their socialisation and that behaviour can be understood as merely a response to external stimulation.

Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodological 'breaching experiments' demonstrate this idea. He deliberately set out to upset people's definition of a situation to show how they 'construct reality'. In one experiment he sent researchers into restaurants and told them to deliberately mistake

customers for waiters. While they were doing so, Garfinkel secretly observed the reactions of the waiters (amusement, confusion and anger). This line of argument concludes that society is not a 'thing' or 'force' acting on our behaviour, since it has no objective reality beyond social interaction. Rather, as Schutz argues, society has a subjective reality – we experience it through social interaction. Society is simply a label we give to the rules and responsibilities arising from our relationships.

Could 'society' be just a label we give to social interaction?

The idea of labelling demonstrates how interactionists view society as the product of social interaction. Labelling theory argues that when we name something, such as categorising people as 'male' or 'female', we associate the name with a set of characteristics that are then used to guide our behaviour. These characteristics influence our behaviour and attitude to the named person, object or situation. If the meaning of something is only developed through interaction, then meanings can change. For example, male and female social identities have changed over the past 50 years. In Western societies female identity has changed dramatically. Previously, a woman was defined almost exclusively in terms of marriage, motherhood and caring for others. Today, there is a wider range of definitions, such as the single career woman, which reflects changing ideas about equality and perceptions of women.

Structuration

Concepts of structure and action are both important in helping us understand the relationship between society and the individual. Although we are all individuals, our behavioural choices are influenced, limited and enhanced by the framework of rules and responsibilities (social structures) that surround us. Just as we cannot conceive of society without individuals, it is impossible to think about people without referring to the ways in which

their behaviour is structured. Giddens (1984) developed a perspective called **structuration**, which outlined the importance of both structure and action in considering the relationship between society and the individual.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Structuration:** theory, developed by Giddens, which argues that structure and action are equally significant in terms of our ability to understand the relationship between the individual and society.

The key to structuration is the idea that as people develop relationships, the rules they use to govern their behaviours are *formalised* into routine ways of behaving towards each other (*practices*). Through the huge range of practices in our lives, a sense of structure develops in our social world – and this involves rules. This idea is important because it indicates the way our actions create behavioural rules and demonstrates how such rules become *externalised* (they seem to take on a life of their own, separate from our individual behaviours). Thus, although we may exhibit rule-making behaviour, these rules 'reflect back' (*reflexivity*) on our behaviour in ways that suggest or demand **conformity**.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Conformity:** behaving in a socially acceptable way.

In explaining why some rules are created and accepted while others are discarded, Giddens uses the idea of social resources and power relationships. Some rules are *negotiated*; friendship, for example, is based on a series of unwritten and unspoken rules that develop over time. Other rules, such as laws governing punishments for murder, are *non-negotiable*; they are simply imposed on individuals by powerful groups.

> **ACTIVITY**
>
> *Think about the groups to which you belong (such as family, school or college, work, friends and peers) and answer the following:*
>
> 1 *How do these groups shape my behaviour?*
> 2 *How does my behaviour shape the behaviour of other people in these groups?*
> 3 *Which groups have most influence on my behaviour?*

The processes of learning and socialisation: how the individual becomes a competent social actor

Socialisation is a process that describes how we are taught the behavioural rules we need to become both a member of a particular society/culture and a competent social actor. Genetics suggests that behaviour may be guided by instincts based on biological imperatives (commands that cannot be ignored). From this viewpoint, people are born with certain abilities that are part of 'human nature'.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Socialisation:** process through which people learn the various forms of behaviour consistent with membership of a particular culture. Young children, for example, must learn the roles, norms and values they will need to become a fully functioning member of their society; these are things children do not acquire naturally.

At one extreme, instincts are fixed human traits. These are things we are born knowing, such as a 'mothering instinct', and our cultural environment plays little or no role in the development of these instincts. A weaker expression of this idea is that people are born with certain capabilities that are then realised through environmental experiences. 'Nature' gives us strong hints about behavioural rules, but people are free to ignore those hints. If women have greater child-nurturing capabilities than men, then it makes genetic sense for them to take on a caring role within a family. However, this is not something their genes force them to do. One way to test whether nature, in the form of instincts, or nurture, in the form of socialisation, is the more important factor is to take advantage of a naturally occurring form of experimentation – the study of unsocialised or feral children.

Feral children

Evidence of human infants raised by animals is rare and not always reliable, although there is one notable example – that of Saturday Mthiyane, who was discovered in 1987, aged five, living with a pack of monkeys in South Africa. However, evidence of children raised with little or no human contact is more common. A well-documented example is 'Genie', a 13-year-old Californian girl discovered in 1970. Pines (1997) notes that Genie had

been 'isolated in a small room and had not been spoken to by her parents since infancy. She was malnourished, abused, unloved, bereft of any toys or companionship.' When Genie was found, 'she could not stand erect … she was unable to speak: she could only whimper'.

How do feral children like Genie, or Dani who was discovered in Florida in 2005 (pictured here), demonstrate the importance of socialisation?

Feral children are sociologically significant for two main reasons. First, when children are raised without human contact they fail to show the social and physical development we would expect from a conventionally raised child – for example, walking upright, talking, using eating implements. Second, if human behaviour is instinctive it is not clear why children such as Genie should develop so differently from children raised with human contact. We would also expect that, once returned to human society, feral children would quickly pick up normal human behaviours. This, however, is not the case.

Further evidence for the significance of socialisation is the fact that different cultures develop different ways of doing things. If human behaviours were governed by instinct, we would expect there to be few, if any, differences between societies.

Sometimes cultural differences are relatively trivial. Billikopf (1999) discovered through his own experience that 'in Russia, when a man peels a banana for a lady it means he has a romantic interest in her'. At other times cultural differences are more fundamental. Wojtczak (2009) argues that in Victorian Britain most women 'lived in a state little better than slavery'. As she notes: 'women's sole purpose was to marry and reproduce.' This is not a situation we would recognise in British society today.

If human behaviour was instinctive, it would be much the same, regardless of place or time. The fact that this is not the case suggests as Podder and Bergvall (2004) argue, that 'culture isn't something we're born with, it is taught to us'.

The 'I' and the 'Me'

Basic human skills have to be taught and learnt. the symbolic interactionist George Herbert Mead (1934) argued that the same was true of more advanced social skills. He claimed that how people behave is conditioned by the social context in which behaviour occurs. While self-awareness – the ability to see ourselves as others see us and react accordingly – is often seen as an instinctive human attribute, Mead argued that it is in fact learnt. It involves developing a concept of Self, and this is what sets humans apart from animals. For Mead, 'the Self' (an awareness of who we are) has two related aspects:

- An 'I' aspect based around our opinion of ourselves as a whole. We each respond to the behaviour of others as an 'I'. Mead called this the 'unsocialised self'.
- A 'Me' aspect that consists of an awareness of how others expect us to behave in a given situation. Mead called this the **Social self** because it develops through socialisation.

We can illustrate these ideas in the following way. If you accidentally put your hand in a fire, the 'I' is expressed by how you react to the pain. The 'Me', however, specifically conditions how you choose to express that pain; your reaction will be conditioned by factors such as:

- who you are – whether you are male or female, adult or child, etc.
- where you are – alone at home or in a public place
- who you are with – such as family, friends or strangers.

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If you are a young child, for example, your reaction to being burnt may be to cry. If you are a young man, you may feel that crying is not a socially acceptable reaction – so you may swear loudly instead. Swearing loudly may be acceptable if you are at home by yourself, but may not be acceptable if you are fixing a stranger's fire as part of your job. Similarly, if you had been messing around with friends when you burnt your hand, their reaction may be to laugh and make fun of your pain. Laughter would not be an appropriate reaction if it was your child who had burnt their hand.

The presentation of self

If the social context of an act changes both its meaning and how people react, it follows that an awareness of self is constructed and developed socially. Goffman (1959) argues that who we believe ourselves to be – our sense of identity – is also constructed socially through how we present ourselves to others.

Goffman proposed a model of self and identity in which he described social life as a series of dramatic episodes. People are *actors*. Sometimes they write and speak their own lines – this is their personal identity. Sometimes they follow lines that are written for them – the external influences that inform how people behave in particular situations and roles. For example, because we understand how our society defines masculinity and femininity, we know how we are expected to behave if we are male or female. As Barnhart (1994) puts it: 'Interaction is a performance, shaped by environment and audience, constructed to provide others with impressions' about how the actor wants to be seen.

The idea of creating an impression is also significant in relation to how we present ourselves in different situations. Goffman suggests that when we adopt a particular identity, we 'perform' to others in order to 'manage' the impression they have of us. Identity performance, therefore, is about achieving a desired result: when you want to create a favourable impression on someone you 'act' in ways you believe they will like.

Fifty years before Goffman, Cooley (1909) suggested that in the majority of social encounters other people are used as a **looking-glass self**. They are like mirrors

> ### KEY TERM
>
> **Looking-glass self:** theory that argues that our sense of self develops from how we are seen by others; we understand who we are by looking in the 'mirror' of how others behave towards us.

reflecting 'our self as others see us'; when we 'look into the mirror' of how others behave towards us we see reflected an image of the person *they* think we are.

The presentation of self always involves two characteristics of social **action theory**:

1 The importance of interpretation: identities are broad social categories whose meaning differs both historically and cross-culturally.
2 The significance of negotiation. Identities are always open to discussion; what it means to be male, female, young, old and so forth is constantly changing as people push the negotiated boundaries of these identities.

> ### KEY TERM
>
> **Action theory:** sociological perspective focusing on individuals and how their interactions create and re-create a sense of society.

> ### TEST YOURSELF
>
> Suggest one way you try to manage the impression people have of you.

Alternatives

Not all scientific disciplines place the same emphasis on socialisation when explaining how individuals become competent social actors. For example, biological ideas about evolution have sometimes been used to explain social development. These ideas range from relatively crude forms of 'social Darwinism', based on the idea that social life simply involves 'the survival of the fittest', to the more sophisticated arguments of sociobiology. In these, biological principles of natural selection and evolution are applied to the 'human animal' to produce what Wilson (1979) argues is a 'biological basis' for all human behaviour. He claims that although human behaviour is not genetically determined, it is strongly influenced by 'biological programming'.

These 'biogrammers' suggest that we are predisposed to behave in a particular way. For example, men and women are biologically programmed with different traits that lead them to perform different cultural roles:

- Women are passive, nurturing and caring, which makes them best suited to child-rearing.
- Male traits of aggression best suit them to a providing role that translates into paid work in contemporary societies.

A similar argument is found in the work of functionalist sociologists such as Parsons (1959a). He argues that in most societies, family roles are organised to reflect the belief that women play an expressive role – that of caring for others. Men, however, play an instrumental role – one geared towards providing for the family. Both of these roles are based, in part, on evolutionary biological principles.

While males and females can choose not to fulfil these roles, behaviour that opposes this biological instinct is generally a less efficient way of organising human cultural relationships. As a result, sociobiologists claim that attempts to limit the effects of biological programming – such as **social engineering** – will cause social problems.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Social engineering:** cultural manipulation of individuals to produce particular social outcomes, such as gender equality.

Evolutionary psychology explains contemporary psychological and social traits in terms of the general principles of natural selection: those behaviours that are evolutionarily successful are selected and reproduced. In this way, various forms of social behaviour, such as family development and gender roles, can be explained as evolutionary adaptations occurring over many centuries. They represent successful adaptations to problems common to all human societies, such as how to raise children while also providing the things family members need for survival.

Psychology is, however, a diverse field and there are many different explanations for human development. These range from those focused on genetics (such as evolutionary psychology), through disciplines such as neuropsychology, to social psychological approaches broadly similar to the interactionist theories found in the works of Mead and Goffman.

The relatively recent development of neuropsychology, for example, focuses on the functions of the brain and how they influence behaviour. Traditionally, this has involved comparing 'normal' and 'abnormal' (damaged) brain functioning to explain behavioural differences. Bruce and Young (1986), for example, investigated the relationship between brain damage in soldiers and prosopagnosia (face recognition problems). More recently, neuropsychology has been used to investigate things such as criminal behaviour. Cauffman et al. (2005)

argue that differences in juvenile brain functioning play a part in antisocial behaviour. Wortley (2011) suggests that neuropsychological factors can explain crimes committed by different types of offender. These factors include how our brains react to punishment or being denied something desirable, as well as whether some brain functions are not working as they should. Wortley argue that while 'genes may be responsible for certain behavioural predispositions, they do not themselves produce behaviour'. Fallon's (2006) neurological research had already revealed that the brain structure of psychopathic killers was not always significantly different from the brain structure of people who did not engage in violent, risky, behaviours. The crucial difference was the social environment in which such people were raised. For example, people who were abused as children were much more likely to develop murderous impulses in adulthood.

Social psychology places greater stress on how environmental factors, such as family and work relationships, affect the development of genetic or psychological predispositions. Meins et al. (2002) noted that although there exists a genetic impulse for babies to become attached to their primary care-giver, this impulse can be affected by environmental factors. The most important of these is the ability of the care-giver to empathise with and understand the needs of the child (*mind-mindedness*). Maternal mind-mindedness, for example, predicts whether the attachment will be secure or insecure – something with significant consequences for a child's emotional, psychological and social development. Van IJzendoorn (1997) argues that there is strong evidence to suggest that insecurely attached infants have more problems forming secure attachments with other adults later in life. They find it more difficult, for example, to regulate 'negative emotions', such as anger, or manage the delicate emotional balance between 'self-confidence and a concern for others'.

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> **ACTIVITY**
>
> *Make a list of anything you think might be instinctive human behaviour (such as eating, sleeping, crime, childcare etc.). Remove an item from the list if people have a choice about whether or not to do it (such as crime) or how and when we do it (such as eating). What do the remaining items on your list tell you about the influence of instincts and culture on human behaviour?*

Agencies of socialisation: family, education, peer group, media, religion

We previously noted Podder and Bergvall's observation that culture 'isn't something we're born with, it is taught to us'. This means that learn the rules for interaction with one another through socialisation – a process that takes two main forms:

1   According to Cooley, primary socialisation occurs within primary groups involving ⬚ntimate face⬚to⬚face association and cooperation⬚This type of socialisation is critical to the development of behaviours we recognise as fundamentally human, such as learning language. The first primary relationship we form is usually with our parents. This is followed by primary attachments to people of our own age (friends) and, subsequently, with other adults, such as work colleagues. Primary socialisation is necessary because human infants need other people in order to develop both as human beings and as members of a particular culture. We do not just need to learn general human behaviours, we must also learn about social relationships, how to play roles, etc.

2   Secondary socialisation involves secondary groups and is characterised, according to Berger and Luckmann (1967), by ⬚a sense of detachment from the ones teaching socialisation⬚Secondary socialisations are situations in which we do not necessarily have close, personal contacts with those doing the socialising. Parsons (1959a) argues that one of the main purposes of secondary socialisation is to ⬚berate the individual from a dependence on the primary attachments and relationships formed within the family group⬚In contemporary societies, where the majority of people we meet are strangers, it would be impossible and undesirable to treat them in the same way we treat people we love or know well. This is why we develop instrumental relationships ⬚those based on what people can do for us, or what we can do for them, in particular situations. Berger and Luckmann suggest that while primary socialisation involves ⬚motionally charged identification⬚with people such as our parents, secondary socialisation is characterised by ⬚ormality and anonymity⬚You do not, for example, treat a stranger who asks you for directions as your closest friend.

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Identify one difference between primary and secondary socialisation.

How does forcing people to dress identically contribute to their socialisation?

Social control

The process of socialisation brings *order, stability* and *predictability* to people's behaviour. If a child is socialised into a 'right' way of doing something, such as eating with a knife and fork, there must also be a 'wrong' or deviant way (such as eating with their fingers), which should be discouraged. Socialisation, therefore, is a form of social control that Pfohl (1998) characterises thus: 'Imagine *deviance* as noise – a cacophony of subversions disrupting the harmony of a given social order. *Social control* is the opposite. It labours to transform the noisy challenge of difference into the music of conformity.'

Social control is linked to the idea that human behaviour involves a life-long process of rule-learning, underpinned by sanctions – the things we do to make people conform:

■   Positive sanctions (*rewards*) are the pleasant things we do to make people behave in routine, predictable, ways. These range from smiling, through praise and encouragement, to gifts.

■   Negative sanctions (*punishments*) are the reverse. They include not talking to people if they annoy us, putting people in prison and the ultimate negative sanction ⬚ killing someone.

Social controls take two basic forms:

1   *Formal controls* involve written rules, such as laws, that apply equally to everyone in a society. They also include non⬚egal rules that apply to everyone playing a particular role in an organisation (such as a school or factory). Sanctions are enforced by agencies of social control ⬚for example, the police and the legal system. Formal controls tell everyone within a group *exactly* what is and is not acceptable behaviour. Infringement of these

rules (deviance) may result in formal sanctions – such as a fine or imprisonment for breaking the law, or being sacked for breaking a company's organisational rules.

2   *Informal controls* reward or punish acceptable/ unacceptable behaviour in everyday, informal, settings (such as the family). These controls do not normally involve written rules and procedures. Rather, they operate through informal enforcement mechanisms that might include ridicule, sarcasm, disapproving looks or personal violence. Such controls mainly apply to the regulation of primary relationships and groups. However, there are exceptions because primary relationships can occur within secondary groups – a teacher, for example, may also be a friend or even a relative. Informal controls also relate to the 'unofficial rules' we create in casual groups. A few of these rules might be applied generally – for example, unless you are in a boxing ring, punching someone in the face is generally regarded as unacceptable. However, the majority of unofficial rules are specific to a particular group. Swearing among friends, for example, may not invite sanction, but swearing at your mother or father might.

Agencies of socialisation

We can look at selected agencies of socialisation in terms of the roles, values and norms they try to teach and the sanctions they impose.

Primary

Family: Although there are only a small number of family roles, these tend to be played out over long periods and involve complex forms of role development, especially in societies that allow divorce and remarriage. Adults may have to learn roles ranging from husband/wife to parent/ step-parent. Child development also involves a range of

Within a family, how do children play their roles differently from adults?

roles: baby, infant, child, teenager and, eventually perhaps, an adult with children of their own.

The ability to develop roles within the context of a group mainly governed by relationships based on love, responsibility and duty, means that we can make mistakes and learn lessons as we go without causing too much harm. Mead refers to parents as **significant others**. They shape both our basic values, such as how to address adults, and our *moral values* – for example, our understanding of the difference between right and wrong. Basic norms, such as how to address family members (e.g. *Mum*, *Dad*), when, where and how to eat and sleep, and definitions of acceptable behaviour are normally taught within the family. Sanctions are mainly *informal*, with positive sanctions involving things like:

- facial expressions (smiling, for example)
- verbal approval/reinforcement ('good boy/girl')
- physical rewards (such as gifts).

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Significant others:** people who are important to us and whose opinions we value.

Negative sanctions are similarly wide-ranging – from showing disapproval through language (such as shouting) to physical punishment.

Functionalists often see primary socialisation as a one-way process that passes from adults to children. However, socialisation involves more than an unquestioning acceptance of the behaviours we learn within the family group. Although children are socialised by *copying* behaviour (Hartley (1959) argues that imitation of adult family behaviours, such as girls 'helping mum' with domestic chores is an important part of socialisation) they are also actively involved in negotiating their socialisation. For example, children do not always obey their parents. Children may also receive contradictory socialisation messages: a relative may reward behaviour that a parent would punish.

Peers: Peer groups are made up of people of a similar age, such as teenagers. They can be considered primary agencies of socialisation because we usually choose friends of a similar age, and personal interaction with them influences our behaviour – from how we dress and talk to the things we love or hate. Peer groups can also be secondary agencies because they may be used as a reference group – what Hughes et al. (2002) call 'the models we use for appraising and shaping our attitudes,

feelings and actions'. In the recent past this has included youth **sub-cultures** such as hippies, skinheads and punks. Although we may never personally interact with these groups, our own behaviour may be influenced by things like the fashions and the general behaviour of people our own age. This is an example of peer pressure as a form of social control.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Sub-cultures:** a culture within a larger culture. Sub-cultures take many forms, such as religious groups, fans of a particular singer or actor, school gangs, etc. Sub-cultures usually develop their own norms and values, although these do not necessarily conflict with those of the wider culture within which they exist.

How do your friends influence your behaviour?

We play a range of peer-related roles, depending on our age group and situation. 'Friend', for example, expresses very personal role play, whereas at school or work we may have a variety of acquaintances. In the workplace, too, we are likely to play the role of colleague to at least some of our peers. Similarly, the values we are taught within a friendship or peer group vary with age and circumstances. However, we will probably carry the value of friendship with us throughout our lives.

Peer-group norms often relate to ideas about age-appropriate behaviour. Young children, for example, are not allowed to smoke or buy alcohol. Conversely, it is generally not considered age-appropriate for the elderly to take part in extreme sports or wear clothes designed for younger people. Peer-group sanctions, or **social sanctions**, are generally informal and include things like disapproving

looks and disparaging comments. This is mainly because peer-group norms vary considerably, and the same behaviour may result in different responses depending on the situation. Swearing at a grandparent will probably be met with disapproval; swearing among friends may be perfectly acceptable. Approving gestures and language, laughing at your jokes and seeking out your company may represent positive sanctions. Refusing to speak to you, rejecting your friendship or engaging in physical violence are negative sanctions associated with peer groups.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Social sanctions:** rewards and punishments designed to exert social control and enforce conformity to roles, norms and values.

Secondary

Agencies of secondary socialisation include schools, religious organisations and the media. In some cases, such as education, we are in daily contact with other members of the group without ever developing a primary attachment to them. In other examples, such as admiring a particular actor or musician, we may never meet them, yet we might be influenced by their behaviour in several ways.

Education: Education involves two kinds of curricula:

- a formal curriculum that specifies the subjects, knowledge and skills children are explicitly taught in school
- a hidden curriculum that Jackson (1968) describes as the things we learn from the experience of attending school, such as how to deal with strangers, obedience to adult authority and respect for the system.

School is also a place where we 'learn to limit our individual desires' – to think about the needs of others rather than our own. School may be one of the first times that children are separated from their parent(s) for any length of time. It provides both *opportunities* (to demonstrate talents to a wider, non-family, audience) and *traumas* – the need to learn, for example, how to deal with people who are not family and *authority figures* such as teachers.

Parsons (1959a) argued that school plays a particularly significant role in secondary socialisation for two reasons:

1. It emancipates the child from primary attachment to their family. It eases children away from the affective relationships found in the family and introduces them to the instrumental relationships they will meet in adult life.

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2 It allows children to 'internalise a level of society' values and norms that is a step higher than those learnt within families. Through interaction with 'strangers' in the educational system, a child begins to adopt wider social values into their personal value system. This process loosens the hold of primary groups and allows children to gradually integrate into adult society, something that also promotes social solidarity and value consensus.

Like any institution, schools involve a range of roles, such as teacher and pupil, which are themselves linked to a range of related roles called a role-set. This further extends the idea of cultural relationships because we become locked into a range of *expected behaviours*. A pupil, for example, plays this role in relation to the roles others are playing in the school environment:

- other pupils in their class
- pupils of different ages
- their subject teachers
- teachers of other subjects
- caretaking staff
- administration staff
- parent(s)/guardian(s).

Schools project a range of values. These range from the idea that pupils should work hard to achieve qualifications to ideas about individual competition for academic rewards, teamwork, conformity to authority (not questioning what is being learnt and why it is necessary to learn it) and achievement on the basis of merit. In many education systems, one 'covert value' is that academic ability, such as a talent for writing essays, is more highly valued than vocational ability, such as bricklaying. Many of these values relate not just to education but also to the wider social world, especially that of the workplace.

From a Marxist perspective, Bowles and Gintis (2002) argue that there is a *correspondence* between school norms and workplace norms: 'Schools prepare pupils for adult work rules by socialising them to function well, and without complaint, in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation.' This correspondence theory is evidenced through school norms like:

- the daily need for attendance
- always being in the place you are supposed to be at certain times
- the right of those in authority to give orders that must be obeyed.

These ideas are backed up by positive sanctions that include the gaining of grades, qualifications and prizes, as well as more personal things such as praise and encouragement. On the negative side, schools use detentions, suspensions and exclusions. Failure to achieve qualifications or gaining a reputation as being unintelligent also function as negative sanctions.

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Suggest two further examples of the connection between school and work. Also suggest arguments against the idea that there is a correspondence between school norms and workplace norms.

Mass media: The media is a slightly unusual secondary agency because our relationship with it is *impersonal*; we are unlikely to meet those doing the socialising. While there is little evidence that the media has a direct, long-term effect on behaviour, there is stronger evidence of short-term effects. Advertising, for example, aims to make short-term changes in behaviour by encouraging people to try different consumer products. Potter (2003) suggests that short-term effects include:

- imitation, such as copying behaviour seen on television
- desensitisation – the idea that constant and repeated exposure to something, such as violence or poverty, progressively lowers our emotional reaction
- learning, in which we are introduced to new ideas and places.

Does repeated exposure to images of violence, poverty or racism desensitise us to such issues?

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There is also some evidence for *indirect* long-term effects. Chandler (1995) argues that 'television has long-term effects, which are small, gradual, indirect but cumulative and significant'. Potter claims that these include things such as:

- **consumerism** – the active and ever-increasing pursuit of goods and services that define lifestyles and identities in contemporary capitalist societies
- fear – where 'heavy exposure to negative and violent' media leads some people to overestimate things such as the extent of crime or their likelihood of being a victim
- agenda setting – Philo et al. (1982) argue that the media determines how something will be debated; in the UK, for example, immigration is framed in terms of 'numbers of immigrants' and Islam is frequently discussed in the context of 'terrorism'. The media sub-text here is that 'Muslim = terrorist'.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Consumerism:** repeated exposure to affluent lifestyles and desirable consumer goods that suggests that 'happiness' is something that can bought.

The extent to which the media can impose values on behaviour is uncertain. However, the media is undoubtedly influential in supporting or marginalising certain values. It has a loud voice in debates over nationality (what it means to be 'British' or 'Chinese', for example). It also promotes certain values while devaluing others – for example, many English newspapers take an 'anti-European Community' stance. Potter suggests that media influence comes about through a process of habituation: the more people are exposed to certain images and ideas, the more likely it is that they will incorporate them into their personal value systems. In relation to norms, the media has what Durkheim (1912) called a 'boundary-marking function'. It publicises acceptable and unacceptable forms of behaviour to reinforce perceptions of expected behaviours. The media may try to preserve particular ways of behaving, through campaigns to 'save the family', for example, but it may also promote changes in behaviour, such as campaigns against racism. To reinforce its message, the media employs a range of sanctions. Positive sanctions involve the use of praise, flattering pictures and uncritical features. Negative sanctions might include being pictured in an unflattering pose, critical articles or behaviour being held up to public ridicule.

Religion: Whether or not we see ourselves as 'religious', religion plays a significant role in the general socialisation process in many societies, particularly in relation to ceremonial functions, such as marriages and funerals. It can also be argued that important moral values – very strong beliefs about how people should behave – are influenced by religious values. For example, several of the Ten Commandments in Christian religions are reflected in legal systems around the world.

In terms of moral beliefs, few people would argue that murder or theft are acceptable. However, many of the world's major religions, from Christianity to Islam, are accused of promoting patriarchy through both their general organisation (many religions have an exclusively male clergy) and the gender values they encourage. Despite this, Swatos (1998) argues that contemporary religions are undergoing fundamental changes that make them more 'female friendly'. For example, God is increasingly portrayed as loving and consoling rather than as authoritarian and judgemental, and clergy are seen as 'helping professionals' rather than as 'representatives of God's justice'.

Religious values are powerful forces for those who believe. Religion can be regarded as a 'design for living' – a force that provides help and guidance to live a life in accord with God, but religious beliefs and values can also be a source of conflict:

- between religions, such as the history of conflict between Christians and Muslims dating back to the 11th century
- within the same religion: Northern Ireland, for example, has experienced major conflicts between Protestant and Catholic Christians over the past 50 years.

Religious values are frequently displayed through styles of dress, such as the Muslim hijab or Sikh turban, something that indicates both religiosity (a measure of people's commitment to religion) and ethnic identity. Religious values are also expressed through notions of patriarchy and social control. Although, as Steggerda (1993) notes, Christianity promotes concepts of love and care that are attractive to women, and Daly (1973) argues that in a 'male-dominated world' religions provide women with a sense of shelter, safety in a threatening world and belonging; the price they pay for these benefits is submission to patriarchal control.

Religions apply positive sanctions on their followers in different ways:

- Hinduism involves a belief in *reincarnation* (when you die you are reborn into a new life) based on how well you observed religious laws in your previous life; the reward

for good behaviour in one lifetime is rebirth into a higher social position.

- Notions of *sin* in Christian religions can also be significant features of religious control, because the believer is encouraged to live a life free of sin in the hope of heavenly reward.

Negative sanctions are also many and varied. Catholicism, for example, has the sanction of excommunication (exclusion from the church), whereas some forms of Islam specify a range of punishments for those who break Shari'ah law. Such punishments may also be applied to 'non-believers' in theocratic societies, such as Iran, where government is dominated by religious authorities.

ACTIVITY

Draw a spider diagram centred on any role you play to illustrate its role-set. What does this diagram tell you about how you present yourself to society or a particular social group? What types of influence are making you take on the role, and why? See example below.
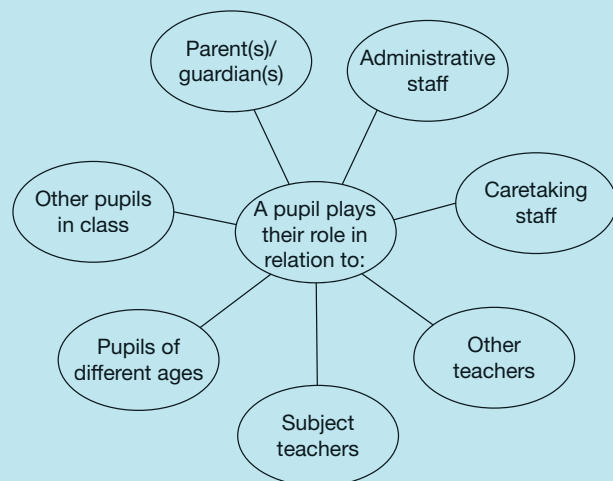
Culture, roles, norms, values, beliefs, ideology and power as elements in the social construction of reality

In previous sections we have referred generally to ideas such as 'society' and 'culture'. In this section we are going to explore these ideas in more depth.

Defining society

While 'a society' is a concept that is easy to reference – we all probably understand what is meant by Indian, Mauritian, Nigerian or British society – it is more difficult to define. One key feature, however, is that people see themselves as having something in common with others in their society and, by extension, they consider themselves to be different from people in other societies. In this respect, different societies involve two types of *space*:

1. Physical space, in the sense of a distinctive geographical area marked by either a physical border, such as a river, or a symbolic border ⬚perhaps an imaginary line that marks where one society ends and another begins.
2. Mental space, which separates people based on the beliefs they have about the similarities they share with those in ⬚their⬚society and the differences from those in other societies.

It seems straightforward to define a society in terms of physical space – Mauritius occupies a certain geographic area, Nigeria another and India yet another. Yet in itself this space is a *mental* construction; we are simply giving a particular meaning and significance to what is effectively a line on a map.

Anderson (1983) captures the significance of this idea when he categorises societies as 'imagined communities' – things that exist only in the mind. He points out that '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'. Societies are mentally constructed by:

- geographic borders that set physical boundaries ⬚we might, for example, consider that everyone born within these borders belongs to a particular society
- a system of government, which may involve a monarchy, parliament and civil service, for example
- common language, **customs** and traditions that people share
- a sense of belonging and identification that involves developing an awareness of ⬚our⬚society as different from other societies; Indians, for example, may see themselves as different from Pakistanis or Bangladeshis.

KEY TERM

Customs: established and accepted cultural practices and behaviours.

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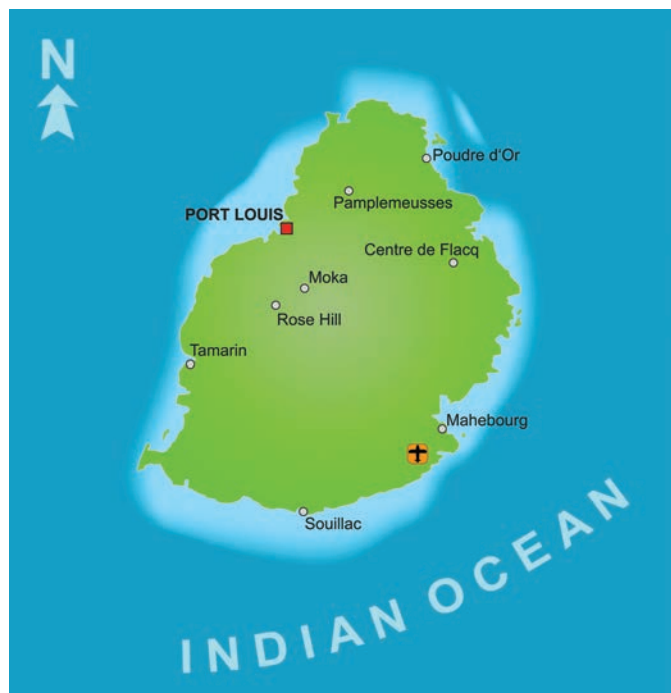
A map of Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean. How are societies ⊠magined communities⊠?

The social construction of reality

If societies are mental constructions, it follows that their reality is socially constructed. To understand how this occurs we need to explore the concept of culture. We have previous referred to culture as a distinctive 'way of life' that has to be taught and learnt through primary and secondary socialisation. We can develop this concept to understand how culture contributes to the **social construction of reality**. Dahl (2000) defines culture as 'a collectively held set of attributes, which is dynamic and changing over time' that structures the social world. In this respect, all cultures have two basic components:

- Material culture involves the physical objects (⊠rtefacts⊠), such as cars, phones and books, that a society produces and that reflect cultural knowledge, skills, interests and preoccupations.
- Non⊠material culture consists of the knowledge and beliefs valued by a particular culture. This includes religious and scientific beliefs as well as meanings people

KEY TERM

Social construction of reality: the idea that our perception of what is real is created through a variety of historical and cultural processes rather than something that is fixed and naturally occurring. Different societies, for example, construct male and female identities differently.

give to material objects. Merton (1957) suggests that objects such as cars, houses and clothes can function in two ways. Their *manifest function* refers to the purpose for which they exist; clothes, for example, function to keep you warm. Their *latent function* however, may be hidden or obscured. Material objects might function as status symbols ⊠owning something a culture feels is desirable says something about you to others.

TEST YOURSELF

Identify an example of material and non⊠material culture in your society.

The idea that cultural objects can have different meanings suggests that cultural interaction, especially in contemporary societies, is both sophisticated and complex. The more sophisticated the interaction in any society, the more open it is to misinterpretation.

In order to make sense of cultural interaction, therefore, we need to create common meanings and establish a structure within which behaviour can be played out in predictable ways. For a society to function it must have order and stability, and for these to exist people's behaviour must display patterns and regularities. While cultures may develop differently, they are all constructed from the same basic materials: roles, values and norms.

An essential tool of communication or a beautiful object of desire?

Roles

Roles are a building block of culture for two reasons:

1 They are always played in relation to other roles. For someone to play the role of teacher, for example, others must play the role of students. Roles contribute to the

creation of culture, therefore, because they demand both social interactions ⬚people have to co⬚operate to successfully perform certain tasks ⬚and an awareness of others. In this respect, roles help individuals develop *sociality*, the ability to form groups and communities, particularly when they are grouped into role⬚sets. This adds a further dimension to the cultural framework because it locks people into a range of relationships, each with its own routines and responsibilities.

2   Every role has a name (or label). This name identifies a particular role and carries with it a sense of how people are *expected* to behave in any situation.

Values

These common expectations provide a sense of order and predictability because role play is governed by behavioural rules in two ways:

1   All roles have a prescribed aspect based on beliefs about how people *should* behave. Role play, therefore, is governed by values that provide general behavioural guidelines ⬚a teacher *should* teach their students, a parent *should* care for their child, etc.

2   Values are a *general* structuring agency; they provide only broad guidance for role behaviour. For example, it is understood that someone playing the role of teacher should teach, but values do not tell them *how* to play this role. The specific behavioural guides that tell people how to successfully play a role are known as norms.

Norms

Thio (1991) argues that 'while norms are specific rules dictating how people should act in a particular situation, values are general ideas that support the norm'. Norms, therefore, are behavioural rules used to perform roles predictably and acceptably. This is important, according to Merton (1938), because without order and predictability, behaviour becomes risky and confusing. He used the term *anomie* to describe a condition where people who fail to understand the norms operating in a particular situation react in a range of ways – from confusion, through anger to fear.

Goffman (1959) argues that norms are more open to interpretation and negotiation than either roles or values. This means they can quickly adapt to changes in the social environment. There are many ways to perform a teaching role, depending on a range of personal and cultural factors – including the behaviour of those in the teacher's role-set. Some teachers interpret their role as strict disciplinarians; others adopt a more friendly approach. However, these interpretations are not set in

stone; even the strictest teacher may relax their approach at certain times.

How do different teachers interpret their roles differently?

Beliefs

Roles, values and norms provide an important framework within which relationships can be ordered and made broadly predictable. A further layer of cultural structuring involves beliefs. These are the fundamental, deep-rooted ideas that shape our values and are, in some respects, shaped by them. While all values express a belief, beliefs do not necessarily express a value. They are more general behavioural guidelines that include ideas, opinions, convictions and attitudes. These may or may not be true; what matters is that they are *believed* to be true. Beliefs in contemporary societies are many and varied, but they perform a significant structuring role when combined with systems or ideologies.

Ideologies

Joseph (1990) argues that all ideologies are constructed around a set of fundamental beliefs whose ultimate purpose is to explain something. This might be:

- the meaning of life (scientific and religious ideologies)
- the nature of family organisation (familial ideologies)
- the superiority/inferiority of selected social groups (sexist or racist ideologies).

Blake (2004) notes that ideology has come to mean something 'not to be believed' – referring to beliefs as 'ideological' suggests that they involve a partial, or biased account. However, the *function* of ideology is more important here than its form or content. All ideologies include elements of propaganda, as those who believe in a particular ideological viewpoint seek to convince others.

Henderson (1981) takes the concept of ideology a little further when she argues that 'an ideology is a pattern of ideas,

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both factual and based on values, which claims to explain and legitimise the social structure and culture of a particular group in society'. In other words, ideologies provide the justification for particular attitudes and behaviours.

Critical theory argues that ideologies have a manipulative element: a capitalist-controlled media directly attempts to influence its audience by constructing and presenting a version of reality favourable to the ruling class. Adorno and Horkheimer (1944), part of the Marxist Frankfurt School, argued that ruling-class ideology is transmitted through a culture industry that creates forms of popular culture – film, magazines, comics, newspapers, etc. – which are consumed uncritically and passively by the masses. By controlling the culture industry, a ruling class controls the means of mental production – how people see and think about the social world.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Critical theory:** theory developed by and associated with Marxism that seeks to understand, criticise and change the nature of capitalist societies or some feature of such societies.

Ideologies are important in the social construction of reality because they play an overarching structural role in any society. They represent complete systems of belief – something Chibnall (1977) suggests is important because 'ideological structures permit events to be "mapped", i.e. located within wider contexts and related to similar events'. In this sense, ideologies are mental maps that tell us not only where we have been – our cultural history – but also where a society wants to go in terms of economic, political and cultural development. Ideologies are powerful structuring agencies because they pull together and make sense of the various strands of our individual and cultural existence and give the social world meaning, stability and order. Jones and Myhill (2004) argue that this occurs because ideologies not only involve related beliefs and justifications for those beliefs, they also specify objectives for social action and instructions for how to realise these objectives.

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Suggest an example of an ideology in your society and identify some of its related beliefs. Assess the extent to which this ideology influences behaviour in your society.

Power

Power is an important, but often elusive, concept. Dugan (2003) defines power *actively*, suggesting that

it involves 'the capacity to bring about change'. Lukes (1990), however, defines power *passively*, arguing that one definition involves the power to 'do nothing' by making others believe nothing has to change. Power also has many sources. Weber (1922) distinguishes between two types:

1 coercive power, where people are forced to obey under threat of punishment
2 consensual power (authority), where people obey because they believe it right to do so.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Power:** the ability to make others do what you want, even against their will.

Authority can be further sub-divided:

- Charismatic power involves people obeying because they *trust* the person issuing a command.
- Traditional power is based on custom and practice – the way things have always been done.
- Rational/legal power expresses the idea that people expect commands to be obeyed because their position in an authority structure gives them the right to demand compliance.

Power also has a number of dimensions. We can define power in terms of decision-making. It involves:

- the ability to make decisions – teachers, for example, can decide what their students do in the classroom
- preventing others making decisions – a teacher can stop their students doing things they might like to do (such as gazing out of the window)
- removing decision-making from the agenda – the ability to 'do nothing' because others are convinced that no decision has to be made.

Giddens (2001) suggests that power relates to the social construction of reality through 'the ability of individuals or groups to make their own concerns or interests count, even where others resist'. This means that those with power can impose their definition of reality on others. In doing so, they can bring about order and stability.

However, Foucault (1983) argues that power in modern societies is different from power in past societies because it is opaque, or 'difficult to see'. People are unaware of the power that other individuals or groups such as governments have over them. This has occurred because the way people think about and experience power in everyday life has changed. In the past, social control was mainly based on raw (coercive) power – from

a monarch exercising supreme power to prison systems that maintained total control over the body. In modern societies, Foucault claims, power is exercised in increasingly subtle modes ways, such as technological surveillance – both 'from above', such as CCTV, and 'from below' – smartphones, for example, that can be used to record people's behaviour.

Foucault further argues that knowledge about the social world and the language we use to express such knowledge are both aspects of belief systems that control behaviour by influencing how people *think* about the world. If, for example, we believe in ideas like 'male' and 'female' this conditions how we behave both *as* males and females and *towards* other males and females.

Although reality is socially constructed, the construction process itself involves a complex relationship between beliefs, ideologies and power on one side (the broad structural elements of culture) and everyday ideas about roles, values and norms on the other.

ACTIVITY

To illustrate how the social construction of reality takes place on an everyday basis, take a walk around your school or college and record the different ways you classify the people you meet. For example, you will probably meet some or all of the following classes of people: strangers, acquaintances (people you recognise but don't really know very well), friends, close friends, best friends. There will, of course, be other categories to discover. How does this classification affect your behaviour towards the people you encounter?

Social class, gender and ethnicity as elements in the construction of social identities

This section examines the ways that people use concepts such as class, gender and ethnicity to create identities that fix them within particular cultures and societies.

KEY TERM

Social identity: collective or group identities applied to important roles. Cultures classify, group and give meaning to broad identities, such as male or female, that define how ⊠he n⊠and ⊠ omen⊠are generally expected to behave.

Class identities

Social class can be difficult to define, but Crompton (2003) suggests that occupation is a good general indicator that can allow us to define simple class groupings, such as working, middle and upper class. Occupation can also suggest ways in which class identities develop out of different work-related experiences.

Lower class

Traditional working-class identities are fixed (or centred) around manual work and the manufacturing industry. Such jobs were widely available in Britain, even in the later part of the 20th century. A further dimension to class identity came from the largely urban and close-knit *communities* within which the traditional working class lived. Here, people of a similar class, occupation and general social outlook had their cultural beliefs continually reinforced through personal experience and socialisation: the 'working-class Self' could be contrasted with the 'middle-/upper-class Other'. In such circumstances, class identity was built not just around what people were or believed themselves to be, but also around what they were *not*. More recently, however, Crompton has suggested changes to the nature of work:

- a decline in traditional manufacturing industries
- a rise of service industries such as banking, computing and a range of lesser⊠status service jobs.

This has led to the emergence of a new working class. Goldthorpe et al. (1968) argued that this section of the working class developed new forms of identity:

- privatised or home⊠centred
- instrumental: work was a means to an end ⊠the creation of a comfortable home and family life ⊠rather than an end in itself.

In terms of general class identity, however, Devine (1992) suggests that there were still important differences between the new working class and the middle classes. The former, for example, retained a strong sense of 'being working class'.

Middle class

Middle-class identities are constructed around a range of occupational identities. These include:

- professionals such as doctors, whose identity combines high levels of educational achievement

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with personal *autonomy* (freedom of action) and decision-making

- managers involved in the day-to-day running of private and public companies – an identity, Brooks (2006) suggests, that combines career progression, decision-making, power and control over others and the organisation of work routines
- intellectuals, such as university lecturers, who reflect an academic identity dealing with knowledge and information services
- consultants focused on selling knowledge, information and skills across both national and global markets
- routine service workers (such as shop assistants), who represent an expanding identity group situated at the bottom of the middle-class hierarchy; they may have lower earnings and levels of skill than some higher working-class occupations, but they qualify as middle class on the basis of their *non-manual* work and, in the case of occupations such as nursing, higher levels of *social status* (a significant factor in all types of middle-class identity).

Upper class

Upper-class identities are based on two major groupings:

- The landed aristocracy is a relatively small group whose traditional source of power is its historic ownership of land and its political connections to the monarchy. In the past, this made it the most significant section of society. Over the course of the 20th century, the economic power and influence of the aristocracy may have declined, but there remains a significant upper-class section of society.
- The business elite now represents a major section of the upper class – one characterised by immense income and wealth based on ownership of significant national, international and global companies.

Self and Zealey (2007) note that:

- 21% of the UK's total wealth is owned by the wealthiest 1% of its population
- 7% of the nation's wealth is owned by the least wealthy 50%.

In India, a similar pattern of income equality emerges:

- The top 10% of wage-earners earn 12 times more than the bottom 10%
- 42% of India's 1.2 billion population live on around $1.25 a day.

On a global scale, Davies et al. (2008) note that the world's richest 1% own 40% of the total global wealth. Of this 1%, 60% live in just two countries: the USA and Japan.

The blurring of class identities

Peele (2004) argues that recent global economic changes have resulted in 'a blurring of traditional class identities'. We can see this in cultural changes in taste and consumption. In particular, a convergence of working-class and middle-class tastes makes it increasingly difficult to define class identity clearly. Distinctive boundary lines between working-, middle- and upper-class identities have changed dramatically, although they have not disappeared completely.

What are the elements of working- and middle-class taste cultures in the 21st century?

Prandy and Lambert (2005) suggest that there has been a gradual shift from people 'seeing themselves as working class to middle class', and Savage (2007) argues that although people still use class categories as a source of identity, the meaning of these categories has changed. Greater emphasis is placed on individual, rather than collective, experiences. As a result, working-class identities in particular have become more varied. This reflects the idea that class identity is becoming increasingly fluid – based on someone's ability to choose who they are or who they want to be. Brooks argues that we can push the idea of a 'coherent, stable and unified' middle-class identity a little too far. Higher-level professional workers may have little or nothing in common with lower-level shop workers. However, it is possible to identify three general cultural themes that contribute to middle-class identity:

1. Not working class: this reflects the idea that 'the middle classes' occupy an ambivalent and precarious class position:

   - 'Above the working class' and wanting to remain separated from them. As Brooks puts it: 'The

construction of middle-class identities has primarily been related to the claim that one is 'not working class.'

- ■ 'Below the upper class' but aspiring to be like them.

2 Disgusted subjects: Lawler (2005) argues that 'expressions of disgust at perceived violations of taste' are a consistent and unifying feature of middle-class identities. The 'ownership of taste' allows the middle classes to distinguish themselves from those below and above; the upper class can be categorised in terms of 'vulgar and tasteless shows of wealth.' As Bourdieu (1984) put it: 'Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, that which represents the greatest threat.'

3 Social capital: this refers to how people are connected to networks (who you know) and the value these have for what Putnam (2000) calls 'norms of reciprocity' – what people are willing to do for each other. Catts and Ozga (2005) call this the 'social glue that holds people together in communities and gives them a sense of belonging.' They argue that the middle classes are in the best position to integrate into significant social networks, such as those found in schools or the workplace, that reinforce their sense of identity and difference. One important aspect of this is what Bourdieu (1986) calls cultural capital. This refers to non-economic resources, such as family and class background, educational qualifications, social skills and status, that give people advantages and disadvantages over others.

TEST YOURSELF

Describe three cultural practices in your society that are commonly used to identify class distinctions.

Gender identities

Connell et al. (1987) argue that we are not born a 'man' or a 'woman'; we become 'men' and 'women' through the social construction of gender identities. In other words, while biological sex refers to the physical characteristics that cause people to be labelled male or female, gender refers to the social characteristics given to each sex. Lips (1993) argues that differences in male and female identities do not occur naturally from biological differences. Gender identities differ historically and cross-culturally, which means that they are both learnt and relative. Connell (1995) suggests that there are two forms of dominant gender identities:

1 Hegemonic masculinity, where 'traditional' forms of masculinity are based on a variety of physical

and mental characteristics. For example, men are encouraged to adopt a particular body shape that, *ideally*, emphasises physical strength and physique. Mental characteristics include ideas about about men as 'leaders', 'providers', being unemotional, rational, calm, cool, calculating, etc. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that even in societies where different masculinities exist, one is always dominant.

2 Emphasised femininity relates to the idea that female identities were traditionally defined by how they could accommodate the interests and needs of men. The *dominant* identity was one that 'matched and complemented' hegemonic masculinity. Women were regarded as essentially passive, emotional beings whose identity was expressed in the service of others. Kitchen (2006) characterises this as a 'complicit femininity' because it is defined by male needs and desires.

Male identities

If one form of masculinity is always dominant, it follows that alternative masculinities exist. Schauer (2004) suggests these take different forms:

- ■ Subordinate masculinities are generally seen as 'lesser forms' of masculinity, particularly for men who are unable or unwilling to perform hegemonic masculinity, such as those with physical disabilities.
- ■ Subversive masculinities involve an alternative masculinity that challenges and undermines hegemonic masculinity. An example here might be the 'serious student' who works hard at school rather than being part of a gang that is disruptive in class.
- ■ Complicit masculinities refer to newly feminised masculinities such as the 'new man', men who combine paid work with their share of unpaid housework. This type of masculinity sees women as equals and occurs, Connell (1995) argues, because 'as women have become more powerful, male identities have begun to change'.
- ■ Marginalised masculinities refer to men who feel they have been 'pushed to the margins' of family life due to long-term unemployment, for example; they no longer feel able to perform what they see as the traditional masculine roles of breadwinner and family provider. Willott and Griffin (1996) noted this type of masculinity developing among the long-term unemployed working class as traditional beliefs about 'the good family man' providing for wife and kids collided with an inability to provide for their partner and children.

How does this behaviour challenge notions of hegemonic masculinity?

Crisis

Benyon (2002) argues that contemporary global societies are experiencing a crisis of masculine identity caused by a combination of:

- long-term unemployment
- the loss of traditional male employment in manufacturing industries
- lower educational achievement relative to girls
- the rise of female-friendly service industries.

Male identities once focused on traditional ideas such as providing for a family, but this is no longer the case. Marginalised masculinities cannot demonstrate traditional male qualities because they no longer control the economic resources on which such masculinity was based. This male identity crisis has resulted in the rise of two particular forms of exaggerated masculinity that try to reassert traditional forms of male identity:

1. Retributive masculinities aim to reclaim traditional masculinity from their 'emasculated' peers. Typical behaviours include binge drinking, fighting and womanising. These behaviours are based on an idealised version of a traditional masculinity 'when 'men were men and women were glad of it'. This identity is:

   - rigidly patriarchal
   - aggressive, both physically and verbally
   - oppositional, in the sense of rejecting complicit masculinities
   - reclamational 'it seeks to 'reclaim masculinity' as an identity.

2. Hypermasculinity is a form that Wolf-Light (1994) characterises as 'authoritarian and autocratic,

impersonal, contemptuous and violent ' the very image of patriarchy' Robinson (2006) argues that this identity particularly appeals to 'white, middle-class and middle-aged men primarily because of its ability to provide a degree of certainty about what it means to be a man ' a belief in an essential and unchanging 'deep masculinity''.

Female identities

There three main forms of feminine identity in contemporary societies:

1. Contingent femininities are framed and shaped by male beliefs, behaviours and demands:

   - Normalised identities, for example, involve women learning to play a secondary role to men 'as mothers, girlfriends, partners and the like. Chambers et al. (2003) argue that such identities continually struggle with the problem of 'producing a femininity that will secure male approval'.
   - Sexualised identities are fashioned through male eyes and fantasies. In these types of identity, women are sexual objects that exist for male gratification.

2. Assertive identities reflect the changing position of women in many societies. They involve women breaking free from traditional ideas about femininity, but not completely setting themselves apart from their male counterparts. Froyum (2005) suggests that assertive femininities are adopted to 'resist male power without actually threatening to overthrow such power' Different types of assertive identity include:

   - 'Girl power' identities. Hollows (2000) suggests that these emphasise 'sex as fun' and the importance of female friendship. These identities represent a way of 'coping with masculinity' but older women are excluded from this identity.
   - Modernised femininities that relate to a slightly older age group. These locate new-found female economic and cultural power within the context of family relationships. The *assertive* aspect here is a desire for personal freedom and expression 'what McRobbie (1996) terms 'individualism, liberty and the entitlement to sexual self-expression'' within the context of traditional gender relationships.
   - Ageing femininities, which assert the right of elderly women to be fashionable, active and *sexual* beings.

3. Autonomous femininities, which involve *competition* with men, on female terms. Evans (2006), for example,

points to a female individualism as part of a new gender regime that frees women from traditional constraints such as pregnancy and childcare. Autonomous women are likely to be:

- highly educated
- successful
- professional middle class
- career-focused.

They also tend to form non-committal heterosexual attachments. These may involve marriage but are unlikely to involve children.

TEST YOURSELF

Identify and explain two types of female identity in your country. Assess the extent to which female behaviour can be explained in terms of these identities.

Ethnic identities

When thinking about ethnic identities it is helpful to keep two things in mind:

1 Ethnicity is not the same thing as race. As Ossorio (2003) argues, 'the simple biological notion of race is wrong' – there is no credible scientific evidence of genetically different 'racial groups'.
2 Avoid thinking about ethnicity in terms of 'minorities'. The Center for Social Welfare Research (1999) states: 'For all of us, identity is in some sense 'ethnic' in that we have diverse origins … related to how we are perceived and treated by others'.

Ethnicity, therefore, refers to a combination of cultural differences, in areas such as:

- religion
- family structures
- beliefs
- values
- norms.

Winston (2005) suggests that ethnic identities develop when people 'see themselves as being distinctive in some way from others' because of a shared cultural background and history. Song (2003) claims that this is often expressed in terms of distinctive markers such as a common ancestry and 'memories of a shared past'. A sense of ethnic identity is based on 'symbolic elements … such as family and kinship, religion, language, territory, nationality or physical appearance'. Ethnic identity does not necessarily relate to 'any actual evidence of cultural distinctiveness as a group'. The key factor is whether people are 'conscious of belonging to the group'.

Ethnicity as a source of personal and social identity is built on a range of ideas that include referencing:

- country of birth and the sense of a common geographic location
- traditions and customs that contribute to unique cultural practices that distinguish one ethnic group from another
- shared histories and experiences as a defining sense of identity, as with victims of slavery in the case of Black Caribbean and African identities or the Nazi holocaust in the case of Jewish identities
- religious beliefs, celebrations and traditions that connect people on the basis of shared cultural practices, such as common forms of worship.

Unlike racial identities, ethnic identities are negotiable. Their nature and meaning can change to external and internal factors. External factors might include contact with other cultures; internal factors might be a clash of ideas and experiences between different age, class or gender groups within a particular ethnic group. For this reason, ethnic identities require constant maintenance through collective activities, such as festivals, celebrations or religious gatherings, and a variety of material and symbolic cultural artefacts, such as traditional forms of dress, food and crafts.

Wimmer (2008) argues that an important aspect of ethnic identities is how they are defined in relation to other ethnic groups by constructing a sense of *difference*, which establishes boundaries for a particular identity. Ethnic boundaries may be positive, conferring a sense of belonging to a definable cultural group, or defensive – a way of fighting racism and discrimination, for example. Boundaries may also be imposed through cultural stereotypes about ethnic groups and identities. This may in fact reinforce a stereotyped group's sense of identity.

Another way in which ethnic identities can be imposed relates to how *minority* identities can be defined by *majority* ethnicities in terms of their 'Otherness': how 'They' are different from 'Us'. While this relationship strengthens both majority and minority ethnic identities, it can also result in minority ethnicities being portrayed as a threat in two main ways:

- cultural, where minority beliefs and practices are framed as challenges to a particular way of life

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- physical, where in countries like Britain and the USA, following the 11 September 2001 World Trade Center attacks, the media framed and referenced this threat in terms of 'Muslims' and 'terrorism'.

While this *oppositional* dimension is significant – the idea that some ethnic groups partly or wholly construct their sense of Self through opposition to the Other – a further dimension involves two types of hybrid ethnic identities:

1 Conventional hybridisation suggests that the mixing of distinctive ethnic styles produces new and unique identities. This mixing tends to take place on the margins of identity, involving the combination of specific *features* of ethnic identities rather than a complete change. Examples include things such as:

- food, Indian, Chinese and Italian cuisine, for example, have become a key part of British culture, often with subtle changes that give them a unique 'British' identity twist
- clothing, where the American style of jeans and T-shirts has been incorporated into a variety of global ethnic identities
- music, such as *Bhangra,* which displays cross-over styles to produce unique musical fusions and genres.

2 Contemporary hybridisation suggests that ethnic identities undergo constant maintenance, change and development under the influence of two main processes:

- immigration, where different ethnic groups physically meet
- cultural globalisation, where, through agencies uch as the internet, ethnic cultures and identities are increasingly exposed to different cultural influences.

Rather than creating new and different hybrid identities, cultural changes result in gradual alterations to an *established* identity. In this way, ethnic identities are constantly drawing on new influences and re-establishing old identities in the face of new challenges. White English youth identities have, for example, *incorporated* aspects of other cultures relating to:

- music, such as rock, pop, rap and hip-hop
- food, such as hamburgers, Asian cuisine and German beer
- language, especially slang terms associated with youth cultures and sub-cultures
- clothing that includes jeans and T-shirts.

While these cultural imports have undoubtedly changed these identities, this involved incorporation and modification to an existing sense of cultural identity

and style, rather than the creation of a new and unique identity as is seen to happen in the case of conventional hybridisation.

Theories of culture and identity with reference to modernism and postmodernism

At the start of this unit, we noted how sociology developed as the product of **modernity**. This was a new type of society characterised by industrialisation, urbanisation and the development of science and reason, which began with the Enlightenment in Europe and gradually replaced pre-modern, pre-industrial, societies. Modernity introduced different ways of understanding social order, stability and change. In this section, we are going to look at how modernist sociological perspectives have theorised culture and identity. We are then going to investigate the postmodernist perspectives that explain the decline of modern societies and their gradual replacement by a new type of post-industrial, post-rational society.

KEY TERM

Modernity: a stage in historical development characterised by things like industrialisation, urbanisation and the development of science and reason.

Modernist theories

One way to look at culture and identity from a general modernist perspective is to consider what culture and identity *do*, how they are *used* and what they *mean*.

Function

Consensus approaches, such as functionalism, have identified a range of functions for both culture and identity. In other words, they exist because of what they

do for – and in some senses to – people. Fisher (1997), for example, argues that culture is shared behaviour that 'systematises the way people do things, thus avoiding confusion and allowing cooperation so that groups can accomplish what no single individual could do alone'. Mazrui (1996) suggests that culture performs seven important functions:

1 Communication: culture provides the context for the development of communication systems such as language.

2 Perception: culture shapes how people see the world. Offe (2001), for example, argues that Western cultures generally believe that 'the future' is not predetermined, whereas 'some African societies believe in a predetermined future not controllable by individuals'.

3 Identity: culture influences how people see themselves and others, in terms of different social and personal identities. For Durkheim (1912), these are an important part of social solidarity and integration.

4 Value systems: cultural institutions, such as education, the media and religion, are a source of values that influence behaviour through socialisation.

5 Motivation: cultural values and norms involve sanctions that promote and discourage particular behaviours. They also set behavioural boundaries to maintain certain standards of behaviour – for example, laws specify acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

6 Stratification: cultures develop ways of differentiating and ranking individuals through categories such as class, gender and age. Lenski (1994) argues that stratification is 'inevitable, necessary and functional' because it generates the 'incentive systems' required to motivate and reward the people who are best qualified to hold the most important positions within a cultural system.

7 Production and consumption: culture defines these practices in terms of what people 'need, use and value'.

1	Communication		4	Value Systems
2	Perception		5	Motivation
3	Identity		6	Stratification
			7	Production and Consumption
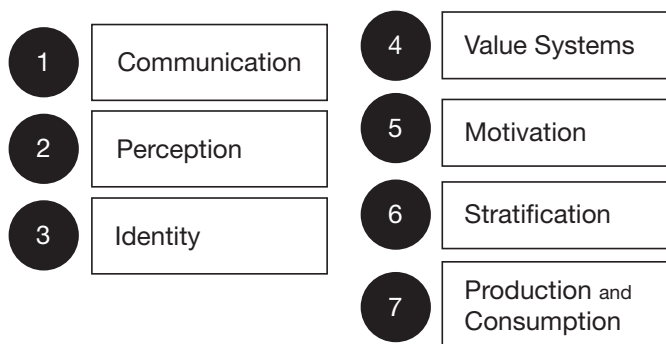
Mazrui's seven functions of culture

Alongside culture, Adams and Marshall (1996) argue that identities perform five complementary functions:

1 Identities provide individuals with a structured context for social actions – a 'framework of rules' that guides behaviour when playing certain roles. This helps people understand their relationship to others.

2 Identities generate a sense of individual purpose by setting behavioural goals. For example, student identity involves the desire to achieve goals such as educational qualifications.

3 Identities create a measure of self-control in terms of deciding what we want and how to achieve it. When faced with a variety of choices, a clear sense of identity allows people to select and process information relevant to particular roles and identities. For example, a student might note down what a teacher says in the classroom, but may not record a conversation they had if they met in the street.

4 When we take on an identity we must ensure the commitments we make are consistent with our personal values and beliefs. A student who believes education is a waste of time is unlikely to perform their role successfully.

5 As part of a general goal-setting function, identities allow us to see likely or hoped-for outcomes. A student identity, for example, has a 'future orientation' – wanting to perform the role successfully in order to achieve a certain type of job.

TEST YOURSELF

Briefly describe, using examples, any two functions of culture.

Use

Conflict theories, such as Marxism, are based on the idea that contemporary societies contain competing cultural groups, with their own affiliations, products and consumption patterns. One focus here, therefore, is on how culture and identity are *used*, both to enhance the 'sense of Self' and the social cohesion of a dominant social class, and to lower the social status of other, competing, classes. We can see these ideas in practice in relation to concepts of high and low (popular or mass) culture.

High culture: High culture refers to the idea that some cultural products and practices are superior to others and that those who prefer high cultural products see themselves as 'socially superior'. To understand why culture and identity is important here, we need to examine how they are used.

In the past, it was easy to maintain a status distinction between the ruling and the lower classes. Status was fixed by birth, marriage, inheritance and law. However, mass education and the growth of higher-paid jobs mean that in many modern societies 'the masses' (or lower classes) can work their way up the social scale. This relatively new situation, in which someone of lowly social origins can become hugely wealthy or politically powerful, has led to an identity crisis among elite groups. They are increasingly unable to maintain their sense of superiority on the basis of wealth and income alone.

Cultural attributes such as taste and 'breeding', however, cannot be bought or learnt; they are either acquired by elites over many generations or, as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) argue, simply invented. In globalised societies where it is increasingly difficult to maintain status distinctions on the basis of how people speak, live or dress, differences can be maintained through the consumption of cultural products and ideas.

Elite cultural identity is not only reflected in consumption, it is also bound up in questions of leadership. As Cooney (1994) argues, elites see themselves as 'determining what happens in society'. An elite group identifies those aspects of culture that are 'the best in thought and deed' – a judgement that happily coincides with the cultural products they consume and separates them from, as they define it, the worthless: the mass-produced and the artificial (low culture). By taking ownership of these forms and elevating them to a position of cultural superiority, an elite group:

- asserts its own cultural identity: 'this is who *we are* and who *you are not*'
- establishes its cultural hegemony over questions of taste: the elite decides what counts as 'high culture'
- creates a strong 'taste barrier' between itself and the masses, especially those who aspire to join the ranks of the elite.

Low culture: Low, **popular** or **mass culture** is the opposite of high culture. It is defined by a ruling class as shallow, worthless and disposable. It is manufactured by

KEY TERM

Mass culture (popular culture): the 'culture of the masses' as opposed to the high culture of a ruling elite, characterised as simple, worthless, mass-produced and disposable.

'culture professionals', such as music and film producers and television executives, on an industrial scale. In other words, it is mass-produced – the opposite of the 'individual crafting' of high culture. Elite groups often contrast modern low culture with the historical folk culture of the peasant class. While this was crude, bawdy and in many respects brutalised, it was at least *authentic* – a culture consumed by those who created it. Modern popular culture is often considered *inauthentic*; its creators have no great interest or emotional investment in their products. Such products are artificial, requiring no great effort to understand, and *formulaic* – once a cultural product becomes a popular success the 'winning formula' is simply reproduced in order to churn out increasingly inauthentic copies.

Low culture is further criticised for its commercialism – the only objective of its producers is to make money – and mass appeal. Low cultural products are aimed at the widest possible audience, not to enrich their lives but simply because the larger the audience, the greater the chances of a commercial success. To be as inclusive and profitable as possible, these products must appeal to the lowest common denominator. This means they have to be:

- intellectually undemanding
- predictable
- inoffensive
- simple to understand.

Davis (2000) notes that while high culture is 'the preserve of very few in society' and involves 'art, literature, music and intellectual thought which few can create or even appreciate, popular culture is regarded as mediocre, dull, mundane entertainment to be enjoyed by uneducated and uncritical "low-brow" hordes'.

How do some forms of popular culture appeal to the lowest common denominator?

While high culture must be unchanging and challenging, because it represents the height of cultural achievement in a society, popular culture does have its uses. It is a way of distracting the working classes from the real causes of their problems in capitalist society – low wages, exploitation and a lack of power. A popular culture that encourages passive consumption of the pre-packaged products of big business destroys vital communal aspects of folk culture. It also provides the lower classes with a false sense of happiness, togetherness and well-being. This stops them thinking too closely about how they are economically exploited by a ruling class.

TEST YOURSELF

Suggest one example of high culture and one example of popular culture in your society.

Meaning

We can also consider culture and identity in terms of what they *mean* in relation to things such as 'conspicuous consumption': what Jensen et al. (2000) describe as 'consumption that serves the principal purpose of impressing on others who and what you are'. One way of expressing cultural identity, therefore, is through a display of wealth that emphasises an individual's social status and position. More generally, consumption is linked to identity because it represents a 'background presentation' of the self. The consumption of goods and services comes with a 'substance of stories and experiences attached to them'. What we buy, how we dress and where we spend our leisure time all reveal something about who and what we are.

Brusdal and Lavik (2005) suggest that consumption in modern societies no longer simply involves people satisfying basic needs. Rather, it involves 'creating meaning and purpose in their life'. As Wearing and Wearing (2000) put it, commodities are increasingly used for what they mean 'in terms of identity and status'.

Neo-Marxist theory has also examined the meaning of culture and identity in terms of consumption in modern societies. Aldridge (2003), for example, notes that consumption in capitalist societies has two dimensions:

1 It involves the satisfaction of needs: the instrumental purchase of goods and services for practical purposes the car as a means of transport.
2 It has symbolic meaning: people exchange messages about class, status and identity the car as status symbol.

KEY TERM

NeoMarxist theory: more recent form of Marxism, sometimes called hegemonic Marxism, that gives greater importance to cultural factors in explaining human behaviour than traditional Marxism (where the emphasis is on economic relationships).

This approach suggests that people in modern societies are socialised into a set of pre-existing identity categories, such as gender, age and class. As a result, consumption choices are used to enhance people's general perception of both their own and other people's identities.

Postmodernist theories

For postmodernism, the 'old certainties' of modernity give way to the 'new uncertainties' of postmodernity – an idea illustrated by changing ideas about identity.

Centred identities are clear, relatively fixed and certain in terms of what is expected by others. In modern societies, for example, people have a clear (*centred*) idea about what it *means* to be 'a man' or 'a woman' because there are relatively few *choices* available to them in how these categories are defined. The social rules governing how to be young or old, male or female, upper class or working class are clear, consistent and rigidly enforced. Postmodernists argue that a key social change is the development of *global* economic and cultural influences, which have opened up societies, communities and individuals to new and different experiences, behaviours and ideas. In the UK, for example, just as people eat food from the USA, India and Thailand, wear clothes from China and listen to mp3 players from Japan, they have imported a range of cultural ideas, styles and fashions from around the globe. This cultural trend has resulted in fragmented identities.

Primary sources of identity such as class, age and gender have become less important as ways of defining 'the Self'; other sources, such as consumption, green and cyber identities, have become increasingly significant. Through exposure to different ways of living, behaving and being, traditional identity sources can no longer be sustained as *monolithic* entities (the idea that there is a correct way to 'be female' or 'elderly'). In postmodernity, there are so many ways to be these things that it is no longer possible to support, sustain and control simple, centred social identities. As a result the rules governing the correct way to play out these identities ('real men don't cry', 'a woman's place is in the home') are relaxed as people develop the freedom to both invent and adapt identities to their personal tastes and styles.

One outcome of fragmentation is that identities become decentred; people are less certain about how to behave. If there are many ways to be 'middle class', which is the 'right' way? Identity categories are also more easily combined to create a whole new range of hybrid identities. Some young British Asians, for example, define themselves as *Brasian* – a mix of both British and Asian cultures and identities. The downside to almost unlimited choice from which we pick and mix identities is uncertainty and confusion about who we are and how we are supposed to behave.

How does the idea of choice produce uncertainty?

People are still socialised into a variety of roles, values and norms, but social identities no longer set certain standards of belief and behaviour. Rather, individuals shape their lives through the development of personal identities that are always unique in some way, shape or form. While individual development (or *personal narrative*) is influenced by others, it is in no sense *determined* by these relationships. Whereas for structuralist sociology socialisation regulates the behaviour of the individual, postmodernists believe that socialisation encompasses a range of possibilities. Every

time new choices are added, the pattern of socialisation changes. Eventually, even tiny changes to an individual's life can have a significant outcome. This explains how and why those socialised in the same family in apparently very similar ways develop different adult personalities.

The decentring of culture and identity means that people are increasingly open to and accepting of different experiences, both 'the new', in the literal sense of something not previously seen or done, and 'the newly different', in the sense of changing how we relate to existing experiences. Rampton (2002) suggests that identity construction in postmodern societies is 'something that involves assembling, or piecing together a sense of identity from many changing options'. Each individual creates their identity through their consumption choices and practices – something illustrated by the difference between shopping at a market stall in a small village (modernity) and a vast mall situated on the edge of town (postmodernity). The market stall presents a narrow range of goods from which to choose, as was the case with identities in the past. Shopping malls present people with the freedom to browse huge spaces filled with a wide range of consumer goods – where they 'shop for identities'. As 'identity consumers', people have an expanding range of choices about who to be and how to express their sense of self. As Phillips (2003) puts it: 'Consumption is changing … It is now just as important to buy things for what they *mean* as what they *do*. Consciously or unconsciously, consumers make decisions about their purchases based on their identity or the identity they wish to project or communicate to others.'

ACTIVITY

Assess the extent to which your social identity is shaped by the things that you own. What other factors influence your social identity?

Summary points

- **The relationship between the individual and society can be understood in terms of three different approaches:**
  - structuralism, or macrosociology: society as a social force constraining behaviour
  - interactionism, or microsociology
  - structuration.

- **The 'nature–nurture' debate involves considering:**
  - biological and genetic (nature) influences.

- **Explanations for social development include:**
  - sociobiology and biogrammers
  - evolutionary psychology and social selection
  - neuropsychology and brain development and function
  - social psychology and the relationship between genetic and social factors
  - cultural learning (nurture).

- **Different types of socialisation include:**
  - primary
  - secondary.

- **Agencies of socialisation include:**
  - family
  - education
  - mass media
  - peer group
  - religion.

- **Societies are socially constructed as:**
  - physical spaces
  - mental spaces
  - imagined communities.

- **Cultures have two components:**
  - material
  - non-material.

- **Cultural order and stability are socially constructed around:**
  - roles
  - values
  - norms
  - beliefs
  - ideology
  - power.

- **Individuals locate themselves within cultures and societies through three types of social identity:**
  - class
  - gender
  - ethnic.

- **Modernist theories of culture and identity involve:**
  - certainty
  - centred identity
  - high and low/popular culture
  - taste cultures
  - conspicuous consumption
  - presentation of self
  - symbolic meaning.

- **Postmodern theories of culture and identity involve:**
  - uncertainty
  - decentred identity
  - fragmented identities
  - pick-and-mix identities
  - consumption cultures and choices
  - identity shopping.

Exam-style questions

a   What is meant by the term primary socialisation?   [2]

b   Describe how any two values may be linked to social roles in a society.   [4]

c   Explain why individuals have to be socialised into acceptable standards of behaviour.   [8]

d   'Neither structure nor action fully explains the relationship between the individual and society.' Assess this claim.   [11]

Total available marks 25

Chapter 3:
Methods of research

Learning objectives

The objectives of this chapter involve understanding:

- the difference between primary and secondary data and between quantitative and qualitative data
- the range of different research methods and sources of data used by sociologists and an assessment of their strengths and limitations
- the stages of research design: deciding on research strategy; formulating research problems and hypotheses; sampling and pilot studies; conducting the research; interpreting the results and reporting the findings.

Introduction

This chapter looks at the research process in terms of how sociologists design their research, from initial thoughts about what to study to ideas about how to study it. As part of this process we need to understand different types of data and their respective strengths and limitations, as well as the range of methods available to sociologists in their research.

The distinctions between primary and secondary data and between quantitative and qualitative data

Primary data

Primary data involves information collected *personally* by a researcher. They may use a range of methods, such as questionnaires, interviews and observational studies.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Primary data:** information collected *personally* by a researcher.

Strengths

The researcher has complete control over how data is collected, by whom and for what purpose. In addition, where a researcher designs and carries out their own research they have greater control over the reliability and validity of the data, as well as how representative it is.

Limitations

Primary research can be time-consuming to design, construct and carry out, especially if it involves personally interviewing large numbers of people. Primary research can also be expensive. In addition, the researcher may have difficulty gaining access to the target group. Some people may refuse to participate or, in the case of historical research, potential respondents are no longer alive.

Secondary data

Secondary data is data that already exists in some form, such as documents (government reports and statistics, personal letters and diaries) or previous research completed by other sociologists.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Secondary data:** data that already exists; data not personally generated by the researcher.

Strengths

The researcher is able to save time, money and effort by using existing data such as official government statistics about crime, marriage or divorce. There may also be situations, where secondary data is the *only* available resource, such as when researching suicide. Secondary data is also useful for historical and comparative purposes. Aries (1962), for example, used historical paintings and documents to support his argument that childhood was a relatively recent invention.

Some forms of secondary data, such as **official statistics**, may be highly reliable because the data is collected consistently, in the same way from the same sources. This type of data is also more likely to represent what it claims to represent. Many countries, including Britain, India and Mauritius, conduct a census of every household every 10 years, which collects representative data that can be used as a reliable secondary source.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Official statistics:** government-generated secondary source of data on areas such as crime, marriage and employment.

Limitations

Secondary data is not always produced with the needs of sociologists in mind. For example, official definitions of poverty, class or ethnicity may be different from

Why might personal websites involve unreliable secondary data?

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sociological definitions. Sources, such as personal documents, can be unreliable. Official crime statistics may not measure all crimes but only those reported to the authorities. Some forms of secondary data, such as historical documents, may only reflect the views of a single individual rather than representing wider opinions.

Quantitative data

Quantitative data expresses information numerically, in one of three ways:

- a raw number, such as the total number of people who live in a society
- a percentage, or the number of people *per 100*, in a population; for example, around 80% of Indians follow the Hindu religion
- a rate, or the number of people *per 1,000* in a population; a birth rate of 1, for example, means that for every 1,000 people in a population, one baby is born each year.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Quantitative data:** information expressed numerically that captures the 'who, what, when and where' of behaviour.

Strengths

The ability to express relationships statistically can be useful if the researcher does not need to explore the *reasons* for people's behaviour – if they simply need to compare the *number* of murders committed each year in different societies. Kruger (2003) argues that quantitative data 'allows us to summarize vast sources of information and make comparisons across categories and over time'. Statistical comparisons and **correlations** can test whether a hypothesis is true or false. They can also track changes in the behaviour of the same group over time (a longitudinal study).

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Correlation:** a statistical relationship between two or more variables that expresses a level of probability. A high (positive) correlation suggests the strong probability of a relationship; a low (negative) correlation suggests the probability of little or no relationship.

Matveev (2002) argues that quantitative research is more reliable because it is easier to repeat (*replicate*) the study. Standardised questions that do not change, for example, can be asked of different groups or the same group at different times. The results can then be quantified and compared. If the answers are the same, or very similar, then the research is more likely to be reliable. Quantitative data also makes it easier for the researcher to remain objective. They not need to have a close personal involvement with the subjects of the study, so their *personal biases* are less likely to intrude into the data-collection process.

Quantitative data, such as that collected from questionnaires, is intended to limit subjective judgements by posing uniform questions and even the choice of responses. Does quantitative data minimise subjective judgements?

Limitations

Quantification is often achieved by placing the respondent in an 'artificial social setting' in order to control the responses and the data collected. People rarely, if ever, encounter situations where they are asked to respond to a list of questions from a stranger, or have their behaviour observed in a laboratory. Some argue that it is impossible to capture people's 'normal' behaviour or collect 'real' responses when the subjects are placed in such an artificial environment.

A further problem is that quantitative data only captures a relatively narrow range of information. Day (1998) calls this the 'who, what, when and where' of people's behaviour. Quantitative data does not usually reveal the *reasons* for behaviour because it lacks

depth; the more detailed the behavioural data, the more difficult it is to quantify. As a result, quantitative data is often seen as superficial. As Kruger argues, it's 'difficult to get the real meaning of an issue by looking at numbers'.

McCullough (1988) suggests that a significant limitation of quantitative data is that 'issues are only measured if they are known prior to the beginning of the research'. To quantify behaviour, the researcher must decide in advance what is and is not significant in terms of the behaviour being studied. There is no opportunity to develop the research beyond its original boundaries. A final limitation is what Sorokin (1956) calls 'quantophrenia' – quantification for its own sake, regardless of whether it tells us anything useful about the behaviour being quantified.

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Briefly explain the idea that quantitative data captures only the ⊠who, what, when and where⊠of behaviour.

Qualitative data

Qualitative data aims to capture the *quality* of people's behaviour by exploring the 'why' rather than the 'what, when and where'. It involves questions about how people feel about their *experiences* and can be used to understand the meanings applied to behaviour. For example, in the USA Venkatesh (2009) studied a juvenile gang from the viewpoint of its members, while Goffman (1961) examined the experiences of patients in a mental institution. Both were trying to capture the *quality* of people's behaviour: what the subjects understand, how they feel and, most importantly, why they behave in particular ways in different situations.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Qualitative data:** non⊠numeric data that expresses the quality of a relationship.

Strengths

The objective of qualitative behaviour is to understand people's behaviour, so they must be allowed to talk and act freely. This allows the researcher to capture the complex reasons for behaviour. Qualitative methods, such as **participant observation** involve the researcher

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Participant observation:** research method that involves the researcher participating, openly or secretly, in the behaviour they are studying.

establishing a strong personal relationship or rapport with respondents in order to experience their lives. By collecting qualitative data in this way, researchers have greater freedom to study people in their 'normal' settings. The results are more likely to show how people really behave and what they really believe. The ability to capture the *richness* of people's lives through qualitative data is also an important strength. Matveev suggests that qualitative methods and data allow the researcher to gain a 'more realistic feel of the world that cannot be experienced through numerical data and statistical analysis'.

Limitations

Qualitative research focuses on the intensive study of relatively small groups, which may limit the opportunity for applying the data more widely – such groups may not be representative of anything but themselves. For similar reasons, it is difficult to compare qualitative data across time and location because no two groups will ever be qualitatively the same (the research does not compare 'like with like'). The depth and detail of the data also makes such research difficult to replicate, which means its reliability is generally lower than that of quantitative research.

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Why is qualitative data useful for capturing the meaning of people⊠s behaviour?

> **ACTIVITY**
>
> *Which of the following types of data do you think is most suitable to collect in sociological research? Give reasons for your answer.*
>
> 1 *quantitative*
> 2 *qualitative*
> 3 *quantitative and qualitative.*
>
> *Make a list of the strengths and limitations of each type of data.*

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Quantitative and qualitative methods and sources of data

Primary quantitative methods

Questionnaires

Questionnaires consist of written questions that take one of two forms:

- Postal questionnaires are normally completed in private; respondents write their answers without the presence of, or guidance from, the researcher.
- Researcher-administered questionnaires are completed in the presence of the researcher, with respondents answering questions verbally.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Questionnaire:** research method consisting of a list of written questions. Closed-ended questions provide possible answers from which the respondent can choose, while open-ended questions mean the respondent may answer in their own words.

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Questionnaires involve two basic types of question. *Closed-ended* or pre-coded questions involve the researcher providing a set of answers from which the respondent can choose. The researcher limits the responses that can be given, as in the following example:

Do you own a sociology textbook?	Yes	No	Don't Know
Code	[1]	[2]	[3]

There are variations on this type of question, such as those that measure respondent attitudes, but their defining characteristic is that they do not allow the respondent to develop an answer beyond the listed categories.

In *open-ended* questions, the researcher does not provide possible answers. Rather, the respondent answers in their own words. For example:

'What do you like about studying sociology?'

This type of question finds out more about the respondent's opinions and produces a limited form of qualitative data – although the main objective of a questionnaire is usually to *quantify* responses. Some questionnaires contain a mix of open and closed questions.

Strengths: Pre-coded questions make it easier to quantify data, because the options are already known, they are limited in number and easy to count. Such questions are also quick and easy to code and interpret; in some cases this is just a simple count of the number of responses. Pre-coded questions are useful when the researcher needs to contact large numbers of people quickly and efficiently. The respondents do the time-consuming work of completing the questionnaire.

Questionnaires can result in highly reliable data; because everyone answers the same questions, it it easy to replicate the research. The fact that respondents often remain anonymous means that the validity of the research is improved, especially when it involves questions about potentially embarrassing or criminal behaviour. In addition, without face-to-face interaction, there is less risk that the respondent will give biased answers or try to anticipate what the researcher wants to hear.

Are questionnaires reliable, unreliable, don't know?

Limitations: One significant practical problem with questionnaires is a low response rate, where only a small proportion of those receiving a questionnaire return it. This can result in a carefully designed sample becoming unrepresentative, because it effectively selects itself. There is also nothing the researcher can do if respondents ignore questions or respond incorrectly, such as choosing two answers when only one was requested.

The questionnaire format makes it difficult to examine complex issues and opinions. In addition, the lack of detailed information means that potentially significant data is not collected. These factors can limit the validity of the research. Another weakness is the fact that the researcher has to decide at the start of the study what is and is not significant. There is no opportunity to amend this later on.

The researcher has no way of knowing whether a respondent has understood a question properly. The researcher also has to trust that the questions mean the same thing to all respondents. While anonymity may encourage honesty, if someone other than the intended respondent completes the questionnaire, it will affect the validity and representativeness of the research. Some of these problems can be avoided by pilot studies (see below), but they cannot be totally eliminated.

A further problem involves (unintentionally) biased questions. These can take a number of forms:

- If a question has more than one meaning (*ambiguity*), people will be answering *different questions*. 'Do you agree most people believe the Prime Minister is doing a good job?' for example, is actually two questions; you could agree or disagree that the Prime Minister is doing a good job, but you could also agree or disagree with 'most people' belief'
- Leading questions suggest a required answer; by saying 'most people believe' for example, the question challenges the respondent to go against the majority.
- When giving respondents a range of answers, they must be weighted equally to avoid leading answers. The following possible answers to the question 'How do you rate Sociology as a subject?' for example, are too heavily weighted in favour of a *positive* answer:

Brilliant!	Incredible!	Fantastic!	Marvellous!	Not bad

- If an option is not precisely defined, it will mean different things to different people. For example, people may define the word 'occasionally' in different ways.
- Hypothetical questions ask respondents to imagine themselves in a position they do not actually hold

('If you were the Prime Minister how would you run the country?') and imaginary questions run the risk of producing imaginary answers.

Structured interviews

A **structured interview** is where the researcher asks questions to respondents in person. To achieve consistent and comparable results, the same questions are asked in the same order each time.

KEY TERM

Structured interview: set of standard questions asked by the researcher of the respondent. It is similar to a questionnaire, but is delivered by the researcher rather than completed by a respondent.

Strengths: One strength of the structured interview format is that potential reliability problems, such as respondents misunderstanding or not answering questions, can be resolved by the researcher. In addition, it avoids the problem of unrepresentative samples – the response rates will be 100%.

Limitations: Structured interviews involve prejudgements about people's behaviour and, like questionnaires, can also contain unintentionally biased questions. The lack of anonymity in an interview also contributes to two related limitations:

1. The interview effect occurs when a respondent tries to 'help' the researcher by providing answers designed to please. This reduces validity because respondents simply provide answers they *think* the researcher wants. This can be caused by a 'halo effect' a situation Draper (2006) describes as occurring when the *novelty* of being interviewed and a desire to reward the interviewer for giving the respondent the chance to experience it, results in *unintentionally* dishonest answers. Conversely, prestige bias occurs when a respondent gives an answer designed to *not make themselves look bad*. Opinion polls, for example, sometimes show respondents saying they would willingly pay more taxes if it helped to improve hospitals or care of the elderly, but in reality they vote for political parties that promise to reduce taxes.

2   The **researcher effect** refers to how the relationship between researcher and respondent may bias responses:

- *Aggressive* interviewers, for example, may introduce bias by intimidating a respondent into giving answers they do not really believe.
- *Status* considerations, based on factors such as gender, age, class and ethnicity, may also bias the data. A female respondent may feel embarrassed about answering questions about her sexuality posed by a male researcher.

KEY TERM

Researcher effect: also called the interviewer effect, this refers to how the relationship between researcher and respondent may bias responses and lead to invalid data.

TEST YOURSELF

Suggest one similarity and one difference between a structured interview and a questionnaire.

Content analysis

Content analysis has both quantitative and qualitative forms. What both types have in common is the study of *texts* (data sources such as television, written documents, etc.). Quantitative analysis of media texts, for example, uses statistical techniques to categorise and count the frequency of people's behaviour using a content analysis grid (Table 3.1).

KEY TERM

Content analysis: research method used for the systematic analysis of media texts and communications.

Although the grid below is a simple example, content analysis can be complex and wide-ranging. Meehan's (1983) study of US daytime television, for example,

identified and analysed the stereotypical roles played by female characters in soap operas. Harwood (1997) used content analysis to demonstrate that television viewers generally prefer to watch characters of their own age.

Strengths: Content analysis can identify underlying themes and patterns of behaviour that may not be immediately apparent. *Recurrent themes*, such as female associations with housework, in complex forms of social interaction can also be identified. Hogenraad (2003) used computer-based analysis to search historical accounts of war in order to identify recurring themes and words in the lead-up to conflicts. This suggests that quantitative analysis can have predictive qualities. By identifying a pattern of past behaviour that always leads to war, it would be possible to predict future conflict. Similarly, Kosinski et al. (2013) used content analysis of Facebook to show how a user's personal characteristics, such as their intelligence quotient (IQ), sexuality and political views, could be inferred from the things they 'liked'.

Content analysis can be used to reveal hidden social processes, such as how websites collect private information

Content analysis can also be used for 'concept mapping'. Page (2005) tracked how media professionals portrayed global warming in order to show how far global warming was reported in terms of 'natural' or 'social' causes. The quantification of such behaviour allows researchers to draw complex conclusions from quite simple data-collection techniques. The use of a *standardised framework* (the *grid*) also means that data can be checked and *replicated*.

Limitations: In some types of content analysis reliability may be limited because researchers must make subjective judgements about behaviour. Not only do they have to decide which categories will and will not be used, they may also have to judge which

Character	Gender	Age	Place and purpose	On screen
Azir Khan	Male	25	Office (employee)	30 seconds
Safiq Dhonna	Male	56	Office (customer)	43 seconds
Angelique Basson	Female	37	Shop (customer)	84 seconds

Table 3.1   Simple content analysis grid to record the behaviour of characters in a television programme

forms of behaviour fit which categories. This raises questions about whether all observed behaviour can be neatly categorised, In this instance, data can be difficult to replicate because different researchers studying the same behaviour may not categorise it in the same way.

Content analysis does not tell us very much about *how* or *why* audiences receive, understand, accept or ignore themes and patterns discovered by the research. This is why content analysis is often used in combination with a qualitative method such as semiology (see below).

Experiments

Experiments involve testing the relationship between different **variables** – things that can change under controlled conditions. The researcher changes (manipulates) independent variables to see if they produce a change in dependent variables that are not changed by the researcher; any changes must be caused by a change in the independent variable.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Variables:** factors that can be changed (manipulated) by the researcher to understand their effect on behaviour.

Experiments, therefore, are based on changing an independent variable and measuring any subsequent change in a dependent variable. This relationship that can be one of two types:

1. Correlations occur when two or more things happen at roughly the same time. These only *suggest* a relationship, however, because it is possible for them to occur by chance. For example, waking up in bed fully clothed may correlate with feeling unwell but that does not mean the former *causes* the latter. A third factor, such as drinking a lot of alcohol the previous evening, might be a cause of both.
2. **Causation** involves the idea that when one action occurs, another *always* follows. Causal relationships are powerful because they allow a researcher to predict the future behaviour of something.

> **KEY TERM**
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> **Causation:** the idea that when one action occurs, another *always* follows because the latter is caused by the former.

It is not always easy to distinguish between correlation and causation in the real world of sociological research, because things often happen at the same time by chance

or coincidence. However, there are two ways to separate correlation from causality:

1. Test and retest a relationship. The more times a test is replicated with the same result, the greater the chances that the relationship is causal.
2. Use different groups with exactly the same characteristics:
   - an **experimental group** whose behaviour is manipulated
   - a **control group** whose behaviour is not.

> **KEY TERMS**
>
> **Experimental group:** the subjects of an experiment. The researcher changes different variables to test their effect on behaviour.
>
> **Control group:** in an experiment, the characteristics of the control group exactly match those of the experimental group. While the behaviour of the experimental group is manipulated in some way, no attempt is made to similarly manipulate the control group. This allows comparisons to be made between the control and experimental groups.

Laboratory experiments

Bandura et al.'s (1963) 'Bobo doll' experiment, designed to measure the relationship between media violence and violent behaviour in young people, used four groups:

- Three experimental groups were shown a film depicting different types of violence
- A control group was not shown violent behaviour.

Each group was observed to see whether those *shown* violent behaviour then *played* violently with a specially designed inflatable doll. The experimental groups demonstrated violent behaviour, but the control group did not. This suggested at worst a correlation and, at best, a causal relationship between seeing violence and acting violently. A control group can be used to check that changes in the experimental groups' behaviour were not the result of chance. Without a control group, Bandura et al. could not have been sure that the violent behaviour of the groups shown violent films was not simply their normal behaviour.

This research is an example of a **laboratory experiment**, one that takes place in a closed environment where conditions

> **KEY TERM**
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> **Laboratory experiment:** experiment that takes place in a closed environment where conditions can be precisely monitored and controlled.

can be precisely monitored and controlled. This ensures that no 'outside' or uncontrolled variables affect the relationship between the dependent and independent variables.

Field/natural experiments

Laboratory experiments are rare in sociology, because they raise ethical issues and questions about validity. Therefore, a more common type is the **field experiment**, which is conducted outside of a closed, controlled environment.

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It is very difficult to control all possible independent variables in a natural setting, which means that natural experiments tend to establish correlations rather than causation. However, the basic principles of the experiments are the same. Researchers use dependent and independent variables to test a hypothesis or answer a research question:

- To test the hypothesis that teachers⬚ xpectations influence how well their pupils do in school, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) conducted a study of low educational achievement in Mexican children. The dependent variable was their level of achievement and the independent variable was the expectations teachers had about the ability of their pupils. Rosenthal and Jacobson manipulated the independent variable by pretending to be psychologists who could, on the basis of a sophisticated IQ test, identify children who would display ⬚ramatic intellectual growth⬚In fact, they tested the pupils and then *randomly* classed some students as ⬚ater developers⬚The researchers informed the teachers of their ⬚indings⬚They retested the pupils at a later date and discovered that the IQ scores of those pupils whose teachers believed were ⬚ate⬚developing high flyers⬚ad significantly improved.
- Garfinkel⬚ (1967) breaching experiments showed how people ⬚onstruct reality⬚through everyday routines and assumptions. In one experiment, student researchers (the independent variable) were sent home with

A specially designed inflatable doll can be used in laboratory experiments to test triggers for violent behaviour in young people

instructions to behave as if their parents (the dependent variable) were strangers and to observe and record how the parents⬚behaviour changed towards their ⬚ddly behaving⬚offspring.

Strengths: Laboratory experiments are easier to replicate than field experiments because the researcher has more control over both the research conditions and the variables being tested. Standardised research conditions give experiments a high level of reliability. Experiments can also create powerful, highly valid statements about behaviour based on cause-and-effect relationships that can be extended from the lab to understand people's behaviour in the real world. Similarly, field experiments can be used to manipulate situations in the real world to understand the underlying reasons for everyday behaviour.

Limitations: It can be difficult to control all possible influences on behaviour, even in a laboratory setting. A simple awareness of being studied, for example, may introduce an uncontrolled independent variable into an experiment. The **Hawthorne (or observer) effect**, named after a study by Mayo (1933) at the Hawthorne factory in Chicago, refers to changes in people's behaviour directly resulting from their knowledge of being studied. The working conditions at the factory were manipulated in different ways, such as changing the brightness of the

lighting and the temperature in the factory. However, the results were always the same: the productivity of the workers increased. As Draper argues, 'the important effect here was the feeling of being studied'.

KEY TERM

Hawthorne (or observer) effect: changes in people's behaviour that result from their knowledge of being observed.

The ecological validity of experiments can also be questioned because they take place in an artificial environment. A controlled experiment is an *unusual* situation and respondents may behave differently in a laboratory or field setting. One solution to this problem is to conduct the experiment secretly, as in the case of Milgram (1974) or Rosenhan (1973), but this raises ethical questions about the right to experiment on people who may be unwitting (and unwilling) participants.

How might the knowledge of being watched change people's behaviour?

Longitudinal surveys

These are a form of comparative analysis that involves tracking changes among a representative sample over time, from a few months to many years. The same group is analysed at different stages in their lives, using methods ranging from questionnaires to non-participant observation.

Like participant observation studies (see below), **longitudinal surveys** are carried out over a significant period of time; they can last many years. However, in longitudinal surveys the researcher remains detached from the study group, having contact with the research subjects only on a limited basis at set intervals. By contrast, with participant observation studies the researcher usually maintains more or less complete contact with the study group throughout the period of the research.

KEY TERM

Longitudinal survey: a form of comparative analysis that involves tracking changes among a representative sample over time.

Strengths: Kruger argues that one strength of longitudinal surveys is that they can be used 'to summarize vast sources of information and facilitate comparisons across categories and over time'. This is because they exploit the ability of quantitative methods to identify and track personal and social changes. Hills et al. (2010), for example, used data from the English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing to analyse the relationship between mortality rates and levels of wealth. The study found a strong correlation between low wealth and premature death. This demonstrates a significant strength of longitudinal studies: the ability to reveal trends that would otherwise remain hidden.

A further advantage of longitudinal surveys is that they can generate reliable representative samples to suggest causal relationships. Power et al.'s (2011) 10-year study of 200 families raising children in highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, for example, found a 'clear cause and effect between physical or environmental improvements to an area and the well-being of its families'.

Limitations: Sample attrition, or the number of people who withdraw from the original sample over time, is a major limitation of these surveys. High levels of attrition can reduce the representativeness of the sample over time – a problem that grows the longer the study lasts.

While longitudinal studies can identify trends or allow researchers to make correlations and causal connections between phenomena, such as income and life expectancy, they are only ever a glimpse of behaviour at any given moment. They can, therefore, be criticised for lacking depth and validity.

TEST YOURSELF

Suggest one reason why a researcher might want to study the same group at different times.

Cross-sectional surveys

This type of survey is explicitly designed to produce a 'snapshot' of behaviour at any given time:

- Qualitative forms are generally descriptive, with the objective being to illustrate a particular type of behaviour. It may involve, for example, looking at a certain

65

population characteristic, such as suicide, income or poverty, applied to a single country, a large area within a country or a specific feature of different countries.

■ Quantitative forms, the most common type, are analytic: the objective is to analyse both correlations and causations between different phenomena. Durkheim's study of suicide, for example, used cross-sectional surveys taken from different societies to build up a comparative analysis of variable suicide rates. He used these as the basis for a theoretical explanation of different types of suicide.

KEY TERM

Cross-sectional survey: research method focused on identifying groups that share broad similarities, such as level of education, and measuring differences in a single variable; whether, for example, people with a high level of education have higher rates of suicide than those with a lower level of education.

Both types of **cross-sectional survey** normally require representative samples because one of the main objectives is to make generalisations about behaviour. In this respect, cross-sectional surveys tend to focus on identifying groups that share broad similarities, such as income, education and gender. They measure differences using a single variable, such as death or suicide rates. By comparing standardised groups, it is possible to explain differences in death or suicide rates using variations in standardised variables – whether, for example, people with a high level of education have higher rates of suicide than those with a lower level of education.

Secondary quantitative methods

Official statistics

Official statistics created and published by governments are a major source of secondary quantitative data used by sociologists to examine trends and patterns within and between societies:

■ Patterns of behaviour may be picked up by statistical analysis because they provide a broad overview of behaviour across potentially wide areas: local, national and international. Durkheim (1897), for example, identified distinct patterns to suicidal behaviour based on a **comparative analysis** of official suicide statistics across a range of different societies.

■ In terms of trends, statistical data drawn from different years can be used to understand how something has

changed. For example, education statistics can track changes in levels of achievement. Statistics can also be used to track changes in behaviour, such as before and after the introduction of a new law.

KEY TERM

Comparative analysis: a comparison of different cultures, cases and situations to understand their similarities and differences.

Statistics can be used for comparisons within groups, such as differences in middle- and working-class family size, and between societies. Bakewell (1999) suggests that official refugee statistics are useful because they quickly and easily demonstrate the size and scale of an international social problem.

Strengths: In practical terms, official statistics may be the only available source covering a particular area of study, such as suicide. In addition, data that would be costly, time-consuming and difficult to collect, such as statistics on marriage, divorce or crime, is readily available – especially since the development of the internet. Another strength of official statistics is their representativeness. As Marshall (1998) notes, statistical 'data are almost invariably nationally representative, because they are obtained from complete censuses or very large-scale national sample surveys'.

More theoretically, many official statistical sources, in areas including crime, unemployment, marriages, births and divorces, are recorded by law. Data is usually collected in the same way from the same sources (*iteration*). This adds to its reliability because research can be replicated and compared. Although definitions, of areas such as 'unemployment' may change over time, most – such as 'birth' or 'murder' – remain the same. Some statistical data has low validity, but this is not true of all official statistics. For example, data about marriage, divorce, birth and death can record these events with a high degree of accuracy.

Sociologists use the term 'hard statistics' to refer to quantitative data that demonstrates such accuracy. For example, statistics about the number of divorces in a society can be viewed as 'hard' evidence. This is because a divorce has to be legally registered and so clear and accurate records are available. Statistics that are considered to be less accurate are referred to as 'soft statistics'. Official statistics about the unemployment rate may be 'soft' in, because there are different ways of

defining 'unemployment'; depending on which definition is used, the figures may vary greatly.

Limitations: Apart from not providing any great depth or detail, official statistics involve of problems of validity due to what governments include in or exclude from published data. Such data may only give a *partial picture of reality* for two reasons:

1   While official crime statistics provide valuable data about crimes reported to the police, they tell us little or nothing about the ⊠dark figure of crime⊠⊠crimes that are not reported or recorded. Research has shown that in many societies as much as 75% of all crime ⊠s in the dark figure⊠

2   Statistical data does not reveal much about the *reasons* for people⊠ behaviour. For example, although we have a reasonably precise figure for the number of year⊠on⊠year murders in countries around the world, this data tells us little about *why* people kill each other.

Although quantitative data is normally considered more *objective* than qualitative data, its significance must always be *interpreted* by researchers; they have to decide what the data *means*. A statistical rise in crime, for example, may be the result of:

■   a real rise
■   a different way of defining and counting crime
■   police targeting certain types of crime and arresting more people.

Governments occasionally change the definition of key concepts. Different governments may also define a concept differently, as Bakewell discovered in relation to official definitions of 'a refugee' around the world. Such changes and differences bring into question the reliability of the data, because when making statistical comparisons the researcher must ensure they are comparing like with like. Two further problems arise over how behaviour is officially categorised:

■   To estimate the extent of ⊠knife crime⊠data is increasingly taken from *hospital records* because victims do not always report the incidents. While this official data gives us an idea of the general extent of knife wounding, it does not distinguish between deliberate and accidental wounding, for example.
■   The categories used by governments to define things such as social class or poverty are not necessarily the same as those used by sociologists.

Does having to legally record statistical information make it more reliable?

Primary qualitative methods

Semi⊠Structured (⊠focused⊠) interviews

Nichols (1991) defines this method as 'an informal interview, not structured by a standard list of questions. Researchers are free to deal with the topics of interest in any order and to phrase their questions as they think best.' **Semi-structured interviews**, therefore, allow a respondent to talk at length and in depth about a particular subject. The focus or topic of the interview is decided by the researcher. The interview has a structure or 'interview schedule' – the areas the interviewer wants to focus on – but there is no list of specific questions. Different respondents may be asked different questions on the same topic, depending on how the interview develops. The objective is to *understand* things from the respondent's viewpoint, rather than make generalisations about behaviour.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Semi⊠Structured interview:** research method in which a respondent is encouraged to talk at length about a particular subject. Also called focused interviews because the topic is decided by the researcher and is the focus of their questions.

Open-ended questions are frequently used in semi-structured interviews. Some of these are created before the interview, while others arise naturally from whatever the respondent wants to talk about. For example, if the interview focused on understanding family life, the interviewer might begin with a question like: 'Tell me about your family.' If the respondent then mentions their children the interviewer might decide to continue with

a question such as: 'Tell me about your relationship with your children.'

Strengths: As there are no specific questions prepared, there is less risk of the researcher predetermining what will be discussed. Where the respondent can talk about things that interest them it is possible to pick up ideas and information that may not have occurred to the interviewer or of which they had *no prior knowledge*. This new knowledge can be used to inform subsequent interviews with different respondents and to suggest further questions.

By allowing respondents to develop their ideas, the researcher tries to discover what someone really means, thinks or believes. The focus on issues that the *respondent* considers important results in a much greater depth of information. This may increase the validity of the data as it is more likely that the research will achieve its real aims. Oatey (1999) suggests that 'freedom for the respondent to answer how they wish is important in giving them a feeling of control in the interview situation'. Within limits, face-to-face interaction allows the researcher to help and guide respondents. To explain, rephrase or clarify a question or answer, for example, may improve overall validity.

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Suggest two differences between structured and semi-structured interviews.

Limitations: This method demands certain skills in the *researcher*, such as asking the right questions, establishing a good rapport and thinking quickly about relevant question opportunities. It also requires skill from the *respondent*; an inarticulate respondent will probably be unable to talk openly and in detail about the research topic. Oatey also argues that open-ended questions 'can cause confusion either because of the lack of understanding of the question or by the lack of understanding of the respondent's answer'.

Semi-structured interviews are not only more time-consuming than questionnaires but the large amounts of information they produce must also be analysed and interpreted. This data is rarely tightly focused on a particular topic, so a researcher may spend a lot of time analysing data that has little or no use to the study.

A theoretical problem is the idea that all interviews are *reconstructions*. Respondents must *remember* and *recount* past events, and this creates problems for both researcher and respondent. While a researcher has no way of

knowing if someone is telling the truth, a further problem is *imperfect recall*; it can not only be difficult to remember things that may have happened months or years ago, but memories can also be *selective* – respondents only recall those things that seem important to them.

Finally, semi-structured interviews lack *standardisation*; the same questions are not necessarily put to all respondents and similar questions may be phrased differently. Can reduce the reliability of the data and make it difficult to generalise the research.

Unstructured interviews

Unstructured interviews are built on a general idea or topic that the researcher wants to understand. Respondents are encouraged to talk freely about the things they feel are important. Kvale (1996) states that 'behaviour is understood from the perspective of those being studied; their perceptions, attitudes and experiences are the focus'.

> **KEY TERM**
>
> **Unstructured interviews:** free-form interview method where the objective is to get the respondent to talk, without prompting or interruption, about whatever they feel is important about a topic.

Strengths: The researcher's limited input means that data reflects the interests of the respondent. It is therefore more likely to be an accurate and detailed expression of their beliefs. Hamid et al. (2010) used this method in their study of young Pakistani females because 'unstructured interviews helped elaborate on the topics of participants' choice [marriage and sexuality] and probed further their concerns'. This technique avoids the problem of the researcher prejudging what constitutes important or irrelevant data.

The researcher must establish a strong *rapport* with respondents. If this rapport is achieved, people who may be naturally wary of being studied can open up to the researcher, allowing sensitive issues to be explored in depth. Hamid et al. established a relationship with their respondents by meeting them a number of times before their research started. This 'helped the participants to open up … and discuss sensitive issues regarding sexuality and growing up with reference to their marriage and other related topics of their choice'. If the research is relatively informal it can take place somewhere the respondent will feel at ease, such as in their own home. For Hamid et al. this helped 'overcome the barrier of talking about sensitive issues'.

How are unstructured interviews like a conversation?

Limitations: Unstructured interviews demand skills of both the researcher and the respondent. The researcher must resist the temptation to influence, encourage or interrupt. Respondents must be able to express themselves clearly and understandably. The researcher, by design, has little control over the direction of the interview and the conversation may stray into areas that later prove irrelevant to the research. The interviews are time-consuming in themselves, but so is analysing and interpreting all the data they generate. Reliability also tends to be low because the *non-standardised* format makes the interview impossible to replicate.

A more severe limitation is the argument that all forms of interviewing are inherently biased by interview effects. Cohen and Taylor (1977) argue that the most significant of these effects is that through the act of questioning people, a series of *status manipulations* come into play. The outcome of this is that respondents try to please the researcher by telling them what they believe they want to hear.

> **TEST YOURSELF**
>
> Suggest two advantages to understanding behaviour from the respondent☒ point of view.

Group interviews

Group interviews (also called focus groups) involve respondents gathering to discuss a topic decided in advance by the researcher. These groups may be selected as representative samples – a cross-section of society,

> 🔑 **KEY TERM**
>
> **Group interviews:** also called focus groups, these involve respondents discussing a topic as a group rather than individually.

for example – or they may simply represent a group the researcher wants to explore in detail. Nichols suggests that focus groups may also be same-sex and from similar backgrounds to prevent gender and class variables affecting the reliability and validity of the data. For Morgan (1997), the effectiveness of group interviewing is based on:

- an interview structure with clear guidelines for the participants, to avoid arguments within the group
- predetermined questions through which the experiences of participants can be explored
- interaction within the group, which Gibbs (1997) argues gives ☒nique insights into people☒ shared understandings of everyday life☒

Strengths: In group interviews, the researcher can help the discussion. They can:

- control the pace and scope of the discussion
- plan a schedule that allows them to focus and refocus the discussion
- intervene to ask questions, stop or redirect aimless discussions
- create a situation that reflects how people naturally share and discuss ideas.

Gibbs argues that one strength of this method is the ability to 'draw on respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions'. In a group, respondents are encouraged to elaborate and reflect on their beliefs. Pain et al's (2000) study of the fear of crime used this format to:

- generate large amounts of detailed information quickly and efficiently
- uncover attitudes, beliefs and ideas that would not have been revealed by less flexible methods.

Kitzinger (1995) suggests that group interaction 'enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understanding of their specific experiences'. Respondents can also 'explore solutions to a particular problem as a group rather than as individuals'. Morley (1980) felt that individual interviews were 'abnormal situations' for most people, but that group interviews created an environment that encouraged people to talk at length.

Limitations: The researcher must control the behaviour of the group to allow people to speak freely and openly about an issue while maintaining the focus of the research. This, Gibbs notes, means 'good levels of group leadership and interpersonal skill are required'. The more people there are to co-ordinate, the more likely it is that there will be