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# Unit 1: Theory and Methods

## Objectives

*At the end of this unit you should be able to:*

- understand the main theoretical approaches to the study of sociology
- describe the main stages in sociological research
- describe the main methods used in sociological research and be able to evaluate them referring to practical, ethical and theoretical issues
- understand the main types of information and data that sociologists use, including quantitative and qualitative data and primary and secondary data.



## Introduction

Sociology tries to understand and explain the relationship between people and the societies they live in. A society is the group to which you belong; it can be a small unit like the family or a large one like your country, and anything in between. People can be grouped by the things they have in common: for instance, their level of education or their religious attitudes, whether they are recent migrants to a country or whether they are male or female. The subject matter of sociology consists of the actions and beliefs of people in social groups, the relationships between social groups and the ways in which people's actions can change society, as well as the ways that social change in the whole society affects different social groups.

To study the complex behaviour of people in social groups sociologists use different kinds of tools. The main tools are of two types: theories about society and methods used to explore those theories. This unit looks at the main theories and methods used. Notice that the theories are based on very different ideas about what the relationship between people and the societies they live in could be and the methods they use are also very different from each other. To study sociology you need to have a good understanding of these differences as well as understanding the content of each main theory discussed here. This book will try to help by pointing out the important features of each.



### KEY TERMS

**Structuralism:** an approach focusing on the large-scale social structures in which people play defined roles.

**Macro/micro approaches:** macro approaches focus on the large scale of whole societies, micro approaches on small-scale social interaction.



Emile Durkheim

## How do different sociologists interpret society?

### Structuralist and interpretivist approaches: the individual, identity and society

#### Structuralism

There are two main approaches to sociology: **structuralist** and interpretivist. Structuralist approaches focus on large-scale (**macro**) social structures and institutions rather than individuals. Structuralists see societies as a set of structures in which individuals play definite roles. In this approach it is the social roles and the actions that people carry out in fulfilling these roles that are important, not the individuals themselves. Sociologists use these theories to discover social structures that may be hidden from individuals.

A well-known example of a structuralist approach is the work of Emile Durkheim on suicide published over 100 years ago. He chose to study suicide because we usually think of it as an individual act motivated by private troubles but he wanted to show it is linked to the way societies are organised. Durkheim noticed that suicide rates – the proportion of the population who committed suicide each year – in a country did not change much. However, there were significant differences in suicide rates between countries. Durkheim tried to show that social forces (or the social causes of actions) lay behind individual actions like suicide. These social forces led to the different suicide rates. A social force, for example, is the connection between individuals and support networks such as families and religious organisations. Strong connections lead to lower suicide rates and weak connections lead to higher rates. Suicide rates thus show us something about the nature of a society, not about individuals.

Durkheim was working within the framework of the positivist method that is used in natural science. Like other structuralists, he looked for

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### KEY TERMS

**Correlation:** when two variables are related to each other but causation cannot be proved; for example, ill-health is related to poverty. This is not a causal relationship because some sick people are not poor and some poor people are not sick.

**Causation:** where a strict link can be proved between variables in a time sequence; such as, heating water to 100°C causes it to boil. Causation is hard to find in sociology.

**Interpretivism:** approaches that start at the level of the individual, focusing on small-scale phenomena and usually favouring qualitative methods.

**Identity:** how a person sees themselves, and how others see them, for example as a girl and a student.

**correlations** and **causation** between variables. According to the structuralist approach, individuals have little freedom of thought or action (though they may think that they do). Society controls our lives. Individuals are puppets, and hidden social forces are pulling the strings that make individuals behave as they do.

### Interpretivism

In contrast, interpretivists start with the individual rather than society and focus on the **micro** rather than the macro scale. **Interpretivists** believe individuals are in control, pulling the strings of society. People make the societies they live in and change them through their actions. We are born into particular societies and learn the norms and values of the society we grow up in but we do not have to accept them, and the values themselves also change continuously over time as people's ideas change. Interpretivists are interested in how individuals make sense of society and of social actions – the things that they do.

Interpretivists start their study of society from the level of the individual, unlike structuralists. They are interested in how people see themselves and what makes up their **identity** (who we think we are). In all societies we are given labels, and these can be part of our identities. We choose among the identities that are socially available to us and reject others, and these labels carry different meanings for us. For instance, someone may see themselves primarily through their religious identity or their age identity. Similarly, we may see other people in terms of labels that they might accept or reject. Socially available labels include:

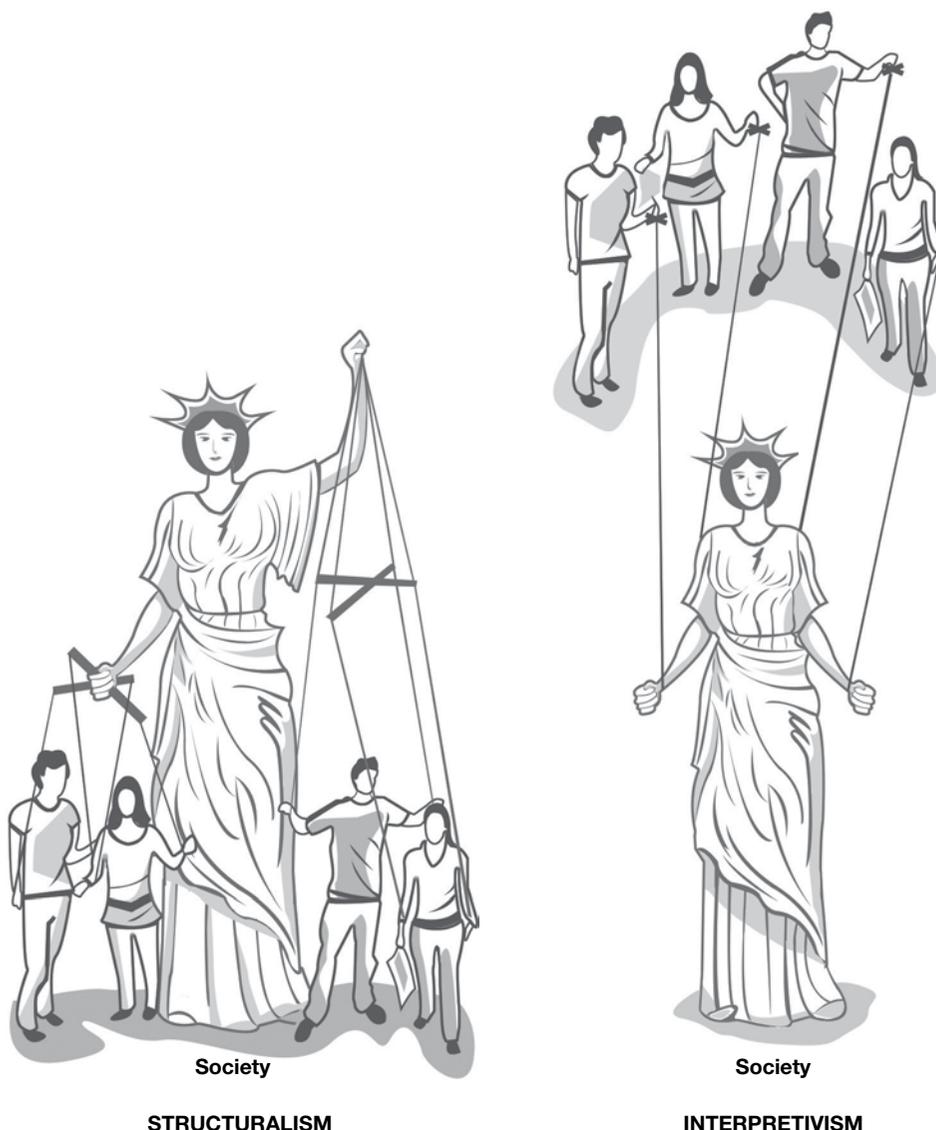
- sex and gender identities
- ethnic identity – membership of an ethnic group
- age
- social class
- nationality
- occupation
- roles within a family, such as parent
- membership of a religious or political organisation.

We have some choice about aspects of our identities and may also decide for ourselves how important different aspects of our identities are to us. In the case of national identity, some people may be very patriotic but others may not see their nationality as important, or may identify more strongly with a religious or ethnic identity. So interpretivists believe our identities are not imposed by society, as structuralists would argue, but come from the interaction between our own thoughts and actions and those of others. Our identities bind us to certain social groups and to certain ways of behaving.

Interpretivists use research methods that try to discover what meanings people give to their actions and how they interpret the world around them. Interpretivist researchers try to understand how people see the world. For example, in researching crime an interpretivist would want to know what the people involved had to say about what they did, not just what happened.

### TEST YOURSELF

- 1 Summarise the main differences between structuralism and interpretivism.
- 2 The picture on page 9 shows puppets and strings. Think of another way of showing the different approaches in a visual way, using as few words as possible.



Approaches to studying society and individuals

### How different theories on conflict and consensus create alternative sociological perspectives

Sociologists have different views on the nature of society and social life. These are referred to as **perspectives**. In this section we discuss the different underlying ideas about conflict and consensus in functionalist, Marxist and feminist perspectives.

#### Consensus and conflict

One major difference between perspectives in sociology is the extent to which they emphasise either social **consensus** or social **conflict**.

There is social consensus when people generally share values and there are no major disagreements between the main groups. This is possible only if either all the groups in a society have similar levels of wealth, status and power or if it is widely accepted that it is right for each group to have the level of wealth, status and power that it does. A society built on consensus will be stable and harmonious. The values that are shared may be based on a religion or a belief system, or perhaps on political



#### KEY TERMS

**Perspectives:** ways of viewing social life from different points of view.

**Consensus:** basic agreement on a set of shared values.

**Conflict:** disagreement between groups with different interests.

ideas, and there are likely to be shared practices and rituals that bring everyone together and make them feel a sense of belonging so they identify strongly with their society and its values.

Social conflict occurs when major disagreements arise about important issues such as wealth, status and power. In a society based on conflict there will be significant and important differences between groups, which may become open conflicts, and there will be no overall set of shared values held by all groups. A society based on conflict will be unstable, though there may be long periods where one group in power is able to suppress others that challenge it.

Because interpretivist approaches are more interested in individuals and small-scale (micro) social interaction than in the overall nature of a society, the debate about conflict and consensus does not apply to them. However, this means that they are sometimes criticised for not taking into account the wider issues such as power, which may influence the situations they study.

### Functionalism

The main sociological perspective based on a consensus view of society is functionalism. Functionalists emphasise social functions and ask, 'What function does this aspect of society carry out that keeps this society stable and allows it to continue?' They might say, for example:

- The function of schools is to give young people the skills they need for work, which helps the economy of a society.
- The function of families is to socialise children into the norms and values of the society so that the next generation will have these values.
- The function of prisons is to remove temporarily from society people who do not keep the laws and who therefore upset the smooth running of society.

Functionalists perceive human society as being like the human body. This is called the organic or biological analogy because it compares society to a living organism. The different parts of the human body – the brain, heart, liver, skin and so on – all have jobs to do to keep you healthy. In the same way, each part of society is seen as having functions that all help the society as a whole to be healthy and survive. If something goes wrong in one part of your body it may affect other parts and it may be a warning sign that you need to do something. So, in a human society, an increase in crime might become a problem that needs to be tackled, perhaps by getting schools to be better at teaching people to obey the law.

Functionalism was the most important perspective in sociology for many years, especially in the early and mid-20th century. It was the way that most sociologists thought societies worked. It is often referred to as structural functionalism. The main sociologist associated with it is the American Talcott Parsons (1902–1979).

### Marxism

Marxism is a perspective that argues that modern industrial societies are based on a fundamental conflict between different social classes. Marxists argue that there is a permanent and continuous conflict of interest between social classes that takes the form of strikes and other protests by the working class, and can lead to revolution. Marxists refer to the two main classes as the bourgeoisie (the owners of wealth and property) and the proletariat (the working class). The bourgeoisie has power and wealth and exploits and oppresses the proletariat, who are 'wage slaves'. This means that the proletariat have no choice but to work if they are to

survive but that they are never paid the full value of their work – this is taken by the ruling class as profits.

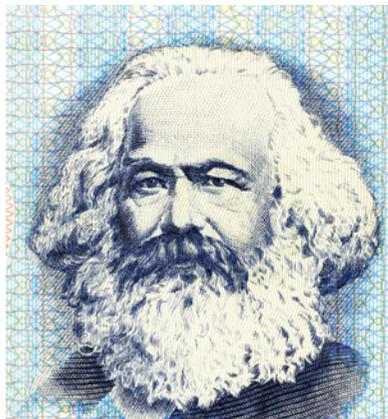
Where functionalists look at parts of society and see how they keep society stable and harmonious, Marxists look at the same phenomena and see how they allow the bourgeoisie to keep their wealth and power. Marxists might say, for example:

- Schools ensure that some people fail and that they think this is their own fault so that they then accept a low position in society.
- The mass media distract people's attention from what is really going on and make people interested only in celebrities, sport and trivial issues.

So Marxists agree with functionalists that parts of society have functions although they disagree completely about their interpretation.

Marxism is much more than a sociological perspective; it is also important in politics, history and economics. Marxism inspired the political movements of socialism and communism, which involve attempts to create new societies based on equality rather than class divisions. Marxists are in favour of radical social changes that will end exploitation and make everyone equal. Critics of Marxism argue that this is probably impossible and that the attempts to create equal societies have led to even greater oppression.

Marxism is named after Karl Marx (1818–1883). Marxist ideas have developed considerably since his time, as later Marxists have tried to adapt his ideas to explain what has happened since, particularly why the revolutions in modern industrial societies that Marx expected did not happen. Modern Marxist writers are often called neo-Marxists.



Karl Marx

### Feminism

A second sociological perspective that emphasises conflict is feminism. Like Marxists, feminists see a fundamental division between two groups in society, but for feminists this division is between the two sexes rather than two classes. Feminists argue that it is men who control society and who have wealth and power in all aspects of society – in relationships, families, the world of work, education, and so on. The control of society by men is called patriarchy. Feminist sociologists research on gender differences; for example, they are interested in why, although girls tend to do better in school than boys, it is still boys who, when they are men, will be in higher paid jobs.

Like Marxism, feminism is much more than a sociological perspective; it is important in other subjects and it is a broad social and political movement with a long history. Feminists have campaigned for equality between men and women for many years. They have achieved advances in many societies but argue that there is not yet full equality. Feminism has sometimes been seen as being anti-men but many feminists argue that equality will bring benefits for men as well.

Feminism covers such a very wide range of ideas that there are several strands within feminism. They include:

- liberal feminists, who believe that major advances have been made and that equality can be reached through further changes such as new laws; their view does not emphasise conflict
- radical feminists, who believe that despite these advances, societies remain fundamentally patriarchal and men still have power; though this may now be less obvious, radical changes are still needed



#### TOP TIP

Throughout this book you will study the ways that these different approaches have been applied to different topics in sociology (families, education, crime and so on). For questions on theory and methods, you can bring in relevant examples from any of the topic areas.

- Marxist (or socialist) feminists, who bring together the insights of both Marxism and feminism, focusing on how class and gender work together to produce fundamental divisions in society.

**TEST YOURSELF**

- 1 Marxism and feminism are both broad political movements as well as sociological perspectives. Why might those who adopt these perspectives want to change society as well as study it?
- 2 How might Marxists and functionalists interpret differently the functions of (a) the government and (b) the police force?

**ACTIVITY: discussion**

*Which of the consensus and conflict approaches discussed here do you think is the most relevant today? Be prepared to justify your choice.*

## How do sociologists study society?

### The distinction between positivist and interpretivist approaches to research methods

In all subjects the methods used to carry out research are important. Sociologists use a range of different methods. They choose methods that are appropriate for what is being studied and for what they want to find out. If the methods are appropriate and have been implemented well other people are more likely to accept that the research findings add to our knowledge. If the method has not been chosen and carried out well, the research will be criticised by others and the findings may be rejected.

#### Positivism

**Positivism** is an approach that concentrates on producing **quantitative data**, usually in the form of statistics. It is based on the belief that, as far as possible, sociology should use the same research methods as the natural sciences such as physics, chemistry and biology.

This approach in sociology goes back to 19th and early 20th century sociologists such as Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim. They witnessed the growing ability of the natural sciences to understand and predict the workings of the natural world. They believed that there were laws of social behaviour that could be discovered by using similar methods and so they advocated the use of scientific methods in sociology.

Scientists try to be objective. They try to be neutral and to discover the truth rather than being guided by their values and by what they would like to be true. If a researcher can be objective the results will be **unbiased** and should be an accurate account of what really happened. Critics have pointed out that this is probably impossible; for example, scientists' research is influenced by their values from the very beginning, when they choose to research something they think is important. Positivists reply that even scientists cannot attain **objectivity** yet sociologists should always aim to be objective.

Positivists favour experiments, as these are typical methods used in the natural sciences. However, it is often difficult to carry out experiments in sociology. Positivists tend to use instead social surveys and questionnaires, which also produce quantitative data.

**KEY TERMS**

**Positivism:** an approach to sociology based on studying society in a scientific manner.

**Quantitative data:** information and facts that take a numerical form.

**Bias:** prejudice that distorts the truth when research is influenced by the values of the researcher or by decisions taken about the research, such as the sampling method used.

**Objectivity:** absence of bias; the researchers do not allow their values or feelings to influence the research.



Surveys using questionnaires

### Interpretivism

Interpretivists take a different view from positivists. They argue that there is a difference between the subject matter of sociology and natural science. Humans are active, conscious beings; they make choices. What makes a social event social is that those involved in it give it broadly the same meaning.

It follows that if we want to understand people's actions we have first to understand these actions in the way that the participants do. Social reality does not exist separately from human actions. It is embedded in social actions. Sociologists need to understand how people make sense of the social reality around them before they can understand their actions. Interpretivists say that if the subject of sociology is so different from that of the natural sciences, sociologists need to use different methods. Positivist methods are not appropriate. Positivists may be able to describe the social world, but interpretivists think it is more important to understand why people behave as they do.

Where positivists prefer experiments and surveys, interpretivists prefer to use unstructured interviews and participant observation, which are more helpful in uncovering why people behave as they do. For example, a positivist may be able to say how many people commit what types of crime, while an interpretivist will want to find out why they commit crimes.



An interview

## TEST YOURSELF

- 1 What do you think positivists mean by the 'laws of social behaviour'?
- 2 Why do interpretivists prefer different research methods to those preferred by positivists?

### The main steps in devising and implementing a research strategy

In this section we discuss research aims and selection of topic; hypothesis setting and revision; pilot studies; and sampling.

#### Research aims and selection of topic

Sociological research starts with the identification of a problem. The best research often involves problems that are also puzzles: not just a lack of information, but a lack of understanding. A research problem could be, for example, why girls do better than boys at school. Research projects do not stand alone; they are always related to or even arise directly from earlier research.

In deciding what to research, sociologists may be influenced by factors such as:

- their personal interests, experiences and observations
- what is already known about the topic and what is not yet known about it
- social changes and developments – there may be something new that we know little about
- whether funding is available, which may depend on how important funders think the topic is
- how practical it will be to do the research; for example, will it be possible to identify and contact respondents?
- what ethical issues are raised by this topic.

Doing research can be costly, so obtaining funding for the research is important. The costs include not only travel and materials such as paper but the time spent on the research. Most research is carried out by sociologists employed by universities and other educational or research bodies, though the money may come from government, businesses and companies or from charitable organisations. To be able to start the research the sociologist may have to convince the funding bodies that it is a worthwhile project by writing them a proposal, including estimates of what the study will cost.

#### Hypothesis setting and revision

Having identified the problem or puzzle, the next stage is to review the available evidence. This involves finding out what is already known. Who else has identified the same problem and how have they gone about investigating it? The evidence will be in books and academic journals. This stage is often called the literature review. Drawing on the ideas of others helps the sociologist clarify the issues and make decisions about how to proceed.

The next stage is to turn the ideas into a clear **hypothesis** that can be investigated. A hypothesis is a statement that the research will attempt to find evidence to support or disprove; it is a sort of educated guess, often about how two or more variables are connected. The hypothesis might suggest a cause and effect relationship but sometimes research is only able to establish a correlation. While a research investigation using a positivist approach will probably have a



#### TOP TIP

Sociologists study sociological problems. These are not the same as social problems, which are the difficult issues that a society faces, such as how to tackle crime or poverty. Sociologists may study these but the main aim is to understand them, not to provide answers about what to do about them.



#### KEY TERM

**Hypothesis:** a theory or explanation at the start of research that the research is designed to test.

hypothesis, a more interpretivist approach may have a looser and broader aim, such as to find out what a group of people thinks about something.

Now the sociologist has to decide the research method and plan its implementation. A range of different methods is available and the sociologist has to choose among them, influenced by practical, ethical and theoretical issues. The method chosen must be able to produce material that will provide evidence supporting or disproving the hypothesis or achieving the aim.

### Pilot studies

Whatever method is chosen, it is important whenever possible to test it with a small number of respondents or in a limited way to see if there are any problems in the design or if the research plan can be improved. This is a **pilot study**. For example, a pilot questionnaire might be given to a small number of people to see if they can understand all the questions, and whether the answers available cover the responses they want to give. Putting problems right at an early stage saves money, time and effort later.

### Sampling

The researcher has to choose an appropriate sample for the research by selecting some of all possible respondents. It is usually expensive and impractical to include all of them in the research so a number of them are chosen. Samples make research more manageable by making it possible to do research with smaller numbers of participants.

The people that the research is about are called the **survey population**. A list of everyone in the population is called a **sampling frame**. Commonly used sampling frames include the following.

- The electoral roll (also called the electoral register): this is the list of everyone registered to vote in elections, with their address. It therefore includes most adults, though it will not include anyone who is not registered or not allowed to vote.
- Telephone directories: these are easily available in countries where many people have land-line telephones and they give addresses as well as telephone numbers. However, they usually list only one person in each household. They do not tell you how many people live at an address and they do not include people who do not have telephones or who have chosen not to be in the directory.
- School registers: for research in a school there will be lists of children, with other information such as their gender, but these lists will be available only to genuine researchers and permission from those in authority, such as the head teacher, is needed.

All these sampling frames have problems. Getting a good, useful sampling frame can be difficult. But sometimes samples are not necessary. If you are in a small or medium-sized school you might find it possible to ask questions of everyone in your year group. Many countries have a census, which is a social survey carried out by the government to get information about every single person in the country. Censuses collect information from the whole population, not a sample.

Samples are usually chosen so that they are representative, that is, so that the researcher can claim that the results apply to the whole population, not just the sample. To be representative, the sample has to be a cross-section of the population. For example, if there are equal numbers of males and females in the



#### KEY TERMS

**Pilot study:** a small-scale test of a piece of a research project before the main research.

**Survey population:** all those to whom the findings of the study will apply and from which a sample is chosen.

**Sampling frame:** a list of members of the population from which the sample is chosen.