Thinking like a sociologist

01 / SOCIETY, SOCIALISATION AND PERSPECTIVES

Society Ideas Meanings

Connect the ideas as you revise

Core vocabulary

Sociology: the study of society and social relationships. **Society:** people connected through shared institutions and relationships.

Culture: a group's way of life. **Norm:** an expected behaviour. **Value:** a belief about what matters.

Role: expected behaviour linked to a position. **Status:** a social position or level of respect.

Identity: how people understand who they are, and how others see them.

Learning society's expectations

Socialisation: learning norms, values and roles. **Primary:** early learning, mainly through family. **Secondary:** learning through school, peers, media, work and other groups.

Nature: biological influences. **Nurture:** social and environmental influences. Sociology studies how social experiences matter; it does not require denying every biological influence.

Functionalism and Marxism

Functionalism: society's parts help it work. Shared values and institutions can create stability. It is often a **consensus** approach.

Marxism: ownership and class power shape society. Institutions may help keep inequality going. It is a **conflict** approach.

A school rule may be seen as teaching cooperation or as teaching obedience to unequal power.

Feminism and interactionism

Feminism: examines gender inequality and patriarchy. Feminists disagree about its causes and how change happens.

Interactionism: focuses on everyday meanings, labels and interactions. People interpret situations and can respond in different ways.

A teacher's label may affect support and self-image, but pupils can resist it.

Structures, processes and issues

Social structure: organised relationships and institutions, such as class or education.

Social process: how relationships develop or change, such as socialisation or labelling.

Social issue: a problem or debate, such as poverty or discrimination. It is not another name for social structure.

Power and discrimination

Power: ability to influence actions or decisions. **Authority:** power seen as legitimate.

Prejudice: a judgement without adequate evidence. **Discrimination:** unfair treatment linked to group membership.

Social control: ways of encouraging conformity, including rules, sanctions and peer pressure.

Beyond common sense

Turn a claim into a question. What evidence supports it? Could another explanation fit? Does it apply to everyone?

Sociological ideas can change as society changes and new evidence appears.

Classical thinkers and evidence

02 / CONTEXT, THEORIES AND RESEARCH

Context Theory Evidence

Connect the ideas as you revise

Suicide

Durkheim (1897) | Classical example

Durkheim used existing statistics to compare suicide rates and explore social integration and regulation. He argued that individual actions can have social explanations.

Use it: Show how secondary numerical data can reveal group patterns.

Think about: Recording practices and definitions may differ. A group pattern does not prove the reason for each person's action.

Durkheim in context

Durkheim worked in late nineteenth-century France during major social change. He asked how people could remain connected as work and social life changed.

Social integration: connection to groups. **Regulation:** guidance through rules and expectations.

His ideas connect with cohesion, socialisation and anomie.

Capital

Marx (1867) | Classical theory

Marx analysed capitalism and conflict between owners and workers. His work connected economic arrangements with power and social change.

Use it: Explain why a theory may ask who benefits from an institution.

Think about: A theoretical argument is not the same as a new experiment or survey.

Marx in context

Marx wrote during nineteenth-century industrial capitalism and spent much of his later life in Britain. Factory work and class inequality shaped his questions.

Means of production: resources used to produce goods. **Class conflict:** competing interests linked to class.

Apply his ideas to wealth, unpaid family work, education or law.

The Theory of Social and Economic Organization

Weber (1947 English edition) | Classical theory

Weber connected economic position, status and organised power. He also examined meanings and the reasons people accept authority.

Use it: Show why money is not the only source of influence.

Think about: This English edition appeared after Weber's death in 1920; he did not conduct research in 1947.

Weber in context

Weber worked in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Growing organisations and bureaucracy shaped his questions.

Bureaucracy: an organisation with formal roles and rules. **Verstehen:** understanding action from the person's point of view.

Two broad research approaches

Positivism: seeks measurable patterns and social explanations. **Interpretivism:** seeks people's meanings and experiences.

Neither means every researcher uses only one method. The question should guide the choice.

How do we plan research?

03 / AIMS, DESIGN AND SAMPLING







Connect the ideas as you revise

Plan the investigation

Aim: what the study wants to find out. **Hypothesis:** a prediction that can be tested.

Operationalisation: turning an idea into something that can be measured. Decide what "parental involvement" means before counting it.

Pilot study: a small trial to find problems with questions or procedures. Revise the design before the main study.

Choose data, methods and a sample. Consider access, cost, time and ethics. Analyse evidence and draw conclusions.

Population and sample

Target population: the group the research concerns. **Sample:** the people studied. **Sampling frame:** a list from which a sample is selected.

Representativeness: how well the sample reflects relevant features of the population. **Generalisation:** applying findings beyond the sample.

A large sample can still miss important groups.

Probability sampling

Simple random: each person on the frame has an equal chance. It reduces selection bias, but needs a suitable list.

Systematic: choose every nth person after a random start. A pattern in the list may distort selection.

Stratified random: divide into relevant groups, then randomly sample within them. It can improve representation of those groups.

Random selection does not guarantee a perfectly balanced sample. Non-response can still cause bias.

Other ways to sample

Quota: fill set numbers from groups without random selection within each group.

Opportunity: choose available people. **Volunteer:** people choose to take part.

Snowball: participants introduce others. Useful for hard-to-reach groups, but may produce similar networks.

Purposive: select people with relevant experience. Useful for depth, but not a random cross-section.

Types of data and design

Quantitative: numerical data. **Qualitative:** words, images and accounts of meanings.

Primary: collected first-hand for the study. **Secondary:** existing material reused by a researcher.

Cross-sectional: studies a group at one point. **Longitudinal:** follows change over time. People dropping out can affect findings.

Case study: a detailed investigation of a person, group or setting.

Origins and Destinations

Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980) | Course example

A large survey linked men's education to fathers' occupations. It excluded women and studied historical generations.

Use it: Explain why sample coverage matters even in a large study.

A school research example

To study subject choice, select pupils across year groups and relevant backgrounds. Interview only your friends and the sample may miss different experiences.

Asking people questions







Connect the ideas as you revise

Questionnaires

People answer written or online questions. **Closed questions** offer fixed choices. **Open questions** allow answers in the person's own words.

Strengths: can reach many people; fixed answers are easier to compare. Anonymous responses may help with sensitive topics.

Limits: low response, misunderstood wording and incomplete answers. Online access or literacy can affect who responds.

Anonymity may help honesty, but it does not guarantee it.

Write better questions

Use clear language and one idea per question. Avoid leading wording such as "Why is prison obviously the best punishment?"

Offer suitable options and pilot the questions. Ask about a clear period rather than "usually" if timing matters.

Types of interview

Structured: set questions, usually in the same order. Easier to compare, but may miss unexpected detail.

Unstructured: flexible conversation around the topic. The researcher can ask follow-up questions and explore meanings.

Semi-structured: planned questions plus flexible follow-ups.

Group interview / focus group: people discuss together. It reveals shared views, but dominant speakers or embarrassment may silence others.

Interview strengths and limits

Researchers can explain questions and build **rapport**, a trusting relationship. Detailed answers take time to collect and analyse.

Interviewer effect: the researcher's identity or behaviour affects answers. **Social desirability:** giving answers that look acceptable.

Being friendly does not remove all bias.

Women, Crime and Poverty

Carlen (1988) | Course example

In-depth, unstructured interviews with 39 women explored experiences of poverty, relationships and crime.

Use it: Explain how flexible interviews can reveal personal meanings.

Think about: A small group of convicted women cannot represent all women.

The Sociology of Housework

Oakley (1974) | Course example

Interviews explored women's experiences of domestic work, including feelings that a time-use total alone may miss.

Use it: Show why qualitative accounts can add depth.

Apply a method to the topic

An interview about household money may reveal who controls decisions. Privacy matters: partners present in the room may affect honesty.

Do not just list a general advantage. Explain why it helps this particular study.

Watching and using existing evidence

05 / OBSERVATION, SOURCES AND MIXED METHODS


Observation


Sources


Comparison

Connect the ideas as you revise

Observation

Participant: the researcher joins activities. **Non-participant:** watches without joining.

Overt: people know research is happening. **Covert:** the research role is hidden. These are separate choices: participation is not always covert.

Strengths: sees behaviour in context and may reveal things people do not mention.

Limits: access, time, safety and recording detail. People may change behaviour when watched. The researcher may misinterpret events or become too involved.

Beachside Comprehensive

Ball (1981) | Course example

Participant observation over three years explored school processes.

Use it: Show the depth and time costs of studying one setting.

Secondary sources

Official statistics: data produced by public bodies. **Non-official statistics:** numbers from other organisations, such as charities.

Documents: diaries, letters, reports, images or online posts. Check who made them, why and whether they are genuine.

Existing data can save time and show past events. Its definitions and coverage may not fit the new question.

Government production does not automatically make data valid or unbiased.

Content analysis

Use clear categories to study material systematically, such as counting portrayals of crime in news stories.

It can reveal patterns, but categories involve judgement. The content alone does not prove how audiences respond.

Pygmalion in the Classroom

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) | Extra method example

Teachers were given expectations about randomly selected pupils. Later progress was compared to explore an expectation effect.

Use it: An experiment varies a factor and compares outcomes. **Independent variable:** changed factor. **Dependent variable:** measured outcome.

Think about: Ethics and other influences need considering. This study's tests and conclusions have been disputed.

Combine methods

Mixed methods: combine qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Triangulation: compare methods, sources or researchers to check or deepen findings. Agreement can strengthen confidence; disagreement may reveal different experiences.

Using more methods does not automatically remove errors. Extra time and conflicting definitions can make comparison harder.

Learning to Labour

Willis (1977) | Course example

Observation, interviews and group discussions explored 12 boys' school experiences.

Use it: Explain the value of combining evidence.

Think about: Several methods in one small group still do not make it representative.

Crime data example

Compare police records, victim surveys and self-report studies. They measure different things and each misses some crime.

Explain definitions and coverage before deciding whether findings conflict.

Ethics, quality and interpreting data

06 / EVALUATE AND APPLY THE EVIDENCE

Ethics Quality Interpretation

Connect the ideas as you revise

Ethical responsibilities

Informed consent: people understand the study and choose freely. **Right to withdraw:** they can stop taking part.

Confidentiality: protect information. **Anonymity:** avoid identifying people. They are linked but not identical.

Harm: avoid distress, unsafe situations or damaging exposure. Consider privacy, secure storage and power differences.

Research involving children needs suitable consent and safeguards. A gatekeeper's permission does not replace participants' agreement.

Practical choices

Time, cost, travel, language, equipment and access affect a design. **Gatekeepers**, such as school leaders, can allow or restrict access.

Covert research raises consent and privacy problems. Group members cannot always guarantee each other's confidentiality.

Quality of evidence

Validity: how well the evidence captures what is being studied. **Reliability:** consistency of measurement or method.

Bias: systematic distortion. **Objectivity:** trying to prevent personal views from distorting research.

Repeated answers can be reliable but inaccurate. A survey with the same confusing question may repeatedly miss the real issue.

Correlation: two things vary together. **Causation:** one helps produce the other. A correlation alone does not prove causation.

Look for alternative explanations

A link between low income and low grades may involve housing, health, school resources or other factors.

Ask about sample coverage, non-response, question wording, measurement and the time/place of a study.

Read tables and graphs

Check title, source, date, place, axes, units and sample. Notice missing data and changing definitions.

Percentage: a share out of 100. From 20% to 25% is a rise of **5 percentage points**, or a **25% increase** relative to the starting figure.

Mean: total divided by count. **Median:** middle value. **Mode:** most common value. Extreme values affect the mean.

A total is not a rate. Compare like with like and identify patterns before proposing explanations.

An exam-answer structure

Method > specific benefit or limit > effect on this study.

Example: an anonymous questionnaire may help pupils discuss bullying, because names are not attached. But fear of identification may still affect answers.

For an extract, identify the argument, use evidence and assess it. A sociologist's name alone is not an explanation.

Apply across the course

Families: privacy and partners' influence. Education: access through schools. Crime: sensitive behaviour and hidden acts. Stratification: income measures and sample coverage.