

Introducing Sociology

This is an important chapter that introduces sociology and some of the key terms, ideas and sociological approaches that are referred to throughout this book. It is therefore worth spending some time on learning the main points covered.

Newcomers to sociology often have only quite a vague idea of what the subject is about, though they often have an interest in people. This interest is a good start, because the focus of sociology is on the influences from society which shape the behaviour of people, their experiences and their interpretations of the world around them. To learn sociology is to learn about how human societies are constructed and where our beliefs and daily routines come from; it is to re-examine in a new light many of the taken-for-granted assumptions which we all hold, and which influence the way we think about ourselves and others. Sociology is above all about developing a critical understanding of society. In developing this understanding, sociology can itself contribute to changes in society, for example by highlighting and explaining social problems like divorce, ill-health and poverty. The study of sociology can provide the essential tools for a better understanding of the world we live in, and therefore the means for improving it.

What is sociology?

Sociology is the systematic (or planned and organized) study of human groups and social life in modern societies. It is concerned with the study of **social institutions**.

These are the various organized social arrangements which are found in all societies. For example, the family is an institution which is concerned with arrangements for marriage, such as at what age people can marry, whom they can marry and how many partners they can have, and the upbringing of children. The education system establishes ways of passing on attitudes, knowledge and skills from one generation to the next. Work and the economic system organize the way the production of goods will be carried out, religious institutions are concerned with people's relations with the supernatural, and the law is concerned with controlling and regulating the behaviour of people in society. These social institutions make up a society's **social structure** – the building blocks of society.

Sociology tries to understand how these various social institutions operate, and how they relate to one another, for example the way in which the family might influence how well children perform in the education system. Sociology is also concerned with describing and explaining the patterns of inequality, deprivation and conflict which are a feature of nearly all societies.

Social institutions are the various organized social arrangements which are found in all societies.

Social structure refers to the social institutions and social relationships that form the 'building blocks' of society.