

# Introduction to A-level Sociology at OLCC

## Sociology:

*noun*

the study of the development, structure, and functioning of human society.

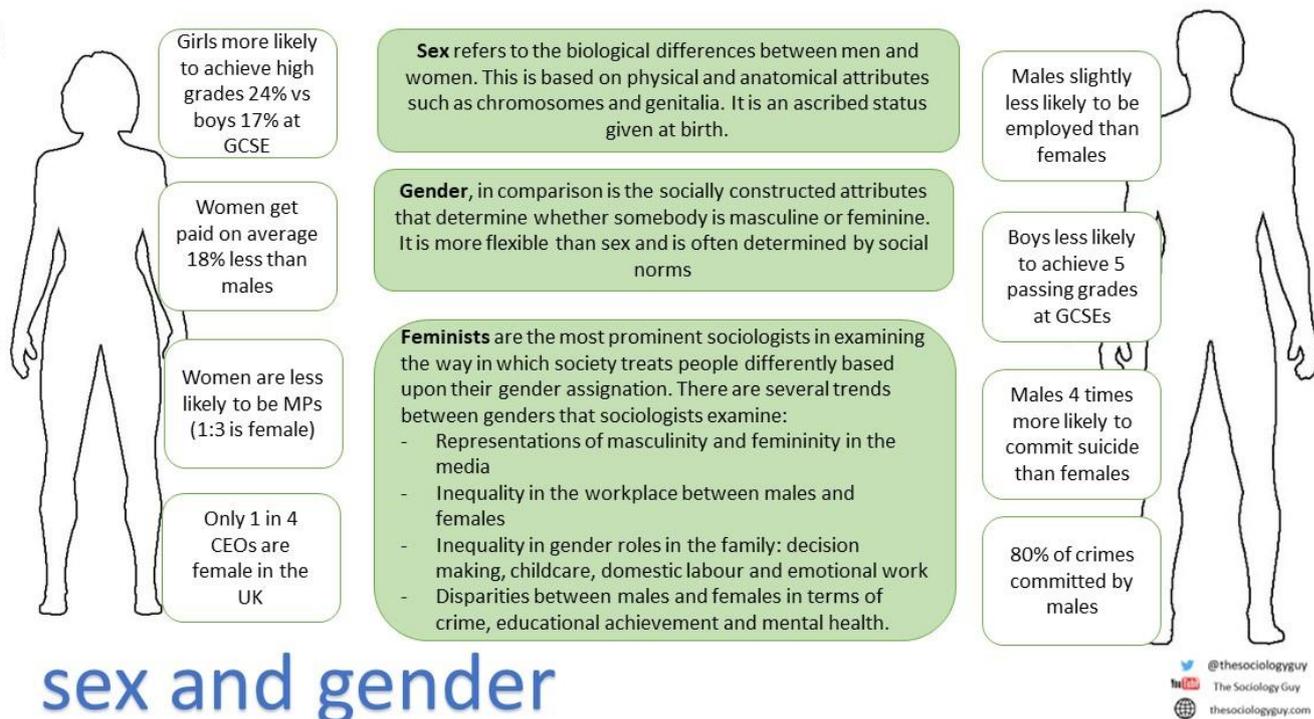
the study of social problems.

During the first few weeks of the A-level Sociology course, it is important to understand some of the key ideas that sociologists look at. Below are some of the resources that students can use to understand some of the key ideas in Sociology.

## Starting sociology

You need to know the differences between the biological definition of sex and the sociological concept of gender. This becomes more important as you progress through the course, with applications to gender roles in the family, gender differences in education, gender differences in criminal behaviour and victimisation and the stratification of society based upon gender stereotypes.

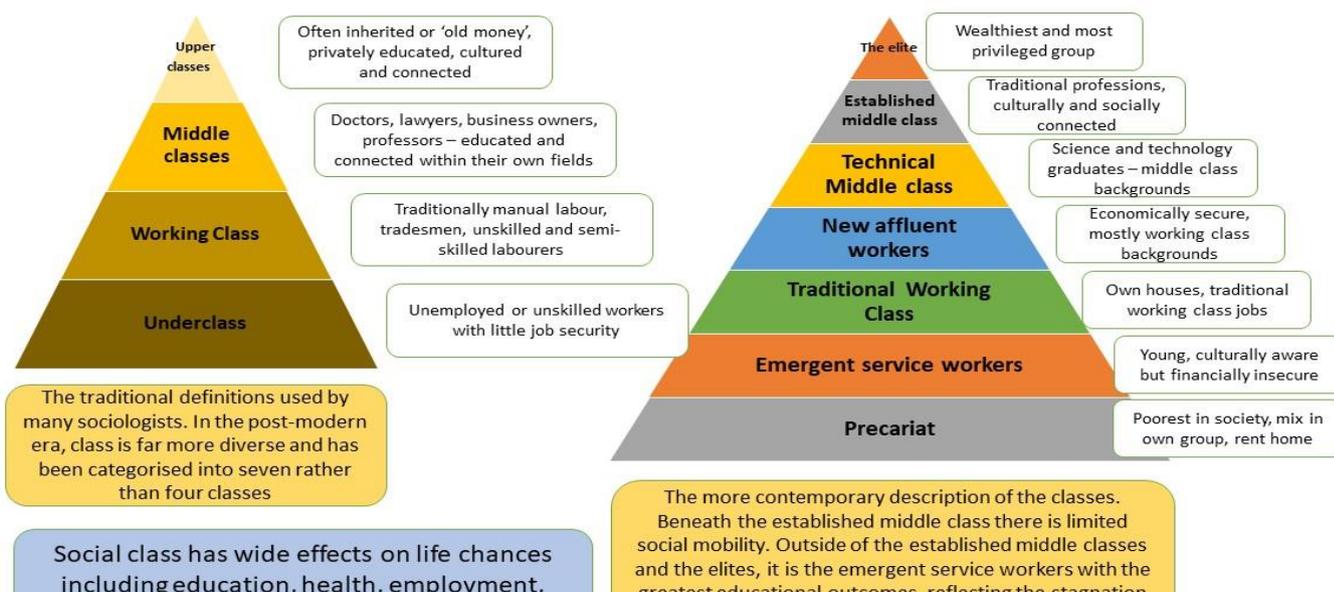
Differences between...



## sex and gender

The traditional social class system of upper, middle and working class is important to understand. However, in contemporary society the social class system is far more diverse and that being 'working class' is not a fixed label that is attached to all students who are not from the upper or traditional middle classes. Parents can be educated, work in non-manual labour and still have working class ideologies in the 21st century. However, most texts refer to differences between the traditional classes, particularly

Differences between



Sociologists talk almost exclusively about ethnicity rather than race, which is an outdated term that suggests the physical characteristics of different groups define their abilities in wider society. Sadly, some racial theories are re-emerging, but sociologists prefer to focus on the social characteristics of

Differences between...



Data 2011 Census



80.5% of UK population



4.4% of UK population

It is tempting to talk about ethnic minorities as one single group, however there are differences between social attitudes towards, educational achievement, employments rates, economic capital and criminal offending between minority groups. 'Model minorities' such as Chinese and Indian have higher rates of achievement, better employment and lower rates of criminal behaviour than other minorities.

According to the 2011 census, London is the most ethnically diverse UK city with 42% from non-white ethnic groups.

After social class, ethnicity is one of the biggest factors affecting an individual's life chances. Black males are 3 times more likely to be arrested and 7 times more likely to be stopped and searched (2017/18 UK Gov). Mixed ethnicity twice as likely as white people to be arrested.

Pakistan and Bangladeshi are most likely to be unemployed with 45% unemployed in comparison to 23% white and 33% black

Despite improvements in educational outcomes for all minority groups, they are less likely to be granted admission into top universities 1 in 4 chance black students of being successful to High Tariff universities vs 1 in 4 for white students (UCAS 2018)



**Race** is an outdated term used to describe the differences in physical characteristics between one group and another

**Ethnicity** refers to the identity formed by a group that has similar beliefs, customs, celebrations, language and identity

## ethnicity and race

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One of the big debates in researching society is whether to collect quantitative data or qualitative data. The decision often rests on several factors, including the sociologist's methodological preference, the choice of topic and the availability of different research methods.

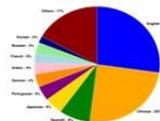
Differences between...

**Quantitative Data** is numerical and seen as being more **objective** and scientific



Quantitative data is easier to collect and represent in graphs, charts and infographics

Quantitative data is usually used by **structural** theorists looking at large scale social issues



Methods that use **qualitative data** are:  
Participant Observations  
Personal and Historical Documents  
Unstructured Interviews  
Written questionnaires  
Case Studies \*\*  
Longitudinal Studies  
Ethnographic Studies

Qualitative data is high in **validity** as it is measuring true responses from people

As it is in-depth, it tends to be small-scale and is preferred by **social action** theorists

It is more **reliable** as often methods that use quantitative data can be repeated and similar results obtained

Methods that use **quantitative data** are:  
Lab experiments  
Field Experiments  
Coded Questionnaires  
Structured Interviews  
Official Statistics  
Structured Non-participant Observations  
Content Analysis\*

\*\* Case studies contain a range of methods, some of which may be quantitative



Qualitative data provides a useful insight or '**verstehen**' into that person's experiences

\* Content analysis is useful to turn qualitative data into quantitative data

Sociologists may use both quantitative and qualitative methods to get a more valid and reliable answer – this is known as **triangulation**



**Qualitative Data** is usually written, spoken or visual information that represents a **subjective** viewpoint

## quantitative and qualitative data

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One of the more confusing debates is how different theories view society. The idea that society agrees on the norms and values (Consensus Theory) or divided into competing groups (Conflict Theory) is present throughout the course. In the family, consensus would suggest that there is an 'ideal family', whilst conflict theories would suggest that family benefits some more than others. Similarly, in education, the idea of meritocracy would be a consensus view, whereas conflict views would see differences in educational achievement as being a result of these conflicts. In crime and stratification there are similar arguments.

Differences between...



Consensus theories suggest that society is in agreement over society's norms and values and that society is generally harmonious



Consensus theories suggest that the role of social institutions is to socialise individuals into a value consensus to enable society to function correctly



Conflict theories suggest that society is divided into two or more opposing factions, with a dominant group and a subject group



Feminism is one example of a conflict theory – it suggests that society serves the needs of males (patriarchy) and oppresses women



Functionalism is the best known consensus theory. It suggests social institutions work together like the organs in the human body to enable society to function



Marxism is another conflict theory. It suggests that the Bourgeoisie have control over the Proletariat and exploit them

Race conflict theories suggest that the dominance of white people leads to exploitation of non-whites in society.

consensus and conflict theories

Another complex topic to discuss in the early weeks is the debate between behaviour being guided by forces that are structural or by individual agency (social action). This debate is focused on the idea of how much control an individual has over their behaviour. Structural theories such as Marxism, Functionalism and Feminism suggest that social forces make people act in different ways. For example, structures such as gender suggest males will act one way and females another. Similarly, if you are middle class you may read different types of books to the working class (who may not read at all). Social Action theories on the other hand, suggest we have agency and can choose how to behave. Social class, gender and ethnicity do not determine your behaviour. In modern sociology, most people are influenced by social factors which may limited their choice, but they are still relatively free to choose. This debate is important as it shows the differences between generalisations or class, gender and ethnicity and the ability to be an individual in society. It also demonstrates that in sociology there is neither black nor white, but an infinite number of shades of grey.

# Differences between...



**Structural Theories** are a form of **macro-sociology** – they are based upon assumptions that society is more important than the individual as society continues after the individual has left.

Structural Theories are **deterministic** in nature – they argue that social forces are responsible for individuals behaviours. **Social Institutions and Social Structures**, such as education, religion, social class and gender dictate our behaviour in social contexts

Structural Theories look at large-scale problems and tend to use **quantitative data** in their research. **Functionalism, traditional Marxism** and some branches of **Feminism** are structural theories – looking at ‘the big picture’ in society – these are called **Metanarratives**



**Social Action Theories** are a form of **micro-sociology** – based upon the assumption that people have **free will**, or **agency**, to choose to behave in a certain way

Social Action Theories argue that **society is constructed and shaped by the decisions of individuals**. Social institutions are shaped by policies that individuals create. They also argue that **individuals interpret society in different ways** and will have a broad range of reactions to social forces. They are not predictable.

Social Action Theories use **qualitative data** in their research as it give them an **insight (verstehen)** into human behaviour. **Interactionism and Post-Modernism** are most common social action theories

## structural and social action theories

Understanding the different theoretical perspectives that students will face over the two years of studying sociology at A-level is also important. These theories will form a large part of student's study across the different modules: family, education, Crime and stratification. Understanding the key ideas of how these theories view society is a good step towards being able to apply theory to some of the issues posed on the specification. The Key theories to consider are: Functionalism, Marxism, Interactionism, Feminism and New Right.

# Functionalism

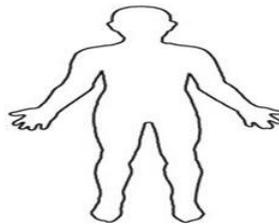
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Key Functionalists include: Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and Robert K Merton

Functionalism is one of the 'grand narratives' of society and the oldest attempt to understand how society might influence social behaviours

They suggest that society is structured through **norms and values** that people are socialised into. This help to develop a **value consensus**, or shared agreement on the rules of society.



Functionalism relies upon Social institutions to perform **primary or secondary socialisation** in order to allow the next generation of society to learn the value consensus

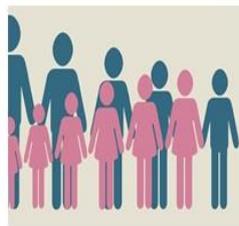
Functionalists also suggest that these institutions provide members with functional pre-requisites, the basic needs of society, such as food and shelter

Functionalists suggest that society operates in a similar manner to the human body with each organ or institution performing vital functions.

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**Harriet Martineau** is often credited as being one of the first female sociologists. Others include **Sylvia Walby** and **Anne Oakley**



Feminism is a movement to achieve the **political, social and economic equality** of the sexes. There are various branches of Feminism and there have been different waves of Feminism throughout history.

# Feminism

Feminism is a **conflict theory** that suggests there is a conflict between males and females as society is **patriarchal** – i.e. it is male dominated



**First wave Feminism** was concerned with women gaining political equality with men and culminated in the **Suffragette and Suffragist** movements of the early 1900s and led to women being given equal rights to vote



They suggest **women are controlled by males** in all spheres of life: family, education, work, law, media and religion



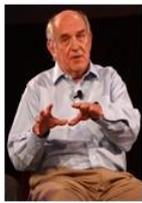
**Second wave Feminism** was concerned with women gaining social and economic equality, challenging gender stereotypes and unfair working practices – this led to legal reforms such as **Equal Pay and Sexual Discrimination** laws in the 1970s

**Third wave Feminism** was concerned with tackling the inequalities that women faced everyday and also the differences between women's experiences. This movement dealt more with the **intersectionality of gender and class, ethnicity, sexuality and (dis)ability**



# New Right

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Key Theorist: Charles Murray – New Right is less of a sociological approach and more of a **political ideology**

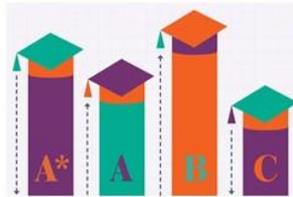


Key ideas of New Right are based upon **Neo-conservative** social policies and **Neo-liberal** economic policy. This included:

- **Free Market** Economics
- Reduced **State Intervention**
- **Individual Responsibility**
- **Traditional Values**



One of the key problems for the New Right is the **decline of the Nuclear Family**. Increases in single parent and cohabitation are worrying trends for the New Right as they see **marriage** as being a **cornerstone of stability** in society. The New Right adopt some functionalist ideas, such as the importance of family as providing the basic needs of society rather than the state. In single parent families, they argue, there is a **lack of adequate socialisation**, particularly of males and a need for the state to financially support single mothers.

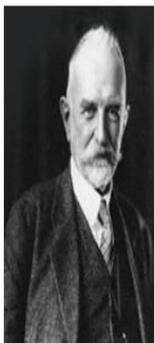


Another key issue is that of **Marketisation**. New Right thinkers believe that education, healthcare and other institutions can only be run efficiently if they are owned by private businesses, promoting **competition** and giving people **choice** over education and healthcare.

The New Right believe that permissive social policies of the 1960s and 70s led to a **culture of dependency** and a **culture of poverty**, with Murray in particular suggesting that an **underclass** of idle young men is destabilising society

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# Interactionism



Key interactionist sociologists include: G.H. Mead, Erving Goffman and Howard Becker

Becker suggested that people are **labelled** by others and that these labels are internalised by individuals and become part of a **self-fulfilling prophecy**, one that becomes true because the person labelled believes it.



In society, often people are given a **master status** because of a certain aspect of their lives. This master status, such as a thief or criminal, then over-rides all other characteristics of that person, so we see the label not the person behind it.



Goffman suggested that individuals are like actors on a stage, taking on different **roles** in different **social contexts**. This was referred to as the **Dramaturgical Model**, and suggest we have different behaviours in different social contexts and around different people.



Unlike structural theories, Interactionism is concerned with **social action** and how individuals **interpret their interactions** with others in society. It looks at the **self** rather than society



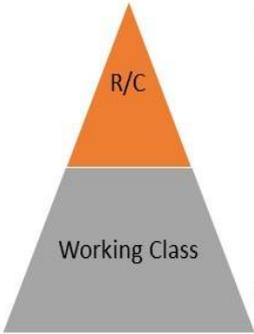
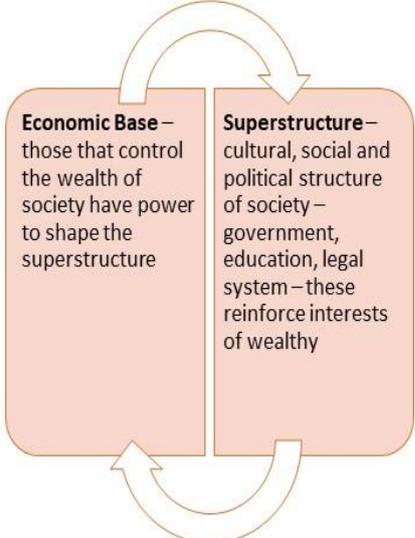
Interactionists look at the use of **symbols, language and gestures** and argue that we learn these in order to **negotiate** living in wider society so we can understand what is expected of us in a certain situation.

# Marxism



Marxism is based upon the ideas of Karl Marx. It is a structural theory that looks at the **conflict** between social classes

The Bourgeoisie owned the **means of production** (factories and machinery) which made them the **dominant class**



Marx suggested that the **infrastructure** of society was divided into two classes – the **Bourgeoisie** or ruling class and the **Proletariat** or Working class

The Proletariat only have their ability to work. This allows the Bourgeoisie to **exploit** them as they need to work to survive in a capitalist society

As the Bourgeoisie control wealth they are able to control other institutions. This leads to **false class consciousness**, as the Proletariat are taught that the reason they are poor is because they are less able or don't work hard enough. Marx argued that when the workers realised this exploitation, they would **revolt** and create a **communist society**.

Marxists are critical of the organisation of capitalist society. They believe that the ruling class have a distinct **ideology** that looks to control the working classes in society. They do this in several ways.

# Top 5 contributions...



Marx was a historian and economist who suggested that society had become divided in the modern age into two distinct classes (the **Bourgeoisie** and the **Proletariat**) and that these classes were in conflict with one another over their different interests.

Marx suggested that the Bourgeoisie controlled the **means of production** (factories, machines) and **exploited** the Proletariat for their labour to gain profits (surplus value). The Proletariat were unaware of this exploitation and sold their labour in exchange for wages.

Marx suggested that the economic system of **capitalism** encouraged the Bourgeoisie to continue exploiting the Proletariat as it was based on **private ownership of property** and the Bourgeoisie owned the property and wanted to protect their own interests.

The Bourgeoisie achieved this through **false class consciousness**. Institutions such as **education, religion and the family socialised workers** from a young age to believe in hard work and misery in order to be accepted into heaven

Marx suggested that despite being **alienated** at work, the Proletariat would one day revolt against the Bourgeoisie and form a **communist society** based upon **shared ownership of resources** or capital. This has influenced many political ideologies and is still influential to this day

# Karl Marx

# Top 5 contributions...



Durkheim was one of the earliest sociologists to adopt a scientific approach to his research. In *Suicide*, Durkheim used the **comparative method** to establish a cause and effect relationship between social facts and rates of suicide – although this was later challenged, it was ground-breaking in the field of sociology.

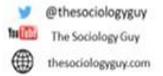
Durkheim’s research took place at the birth of the modern era in Europe, at a time of great social change, yet many of his ideas still have **practical applications to contemporary society**. Despite being criticised for being conservative, Durkheim recognised the evolution of societies and the impacts of social change on a society’s members

Durkheim’s interest in the social changes led him to establish some of the **functions education** should perform. Education should provide specialist skills for the complex division of labour in modern society. This is evidenced in contemporary society with vocational courses and teaching students core skills such as Maths and English

Durkheim was also interested in the social bonds between members of society. He believed that education should reinforce our social heritage, through subjects such as history and literature to give us a sense of **social solidarity**. He also suggested crime reaffirms our **collective conscience** as society will unite to condemn criminals that go against our values

Durkheim also believed that crime was an essential part of a healthy society. Whilst most people conform, Durkheim suggested that some deviance is necessary in order to stop society from becoming stagnant. He suggested deviance that becomes acceptable, leads society to **adapt and change** to new norms and values.

## Emile Durkheim



# Top 5 contributions...



One Of Weber’s major contributions to sociology is his approach to studying society. Weber is often credited as an **anti-positivist**, suggesting that researchers need to show empathy with others and insight into their condition – what sociologists refer to as **verstehen**

Weber was interested in the social structure of society (**stratification**). He disagreed with Marx that there were only two classes, suggesting that in the modern age there was an **expansion of the middle classes** that was needed to control workers for the bourgeoisie.

Weber suggested that protestants were better socialised into the capitalist system. One of his major works *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* saw Weber suggest that Western capitalism had been based upon the work of protestants.

Unlike Marx, Weber suggested that power was not solely defined by wealth. He suggested people obeyed people they believed had authority and that there were three types of power relationships: **charismatic, rational legal and traditional**.

Weber is often associated with a **social action** approach. He suggested that individuals demonstrate **free will**, albeit within a limited range. He suggested that their actions were motivated by: **traditions, emotions, values and goals**.

## Max Weber

