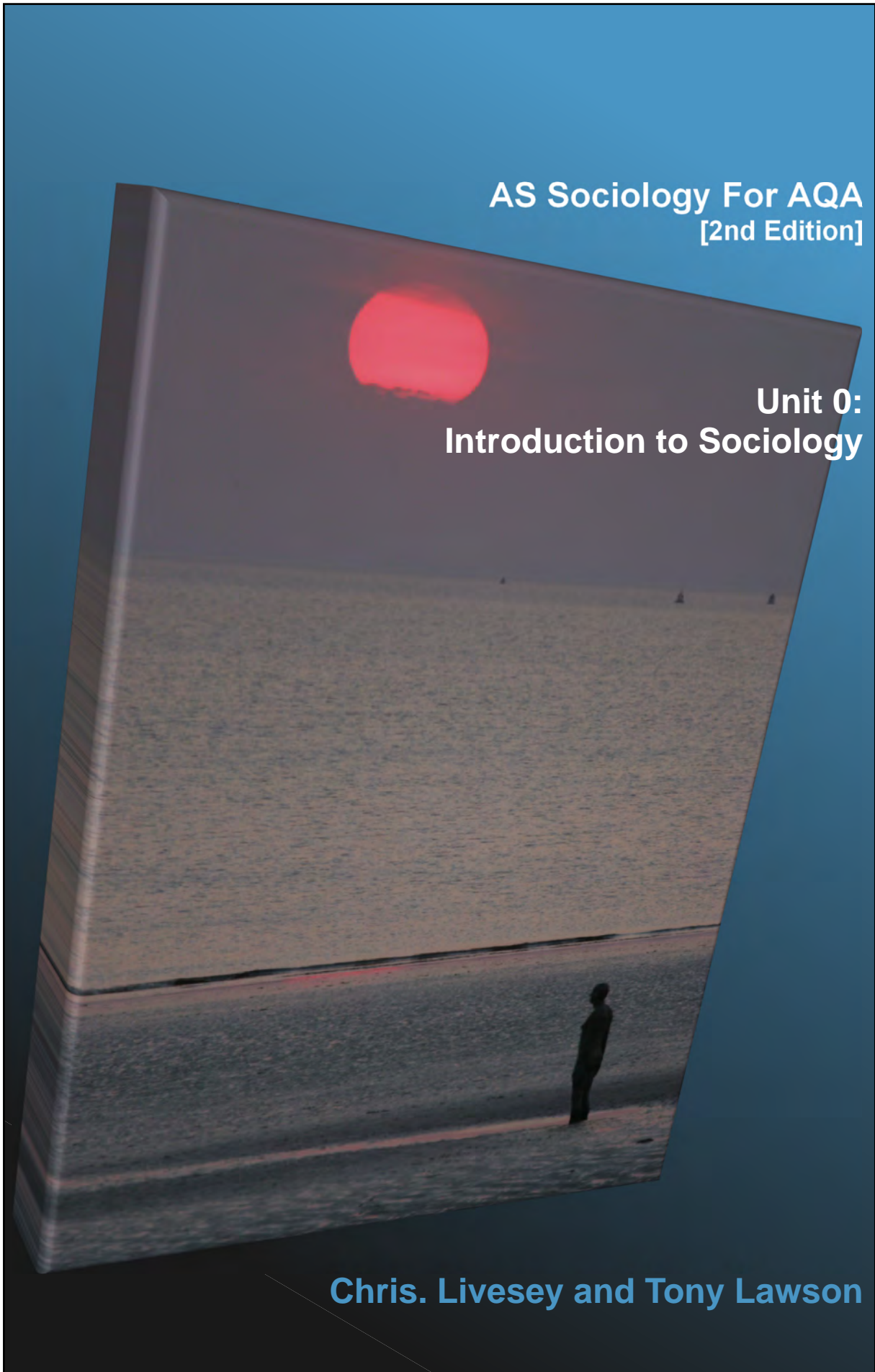


AS Sociology For AQA
[2nd Edition]

Unit 0:
Introduction to Sociology

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**Unit 0:
Introduction To Sociology**

Contents

1. Culture, roles, values and norms.

02

2. Sociological Perspectives.

11

Sociological Perspectives

Structure and Action: Observations

The first of these ideas is sometimes characterised as a debate between “*social structure*” and “*social action*” theory— a difference of interpretation that focuses on a central problem for sociologists - the relationship, as we’ve suggested, between the individual and society:

The Individual: On the one hand we are all individuals, each with our particular histories, hopes, fears and aspirations. We are all uniquely different, not just from our fellow human beings but also, as a species, from all other animals – and the thing we each possess that confers this uniqueness is *consciousness* - our ability to think (both about ourselves and our relationship to others) in ways more highly developed than in any other animal.

The ability to think is both a blessing and a curse; the former because it enables us to create complex technologies (the microwave oven!) and relationships (my mother’s sister’s brother’s aunt’s child...) and the latter because, in a sense, we are all prisoners of our own individuality - we can never really know what other people are thinking. We can, of course, make educated guesses (based on how someone talks to you, their body language and so forth), but we can never know for sure...

The Group: On the other hand we all live in a large social group we call a society. Although all societies are different, one of the striking things about human behaviour is that, for all our unique individuality, we do a surprising number of things with a regularity and general predictability that can’t just be the result of accident or chance. Something, in other words, forces us to behave in routinely predictable ways (going to school; going to work; going shopping...) and for sociologists that “thing” is *social structure*.

What sociologists have to do, therefore, is to note the fact of human individuality (and our ability to act in almost any way we care to imagine) and square it with human predictability - the fact that, generally, our behaviour is characterised by almost mundane similarities) – and this is where the concept of *structure* and *action* come into the equation.

Feeling the Force

Social Structure: It sometimes helps to visualise a social structure as a “*framework of rules*” - a rule being something you’re supposed to obey and a framework being the way such rules are created, maintained and policed. We can illustrate the general principles behind this idea by thinking about how your everyday behaviour is governed by laws - we can talk about a *legal framework* (or structure, if you prefer) involving: the government making laws (formal, legal rules), a police force enforcing these rules, a judicial system

deciding whether or not you’ve broken the law and prisons in which to lock you up if you’re judged to be guilty. The idea of a *legal structure* is a good way of thinking generally about the concept of a social structure, for a couple of reasons:

Firstly, even though we may never personally “break the law” or become subject to the power of the legal system this doesn’t mean that our behaviour is not influenced by the

existence of legal rules; on the contrary, I may *consciously* choose not to break the law precisely because I understand the possible consequences of such a course of action.

Secondly, while we can’t actually see, smell or hear a “legal rule” (because it has no real, physical, existence) we know such rules exist if (or when) we experience their effect. We may, for example, personally experience the (police) force of the law if we are caught stealing something from a shop – although the majority of us probably only experience legal structures “second hand” through the behaviour of others (reading about what has happened to people who have broken the law, for example).

Keeping this idea in mind, if you think about the variety of ways your behaviour is governed by informal rules

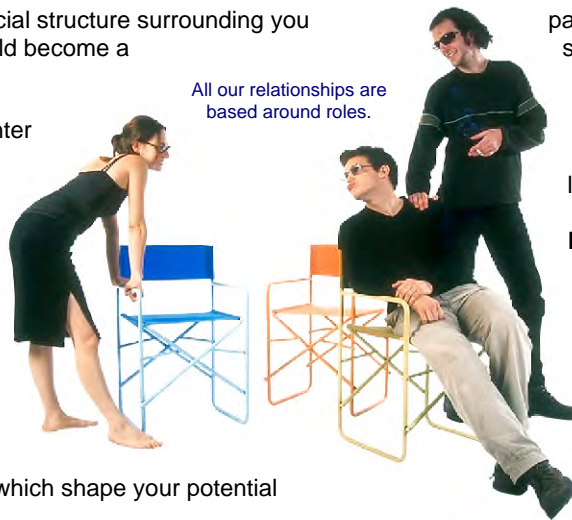


Are we prisoners of our own individuality?

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(norms), the idea of a social structure surrounding you and your behaviour should become a little clearer.

Every relationship you enter into (such as with family, school, work and friends) involves playing a role, which in turn involves values relating to the role and, of course, norms associated with the role; every time you play a role, therefore, you are experiencing (however unwittingly) the effect of social structures – rules which shape your potential behavioural choices.



Social Action: If the concept of social structures focuses on how behaviour is governed by rules designed to constrain (limit) and control, the associated concept of *social action* focuses on our ability to make *choices* about how to behave. Just as, for example, we make choices about such things as who will be our friends, so too, ultimately we can make choices about the rules we obey or disobey - although, because we're talking about social structures there may well be consequences, in the form of **negative social sanctions** (punishments), for choosing to disobey.

Be that as it may, the important point – regardless of how “society” or people try to influence our behaviour - is we always have a *choice* about how to behave. To put this another way, in terms of social action our choices are potentially unlimited – we are free to act in whatever way we choose. However, our actual choices about how to behave are limited by the effects of social structures – by the framework of rules that characterise our relationships, our culture and our society. This early in the course the introduction of these quite complex ideas can be a little daunting, but we can make things a little clearer by using an *analogy* (identifying and comparing the features of something we know a lot about to something we know little or nothing about).

If, therefore, we liken society to a game such as chess - although you could use any game with which you're familiar (Football, Battleships, Connect 4, Twister...), it can help us understand the relationship between structure and action in the following way:

Structure: Thinking about chess, for example, we know it has certain *physical boundaries* (the playing area). It also has *rules* governing how the game is played: these are both *technical* (relating to the basic mechanics of the game - the starting position of each playing piece, how different pieces are allowed to move, taking it in turn to move and so forth) and *cultural* (it's a competitive situation, with the main objective being to beat your opponent). This represents the basic structure of the game – or, if you prefer, the basic *framework of rules* within which the game is played.

Action: Each player is free to choose their own particular *strategies* and *moves*, based on their

Sociological Perspectives

particular assessment of how to successfully play the game. In chess, therefore, structure and action come together in the sense each player's behaviour (action) is limited, in some ways by:

Rules: If one player decides to change or break the rules, their opponent will react to this deviant act in some way (by protesting or refusing to continue playing, for example).

Conditions: Each player must, in this competitive environment, take note of how their opponent is playing - by responding to certain moves or moving in

ways that produce particular responses from their opponent.

Structure and Action: Explanations

We can dig deeper into concepts of structure and action by both developing them in more detail and exploring the relationship between the two ideas.

Social Action: Weber (1922) drew an important distinction between the concepts of *behaviour* and *action* on the basis that behaviour becomes action when it is directed towards other people in such a way that it takes account of how others act. If this is a little unclear, think about the following ideas:

- **Behaviour:** **Weber** argued the animal world was governed by *behaviour*, rather than action because animal behaviour is not based on any understanding of how it might affect other animals. When a dog barks, for example, it does not understand how this behaviour affects other dogs or indeed other animals.

- **Action:** The social world, on the other hand is, for **Weber**, governed by action. Whenever we act, we do so in the knowledge of how our behaviour might impact on people at whom the action is directed. For example, whenever you have a conversation you're engaging in *social action* because you're interacting – how you behave is influenced by how the other person behaves and vice versa.

In this respect, social action involves a range of things that simple behaviour excludes. For example, it involves:



Meanings: Whatever we say or do means something to both ourselves and others. When I'm getting ready to boogie-on-down at the local disco on a Friday night after a hard week teaching, for example, I choose what clothes to wear carefully. This is because I aim to make an impression on my disco-buddies – my choice of clothes has meaning to both me (“How cool do I look!”) and the people with whom I interact (“Why would anyone think they looked good in those clothes?”). This is not, of course, to say we always fully understand what our actions mean to other people (as my disco example probably demonstrates), nor that our actions will mean the same things to others as they mean to us. This, however, leads to the idea of:

Interpretations: Our behaviour is constantly open to interpretation, both by ourselves (“Why did I wear that tie with that shirt?”) and others (“Nice tie, shame about the dancing”). In addition, interpretation reflects back on meaning since, as we've suggested, how I interpret the behaviour of others is going to depend on what it means to me.

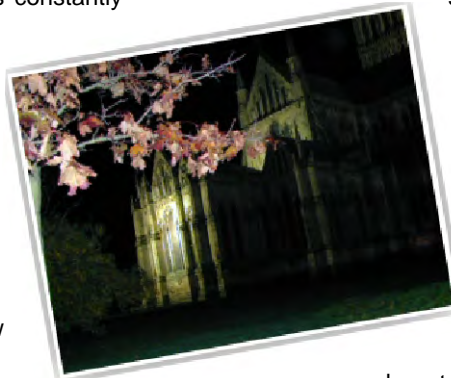
Negotiations: Thinking about how people interact involves a certain level of negotiation; that is, we are able to “discuss” (in the widest sense of the word) the meaning of our actions and how others should interpret them. Social life and social interaction, in this respect, doesn't simply involve obeying rules without question since the meaning of our behaviour to others can change, depending on the circumstances surrounding our behaviour.

For example, whenever I start to teach a new class we lay down some basic rules of behaviour, one of which is that when I set homework I specify the date for its completion. The first piece of homework is, normally, dutifully completed on time by all my students (they're new and unsure about how I'll act if they try to hand the work in late). By the next piece of work, there's usually one student (who will, for the purpose of avoiding an expensive law suit, rename nameless – but I think you probably know who we're talking about) who asks if they can hand the work in after the deadline. This is an example of how rules are negotiated, since the student is asking the lecturer to *renegotiate* the established rule.

This is a crucial point in my teaching since how I respond to this deviant (norm-breaking) behaviour sets the tone for all future homework deadlines – if I extend the deadline for this student (their hamster had, after all, been eaten by their aunt and they were too traumatised by this sad turn of events to even think about completing the work that had been set) then I

send a signal to my students that deadlines are negotiable and rules are flexible. If, however, I say the student must hand in the work on time or leave the course I've sent a different message – one that says “Don't mess with me 'cos I'm a hard, heartless, dude” who cares nothing for hamsters, aunts or indeed traumatic life experiences (or something to that effect anyway).

Social Structure: The concept of social structure, as we've suggested, focuses on group behaviour (usually, but not exclusively, on very large groups – social *institutions* such as education for example) and how social life is *patterned* (in terms of regularities in group behaviour). An easy way to develop our thoughts about social structures is to illustrate this idea using the concept of:



Whooooo-oooooo: Spooky

Haunting suggested by **Meighan** (1981), when he argues social actions are always surrounded by the *ghosts of social structures*. We are all, he argues, *haunted* by things we cannot see but which nevertheless affect our behaviour. For example, when teachers and students enter a classroom (for the purpose of education) the interaction between them is

haunted by things like:

- **Physical environment:** Whether the room is warm and inviting or, alternatively, cold, dark and off-putting; whether the classroom resembles a prison cell or a bright, modern, learning lab – such things affect the teaching and learning process.

- **Knowledge** being taught: Classroom teaching reflects what our culture values (or doesn't value, as the case may be). What and how you're taught and the ways you're allowed, as students, to demonstrate knowledge are all evidence of the impact of social structures. Is, for example, *theoretical knowledge* – such as the ability to write essays about Shakespeare – more valued than *practical knowledge*, such as the ability to build a brick wall?



I'm sorry but I'm really going to have to come down hard on you about this homework situation.

- **Language** of education: The language we speak is structured in terms of both grammatical rules (know what I mean?) and in terms of how it can be used to communicate ideas. At A-level, for example, you're expected to learn the *technical language* of the subjects (such as Sociology, Physics or Media Studies) you're studying if you want to do well in your exams.

- **Demands** of employers: If employers require qualifications from their workforce, teachers are haunted (in terms of what they teach, when they teach it and so forth) by the ghost of examinations. In our education system, for example, students have to be taught against a background of preparation for formal examinations – they have to learn the techniques involved, what constitutes knowledge acceptable to an examiner and so forth.

Module Link

Education

Meighan's concept of "haunting" (in terms of the ideas we've just noted) can be applied to our understanding of the role and purpose of the education system.

Social Structure and Social Action: The concepts of structure and action are both important, in terms of understanding the relationship between society and the individual, and complementary. Although we're all individuals, our behavioural choices are influenced, limited and enhanced by the framework of rules and responsibilities (social structures) that surround us as we go about our daily lives. Just as we cannot conceive of society without individuals (who, after all, but people can create society?) it's very difficult to think about people without needing to refer to the various ways our behaviour is structured. Ideas about structure and action, therefore, are fundamental to sociologists (just as they are, probably unwittingly, to us all) because they reflect two important ideas about social behaviour:



It's lonely being an individual
- but at least you can be
moody for a reason...

1. Diversity: On the one hand, people are free to make choices about their behaviour and this results in **cultural diversity** (or difference) over how they organise their society and relationships. We can demonstrate this idea by looking at examples of how different cultures view the same behaviour:

In **Britain**, it's legal for an 18 year old to order a pint of beer in a pub. In **America**, an 18 year old exhibiting the same behaviour is committing a criminal offence (you have to be at least 21 for this behaviour to be legal).

In **Britain**, when you meet someone it's acceptable to shake their hand. In **Japan**, it's more socially acceptable to bow when greeting someone. The depth of the bow is important – if greeting someone of a *higher social status* you should bow lower than they do. In **India**, shaking hands with someone of the opposite sex is unacceptable.

In **America**, to beckon someone with the palm facing upwards and crooking your index finger is an acceptable way of calling someone towards you. In **India**, the same action is viewed as an insult (the palm should always face downward, in case you were wondering).

2. Culture: On the other hand, our behavioural choices are influenced by both the society / culture into which we are born and our relationship to other people (whether as family, friends and work colleagues or

simply on the basis of our awareness of sharing things (like a common nationality) with others in our society). A key idea to understand, therefore, is that in order to engage in *social action* there must exist some sort of *framework* (or *structure*) within which that action can take place. For example, in terms of the cultural diversity examples we've just noted, the framework might include things like:

Verbal communication: It's difficult to communicate with someone if you don't share a language with them.

Non-verbal communication, which involves the ability to understand gestures, body language, roles being played and the respective statuses of the social actors.

Sociological Perspectives: Observations

The distinction we've made between the concepts of "social structure" and "social action" represent general observations about the relationship between the individual, on the one hand, and society on the other and we can refine the focus of these ideas somewhat by thinking about the various ways sociologists explain their relationship in more specific terms. To do this we can start to outline a number of different **sociological perspectives** - or, to put it another way, different ways of seeing, thinking about and understanding the social world. However, before we outline how the views of different (individual) sociologists can be broadly grouped into "sociological perspectives", we need to note two things:

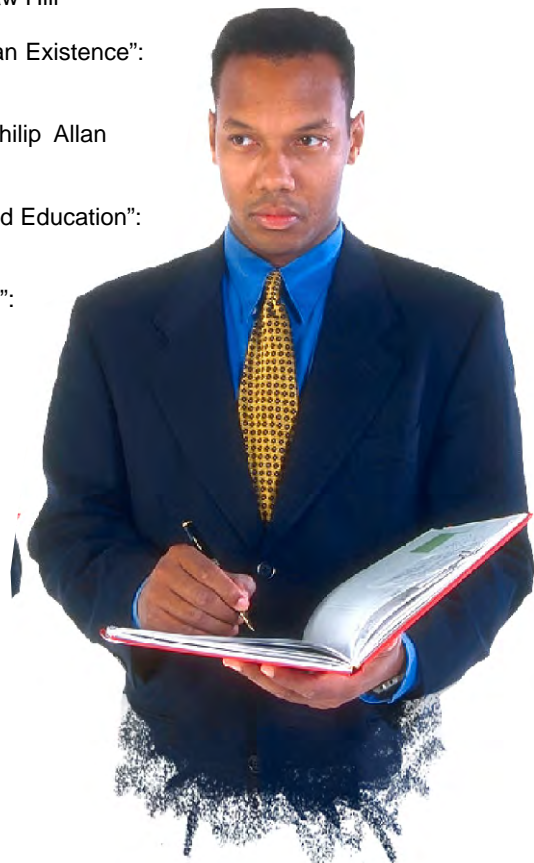
Firstly we need to take on board the idea that it's possible for people to view the same behaviour yet "see" it from a different perspective and, consequently, interpret its meaning and significance differently.

Secondly, some sociologists view *social structures* as the most important factor in understanding behaviour while other sociologists see *social action* as the key factor. A third group argue both should be given equal prominence in any explanation of behaviour.



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