

Core sociological terms and research methods

Term	Definition	Early-stage examples in A-Level Sociology
Agents of Socialisation	The institutions and social groups, such as the family, education system, media, and peer groups, that teach individuals the expected norms and values of their culture.	Family: Parents teaching children manners or gender roles. Education: Schools teaching the formal curriculum (e.g., maths) and the informal or 'hidden' curriculum (e.g., respecting authority).
Consensus Theory	A theory that views society as being based on broad agreement on norms and values, with different groups working together for the common good. Functionalism is a major example.	A consensus theorist would see the education system as beneficial for all of society, helping to socialise young people into shared norms and values.
Conflict Theory	A theory that sees society as being in a state of conflict due to the competition for limited resources. Marxism and feminism are key examples.	Marxist example: The education system serves the interests of the powerful capitalist class by teaching future workers to be obedient, preparing them for exploitation in the workplace. Feminist example: The family structure is based on conflict because it benefits men at the expense of women.
Culture	The way of life of a particular society, including its shared beliefs, values, norms, customs, knowledge, and language.	The general British culture of queuing politely, the expectation of saying "please" and "thank you," or wider beliefs about individual rights and freedoms.



Deviance	Behaviour that goes against the norms and values of a society or social group.	Non-criminal deviance: Picking your nose in public. Criminal deviance: Committing a crime like theft. What is deviant can change over time, e.g., tattoos are now more accepted.
Identity	An individual's sense of self, shaped by socialisation and interactions with others.	A student's identity might be shaped by their social class, gender, and how they interact with peers, teachers, and family.
Macro Approach	A large-scale approach focusing on society as a whole and its institutions, rather than on individual actions. Functionalism and Marxism are examples.	Studying the impact of playing video games on students' academic performance across the country, focusing on statistics and trends.
Micro Approach	A small-scale approach focusing on the interactions between individuals and small groups. Symbolic Interactionism is an example.	Focusing on how students in one specific friendship group interact while playing video games, using interviews and observation to understand their experiences.
Norms	The unwritten rules of behaviour considered socially acceptable within a particular group or society.	Informal norms: Not pushing to the front of a queue. Formal norms: Legal rules, such as traffic laws, backed by sanctions.
Patriarchy	A social system in which males hold primary power and authority over women in areas such as family, politics, and the economy.	In early sociology, this term is used by feminists to describe the male-dominated family structure and unequal power relations between men and women.



Positivism	An approach that advocates using the methods of the natural sciences to study society, focusing on quantitative data to uncover objective social facts and correlations.	Émile Durkheim's study of suicide, using official statistics to identify patterns and correlations.
Interpretivism	An approach that argues scientific methods are inappropriate for studying society, as human behaviour is based on subjective meanings. It prefers qualitative data to gain an empathetic understanding of individuals' actions.	An interpretivist might interview suicide survivors or bereaved families to understand the personal motivations behind their actions.
Primary Socialisation	The first stage of socialisation, typically occurring in the early years within the family, where individuals learn fundamental norms and values.	A child learning how to talk, use cutlery, and understand the difference between right and wrong from their parents.
Qualitative Data	Descriptive information expressed in words, pictures, or narratives, used by interpretivists to understand social phenomena in detail.	Transcripts from in-depth interviews, observational notes, or personal diaries.
Quantitative Data	Numerical information or statistics, used by positivists to identify patterns, trends, and correlations across large populations.	Official statistics like crime rates, census data, or numerical results from large-scale questionnaires.



Reliability	The consistency of a measure. If a piece of research is repeated, it should produce the same results. This is generally higher in quantitative methods.	A standardised, multiple-choice questionnaire is highly reliable because another researcher can administer it and expect similar results.
Representativeness	Whether a sample of people in a study accurately reflects the characteristics of the wider target population. This allows generalisations to be made.	A study on students' views is representative if the sample reflects the age, gender, and ethnic diversity of the entire student population.
Role	A set of behaviours and expectations associated with a particular position or status in society. A person can have many roles.	The status of a teacher comes with the role of teaching students, setting homework, and maintaining discipline. The status of a son comes with the role of respecting his parents and doing chores.
Role Conflict	The tension experienced when the demands of one role clash with the demands of another role.	A student who is also a parent might experience conflict between their role as a student (studying late) and their role as a parent (looking after their child).
Secondary Socialisation	The stage of socialisation that takes place outside the family, in institutions such as the education system, media, and peer groups.	A child learning to respect a teacher's authority at school, or a teenager learning social etiquette from their friends.
Social Class	A group of people who share a similar economic situation, often based on income, wealth, and occupation.	Early teaching often uses a simple three-class model: working class (manual jobs), middle class (professional jobs), and upper class (the elite).



Social Construction	The idea that aspects of social life, such as concepts of race or gender, are created and defined by society, rather than being naturally occurring.	The idea of 'childhood' is a social construction. In the past, children were expected to work like adults much earlier, but social norms have changed over time.
Social Control	The methods and strategies used by a society or social group to regulate people's behaviour.	Informal control: Peer groups using negative feedback (like mocking) to ensure conformity. Formal control: The police and courts using sanctions like fines or prison sentences.
Social Mobility	The movement of individuals or groups between different social classes within a social hierarchy.	Upward mobility: A factory worker's child getting a university degree and becoming a doctor. Downward mobility: A professional losing their job and experiencing long-term unemployment.
Social Structure	The organised network of social institutions and relationships that form the building blocks of society.	The family structure, the class system, or the education system are all examples of social structures that influence people's lives.
Socialisation	The lifelong process of learning the culture of a society, including its norms, values, and behaviours.	Encompasses both primary and secondary socialisation, allowing individuals to function effectively within their society.
Status	The social standing or amount of prestige a person's position gives them. It can be ascribed or achieved.	Ascribed status: Your gender or ethnicity. Achieved status: The status of 'student' or 'doctor', earned through effort and qualifications.



Stratification	The division of society into a hierarchy of unequal social groups based on factors like wealth, power, or status.	Studying social class divisions in the UK is a key topic in understanding social stratification.
Subculture	A smaller group within a wider culture that has its own distinctive norms and values.	Youth cultures like 'Goths' or 'Punks,' or specific groups like football fans or religious communities.
Value Consensus	A general agreement around the main values and norms of a society. A core concept of Functionalist theory.	The broad agreement in a society that hard work is a good thing to do.
Values	The beliefs about what is important and worthwhile in a particular society.	A society might hold values like freedom, equality, or respect for elders.
Validity	The accuracy of research; whether it truly measures what it claims to be measuring. Qualitative methods are often considered more valid because they offer deeper insight.	A participant observation study of a gang provides greater validity into the lived experiences of gang members than a quick survey.
Verstehen	A German term meaning "empathetic understanding." A key goal for interpretivist sociologists, who aim to see the world from the point of view of those they are studying.	An interpretivist researcher attempting to understand the feelings and motives of a gang member by observing and interviewing them, rather than just collecting statistics.

