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A LEVEL SOCIOLOGY • STUDY NOTES

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What is Sociology?

Homework activities for after your first A Level Sociology lesson

COMPLETE THE HOMEWORK TASKS IN THE GREEN TABLE

"When, in a city of 100,000, only one is unemployed, that is his **personal trouble**... But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million people are unemployed, that is an issue." This is one of the most famous examples in sociology, used by the American sociologist C. Wright Mills in his 1959 book *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills, 1959). Mills called the skill of connecting **personal troubles** to wider **public issues** the **sociological imagination**: the ability to see how private experiences are shaped by society.

You have just finished your first **Sociology** lesson. This short reading will help you understand what sociology actually means as a subject, and introduce a few key words you will keep using throughout the course. Once you have read it, complete the questions and activities at the end.

What Does Sociology Mean?

Sociology is the study of society: how people live together, the groups and institutions they form, and the shared rules that shape their behaviour. Every society has patterns in how people behave, and sociologists try to explain those patterns.

Sociologists do not simply describe society. They ask why people behave as they do, and how much of that behaviour comes from the individual and how much comes from the society around them. Here are some key words to know before going further.

Key terms
Sociology: the study of society, including how people behave in groups and how society is organised.
Society: a group of people who live together in an organised way, sharing institutions, rules and a way of life.
Culture: the shared way of life of a group, including its beliefs, customs, values and knowledge.
Socialisation: the process by which people learn the norms and values of their society, usually starting in childhood.

Two Different Views of Sociology

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim argued that society is built from social facts. These are ways of acting, thinking and feeling that exist outside the individual person, and press upon them with a kind of force (Durkheim, 1895). On this **structural view**, society shapes individuals more than individuals shape society.

Other sociologists disagree. The German sociologist Max Weber argued that sociology should focus on the interpretive understanding of social action: the meanings people give to their own behaviour (Weber, 1922). On this **social action view**, society is built up from individuals' own choices and understandings, not simply imposed on them.

View	What it says
Structural view (Durkheim)	Society is made up of social facts that exist outside individuals and shape their behaviour.
Social action view (Weber)	Society is built from individuals' own choices and the meanings they give to their actions.

Table 1: Two different views of how society works.

- Structural approaches, such as functionalism and Marxism, tend to focus on how institutions like the family, education and religion shape people's lives.
- Social action approaches, such as interactionism, tend to focus on how individuals create meaning through their everyday interactions.

Sociology and Common Sense

Sociology is often confused with **common sense**, since both are about understanding people. The difference is method. Common sense relies on personal opinion, tradition or assumption, and is rarely tested. **Sociology** relies on evidence, gathered through careful research, and its claims can be checked and challenged.

For example, **common sense** might assume that poverty is simply caused by individual laziness. Sociological research instead looks at evidence about wages, unemployment, education and government policy, and often finds structural causes that **common sense** overlooks.

- Common sense is often based on personal experience or repeated assumption, not evidence.
- **Sociology** tests its claims against research, and is willing to revise them when the evidence changes.

Back to Mills

Mills' idea of the **sociological imagination** is a good way to remember what sociology is about. Every topic on this course, from family life to crime, asks a version of the same underlying question: how do private experiences connect to the wider structure of society?

HOMEWORK – MUST BE HANDWRITTEN, ONE SUBSTANTIAL PARAGRAPH FOR EACH TASK

1. What does C. Wright Mills mean by the "sociological imagination"?
2. What is the difference between the structural view (Durkheim) and the social action view (Weber) of society?
3. What is the difference between common sense and sociological knowledge?

h **OPTIONAL EXTENSION Activities -**

The activities below all check that you have understood the reading above. Those of you aiming for high A Level grades – A*/A – should always consider completing extension/check your understanding tasks in your own time. Hand them in and get extra feedback.

Activity 1: Match the Key Words

List the four terms from the Key terms box (sociology, society, culture, socialisation) in one column, and the four definitions in a jumbled, different order in a second column. Match each term to its correct definition from memory, then check your answers against the reading and correct any mistakes.

Activity 2: Complete the Comparison Table

Using the reading, complete the blank grid below. Fill in what each view (the structural view and the social action view) says about how society works, and note which sociologist is linked to each one.

View	Who says this	What it says

Activity 3: True or False?

Mark each statement below true or false, then correct every false statement so that it becomes true. All six can be answered directly from the reading.

1. C. Wright Mills introduced the idea of the "sociological imagination" in his 1959 book.
2. According to Mills, if only one person in a city of 100,000 is unemployed, this is best explained as a public issue.
3. Durkheim's structural view says that social facts exist outside the individual and shape their behaviour.

4. Weber's social action view focuses only on institutions such as the family and education, not on individual choices.
5. Socialisation is the process by which people learn the norms and values of their society.
6. According to the reading, sociology never tests its claims against evidence.

Activity 4: Sort the Examples

The six examples below do not appear in the reading. For each one, decide whether it fits the structural view, the social action view, or both, and explain your answer in one sentence.

- A sociologist studies how schools pass on shared values to prepare children for work.
- A sociologist studies how two strangers negotiate the rules of behaviour when sharing a lift.
- A sociologist argues that widespread unemployment is caused by economic structures beyond any one person's control.
- A sociologist interviews people to understand what getting married personally means to them.
- A sociologist studies how the education system reproduces inequality between social classes.
- A sociologist studies how football fans create shared rituals and meanings at a match.

Activity 5: Common Sense or Sociology?

For each statement below, decide whether it is an example of common sense or of sociological thinking, and explain your answer in one sentence using the definitions from the reading.

- "People are poor because they don't work hard enough."
- A study using government data to show that unemployment rates differ sharply by region and level of education.
- "Crime is just caused by bad people."
- A researcher interviews offenders and analyses reoffending statistics to explain patterns in crime.
- "Everybody knows teenagers are just naturally rebellious."

Sources

Durkheim, É. (1895) *The Rules of Sociological Method*. Paris: Félix Alcan.

Mills, C. W. (1959) *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Weber, M. (1922) *Economy and Society*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.