

Understanding Key Concepts in Sociology

Sociologists use key concepts to describe human behaviour and the society in which we live. In this section, you will be introduced to some of the key concepts that you will need to understand and use throughout the course.

1. Culture, norms and values

Culture is the whole way of life of a society: its language, beliefs, **values**, **norms** and customs. But what do sociologists mean by values and norms?

Values are the things in a society that are considered important and worth striving for. In Britain, values include beliefs about respect for human life, privacy and private property, about the importance of marriage, money and success. A society's values shape its norms.



Norms are social rules which define the correct and acceptable behaviour in a society or social group to which people are expected to conform.

Norms are much more precise than values: they put values into practice in particular situations. For example, the norm that someone should not enter a room without knocking reflects the value of privacy. Rules about not drinking and driving reflect the values of respect for human life and consideration of the safety of others. Norms are mainly informally enforced by the disapproval of other people, embarrassment or a telling off from parents or others.



While not everyone will always share the same values or norms in a society, there are often strong pressures on people to conform to some of the most important ones which are often written down as laws. .

It is useful to look at other cultures to see how norms and values may differ. Read the extract below about the Cheyenne culture.

A comparison of cultures and values

The Cheyenne are a Native American tribe that live in the Great Plains of North America. The Cheyenne believe that wealth, in the form of horses and weapons, is not to be hoarded by the owner. Instead, it is to be given away.

Generosity is highly valued and people who accumulate wealth and keep it for themselves are looked down upon. A person who gives something to others does not expect an equal amount in return. The greatest gift anyone can receive is prestige and respect for their generous action.



2. The process of socialisation

Sociologists believe that most human behaviour is **learnt** by individuals as members of society rather than something with which they are born with. **Socialisation** is the lifelong process by which people learn the **culture** of the society in which they live. Socialisation is carried out by **agents of socialisation** such as families, the education system, religious institutions or the media.

Primary socialisation

The most important part of the socialisation process begins in the family. The family is where **primary socialisation** takes place. Primary socialisation is the teaching of society's norms and values, as well as basic skills. For example, parents may teach children skills such as how to eat or speak, norms such as how to take turns or listen to others, and values such as honesty and hard work.



Secondary socialisation

Socialisation does not once a child grows up and leaves the family. A range of institutions continue to perform **secondary socialisation** throughout a person's life. For example, at school a child may learn the value of punctuality and norms around following school rules. At work, a young adult may learn new norms around interacting with colleagues and the value of teamwork.



What happens when socialisation doesn't happen?

It would be deeply unethical to carry out an experiment to see what would happen if a child didn't receive any socialisation from their parents. There are examples of where this has happened in real life though. Read the case-study below to better understand what can happen if socialisation does not take place:

Case Study: John Ssabunnya (from BBC News article 1999).

Walking through a Ugandan forest, a woman spotted a group of monkeys. To her astonishment, she realised that one member of the group was a small boy. Local villagers 'rescued' the boy and identified him as John Ssabunnya who had been abandoned as a two year old.

For the past three years, John had lived with a troupe of Columbus monkeys. He had learned to communicate with them with chatters, shrieks, facial expressions and body language. He shared their diet of fruit, nuts and berries, he became skilled at climbing trees and he walked on all fours. He was terrified of his 'rescuers' and fought to remain with his family of monkeys.

John was taken to an orphanage where he slowly learned to behave like a human. Gradually he began to sing, laugh, talk, play and walk like children of his age.



3. Social inequalities of class, ethnicity and gender

a) Social class

A **social class** is a group of people who share a similar economic situation. For example, they might have a similar level of income from their job. **Income** refers to the amount of money that people obtain from work, investments or from the government (for example through benefits). People from the same social class will have a similar amount of **wealth** - this refers to the property they have which could be sold and turned into cash.



An individual's social class has a significant influence on their **life chances**. For example, the chances of getting a good house, a well-paid job, of living a healthy life. Sociologists disagree about the level of **social mobility** in UK society. Some believe that it is relatively easy to move up the class hierarchy if you work hard, others disagree, arguing that there are many factors preventing a person born into a working-class family from becoming middle or upper class.

Most people identify themselves as one of the four categories of social class described below, although many sociologists argue that these are no longer relevant in the UK today.

| Traditional Social Class Categories | Examples |
|---|---|
| The upper class is a small class and refers to those who are the main owners of society's wealth. Often these people do not work for others, as their wealth is so large that work is not necessary for them to survive. | CEOs of large companies Members of the aristocracy |
| The middle class is a large class and refers to those in non-manual work- jobs which don't involve heavy physical effort. Most middle-class occupations require qualifications and a certain level of education. | Lawyers Doctors Engineers |
| The working class is one of the largest social classes, referring to those working in manual jobs (jobs involving physical work) | Plumber Electrician Beautician |
| The underclass is a small class and refers to a group of people who are right at the bottom of the class structure and whose poverty often excludes them from full participation in society. | Unemployed Part-time minimum wage |

It's important to remember that social class is not always as straightforward as how much money you earn. For example, a human rights lawyer may have a lot of educational qualifications and training but earn less money than a plumber. Would the lawyer be considered middle class or working class?

The social class structure tends to shape people's experiences, **life chances** and influence their behaviour. The lower people are in the class system, the more likely they are to suffer

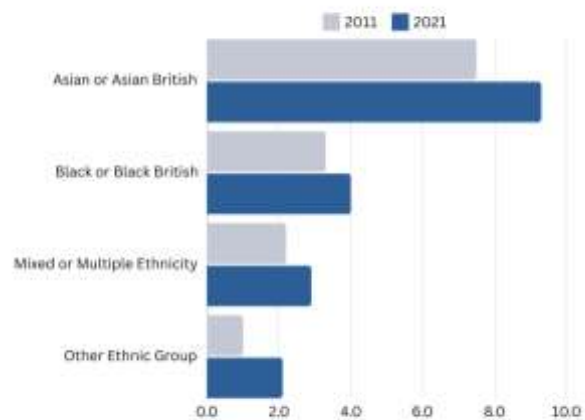
from physical and mental illness, to live in substandard housing, to be a victim of crime, to be unemployed, to lack educational qualifications and to have a relatively short life expectancy.

b) Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to having a shared culture and identity. An **ethnic group** is a group whose members see themselves as a group with a shared heritage history and cultural background, often including speaking the same language and having the same religion. An ethnic minority group refers to a social group which shares a cultural identity which is different from that of the majority population of a society.

In the UK today, significant inequalities remain between different ethnic groups. Unemployment is almost twice as high for ethnic minority groups as it is for white British people. On average, employees from ethnic minority groups earn less than white British employees and are more likely to work shifts. The infant mortality rate of African Caribbean and Pakistani babies is more than double that of the white majority. Members of ethnic groups may experience negative discrimination and disadvantages due to their ethnicity. A study by the Institute for Social and Economic Research shows that ethnic minority British graduates are at a disadvantage in the labour market compared to white graduates.

UK POPULATION BY ETHNICITY (Excluding White British)



Source: ONS 2021

c) Gender

Gender refers to the social or cultural expectations and ideas associated with being male or female. There are significant differences between men and women despite major changes in recent years. Although girls are now more likely to achieve highly than boys at school, this success is not transferred to the job market. Women do not have equal access to higher level jobs and the gender pay gap still exists. More women than men are living in poverty and most low paid workers are women. Women continue to be more likely to work part time and carry out more housework and childcare than men.

