

# This changing world

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Welcome to the study of sociology – and to **SOCIOLOGY REVIEW**, the magazine for all right-thinking A-level sociology students. As you will soon see, there has never been a better time to study sociology.

**S**ociology is a subject concerned, essentially, with the *patterning* of human relationships. Sociology tries to answer questions about who we are and why we do the sorts of things we do. It is a subject that tries to get to grips with social change by asking questions such as: 'How are the lives of young people today different from those of their parents and grandparents?'

The answer to the last question might seem quite obvious to you: after all, your generation has nightclubs, mobile phones, reality television and the internet. Earlier generations had little or no access to these things. You have had regular testing in school – and a lot more choice in clothes and shoes than your parents ever did. And you have...texting. Important as all these things obviously are, they only really begin to scrape the surface of how and why life has changed for your own generation. A little later, we will show you what we *really* mean about this.

## Do I jump – or am I pushed?

You will soon get to learn that one of the central questions in sociology concerns the relationship between *action* (the choices we make as individuals to do certain things or act in certain ways) and *structure* (the ways in which our background or shared characteristics as a male/female, or someone who is black/white, or from a working-class or a more middle-class background) shape the choices we are able to make and our opportunities to 'act'. The social theorist Karl Marx said, many years ago, that people make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing. What he meant was that because we all make decisions and choices, we all 'make' our world through our own actions. None of us finds it easy to escape the shaping effects of our own background. In short, some people have rather better opportunities to make good choices than do others.

Working out the precise relationship between action (choice) and structure (advantage or restraint) has tested many sociologists. Some have tried to combine the two concepts – and have produced new ones as a result. Whenever we, as sociologists, try to explain behaviour or read newspaper stories or accounts from other people about someone *acting* in certain ways or *making choices* to do certain things, no matter how odd or inappropriate this behaviour may

seem to us, we will always try to ask questions about the *background* for their actions. What is the context? What is the bigger picture? What sorts of *structural* constraints – or advantages – are helping to shape these actions? These are still key questions in sociology, and you will get used to asking them.

## Looking beyond the obvious

This focus on looking *beyond* the obvious, beyond the superficial dimensions of action or choice, is one of the key features of the sociological imagination. This is not to say that people should not be held responsible for what they do: they must be. It is more a case of trying to find out about the *circumstances* that make these sorts of choices meaningful for them.

The 'common-sense' assumptions we all routinely make about the likely effects of background on behaviour are challenged by sociology. These assumptions are usually based on partial knowledge or even on simple prejudice. Look at Exercise 1 – it's about testing the assumptions we make about different types of people, based, simply, on how they look and what we think we already know about 'people like them'. Ask yourself where these assumptions and ideas come from.

How do we *learn* to behave differently as men and women? How are our choices and actions (with respect, in this case, to gender) shaped by our background – by our *socialisation* as boys and girls and by this society's *expectations* of how the sexes should behave? There is no simple, fixed pattern: some men behave in quite a 'feminine' way and some women are rather 'masculine' in their behaviour. These days we have male footballers who wear sarongs and women who like to box, so there is plenty of real overlap between the sexes.

The codes for acceptable masculinities and femininities differ from country to country, and this is one reason why most sociologists don't see the behaviour of men and women as being determined, simply, by biology or genetics. Another reason is that what is acceptable for boys and girls to be or do – for example as portrayed in movies such as *Billy Elliott* or *Bend it like Beckham* – is always changing. Gender is not programmed or fixed. Exercise 2 looks at gender identity. Ask yourself who usually dominates the college space and why.

Although gender behaviour is not something that is fixed, there are usually identifiable patterns that distinguish what we take to be 'typical' behaviour on the part of males and females in any given society. And we also take in – not always consciously – loads of 'common sense' or stereotypical ideas about acceptable or gender identities all the time.

## Sociology and social change

What does all this have to do with what we said at the beginning of this article about *social change* – about how your own life is, perhaps, different from that of your parents and grandparents? We'll try to answer that question now.

Over the past 30 years some sociologists have begun to argue that the *balance* between the effects of action and structure on shaping behaviour and on the opportunities we all have is beginning to shift. They suggest that perhaps structure – one's background – is becoming less important in shaping life chances than it used to be – contentious stuff.

What do they mean by this? In the more 'open' and global society of today – a world in which major transnational companies shop around the globe for the most efficient and highly skilled workforce – having a British or a northern European background is no longer the obvious advantage it once might have seemed to be. Plenty of the work that used to be done in the West is now done abroad – perhaps in the Far East. This means that the skills you have – and the price at which you will work, of course – are now more important than geography, tradition, class or ethnic background, in shaping new opportunities in the global market for work.

In addition to this new global division of labour, recent domestic changes in the family, in education and in the very nature of work are important too. Your own grandparents would certainly have grown up in a world in which it was generally assumed that boys would do well at school or would find their place in the 'masculine' world of industry – and that most girls would be 'happy' raising children. (Ask them about this.) How this picture has changed! Today, much heavy industry (men's work) has moved away from Britain. Women are much more ambitious and are now as important to the waged workforce as men, especially in the new service industries. More couples are having no children at all or are having them later; fewer younger people stay in the same job, or even in the same family, for more than a few years at a time. The stable features of modern life – family, work – suddenly look less secure, less predictable.

### The risk society

Your world is very different from the world of your grandparents or your parents. For many of them, a life 'script' would have been effectively laid out for a secure but strongly gender- and class-determined 'job for life' (for many men), a career of child-rearing (for most women), probably one serious adult partnership for a lifetime (almost certainly so for your grandparents), and a world in which the barriers between adults and children, between the sexes and the social classes and between different ethnic groups remained pretty strongly fixed. Few girls — and almost certainly no Asian ones — would have been allowed to 'Bend it like Beckham' then.

Sociologists tend to think that today's young people are responsible for 'making up' more of their own life story — certainly much more than their own grandparents and parents ever did. Young people now are said to live in a world of both greater opportunity and much more risk: a world in which the old safety nets or barriers of background or structure no longer advantage or constrain their lives in quite the same way as they did for earlier generations. In short, today's young people think of themselves more as *individuals* faced with choices than as people locked into a society that is unequally divided by defining 'background' categories, such as those of class, ethnicity or gender.

These assertions and these possible changes are hugely important for sociologists. They raise crucial questions for us, such as: do class, 'race' or gender background really matter that much in today's individualistic risk society? After all, this is a world in which, it is alleged, some young people define themselves as much by what they wear (Nike or Reebok, Armani or Calvin Klein) as by who they are or where they come from.

### Conclusion

Of course, sociologists acknowledge that the world is a very different place today: that technology, globalisation, the new focus on consumption and the changing patterns of family and work may, indeed, have loosened some of the boundaries of inequality, but few would argue that the old structural categories are no longer important or useful. In fact, in the professions, in educational performance, in healthcare and in the experience of poverty — in virtually everything, in fact — class, gender and 'race' still seem to prove important predictive variables. Think about this.

Finally, as another example of the new debate in sociology about the changing balance between action and structure, look at Exercise 4, and ask yourself this question: does social class background still affect the ways in which we parent children in Britain, even in this new, globalised, risk society? Are there still important class patterns of behaviour to examine and evaluate? Then ask yourself this further question: exactly how did I get here and what has been shaping my life chances?

If any of this makes you think or has begun to stir your interest, you have a real chance of becoming a sociologist.