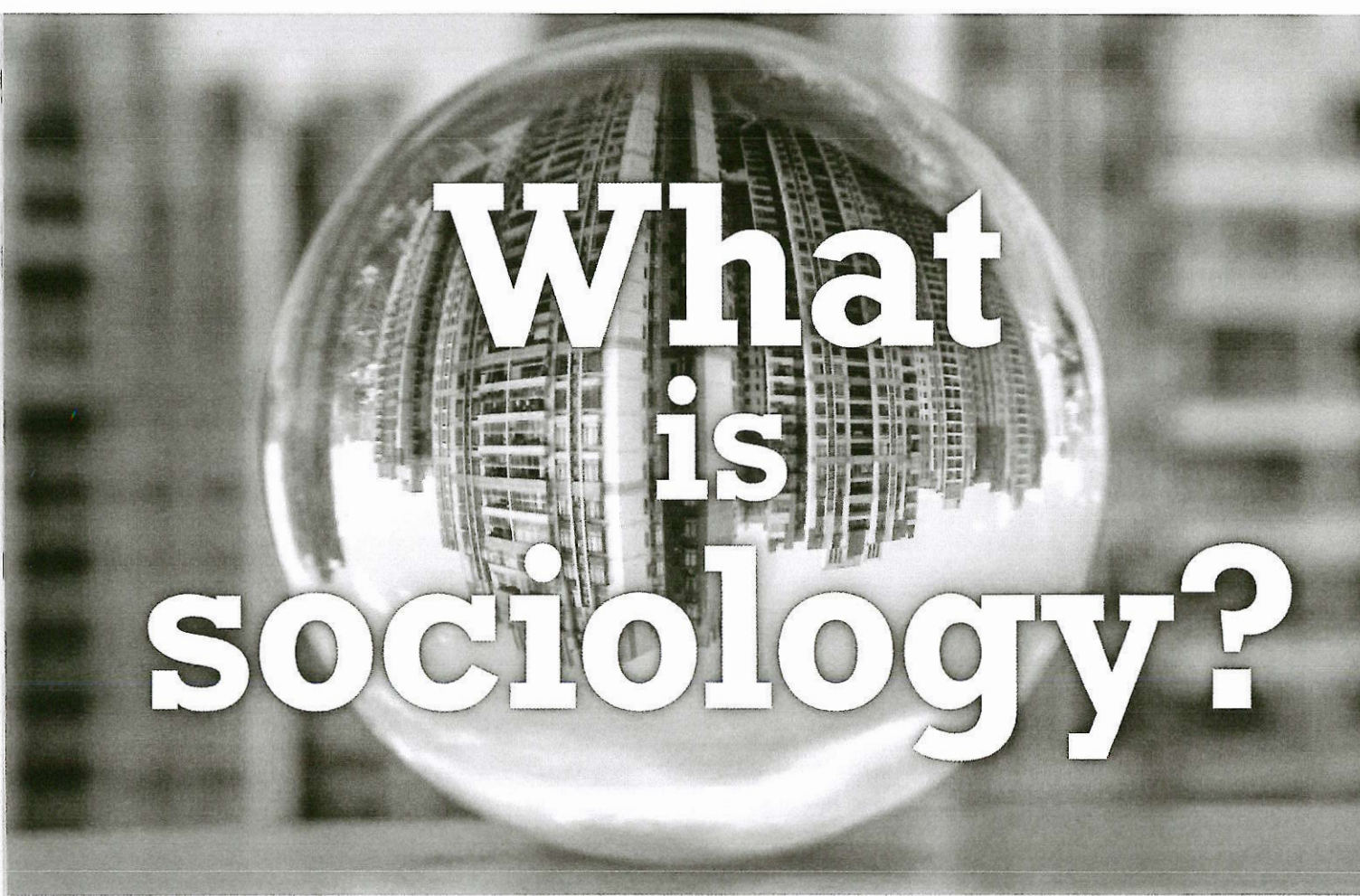


Updated link for the mindmapping task:

<https://subjectguides.york.ac.uk/note-taking/mind-map>



What is sociology?

John Williams

If you're just getting started on your sociological journey, find out what it's all about and why it is important

Sociology is the study of human social relationships and the structures and institutions that support them. There, I have said it — and that sounds incredibly dull, don't you think? You might believe right now (as I would) that I would much rather go to the park, or watch a movie and get a takeaway, than study *this* kind of sociology.

But sociology *in practice* is quite the opposite to dull. Take my word for it. When you get into it, you will soon realise that everything you do, and any social situation you find yourself in, every story you read online or in the press, and any TV show you watch, is amenable to — demands — a sociological analysis. And just applying some basic insights from sociology can make the whole thing much clearer and more obvious. The world and how it really works will start to make a lot more sense. Trust me.

Addressing some key questions about the social world

All this is because sociology asks some very important questions about the social

world, the sort of inquiries that few other disciplines do. Questions such as: Who ordered this research and how has it been done? How is power being exerted here? Who is benefitting from what is going on? Who is being discriminated against? Whose ideas are being spread and supported? And, who is missing out in most things — and why?

You might think that people in their daily lives, politicians, public servants and others, ask these sorts of questions most of the time, but that is simply not the case. At least not the way sociologists ask them. And you may find that your own family and friends become just a little bit defensive — or even alarmed — when *you* start asking questions along these lines. Do not be spooked: their response is to be expected. And you are just doing your job.

Sociology's subject matter is incredibly (depressingly?) diverse. It ranges from global development to crime, to religion and spirituality, and to education and work; from how family relationships function to the wider responsibilities

of the nation state; from health and the media to the divisions of gender, race and social class, and the shared beliefs of a common culture; and from enduring sources of social stability to the challenges of addressing radical change in whole societies.

By better understanding the social processes involved here, we can also come to know a lot more clearly what shapes the personal experiences and outcomes of our own lives. Indeed, studying these diverse subjects requires consideration of sociology's key purpose: which is to try to work out how human action and consciousness — the individual choices we make — both shape, and are shaped by, existing cultural and social structures.

The point here is that all of us make decisions every day of our lives; some of these are very important, others less so. But what are the wider influences that help shape those choices? And what are the core beliefs that underpin them? These sorts of imponderables are meat and drink to sociologists.

The importance of methods

Sociologists are perhaps especially notable for prioritising the careful collection of data. We ask lots of questions about the status of the evidence we collect about the social world. If you put rubbish in, then rubbish will come out. The research methods we sociologists use, are carefully constructed and are very varied. Many sociologists spend their entire careers asking questions about how we do research and how we can do it better.

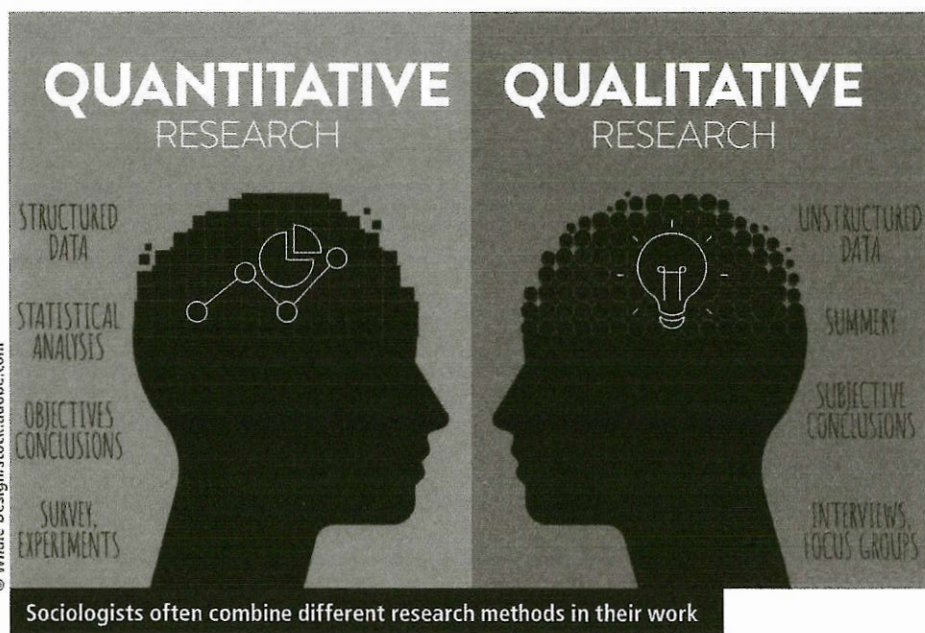
Some sociologists in their research may simply observe the everyday life of individuals or groups over time, arguing that what people *say* they do, can be very different from what they *actually* do. You need to see people in action in social settings to be sure. Others argue that interviews or focus groups are the way forward. Hearing people talking about their lives, using their own words, is very instructive. The idea here is that people construct the social in their day-to-day interactions with others.

Still other sociological researchers say that we need much larger and more representative samples of social groups to understand how the world really works. They argue that understanding patterns of social behaviour requires that we conduct large-scale surveys to find out how different categories of people live in the world.

Some other researchers collect and interpret historical documents, or else analyse existing secondary data, such as that collated for the national census. There are even some sociologists who conduct social experiments, because they believe they are more rigorous and more 'scientific' than other approaches.

By now you will have noticed that sociologists' approaches to method vary between those who favour a more *qualitative* approach and those who are of the more *quantitative* persuasion. Very often, though, sociologists combine different approaches to be sure to get the best, the most reliable, outcomes.

Combining what we learn from methodology with the main theories of sociology can yield very powerful insights into the social processes that both shape our lives and also give rise to social problems in the contemporary world. Having what the American academic C. Wright Mills has called a 'sociological imagination' is one of the best ways of



understanding the connections between those social processes and the personal experiences and practical outcomes of our own lives.

The significance of theory

In the last volume of *SOCIOLOGY REVIEW* my co-editor, Martin Holborn, discussed some key sociological perspectives — that is, groupings of theories which share some common features. He summarised the most familiar perspectives, along with examples of how they have been typically applied by sociologists to particular topic areas at A-level.

Functionalism, Marxism and Feminism are all perspectives which tend to argue that structural matters are more important in shaping the social than the day-to-day interactions of individuals. By contrast, symbolic interactionism takes much more of a 'bottom-up' approach to understanding how the social works (also known as a social action or micro approach) rather than the 'top-down' (macro or structural approach) generally favoured by the other major perspectives. Symbolic interactionism places much more emphasis on how social life is developed through the everyday meanings that individuals create in their language use and face-to-face interactions, and how this might affect wider patterns of social life.

More recently, postmodern and new right (or neo-liberal) perspectives have begun to challenge some of the more conventional approaches typically

discussed at A-level. Postmodernists often focus on aesthetics and consumer culture and tend to rely on the accounts given by individuals and social groups of their own experience of social life, rather than looking for any overall patterns, or offering single, grand theories of how societies work. New right theorists are much more interested in the extent to which markets can both predict and solve social problems.

As Martin Holborn has pointed out, it is very easy to exaggerate the influence of the traditional perspectives on contemporary sociology. The most influential sociologists working today would not typically associate themselves, in a direct way at least, with any one of these general perspectives. It is far more usual now that sociologists draw on a range of ideas from many different theoretical positions, selecting and combining them, according to how useful they are for understanding a particular topic or question. You should try to do the same.

So, there you have it. Of course, this short article barely scratches the surface of what A-level sociology offers, but you will find that out for yourselves. Above all, *enjoy* your study of sociology at A-level. It is there to enlighten and aid your understanding, but it should also fill you with more questions and curiosity. Go to it!

John Williams is a managing editor of *SOCIOLOGY REVIEW*.