



# **Sociology Central Teaching Notes**

## **2. Basic Definitions**

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### Introduction.

1. In the first section we looked at a number of ideas relating to the question of “What is Sociology?”. We arrived at a number of general ideas concerning the subject matter, type of questions asked, differences between Sociology and other ways of looking at / studying the social world and so forth.

- What we need to do next, therefore, is to develop some of these ideas more specifically. That is, we need to start to look at how sociologists consider human social behaviour in terms of it being a **learned process**. To help us do this we can divide these notes into a number of related categories:

- a. **Sociology and the concept of society.**
- b. **The distinction between culture and instinct.**
- c. **Sociological concepts relating to how we learn to be human.**
- d. **Different sociological perspectives.**

2. In this opening section of the course, therefore, we will be looking at some of the basic introductory ideas that you need to understand about Sociology if you are to make a solid, successful, start to your course of study. It is important to remember that you will be using these ideas at various points in the course, since most (if not all) can be **applied** to the study of other syllabus areas such as Family Life, Education, Work and so forth.

### A. Sociology: The Scientific Study of Social Life.

1. We have seen that Sociology is the study of **human social behaviour**. More accurately, we can characterise it as the study of the way people behave in groups; in basic terms, how the fact of belonging to a group affects our behaviour.

2. As you will appreciate, there are various types of social group that we can define and these include groups such as:

- A family group - people who are related to each other in some way.
- An educational group - this could include people studying together in the same educational establishment or class.
- A work group - this might include people who do the same type of job.
- A **peer group** - this involves people of roughly the same age.
- A friendship group - this includes people who go around together because they like each other.

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- We will, throughout this course, be looking at these and other types of social group, since, as I have said, the main purpose of sociology is to understand the way human beings forms social groups and how our membership of these groups affects:
  - a. The way we think about the social world and
  - b. The way we behave in the social world.
- 3. We can start by looking at the largest group to which you all belong, namely a **society**. This is a good place to start because membership of a society is something that you all have in common and by understanding the idea of a society (and thinking about how our membership of this group affects our behaviour) we can begin to understand the similarities and differences in your behaviour. This will also provide us with a lead into the idea of different sociological perspectives, something we will discuss in more depth at the appropriate point.

### **B. What Is Society?**

1. A society, for sociological purposes, can be defined in terms of two related ideas:

#### **a. What society involves.**

- In this respect, we can define a society in terms of the following characteristics:
  - Living in a particular geographical area (marked by physical borders).
  - Subject to a common form of government (monarchy, parliament, etc.).
  - Aware of having a distinct identity from other groups around them.
- Other features of a society we could add might be that they consist of a group of people who share:
  - Common language and
  - Common traditions.
- In terms of the above, therefore, the definition of a society is quite broad. It is a definition that could include relatively small groups of people (tribal societies) or millions of people (modern societies such as Britain, China and America).
- However, we need to add a further dimension to the definition, since the main area of interest for sociologists is not what society is (in the sense of its physical definition), but rather what the effects of living in a social group like a society might be on individual human behaviour. This second dimension, therefore, involves defining society in terms of its possible effects.

#### **b. What society does.**

- This definition is more complex than the first, but it is also more useful to us as sociologists because it starts to explore the way our behaviour is affected by the people around us. Thus, a society is:

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- A form of organisation that involves co-operation between individuals in order to produce the things they need for their survival (at its most basic, these things are food, water, shelter, clothing, heat, light and so forth).
- A way of regulating the behaviour of its members in order to:
  - a. Meet certain social needs and
  - b. Prevent conflicts occurring.

2. Although the above provides us with a starting point for our understanding of the concept of society, it does not, as yet, provide us with an answer to the question "what is society?".

- One of the reasons for this is that when we try to study "society", we have, as social scientists to confront the problem that society is not a thing that has a physical existence.

3. Unlike natural scientists (such as chemists, physicists and biologists) the thing that we are trying to study cannot be sensed. That is, we cannot see, smell, touch, taste or hear the thing we call "society". Natural scientists don't have this problem because when they study their particular area they can sense the things they are studying.

- A chemist can mix chemicals and see how they react together.
- A physicist can experiment with laser beams and see their effect
- A biologist can experiment with plants and see how changes in the environment affect how plants grow.

4. This inability to see the things we are studying, as sociologists, has had two major consequences.

a. The first is that our inability to point to something solid and say "This is society" has meant that sociologists have developed different opinions about the nature of society; the way it is organised and the way it affects our behaviour. In this respect, not all sociologists agree about how society is defined or how it can be studied. There are frequent arguments within sociology about these fundamental questions and we will look at some of these at a later point.

b. The second is that sociologists are often accused of not being "real scientists" (real scientists being defined as chemists, physicists and so forth). Whether or not this matters probably depends upon how important you consider this status to be.

- However, it does tend to mean that the value of sociological knowledge is generally downgraded, mainly because sociologists do not seem capable of producing knowledge that allows us to predict the behaviour of human beings. This is a question we will return to at a later point.
- For the moment, we can note that there are plenty of things in the natural world that can be studied without the scientist being able to see them. For example:

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- Gravity,
  - Electricity,
  - Radiation,
  - Oxygen and many more.
- The important thing is not that we are able to see them as things but that we can see or sense their effects. To take but one example from the list above, while we cannot see gravity (it is a **force** rather than a thing), we can feel its effect.
  - In a similar way, if we think about society not as a thing but as an invisible **force**, it should be possible to study its effects and, by so doing, show that society has some form of existence. Thus, in this way we are starting to get a little closer to answering the question "what is society?" and, by extension, to answering the question "what is sociology?".
5. What we are starting to talk about when we view society as some sort of force is how human behaviour is organised in terms of the various ways individual human beings **interact** with others to create something called "a society". The important idea here is **social interaction** (in basic terms, how people behave towards each other) and we need to develop this idea in the next section.

### C. Society as a Structure of Relationships.

1. If we view society as an unseen **force**, we now have to think about - and explain - how this force is created?
2. Firstly, whenever we enter into a relationship with someone - either through choice or through necessity - we create some kind of invisible bond between us and the other person. For example, when you say something like  
"That person is my friend"  
you are recognising that there is some kind of special relationship between you and that person.
  - This relationship is different to the one created when you say something like:  
"That person is my brother / sister / father / mother".
  - Alternatively, when we say:  
"This person is my teacher / employer / probation officer"  
another type of relationship is identified.
3. There are probably hundreds of different relationships that you could identify between yourself and other people in society. Some of these relationships are very personal (such as when you say "This is my lover") and some are very impersonal (such as when you watch someone on television), but the important thing is that all of these relationships affect you in some way, shape or form.

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- You might like to think about this in terms of the way that you classify the people around you - and how this classification system affects the way you behave to them and they to you. For example, as you stroll around the College, you come across various people:
  - Some (probably the majority) you do not know - you do not respond to them in any way and they do not expect any response from you. In fact, if you did respond to them, they would probably think you were a bit odd...
  - Some (a reasonable number) you recognise as being in one of your classes - you may respond to them by saying "hello" (if you think their require a response), but its unlikely that this would be taken any further.
  - Some (a much smaller number) you recognise as friends - you would respond to them quite differently. You would probably stop and talk to them about all sorts of things. They would expect you to do this (to recognise them etc.) and would probably be quite hurt if you ignored them.
  - Some (probably only one or two people) you would recognise as very special friends - people who you would not only talk to, but also touch. You will talk about things with these people that you would probably not talk to anyone else about. If you did not respond appropriately to these people they would probably be worried about why you seemed to be acting so strangely.
- When you start to look at things in this way, it should strike you how complex our relationships are and how clever we are to be able to recognise different relationships and respond to them accordingly...

4. Secondly, it should be apparent that the relationships we form are significant to us only because of the **meaning** we give to them. In a way, it's as if we are all involved in an elaborate game, where we pretend to both ourselves and to each other that the relationships we form are real, in the sense of having some sort of physical existence.

Two examples can be used to illustrate this idea:

a. Firstly, if you think about it, how would a stranger be able to identify the different types of relationship that you have in your life. How, for example, would this stranger know which person was your father or mother, brother or sister, employer or lover? The simple answer is that, simply by looking at you and at them they would not know. They will only be able to guess at these relationships by the way both you and these other people behave - and this is an important idea we will return to and develop in a moment.

b. Secondly, think about what would happen if you claim that a relationship exists and people around you deny that it does. What would happen, for example, if you went up to someone and started behaving towards them as if they were your boy / girlfriend and they asked you what the hell you thought you were doing?

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- One answer is that one of you would run the risk of being classified as "mad" - an extreme social category we use to help us explain behaviour we do not understand.

***An important point to note here is that social relationships only really exist for as long as people believe they exist - a society without people, for example, is an impossibility. On the other hand, people without society is also an impossibility.***

6. The idea of **social relationships** and the **meaning** they have for us is a key one in Sociology. This is because we can use this idea to suggest a theoretical solution to the problem of how to explain the apparent contradiction that exists between the fact that:

a. We are all unique, conscious (thinking) individuals with our own unique range of individual characteristics.

b. Human behaviour is highly organised, generally predictable and involves a great deal of broad similarity.

- If you think about England and France, for example, each society has developed a broadly similar:
  - Economic system (work).
  - Political system (government, police, army etc.)
  - Family system (natural parents and their children is the basis for family life).

### D. The Nature of Social Organisation.

1. I have suggested, in the above, that human behaviour is clearly organised. We know this because, through observation of the social world we can establish **patterns** to peoples' behaviour.

- Given that we are all unique, thinking, beings, the existence of patterned behaviour suggests that something must **cause** these patterns to occur. That is, in simple terms, something must effectively force human individual's to co-operate - to form reasonably orderly forms of social organisation.

2. There are a number of **theories** we could use to explain this situation (for example, people who are religious might explain the force as being that of a god or gods), but we are going to look at only two main theories, one sociological and one rejected by sociologists.

- The non-sociological theory is that of **instinct**. That is, the idea that we are somehow naturally programmed to behave in certain ways. This is an attractive theory because, if it is true, it would explain why human beings generally behave in largely predictable ways.
- The sociological theory is that of **culture** and **socialisation**. That is, the idea that we are born into a society that has certain rules of behaviour (**culture**) and we, as human beings, learn these rules through a system of teaching called **socialisation** (for the moment, **socialisation** simply means the various ways that we learn how to be a human being and are taught the basic rules of the society in which we live. We will define and develop this idea in more detail at the appropriate point).

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### Learning to become Human.

1. One of the primary ideas within Sociology is that people are not born knowing how to behave. The claim made by sociologists is that this is something that has to be taught and learnt and we can start to investigate this idea by looking at two very basic forms of human development and need:

#### **a. Physical development and need.**

- Unlike some (but not all) animals, the human infant is not only helpless at birth, it remains physically dependent upon other human beings for a number of years (the exact number is not clear).
- If a human baby is neglected at birth, it will die. In this respect, one of the most important relationships that we experience in life is the one that exists between us and the people who help us to develop physically to the stage where we can start to look after ourselves.

#### **b. Psychological development and need.**

- Caring for a baby's physical needs, although important, doesn't ensure it develops into something we would recognise as a human being. A child who is neglected psychologically will not develop into a recognisable member of society because they will not be psychologically-equipped to do so. They will not, for example, be able to communicate with people, because they will not have learnt a language.

2. Not everyone, of course, agrees with this argument (although no sociologist would disagree with it since if they did there would be little point in trying to understand the world sociologically). Some people argue that human behaviour is based on **instincts**.

- From this point of view human beings are **genetically programmed** to do certain things in certain ways. So, for example, although a human infant is clearly physically helpless at birth, the child's parents, having been physically responsible for bringing him or her into the world, **instinctively** care for their child. In this instance, you sometimes here this particular idea expressed as a "mothering instinct" - the idea that women have an instinct to take care of their child and ensure that it is raised to a point where it can start to take care of itself.
- Some people talk about the idea of human instincts in very vague, general, terms (for example, mothering instincts, criminal instincts, survival instincts and so forth), whereas others talk about instincts in much more specific terms (such as an instinct to know right from wrong). Whatever the particular viewpoint, sociologists argue that there are a number of ways that we can show this idea to be wrong. From a sociological point of view, human beings do not have instincts and we can justify this argument in the following way.

3. We can define an **instinct** in terms of two things:

- a. Firstly, it is behaviour that is **genetically-programmed** from birth. An instinct is not something that we could choose not to do.

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- For example, in the animal world, birds have a nest-building instinct. At a particular time in the year, a bird such as a blue tit instinctively starts to build a nest. It is not something that an individual blue tit can choose not to do because it is compelled by its genetic programming to do this.
- b. Secondly, not only does an *instinct* tell an animal *what* to do at a certain time, more importantly it tells the animal *how* to do it.
- Thus, a blue tit is not only forced to build a nest, its instincts tell it how to build a certain type of nest. The bird has no choice in the matter. It cannot, for example, decide that this year, to be different and because it's grown tired of building the same old nest year after year, it will build a three-story super nest with a private bedchamber...
4. If we apply this definition to the study of humans, we can note a number of things:
- a. People always have a choice about how to behave. For example:
- Many women in our society choose not to have children. Some women also choose not to take responsibility for raising their children (they pay others to do this).
  - No one is forced to commit a crime. Some people choose to do this, others do not.
  - Ultimately, no one is forced to live. Some people in our society choose to kill themselves (suicide).
5. We could, of course, argue that people who choose to do these things are somehow different, but genetically this is not the case. Every single human being has the same basic genetic code (which, incidentally, is why it is possible for a human male to successfully breed with any other human female - a polar bear could not breed successfully with a gorilla because they do not share a common genetic identity).
6. Another idea that leads us to favour a cultural approach to understanding patterns of human behaviour is that people choose to do things in a wide variety of different ways. Human social behaviour demonstrates a wide variety of differences and not just in terms of the general way in which we organise ourselves on a social basis:
- For example, in our society it is considered normal for a man and a woman to fall in love, get married and not have any other sexual partners (monogamy).
  - In other societies it is considered normal for a man to marry a number of different women at the same time and have sexual relations with each of them (polygamy). On the other hand, slightly rarer are societies where one woman marries a number of different men and has a sexual relationship with each.
  - In our society, married couples tend to live in a family group that does not involve wider relations (uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.).

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- In other societies this would appear abnormal, since normal family life would consist of a family group that involved a wide range of kin living together (grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, children and so forth).
  - In more specific terms, we could think about the way men and women dress and behave in our society. It is traditional, for example, for women to use make-up whereas men, in the main, do not. Women are expected to take care of family life within the home, whereas men have traditionally been full-time workers.
  - Amongst the Tchambuli tribe in Africa, the reverse is true. In this society it is men who are expected to adorn themselves and it is women who are expected to perform most of the work outside the home.
7. Finally, we can show experimentally how behaviour is learnt, not instinctive.
- One way of doing this is to isolate a human infant at birth, keeping it away from human contact for as much time as possible. We could then observe the child over a number of years to see what effect this would have on it. Would that child after, for example, 10 years of such treatment:
    - a. Have recognisable forms of human behaviour?
    - b. Be able to take its place in society and lead a relatively normal life?
8. Clearly, we cannot do this, even if we wanted to, since such cruelty would not be **ethical** (we would not accept it as morally right to experiment on a child in this way).
- However, we can take advantage of something called **a natural experiment**. That is, something that has been done by people in the past which we can analyse sociologically. There have been a number of instances where just such behaviour has been observed and we can document some of these in the following terms:
    - a. "It is reported that Akbar, who was an emperor in India from 1542 to 1602, ordered that a group of children be brought up without any instruction in language to test the belief that they would eventually speak Hebrew, the language of God. The children were raised by deaf mutes. They developed no spoken language and communicated solely by gestures".
    - b. "There is an extensive, though somewhat unreliable, literature on children raised by animals. One of the best documented cases concerns the so-called "wolf-children of Midnapore". Two females, aged two and eight, were reportedly found in a wolf den in Bengal in 1920. They walked on all fours, preferred a diet of raw meat, they howled like wolves and lacked any form of speech. Whether these children had been raised by wolves or simply abandoned and left to their own devices in the forest is unclear".

Both of the above are taken from Haralambos "Sociology: Themes and Perspectives"

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c. "On January 9th 1800 a strange creature emerged from woods near the village of Saint-Serin in southern France. In spite of walking erect, he looked more animal than human, although he was soon identified as a boy of about 11 or 12. He spoke only in shrill, strange-sounding cries. The boy apparently had no sense of personal hygiene and relieved himself where and when he chose. He refused to wear clothes, tearing them off as soon as they were put on him. No parents ever came forward to claim him. The child was subjected to a thorough medical examination, which turned up no abnormalities of a major kind. Later the boy was moved to Paris. He was toilet-trained, accepted wearing clothes and learned to dress himself. Yet he was uninterested in toys and games and was never able to master more than a few words."

Taken from Giddens "Sociology".

9. In case you think these examples might not be very reliable because of the times in which they were supposed to have occurred, consider a final example taken from "Human Society" by Kingsley Davis.

"In 1978 a girl of about 5 years of age was discovered on a farm in the United States. Since birth she had been completely isolated...This was done because she was illegitimate and the grandparents were ashamed. When discovered she could not walk, talk or feed herself and had no control over her bladder or bowels. She had great difficulty in understanding anything that was explained to her or done for her. After being taken from the farm and looked after, she made some progress, learning to feed herself, to speak a few sentences and to dress herself."

10. On the basis of the above evidence, it seems clear that human beings do not have instincts in the way that we understand some animals, birds and insects to have this type of genetic programming. It is evident, however, that human beings, like any other living thing, have certain **biological drives**.

- Biological drives are not the same as instincts (in the way we've defined these things above). They are things that it is biologically desirable or necessarily to do if we are to physically survive. Some examples of these drives might be things like:
  - Eating,
  - Sleeping,
  - Breathing,
  - Crying,
  - Defecating and so forth.
- Each if these can be regulated, which gives us some measure of choice about when and how we do them. Eating, for example, can be regulated through dieting. In the case of sleep, this is slightly unusual because there are rare examples of people who do not sleep at all, as well as more numerous cases of people who sleep only very occasionally. As far as we can tell, such people are able to lead normal lives and do not seem to suffer any physical or mental side effects.
- Crying is slightly different, in that this is something that we all have the capacity to do, but we tend to regulate it depending upon who we are, where we are, who we are with and so forth.

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- For example, a young child who puts their hand in a fire so that it burns is likely to cry.
- A young man who burns himself while messing around with a group of friends is unlikely to burst into tears, mainly because to do so would probably invite the derision of his friends...

### The Culture of Society.

1. From the above we can see that sociologists focus on the ideas of culture and learned behaviour. However, even though we reject the idea of instinct as the basis for human social organisation, this still leaves us to find explanations for two ideas:

- a. How cultures develop and
- b. Why cultures develop in particular ways.

2. The American sociologist **Talcott Parsons** (1902 - 1979) has suggested a solution to the problem of understanding how and why human behaviour is socially organised (that is, why clear patterns of behaviour develop amongst human beings).

- He argued that all societies are faced with solving four great problems if they are to both exist and survive over time. These problems can be outlined in the following way:

**a. Problem 1:** The **economic problem** of how to produce the things that are needed for human survival.

- **Solution to the economic problem:** Society has to organise people into economic (work) relationships in order to produce things like food, shelter and so forth.

**b. Problem 2:** The **political problem** of how to ensure that society is orderly and stable. The problem here, therefore, is own of government and control over people's behaviour. In short, the need is the need to enforce rules of acceptable behaviour.

- **Solution to the political problem:** Society has to develop ways of governing people and controlling people. In our society this involves government, the police, the courts and so forth.

**c. Problem 3:** The **family problem** of how to ensure that children are born and looked after in a way that allows them to grow into functioning adult members of society.

- **Solution to the family problem:** Adult society has to develop ways of ensuring that babies and children are raised in ways that allow them to learn the culture of the society into which they were born.

**d. Problem 4:** The **cultural problem** of how to make people feel that they have things in common with other people. How, in short, to make people feel that they belong to a society and common culture.

- **Solution to the cultural problem:** The development and encouragement of cultural relationships, involving things like religion, education, the mass media and so forth.

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3. We can summarise the above, in Parsons' terms, by noting that:

- a. He used the term **social system**, instead of **society**, to symbolise the idea that human behaviour is organised in terms of a system of relationships.
- b. The four problems he identified were called **sub-systems** to signify the idea that each played a part in the construction of an overall **social system**.
- c. Every human social system, therefore, consists of four sub-systems:
  - Economic,
  - Political,
  - Family / Kinship and
  - Cultural.

4. Parsons argues that a way has to be found to solve each of these "problems of human existence" if a society is to develop and grow. Thus, if a solution is not found to any or all of these problems, then a society will not develop or persist. In addition, you should note that although I've separated each of these problems for the sake of illustration, the various solutions to the problems are necessarily inter-linked.

- For example, the specific way people solve the economic problem will have consequences for the solution of political, family and cultural problems - an idea we will develop at later points in the course.

5. The identification of these four major problems provides us, as sociologists, with a clue to the basic organising principles of all human societies. These problems are, in short, the motor of human social organisation; they are problems that must be solved if human society is to exist.

- However, of equal importance is the fact that the use of this idea not only allows us to account for things like how human societies develop and why they display general cultural similarities; it also allows us to account for the differences between societies based on the specific cultural choices concerning the solution to each of these problems made by people in different societies. We can use an example drawn from family life to illustrate this idea.

6. For a society to exist over time and carry-on cultural developments and traditions from one generation to the next people have to solve the problem of socialisation (how to ensure that children are born and then cared-for until they have learnt enough about their culture and society to take their place in adult society).

- Thus, the **family problem** specifies the **goal** to which people must **conform**. If they fail to achieve this goal, their culture will die (history, for example, provides us with numerous examples of cultures that have ceased to exist).
- However, there may be many possible ways that this basic goal can be reached and this reflects the idea of human choice and diversity.

7. In relation to the bearing and rearing of children;

- Some cultures argue that the best solution to this problem is to ensure that a child's natural parents perform this function.
- Other cultures argue that the best solution is to raise children communally, away from their natural parents and relatives.

8. Both of these viewpoints have their advantages and disadvantages.

- Some of the advantages of allowing a child's natural parents to raise them are:
  - a. They are likely to love and care for the child because it was born to them.
  - b. They will invest more time in raising their own child.
  - c. They will take more interest in ensuring that their child is raised properly.
- Some of the disadvantages of allowing a child's natural parents to raise them are:
  - a. A child that is raised in a family group hidden away from the prying eyes of society may be vulnerable to physical, mental and sexual abuse.
  - b. They may not want to take-on the responsibility for raising a child.
  - c. They may raise their child in a way that conflicts with what society as a whole considers right and proper.

### Summary.

1. The main argument here has been that sociologists reject the idea that human social organisation is based on instinct. Rather, it is possible to show, through historical and cultural comparison, that the concept of culture and learned behaviour is a more plausible form of explanation, for a number of reasons:

- a. It can be easily demonstrated and **tested**.
- b. It provides a more **flexible explanation** that allows us to account for both **cultural similarities** and **cultural differences**.

2. In the next section we have to develop the concept of culture in more depth, since having outlined the basic ideas involved we need to explore the specific aspects of cultural creation and transmission.

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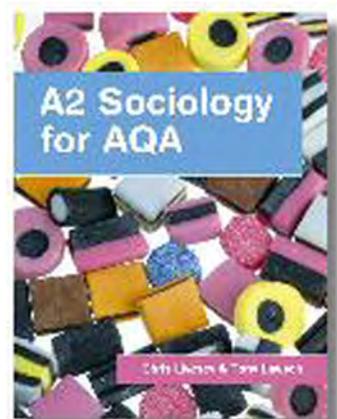
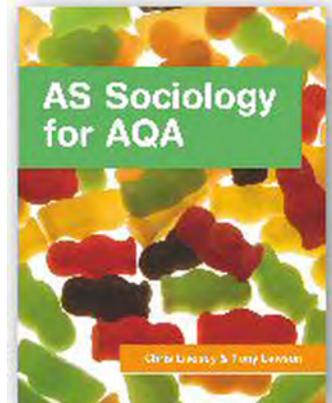
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