

Title: **The Sociology Society**

Time Open-Ended – as necessary.
This has taken me about 2.5 hours in the past

Preparation

Materials White-Board / Pens or OHP / Data Projector

Prior Knowledge None

Objective This exercise is designed to do two main things:

1. To serve as an “ice-breaker” exercise for a new class of Sociology students.
2. To introduce students to a range of basic sociological concepts related to “Culture and Identity” and the question “What is Sociology?”

Students should be encouraged to discuss (preferably in small groups) the questions listed in this exercise. They should record their discussions in note form that can be relayed to the whole class.

It might be useful if, after every question has been discussed, each group reports their deliberations / answers back to the whole class (for the teacher to record on a white-board / OHT / Projector).

The Exercise The exercise develops through a series of questions posed by the teacher. These should be posed in the order suggested below, although this is not a hard-and-fast prescriptive order and can be changed / adapted to suit the way the class develops.

The exercise is “open-ended” in terms of time in order to allow students to both get to know each other (if necessary) and develop their initial understanding of the subject matter of Sociology. A “follow-up” lesson (see the end of this exercise) can be scheduled, if required, to develop the ideas generated in this lesson.

Content**Commentary**

Introduction

It would be helpful to begin by giving students a basic context for the lesson. This might include noting such ideas as:

a. We need to consider the question “What is Sociology?” (ie we need to think about its object of study (“society”))

b. One way to do this is to think about the class as a “society” (hence “The Sociology Society”) - What are its essential features?, How does it function as a group?, What will be its rules? and so forth.

c. If Sociology is the study of societies and social relationships, we need to think about the most obvious contradiction – that between our “unique individualism” and our ability to “act socially”.

For example: Begin by stating a problem:

We are all individuals (unique / different in some way), but
We live in groups (some pre-existing (such as family) some we develop (such as friends))

Sociology is:

The study of social groups (which involves the idea of culture – a “way of life”)

The study of how group membership shapes us (identity) and how we shape the behaviour of others.

Ultimately, sociology is the study of social order (this is what makes it different from other social sciences):

The examination of how potentially chaotic individualism is shaped by our social relationships (“society”).

1. How are we different? This initial question is designed to get the students to think about the various ways people can be differentiated. It should key-into student's common sense knowledge and will probably initiate answers that focus on individual qualities.

This could involve small-group work / discussion and answers could be listed for the whole class to see. If you want / need to prompt student responses, get them to think about the following key concepts (which may need to be briefly defined):

Class differences (eg. Rich and poor)

Age – young and old

Gender – male and female

Ethnicity – different cultures

Nationality – different nations, regions of the same country

Family differences (divorced parents, single-parent families...)

Educational differences (are some people more intelligent?)

Religion – differences in faith / beliefs

Lifestyle differences – do we have different tastes?

Students should be encouraged to start a **Sociology Glossary**, using the key concepts they've just encountered (definitions and brief examples).

You can, if you wish, introduce the concept of Social Action at this point – keep the definition brief (reduce it, for the moment, to the idea of individual choices...).

2. What do we have in common?

If we are so different / individual / unique how are we able to live together?

The objective here (using the same format as above) is to get students to think about how we behave socially – as members of various groups (large and small).

As the students start to discuss things we have in common, head-up the white-board / OHT with the following:

Roles
Values
Norms
Social status
Sanctions

Put brief definitions of each under each heading.

As each group suggests things we have in common as a “sociology society”, place them under the appropriate heading.

This will start to produce illustrations of the concept of culture (a “way of life” we share). Once the examples are exhausted, briefly explain (using the students’ ideas as examples) the key concepts you have listed.

3. How is our “Sociology Society” possible?

(The Rules of the Sociology Classroom)

Building on the ideas the students have just identified, lead into the concept of culture by asking the students (in small groups) to think about how it is possible for our society to function (or, if you prefer, to hold in check the competing individualisms / differences previously identified).

To prompt if necessary, ask them to focus on three key concepts (the 3R’s):

Relationships
Rules and
Responsibilities

Students should provide examples of each in the Sociology Society and some indication of how they serve as the “social glue” that bind people together.

This can then lead into a more-specific discussion about “the student role” and “classroom behaviour” – get the students to reflect on their own behaviour and what might be “reasonably expected” of members of the sociology society (this can, if you wish, become a blueprint for laying-down some rules of (student) behaviour: attendance, punctuality, classroom behaviour, homework...).

If it hasn’t been covered under the previous question, make sure one example used is that of the teacher – student relationship (including values, norms, status and sanctions. By doing this you can tie roles into norms and values – for example, if a student suggests “doing nothing” as a norm for the group you should be able to challenge this norm by pointing to the values already identified for the group – to get a qualification, for example).

You may want to turn the discussion to what students can reasonably expect from their teacher. This leads into a more-detailed explanation of the concept of roles and can be developed if required (for example, role relationships, role-sets, etc.)

When discussing the idea of “rules” you may want to introduce the distinction between formal and informal norms. For example, even if, as a Sociology Society, we may decide, as a group, to have certain (informal) rules of behaviour, our choices are constrained in many ways by pre-existing, formal, rules:

For example, the rules of the Examination Board (specification, exams, etc.); the rules of school / college; the law of the land etc.

If appropriate, this will provide any opportunity to introduce / elaborate ideas about “structure” and “action” and lead into the topics of culture and identity.

4. How do we learn the rules?

The final question is about how and why we learn the “rules of behaviour”. This is designed to lead into an explanation / illustration of the concept of Socialisation (both primary and secondary).

This can be explored through questions such as:

What do we need to learn in order to be members of the sociology society?

Why do we need to learn these things?

This could be developed into a brief examination of the concepts of “instinct”, biological drives and culture – if this occurs, the concept of cultural diversity could be usefully introduced here (including the important ideas of historical and cross-cultural behavioural differences)

How do we learn these things, which might include ideas about:

Experience (memory)

Observation (finding out for ourselves by watching how others behave – this could lead into a brief examination of the concept of The Self and The Other (perhaps even material such as Cooley’s concept of a “looking glass self”).

Teaching (parents, friends, teachers, etc.).