

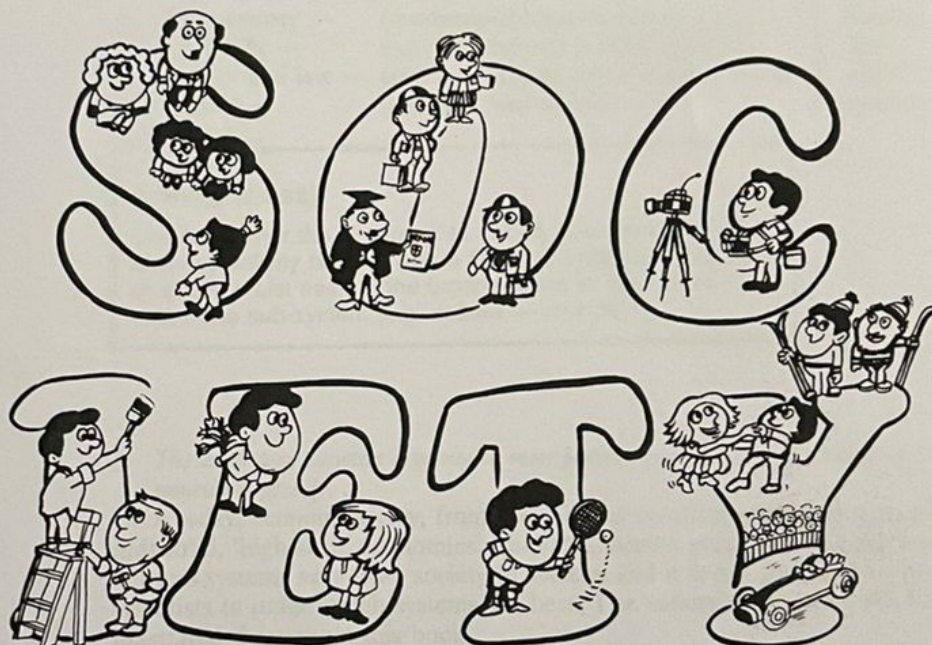
2 What is Society?

What is society? What is sociology?

Sociology is the study of society, but what is society? A simple definition is that society is made up of groups of people — which vary greatly in size, purpose, membership and in many other ways. In this brief chapter we will try to reach a clearer and more detailed idea of 'society' — the subject of sociological study.

All societies have certain things in common. The best way to understand what they have in common is first to try to work it out for yourself. The aim of the following activity is to help you to do this.

Figure 2.1. The individual in society. You, the individual, are part of many groups. Together, all the groups make up society.

**Activity (class)**

Imagine you are on a Jumbo jet flight. There are 380 people on board — a mixture of women, children and men of various races, nationalities and religions. Some children are travelling without their parents, and some adults without their husbands/wives. Most, however, speak English.

The jet gets into difficulties and is forced to land on a remote island. Extensive search operations fail to discover the plane; it is given up for lost and the search called off.

Meanwhile the passengers and crew on the plane have survived the first problems of being wrecked and begin to build a society for the long term. There is some food and water on the plane, but it obviously won't last very long.

Now decide how the marooned people will make their new society. (You can do this either individually or in groups.) Here are some of the main problems the islanders will have to face (don't write answers to these questions! They are just to help get you going):

- 1 How to survive — what is needed?
- 2 How the various survival tasks and everyday work will be organised — who will do what? Why?

- 3 How decisions are going to be made — will there be a leader — if so, who? Will everybody have an equal say? What if they cannot agree?
- 4 How children are going to be looked after — including any new babies who might be born.
- 5 How family life and sexual relationships will be organised.
- 6 How to share the things that people need and want — equal shares or will some people get more than others? If so, who and why?
- 7 How to organise leisure and religious activities (if any).
- 8 Do you think that people in your group will be able to get on with each other? Which groups might come into conflict? How would you deal with this?
- 9 How to deal with people who 'break the rules'.

Follow-up discussion

To get the best out of this activity, you should follow up the written part of the exercise with a report back to the rest of the class, before reading the rest of this section. Did you all end up with similar kinds of society? What differences are there between your societies?

What all societies have in common

Usually, three important general points about society become clear from the above activity. They are:

1 *In all societies, the family, the economy, politics and culture occur.*

In order for people to survive, society must provide for their basic needs.

These needs are:

- a producing and consuming (using) goods and services,
- b bearing and rearing children,
- c deciding how to deal with problems and making laws,
- d the 'non-material' side of life concerned with leisure, pleasure and the meaning of life (e.g. religion, values).

Another way of putting this point is to say that every society must have a way or a 'system' for meeting these needs. So, if we think of society in total as *the* system, then the four smaller systems or *sub-systems* that make up society are:

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| i | the economy — | (production/consumption of goods) | } Society
(the
social
system) |
| ii | the family — | (sex, bearing and rearing children) | |
| iii | politics and law — | (arguing, making and enforcing rules) | |
| iv | culture — | (people's 'way of life') | |

Activity (class)

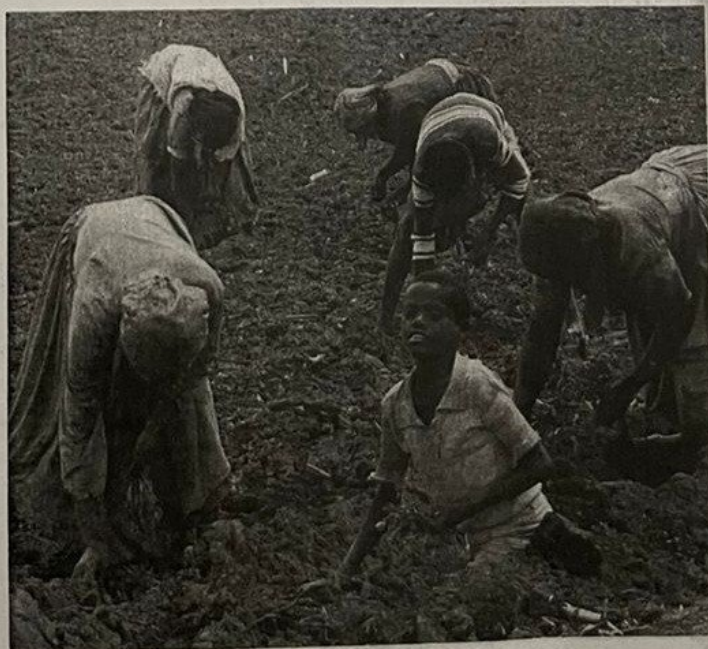
Check whether the 'blueprint' of society you drew up for the previous activity has the above four sub-systems in one form or another. List each of the organisations in 'your' society under one sub-system (e.g. culture — church).

2 *The exact way societies organise to meet people's needs and wants varies — sometimes greatly.*

Even today, economies vary, from those based on simple agriculture to modern, industrial, 'high-tech' economies. Similarly, family, political and legal, and cultural systems vary from society to society, and it is not the place of social scientists to judge which systems are best. The variety of societies will be illustrated throughout this book.



Societies vary greatly: i) Modern society, Birmingham



ii) Agricultural society, Ethiopia.

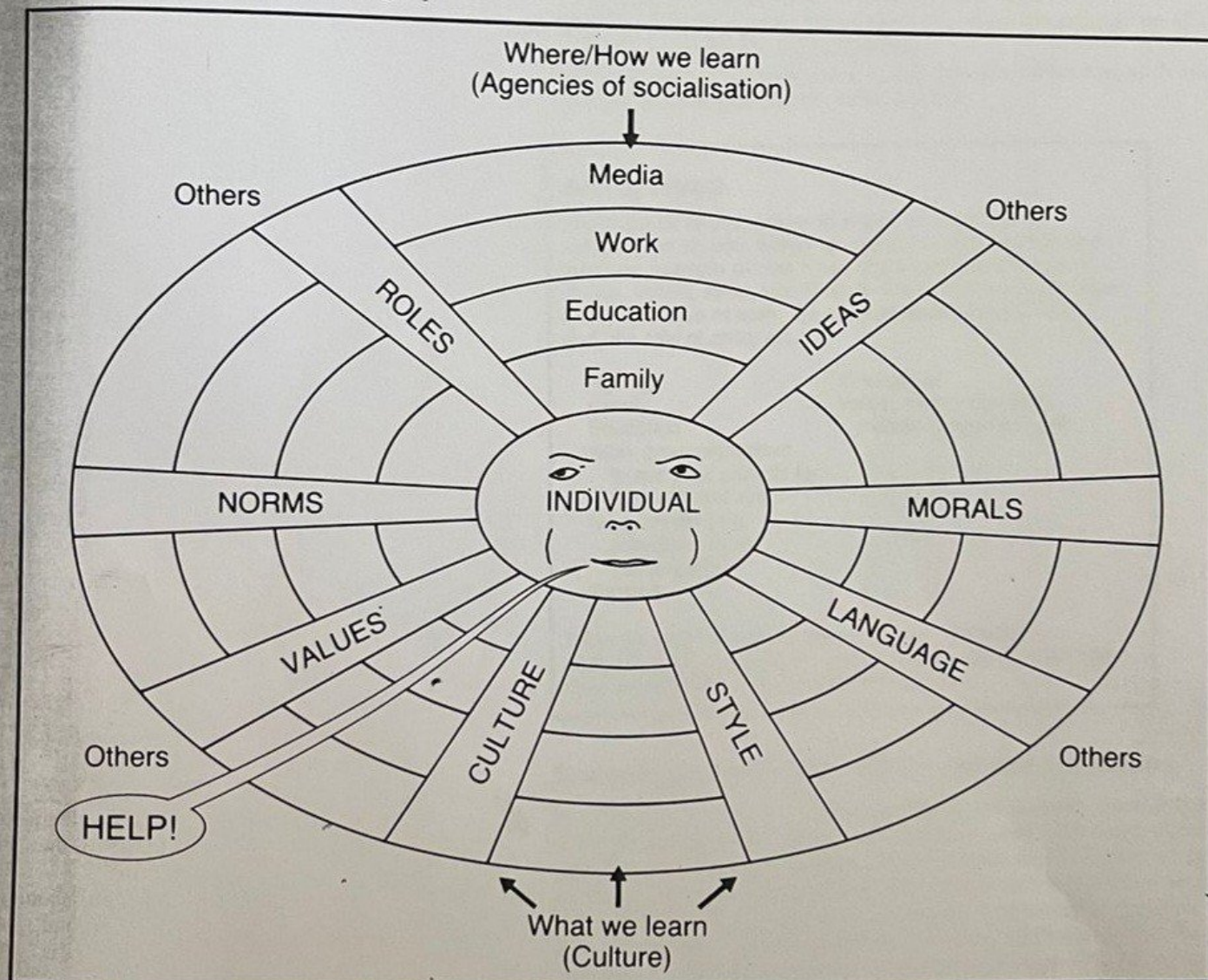


3 Social conflict occurs in all societies.

Some conflict exists in all societies. People inevitably disagree about things — often because they are in different positions in society (e.g. the rich and the poor). Usually, a society tries to organise or *regulate* conflict so that it does not disrupt life too much. For instance, in Britain, the political parties often come into conflict, but 'within the system'.

Karl Marx considered that deep conflict between rich and powerful property owners and those who work for them is unavoidable. He thought that only a classless society would end this conflict. Others stress that differences between males and females (gender), races and age groups can also cause conflict. However, it is only fair to say that there are countless examples of co-operation between the two genders, members of different races, age groups and social classes.

Figure 2.2. The individual and social group



Definition of cultural terms (with examples)

Socialisation is learning to become a member of society. To do this, it is necessary to learn a particular way of life or *culture*. Socialisation begins in the family and continues throughout life. The following are the main areas or *agencies* of socialisation — family, education, work, the media, religion and other forms of belief (see Figure 2.2). Although members of the same culture share a similar way of life, they remain unique individuals — perhaps because they are partly able to decide not to conform (be like others) in every respect.

Values reflect what is felt to be important, e.g. patriotism — 'I love my country'.
Norms are the rules, written and unwritten, of a particular society, e.g. not laughing in church.

Roles are the (many) parts the individual plays in society, e.g. daughter, mother, wife, aunt.

Ideas are thoughts and notions about things — most of which are based on other people's thoughts', e.g. an idea about what your career might be.

Morals are beliefs about what is right and wrong, e.g. it is wrong to steal.

Language is the *meaningful* use of words, i.e. verbal communication, e.g. the English language. There are a number of non-verbal forms of communication, such as sign language, deaf and dumb language.

Style is the particular manner or way in which we present ourselves and do things. Usually our style 'says' something about us. It is a special form of language, e.g. dress, music — such as Punk 'style'.

Others are everybody else. Your experience of society is made up of your *interactions* (what you do) with others.

Significant others are people close to you and who affect you, such as your family, friends and, maybe, some teachers.

Activity (class)

The purpose of this activity is to look at the effect of socialisation on *you*. Select an agency of socialisation and give *one* example of how it has socialised you in terms of values, norms, roles, etc. Thus, in the family you might have learnt the value of truth, the norm of wearing pyjamas in bed, the role of child, etc. . .

Agency

Family

Education

Work (you might have to ask your parents for help with this one)

Mass media (e.g. television, films, newspapers)

Religion

Example of

Value, norm, role, idea, morals, language, style

From the point of view of having a good classroom discussion you may want to share out the agencies so that they are all covered by at least one person.

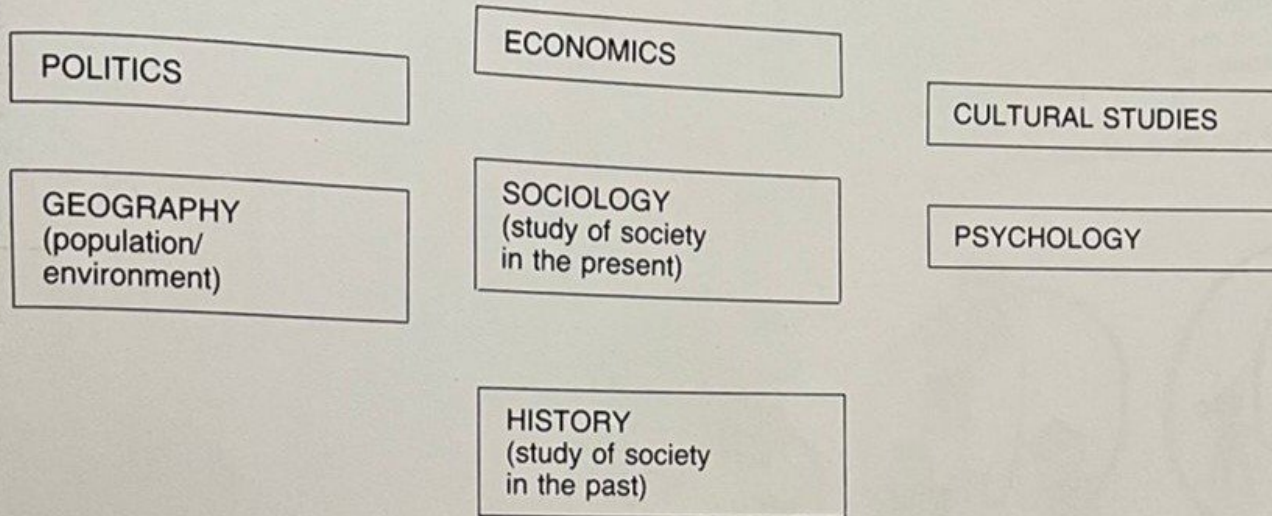
Sociology and the other social sciences

Sociology and history are closely related social sciences. Sociology is mainly the study of society in the present and history is mainly the study of society in the past. For that reason, it is useful to know some history before studying sociology. You cannot understand the present unless you know something about the past. The role of women in society, the long-running 'troubles' in Ireland, race relations in Britain (see Chapter Twelve) all illustrate how the present is influenced by the past. Sociology and history overlap with the other social sciences. Look again at the sub-systems model of society and see how much economics, politics and cultural studies are a part of sociology. Similarly, history is linked to other social sciences. For instance, there is economic history, political history and cultural history.

However, economics, politics and cultural studies are social sciences in their own right. To these we must add psychology, as well as geography, in so far as it deals with population and people in relation to the environment (material surroundings). Figure 2.3 summarises the social sciences and is followed by definitions of each:

Figure 2.3. The social sciences

What is society?



العلوم
الاجتماعية

Definitions of the social sciences

Sociology is the study of the life of people in groups, e.g. why some schools get better examination results than others.

Economics is the study of production and consumption (buying) of goods and services, e.g. work — either paid or in the home — and what you buy and sell are economic activities.

Politics is the study of power, especially in relation to government, e.g. voting or not voting (either through choice or because the vote does not exist) are political activities.

Geography (human) is the study of the relationship between the physical world and people, e.g. the way you treat your neighbourhood is part of local geography.

Cultural Studies is the study of all forms of human expression and communication, including the media, literature, fashion and style (fashionable or not), and the way people live their everyday lives, e.g. what you choose to do with your leisure time this weekend is a cultural activity.

Psychology is the study of how individuals act, think and feel, and of relationships. It is a good balance to the more social emphasis of sociology, e.g. the study of intelligence and emotion are part of psychology.

Activity

- 1 Give another example to the one in the text of an area or activity studied by each of the social sciences mentioned above.
- 2 Choose two social sciences and in each case suggest a possible area that you might find worth studying.
- 3 Below is a list of possible chapter headings, from social science textbooks. Try to match each chapter heading with the appropriate social science:

'Making the News'
'The Coming of the Railways'
'Slum Settlements in the City'
'Individual Responses to Stress'
'Social Control and Deviance'
'The Causes of the Wall Street Crash'
'Party Conflict in the 1980s'

Key words

Culture	Society
Politics	Sub-system (of Society)
Role	System (Social)
Socialisation	Value