

AQA A Level Sociology

Year 11 to Year 12 Transition Pack

Welcome to A Level Sociology!

This pack has been designed to prepare you for studying AQA A Level Sociology at Sixth Form. Working through these materials before you start will give you a head start, help you understand what the subject involves, and introduce you to the key concepts, thinkers, and skills you will need.

The pack covers:

- An introduction to Sociology as a subject
- Core sociological perspectives (theoretical frameworks)
- Research methods overview
- Topic 1: Families & Households
- Topic 2: Media (Year 13 topic so can just read information provided)
- Key sociologists to know
- Practice tasks and reflection activities

Name:

Section 1: What is Sociology?

Sociology is the systematic study of human society, social behaviour, and social institutions. Unlike everyday observations about people, sociology uses theories and research methods to examine why society is organised the way it is and how it shapes the lives of individuals.

A key idea in sociology is the sociological imagination — a concept developed by C. Wright Mills. It encourages us to look beyond personal troubles and see how wider social forces (history, culture, power, and institutions) shape individual lives.

Why Study Sociology?

Sociology helps us to:

- Understand social inequalities (class, gender, ethnicity, age)
- Analyse how institutions like family, education, media, and religion shape society
- Question taken-for-granted assumptions about social life
- Evaluate evidence and construct arguments using sociological theory
- Develop transferable academic skills: analysis, evaluation, essay writing

How is A Level Sociology Assessed?

AQA A Level Sociology is assessed over three exam papers at the end of Year 13:

Paper	Topics	Weighting
Paper 1	Education + Theory & Methods	33.3%
Paper 2	Topics in Sociology (Families & Households + Media)	33.3%
Paper 3	Crime & Deviance + Theory & Methods	33.3%

Year 12 – Introduction to Sociology and Perspectives, Education, Research Methods, Families and Households.

Year 13 – Crime and Deviance, Media, Theory and Methods.

Task 1

Think about your own life. Write down THREE ways that society has shaped who you are — think about your family, school, media you consume, or where you grew up.

Section 2: Sociological Perspectives

Sociologists use theoretical perspectives to interpret and explain social phenomena. Think of these as different lenses through which to view the same social issue. You need to be able to apply and evaluate these perspectives throughout your A Level course.

The Core Perspectives

1. Functionalism

Functionalists see society as a system of interconnected parts, each performing a function that contributes to the stability and smooth running of the whole. Society is compared to a biological organism — just as the body has organs that work together, society has institutions (family, education, religion) that work together.

- Key thinkers: Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton
- Key idea: Social institutions have positive functions that maintain social order
- Criticism: Ignores conflict, inequality, and the negative aspects of institutions

2. Marxism

Marxists argue that society is based on conflict between two classes: the bourgeoisie (ruling class who own the means of production) and the proletariat (working class who sell their labour). Social institutions serve to maintain the power and wealth of the ruling class.

- Key thinkers: Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci
- Key idea: Capitalism creates exploitation and inequality; institutions reproduce ruling class ideology
- Criticism: Economic determinism — ignores other forms of inequality such as gender and ethnicity

3. Feminism

Feminists argue that society is patriarchal — dominated and controlled by men. There are several strands of feminism, each offering a different explanation for gender inequality.

Type	Key Argument	Key Thinker
Liberal Feminism	Inequality can be tackled through legal reform and changing attitudes	Ann Oakley, Betty Friedan
Marxist Feminism	Women are oppressed by both capitalism and patriarchy	Margaret Benston
Radical Feminism	Patriarchy is the primary source of oppression; all institutions are male-dominated	Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone
Postmodern Feminism	Women's experiences are diverse and intersect with class, ethnicity, sexuality	Judith Butler

4. Interactionism (Social Action Theory)

Unlike structural theories (Functionalism, Marxism), interactionists focus on small-scale (micro) face-to-face interactions. They argue that meaning is created through social interaction, and that society is constructed by the choices and interpretations of individuals.

- Key thinkers: Max Weber, George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, Howard Becker
- Key idea: Focus on how individuals make sense of the world through symbols and interaction
- Criticism: Ignores the role of wider structural forces (class, power) in shaping behaviour

5. Postmodernism

Postmodernists argue that we live in a new era where traditional structures and 'grand narratives' (like Marxism or Functionalism) can no longer explain society. Identity is now fluid, diverse, and chosen rather than fixed by class or religion.

- Key thinkers: Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Zygmunt Bauman
- Key idea: Society has become fragmented; there is no single truth or overarching explanation
- Criticism: Relativism — if there is no truth, how can sociology make valid claims about the world?

Task 2

Choose ONE sociological perspective. Explain how it might be used to analyse the family. For example, what does Functionalism say about why families exist? What does Marxism say? Write a paragraph of at least 100 words.

Section 3: Research Methods Overview

Sociologists collect data about society using a range of research methods. You need to understand these methods and be able to evaluate their strengths and limitations. A key distinction is between quantitative and qualitative data.

Quantitative Data	Qualitative Data
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Numerical data that can be counted or measured• Produces statistics — easy to compare and generalise• Associated with the positivist approach• Examples: surveys, official statistics, structured interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Non-numerical data — words, descriptions, meanings• Produces in-depth, rich insights into people's experiences• Associated with the interpretivist approach• Examples: unstructured interviews, observations, diaries

Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary data is collected first-hand by the sociologist for the specific research. Secondary data has been collected by someone else for a different purpose.

Key Research Methods

Questionnaires / Social Surveys

- Large-scale, written questions — can be postal, online, or face-to-face
- Strength: Quick, cheap, large sample, easily quantifiable, replicable
- Weakness: Low response rates, superficial data, social desirability bias
- Example: The British Social Attitudes Survey

Interviews

- Structured: fixed questions — more reliable, less valid
- Unstructured: conversational — more valid, less reliable
- Semi-structured: a mix of both — most commonly used in sociology
- Strength: Detailed, flexible, can explore sensitive topics
- Weakness: Interviewer effect, time-consuming, small samples

Observation

- Participant observation: researcher joins the group being studied
- Non-participant observation: researcher watches from the outside
- Can be overt (group knows) or covert (group does not know)
- Strength: High validity, captures natural behaviour
- Weakness: Time-consuming, Hawthorne effect, ethical issues with covert research

Secondary Sources

- Official statistics (government data), documents, historical records, media content
- Content analysis: systematic analysis of media texts
- Strength: Free to access, large-scale, longitudinal comparisons possible
- Weakness: May be biased, collected for non-sociological purposes

Key Concepts in Research

Term	Definition
Reliability	Can the research be repeated and produce the same results? Questionnaires tend to be more reliable.
Validity	Does the method measure what it claims to measure? Captures the 'truth' of social reality.
Representativeness	Can the findings be generalised to the wider population? Depends on sampling.
Sampling	The method used to select participants (random, stratified, snowball, opportunity).
Hawthorne Effect	When people change their behaviour because they know they are being observed.
Ethical Issues	Issues of consent, confidentiality, harm, and deception in research.
Positivism	The view that sociology should use scientific methods to discover objective laws.
Interpretivism	The view that sociology must understand the subjective meanings people give to social life.

Task 3

A sociologist wants to research whether social media affects young people's body image. Suggest ONE research method they could use and explain TWO reasons why it would be appropriate for this study.

Section 4: Families & Households

Families & Households is one of your two Paper 2 topics. This is a rich topic that asks you to consider what 'the family' actually is, how and why it has changed, and what sociological perspectives say about its role in society.

Key Concepts and Definitions

Term	Definition
Nuclear family	A two-generation unit consisting of parents (traditionally a married heterosexual couple) and their dependent children.
Extended family	A wider family network including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins — either living together or in close contact.
Beanpole family	A multi-generational, narrow family structure — more generations but fewer siblings, reflecting longer life expectancy.
Reconstituted family	A stepfamily formed when adults with children from previous relationships come together.
Same-sex family	A family headed by a same-sex couple, increasingly recognised and legally protected.
Lone-parent family	A family with one parent and dependent child/ren — the majority are headed by women.
Household	A person or group who live together at the same address, sharing facilities. A household is not necessarily a family.
Symmetrical family	Young and Willmott's idea that conjugal roles are becoming more equal and joint.
Conjugal roles	The roles played by husband and wife (or partners) within the family — can be joint or segregated.
Domestic labour	Unpaid work done in the home — cooking, cleaning, childcare. Often seen as a site of gender inequality.
Triple shift	Duncombe and Marsden's concept that women work a paid job, do domestic labour, AND manage emotional work.
Ideological state apparatus	Althusser's term for institutions that reproduce ruling class ideology — includes the family.
Warm bath theory	Parsons' functionalist view that the family provides emotional support that relieves stress for workers.

Perspectives on the Family

Functionalist Views

Functionalists argue the family performs essential functions for society and individuals. Parsons identified two irreducible functions:

- Primary socialisation of children — teaching norms, values, and culture
- Stabilisation of adult personalities — the family as a 'warm bath' that manages stress

Murdock (1949) studied 250 societies and argued the nuclear family was universal, performing four functions: sexual, reproductive, economic, and educational.

Marxist Views

Marxists see the family as serving the interests of capitalism rather than individuals. Key arguments include:

- Engels: The family emerged with private property — it ensures wealth is passed down through the male line
- Althusser: The family is an Ideological State Apparatus — it reproduces ruling class ideology and acceptance of inequality
- Zaretsky: The family maintains the labour force by consuming goods, providing emotional support, and reproducing workers

Feminist Views

Feminists see the family as a key site of women's oppression:

- Oakley: Criticises Parsons' view of gender roles as 'natural' — gender roles are socially constructed
- Delphy and Leonard: The family benefits men — women perform domestic labour unpaid
- Radical feminists: The family is a patriarchal institution — domestic violence and abuse demonstrate male power
- Liberal feminists: Progress is being made, but inequalities remain — the 'stalled revolution'

New Right Views

The New Right (politically conservative) argue that the traditional nuclear family is the ideal family form. Key thinkers include:

- Murray: The growth of lone-parent families has created a 'welfare dependency' culture and a 'New Rabble'
- Dennis and Erdos: Absent fathers lead to moral decline and antisocial behaviour
- Criticism: Ignores the diversity of family forms; idealises the nuclear family

Changes in Family Life

Family life has changed dramatically since the 1950s. Key trends include:

Trend	Detail
Rise in divorce	The 1969 Divorce Reform Act and subsequent changes made divorce easier — divorce rates peaked in the 1990s. However, rates have recently fallen, partly because fewer people are marrying.
Decline in marriage	Marriage rates have fallen since the 1970s. People are marrying later or cohabiting instead.
Rise in cohabitation	More couples are living together outside of marriage — often as a precursor to or substitute for marriage.
Rise in lone-parent families	Around 25% of families in the UK are lone-parent families; most are headed by women. Often linked to divorce.
Smaller families	The average number of children per family has fallen. Women are having children later in life.
Rise in same-sex families	Legal recognition of same-sex relationships (Civil Partnership 2004; Marriage 2014) has increased visibility.
Secularisation	Decline in religious influence has reduced the stigma around divorce, cohabitation, and alternative family forms.

Key Sociologists: Families & Households

George Peter Murdock
(1897–1985)

Functionalism

Key Idea: Studied 250 societies and concluded the nuclear family was universal, performing four essential functions: sexual, reproductive, economic, and educational.

Key Work: Social Structure (1949)

Talcott Parsons
(1902–1979)

Functionalism

Key Idea: Argued the nuclear family has two irreducible functions: primary socialisation and stabilisation of adult personalities. Identified instrumental (male) and expressive (female) conjugal roles.

Key Work: The Social System (1951)

Ann Oakley
(1944–)

Feminism

Key Idea: Challenged Parsons' view of gender roles as natural and functional. Argued domestic labour is work and that women's oppression within the family is socially constructed.

Key Work: Housewife (1974) / Sex, Gender and Society (1972)

Michael Young & Peter Willmott
(1950s–1970s)

Symmetrical Family

Key Idea: Traced the shift from the classic extended family of Bethnal Green to the privatised symmetrical family, arguing conjugal roles were becoming more equal.

Key Work: The Symmetrical Family (1973)

Charles Murray
(1943–)

New Right

Key Idea: Argued that the welfare state has created a dependency culture and an 'underclass'. Lone-parent families, especially without fathers, were seen as a social problem.

Key Work: The Emerging British Underclass (1990)

Task 4

Read the following statement: 'The nuclear family is still the ideal family form in modern society.' Using sociological knowledge, write a paragraph AGREEING and a paragraph DISAGREEING with this view.

Section 5: Media

Media is your second Paper 2 topic. This section examines the role of the media in modern society, asking how it is owned, who controls it, what messages it sends, and what effects it has on audiences and on social groups.

Key Concepts and Definitions

Term	Definition
Mass media	Methods of communication that reach large audiences — television, newspapers, radio, social media, film.
Traditional media	Older forms of media: print, broadcast TV/radio. Subject to greater regulation.
New/digital media	Internet-based media: social media, streaming, podcasts, blogs. Audience becomes a producer (prosumer).
Media ownership	Who owns and controls media organisations — can affect the content and ideology of media output.
Concentration of ownership	The trend towards fewer, larger conglomerates owning a wide range of media outlets.
Pluralism	The view that there are many competing media outlets with diverse viewpoints — audiences have power.
Hegemony	Gramsci's concept that the ruling class maintains power through ideological control — including the media.
Moral panic	Cohen's concept: media coverage amplifies a perceived social threat, producing public anxiety.
Folk devil	The group identified as the source of the moral panic — often a marginalised or minority group.
Representation	How social groups are portrayed in the media — often involves stereotyping.
Hypodermic syringe model	The view that media has a direct, powerful effect on passive audiences — audiences 'inject' media messages.
Two-step flow model	Katz and Lazarsfeld: media messages are filtered through opinion leaders before reaching the wider audience.
Uses and Gratifications	McQuail: audiences actively choose media to meet needs — information, identity, social interaction, entertainment.
Postmodern media	Baudrillard: media creates a 'hyperreality' — simulations replace reality; media is the message.
Citizen journalism	Ordinary people producing and distributing news via social media — challenges traditional media gatekeepers.

Media Ownership

The ownership and control of the media is a major concern in sociology. Key debates include:

Concentration of Ownership

In the UK and globally, media ownership has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of large corporations (conglomerates). Examples include:

- Rupert Murdoch's News Corp: owns The Sun, The Times, Fox News, and many more globally
- Disney: owns ABC, Pixar, Marvel, Lucasfilm, ESPN, National Geographic
- Google and Meta dominate digital advertising and content distribution

Bagdikian (2004) called this the 'media monopoly' — a handful of corporations control what billions of people see and hear.

Marxist Views on Media Ownership

Marxists argue that media ownership by the ruling class means the media serves ruling class interests:

- Miliband: The media is owned and run by the bourgeoisie — content reflects their ideological interests
- The Glasgow University Media Group: News coverage systematically favours the powerful — e.g. representing strikes as harmful without giving workers' perspectives
- Gramsci: Hegemony is maintained through the media — ruling class ideology is presented as 'common sense'

Pluralist Views on Media Ownership

Pluralists argue that the market ensures diversity:

- Many competing outlets mean no single view dominates
- The internet and social media have democratised media — anyone can produce content
- Audiences are active — they choose what to consume and resist dominant messages
- New media has given voice to marginalised groups

Media and Social Groups

Gender and Media

- Tuchman's 'symbolic annihilation': women are trivialised, condemned, or absent from media
- Women are often represented in relation to their appearance, domestic roles, or sexuality
- Wolf: The media promotes an impossible 'beauty myth' that oppresses women
- More recently: some debate about whether representations have improved — but many argue they remain problematic

Ethnicity and Media

- Hall: Ethnic minorities are often represented through negative stereotypes — 'othering'
- Van Dijk: News media reproduces racist ideology — stories frame ethnic minorities as a 'problem'
- Gilroy: Diaspora media and new media have allowed ethnic minority communities to construct their own identities

Social Class and Media

- Working-class people are often portrayed negatively or as entertainment (e.g. 'chav' stereotypes)
- Owen Jones ('Chavs'): Media demonises the working class to justify inequality
- Middle-class values dominate mainstream media — especially newspapers and broadcasting

Media Effects

A key debate in media sociology is how much influence the media has on its audience. There are three broad positions:

Media is Powerful (Passive Audience)

- Hypodermic syringe model: direct injection of messages
- Bandura's Bobo doll experiment: children imitated aggression seen on screen
- Moral panic theory: media amplifies and creates social problems
- Marxist/feminist views: media transmits dominant ideology unchallenged

Audience is Active (Active Audience)

- Uses and Gratifications: audiences choose media to meet their needs
- Reception analysis (Hall): audiences decode messages in different ways — dominant, negotiated, oppositional readings
- Pluralism: audiences resist or ignore messages they disagree with
- Postmodernism: audiences are media-literate — they understand media is constructed

Moral Panics

Stanley Cohen's concept of the moral panic is central to understanding media effects. In his study of Mods and Rockers in 1960s Britain, Cohen identified a cycle:

1. A group or behaviour is identified as a threat to social values
2. The media amplifies and exaggerates the threat
3. Moral entrepreneurs (police, politicians, media) respond with calls for action
4. Experts diagnose the problem and offer solutions
5. The panic subsides — or the group/behaviour becomes incorporated into mainstream culture

Modern examples of moral panics include: video games and violence, social media and mental health, 'hoodies'/knife crime, and immigration.

Key Sociologists: Media

Stanley Cohen
(1942–2013)

Interactionism / Labelling

Key Idea: Developed the concept of the 'moral panic' through his study of Mods and Rockers. Showed how media amplification creates and exaggerates social problems.

Key Work: Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1972)

Stuart Hall
(1932–2014)

Marxism / Cultural
Studies

Key Idea: Argued that the media transmits dominant ideologies but audiences can decode messages in three ways: dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings.

Key Work: Encoding/Decoding (1980)

Gaye Tuchman
(1943–)

Feminism

Key Idea: Coined the term 'symbolic annihilation' to describe how women are trivialised, condemned, or absent in mainstream media, reinforcing their lower social status.

Key Work: Hearth and Home (1978)

Ben Bagdikian
(1920–2016)

Media Ownership

Key Idea: Documented the increasing concentration of media ownership in the USA, arguing that fewer corporations controlling the media is a threat to democracy.

Key Work: The Media Monopoly (1983, updated to The New Media Monopoly 2004)

Task 5

Choose a recent news story or media event. Using at least TWO sociological concepts from this section, analyse how the media has represented the story. Consider: who benefits from this representation? Who is harmed?

Section 6: Essay Writing Skills

Sociology A Level requires you to write extended essays in response to structured questions. The most important skill is the ability to evaluate — to consider different perspectives, use evidence, and form a reasoned judgement.

Question Types on AQA Sociology

Question Type	Marks	What it requires
Define the concept of...	2	Brief, accurate definition — one or two sentences
Using one example, briefly explain...	2	One clear example with brief explanation
Outline three...	6	Three separate points, each developed
Outline and explain two reasons / ways...	10	Two points with sociological knowledge, examples, and brief evaluation
'...' Discuss, Analyse / Evaluate	10/20/30	Extended essay: multiple perspectives, evidence, and a conclusion

Section 7: Recommended Reading & Preparation

Reading around your subject will give you a huge advantage. Below are some recommendations at different levels of challenge.

Essential Background Reading / Websites

- Your AQA A Level Sociology textbook — get hold of it before September if possible
- BBC Bitesize Sociology — a useful starting point for each topic
- Revisesociology.com — excellent free revision notes and essays
- tutor2u Sociology — good summaries of key studies and concepts
- Hectic Teacher - <https://www.hectic-teacher.co.uk/sociology-support>
- Youtube – tutor2u, HecticTeacher, theTEACHERSOCIOLOGY

Accessible Books

- Chavs by Owen Jones — readable account of class and media representation in the UK
- The Sociology Book (DK) — illustrated introduction to key ideas
- Bad Science by Ben Goldacre — accessible critique of how evidence is used and misused (good for Research Methods)

Media and News

Read, watch, and listen to the news regularly. Apply sociological thinking to what you see — ask yourself:

- Who is being represented in this story?
- Whose perspective is being given?
- Who benefits from this news item being framed this way?
- Are any groups being stereotyped?
- Could this be an example of a moral panic?

Final Reflection Checklist

Before you start Sixth Form, aim to be able to answer 'yes' to each of the following:

Tick	I can...
	Explain what sociology is and why it is different from common sense
	Name and describe at least FOUR sociological perspectives
	Explain the difference between quantitative and qualitative data
	Name and evaluate at least THREE research methods
	Define at least TEN key terms from Families & Households
	Name at least FOUR key sociologists from Families & Households with their key ideas
	Define at least TEN key terms from Media
	Name at least FOUR key sociologists from Media with their key ideas
	Identify examples of sociological thinking in everyday news and media

Welcome to the Sociology Department!

We look forward to exploring society with you in September.