

# What is sociology?

Up until March 2020, if you walked into any café, pub or restaurant you would have been likely to see a couple or a group of friends sitting at a table and not talking to each other. Instead, they would be gazing at their mobile phone screens, texting, emailing or playing a game. Every so often, someone would lift their head to share what they were viewing with their companions. As we are writing this book, those cafés, pubs and restaurants are deserted, serving only take-way coffee and food, and everyone is looking at their mobile phones at home, in quarantine or in a hospital bed. Hopefully by the time you read this,



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Increasing use of technology is changing social relations and modes of communication that affect our relationships with each other.

things will have returned to how they were before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out.

Today, people around the world spend an enormous amount of time connecting through technology, shopping, playing games, sharing photos and music, looking up information and other activities made possible by the expanding range of apps available for smartphones. Whereas computers used to be the primary means of using the internet, convergence technology has meant that, today, smartphones outnumber computers on the planet. They have become even more crucial as a means of communication and social interaction in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But what does this changing relationship with technology and with each other mean for our sense of self, our relationships with each other and the type of society we live in? It is not really possible to answer such questions without paying attention to the social dimensions of these kinds of changes – without the help of a ‘sociological imagination’. Although the technology is constantly changing, and a global pandemic has not been seen since the Spanish flu in 1918–20, we need to ask what the similarities and differences are between our experience and the way people in the past experienced dramatic changes in their means of communication, such as the printing press, radio, television and telephone, and in their relationships with each other in times of plagues, pandemics and war.

A sociological imagination locates technology and social media within processes of globalisation and individualisation. It helps challenge assumptions that virtual connectivity is damaging for human sociality. It makes it possible to develop new concepts such as the 'non-human' and 'surveillance society' to explain the effects of changing human–technology connections. These ideas enable us to go beyond individual experience so that we understand the underlying structure of social relations and modes of communication that affect our relationships with each other.

1. What effects do you think changing forms of communication (mobile phones, the internet) are having on the way people relate to each other? In what ways do people today experience their family, friends and workmates differently from in the past, when there were no mobile phones or internet?
2. The term 'surveillance society' refers to the increasing use of technology to monitor and regulate human populations. What are some of the ways in which surveillance operates in contemporary Australia? What do you think the implications of this are for the future of democracy?

On successful completion of this chapter, you will be able to:

- LO1:** Explain what is meant by 'the sociological imagination', outlining the importance of the relationship between 'public issues' and 'private troubles'.
- LO2:** Define the basic sociological concepts of social construction, social structure, culture, agency, socialisation and identity, modernity, colonialism, settler-colonialism and postcolonialism, and globalisation.
- LO3:** Summarise the following sociological perspectives: sociology as science, politics or interpretation; feminist theory; postmodernity.
- LO4:** Discuss the historical development of sociology within changing social contexts, from its origins in mid-18th-century Europe to current debate on the concepts of public sociology and of internationalising sociology.
- LO5:** Explain how Australian sociology relates to sociology in other parts of the world.

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This chapter provides an introduction to the study of sociology and gives you an overview of some of the basic concepts you are likely to encounter in your reading in sociology. It explains how and why developing a 'sociological imagination' in thinking about social life is useful if you would like to understand the world you live in and how it is changing. It also outlines how sociology has changed over time in response to changes in the social context. It ends with some observations on the more recent concerns of sociologists in the contemporary world, with particular reference to Australia.

People study **sociology** because it helps them understand the social world around them and how it is changing. There are patterns to the ways we relate to each other that are difficult to see and understand without close study over a period of time, and experimenting with different possible explanations. Many dimensions of the world around you cannot be explained simply in terms of individual behaviour or personal choices. This means you need concepts and ways of thinking that can capture those aspects of the social world, such as 'society', 'culture', 'modernity' and 'globalisation'. You need to gather information (data) about what people do, how they think and feel, and how their relationships with each other are shaped, in order to come to an informed understanding of any problem or issue. This is what sociological research is concerned with.

## THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

The classic statement of what it means to 'think like a sociologist', and still one of the best, is the American sociologist C. Wright Mills' (1959) argument for a

**sociological imagination.** In Western societies, with the high value placed on ideas of individual ‘autonomy’ and ‘freedom,’ we tend towards a psychological orientation in our understanding of what happens to ourselves and others. There is a strong inclination in liberal democracies towards seeing human behaviour in terms of individual characteristics, abilities, choices and preferences. Often, people think it is too ‘deterministic’ to suggest social forces such as class restrict individual choice. Most people experience their life as unique and private, and interpret what happens to others as also unique and private – in other words, as *private troubles*.

Sociologists, in contrast, are interested in establishing the relationship between what happens to individuals and the larger processes of social, economic and political change that lie behind them. The sociological imagination, wrote Mills, ‘enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society’ (1959, p. 6). The discipline of sociology encourages you to look for the social processes and structures that give a generalised pattern to those private troubles and thus turn them into *public issues*. Mills gave the example of unemployment: when one person is unemployed, that is a private trouble; when three million people are unemployed, that is a public issue. Another example is fertility: when one couple never has a baby, that is a private issue. When ever-increasing numbers of couples are in this situation, it is a public issue known as ‘the declining fertility rate’. Sociologists are responsive to the times when it is useful to step outside of our individual experience and see ourselves ‘from the outside’, as social creatures, part of groups and larger institutions.

... sociology is justified by the belief that it is better to be conscious than unconscious and that consciousness is a condition of freedom. To attain a greater measure of awareness, and with it of freedom, entails a certain amount of suffering and even risk. An educational process that would avoid this becomes simple technical training and ceases to have any relationship to the civilizing of the mind. (Peter Berger 1963, p. 175)

Anthony Giddens (1986, p. 13) argues that the sociological imagination is composed of three distinct kinds of ‘sensibility’. First, there is a *historical sensibility*, an appreciation of how the world we live in today is the product of a number of historical processes of social transformation that we need to understand if we are to grasp how and why social life takes the form that it does today. Second, there is *anthropological insight*, which refers to a sensitivity to what is culturally specific about the social world in which any individual lives, and the significant variability in what humans value, how they see the world and how they do things in everyday life.

Third, sociology encourages the capacity for **critical thought**, which is underpinned by both of these sensibilities and involves questioning everyday thinking and commonsense assumptions about human behaviour and social life. Critical thought in sociology is an invitation to look beyond everyday perspectives so that we see the world in a different light, as if we had come from another culture, another period in history or even another planet. It involves challenging the taken-for-granted in order to create new insights and understandings of our experiences. By standing outside our cultural and historical ‘skin’, we can make new, often unexpected, connections between social phenomena. This can lead to new and more penetrating interpretations of social life that have the potential to help change the way we relate to the world around us.

One could say that the main service the art of thinking sociologically may render to each and every one of us is to make us more sensitive; it may sharpen our senses, open our eyes wider so that we can explore human conditions which thus far had remained all but invisible. Once we understand better how the apparently neutral, inevitable, immutable, eternal aspects of our lives have been brought into being through the exercise of human power and human resources, we will find it hard to accept once more that they are immune and impenetrable to human action – our own action included. (Bauman 1990, p. 16)

This does not mean that sociologists are just aiming to expose flaws and contradictions in commonsense ideas; the relationship between sociological knowledge and our commonsense beliefs about the social world is more complex than that. You could probably say that everyone is an amateur sociologist, since most people are at least partially conscious of the rules and structures within which they are embedded, such as their sense of time, their experience of masculinity and femininity, and their adherence to manners and etiquette. There is a great deal of sociological imagination embedded in television series like *The Office*, *Modern Family* and *The Simpsons*: much of the humour stems from the exposure of unwritten rules and patterns of behaviour and social interaction that are usually simply assumed and left unspoken. At the same time, when people do consciously reflect on social processes – say, the relationship between changing economic forces and family life – sociology has also contributed to and even formed that everyday knowledge. The information and knowledge gathered in social research and the associated analyses of social change often filter through society to become part of the common sense of most of its members. Examples include the ‘lay theories’ we all hold about how crime is best prevented, the role that education plays in society and the impact of mass media on the way we think about the world.

## SOCIOLOGICAL GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

### Taking Kim Kardashian seriously



Source: James Atoa/Everett Collection Inc/Alamy Stock Photo.

Kim Kardashian shows how celebrities are portrayed as playing a particular social role in society. They provide a reference point for identity formation, gossip and social interaction.

When people talk about celebrities like Lady Gaga or Kim Kardashian, the tendency is to think about them as unique individuals and to attribute their place in the world to their distinctive personalities. The focus is mostly on an endless parade of individuals, rather than seeing what binds these individuals together, what makes 'celebrity' a historically specific social form. With a more sociological imagination, however, one looks more closely to see how celebrities play a particular social role in society, providing a reference point for identity formation, gossip and social interaction. When a figure like Michael Jackson or Heath Ledger dies, people respond in a very personal way, as if they have

lost a close friend. The shared attraction of celebrity also creates emotional ties between people, so fan club members form a symbolic community, often regarding themselves as part of a global family.

Drawing on the theorist Norbert Elias, van Krieken (2019a) argues that celebrities are the contemporary version of the aristocracies of earlier times in Europe who influenced the way people saw themselves and their place in society, providing a moral grammar of behaviour and social relations. In an information-rich age, the capacity to attract and hold attention is no longer confined to a small minority, so those who can command attention have significant power. Attention has become a valuable resource, and celebrities today act as 'attention-traps' in a manner that resembles the power of the aristocracies of the past. As well as attracting attention themselves, celebrities generate enormous amounts of attention 'capital' in the networks that surround them, and this is then leveraged by industries such as tourism and the mass media. From Audrey Hepburn's 'little black dress' to Kim Kardashian's lace bodysuits, celebrities sell products and their capacity to influence audiences commands huge sums.

The attention celebrities capture also carries enormous political power. Donald Trump's path from reality TV host to President of the United States reflects modernity's growing tendency for social and political life to be organised around celebrity. It is not only the way some celebrities enter the world of politics; politicians today increasingly rely on the same techniques as pop stars and movie idols to secure attention capital for communicating with and persuading their audiences.

Thinking sociologically makes it possible to look beneath the surface of celebrity identities, to grasp 'the deeper significance of celebrity for our everyday life, our sense of self, and relations of status, recognition and power' (van Krieken 2019a, p. 1).

#### ? REFLECT and APPLY

What do you think it means to 'take Kim Kardashian seriously' using a sociological imagination? Do you think it is true that, as a character in Woody Allen's 1998 film *Celebrity* said, 'You can learn a lot about a society by who it chooses to celebrate'?

The example of the emergence and spread of McDonald's fast-food restaurants is a useful illustration of what can be done with a sociological imagination. In *The McDonaldization of Society* (2012), the American sociologist George Ritzer argues that going to McDonald's or Starbucks is about more than eating hamburgers or drinking coffee. He shows how the manufacture and sale

## SOCIOLOGICAL SPOTLIGHT

### The self and social change

The list of changes that our apparently 'intimate' and 'personal' lives have undergone over time is long and constantly expanding. The fact that these changes are as widespread, patterned and systematic as they often are means that the only way to explain them properly is in terms of changing social structures and social relations; in terms of broader social arrangements. For example:

- *Our sense of time.* Clocks and watches became widespread only relatively recently. Before their emergence, people felt very differently about the passage of time, and it played a different role in their lives. This change is closely related to the increasing complexity of modern societies and the ever-increasing need to coordinate a growing variety of activities.
- *Manners, emotions and etiquette.* Our sense of what is acceptable and desirable behaviour is constantly changing, and is intimately linked to the way our social relationships are organised. For example, it is now much less acceptable to express anger in the workplace; the spread of mobile phones has produced different concerns about phone etiquette, and the management of anger while driving has become a new social problem.
- *Gender relations and sexuality.* What it means to be a man or a woman, and what is acceptable dating, or courting behaviour, has been transformed enormously as broader social relations between men and women have changed.

- *Family relations.* What it means to be a mother/father/child, when to have children and how many, and how to balance work and family life are all concerns that we think about differently from the way our parents and grandparents do (or did).
- *Mass media and the internet.* The role played by mass media, and more recently the internet, in providing us with information and 'ways of thinking' about ourselves, society and politics is constantly changing, and this also has an impact on our social relationships and our sense of identity.



Source: Everett Collection/Shutterstock

As a result of changes in social structures and social relations, manners and gender are perceived very differently now from the way they were viewed in the early 20th century.

of hamburgers actually characterises a much broader range of organised social activity. For example, he notes that every step in the process is carefully measured and controlled, from the size of the hamburger to the positioning of the cheese. The way that each outlet is organised and run conforms to a precise formula, including the phrases and facial expressions used when serving customers, as well as the furnishings. The amount of time taken to perform each action is carefully calculated and organised for maximum efficiency.

Ritzer argues that the McDonald's phenomenon reflects one of the key features of social organisation today. Building on the ideas of one of the founders of sociology, Max Weber, Ritzer suggests that the principles behind

the McDonald's chain reflect contemporary demands for the *rational organisation of social life*. By this he means the process by which the principles of efficiency, control, predictability and calculability are applied to human endeavours, usually with the aim of financial profit. Not only has this technique allowed McDonald's to be a global success, but its impact as a model beyond the world of eating hamburgers means that it is possible to speak of a much more general process of 'McDonaldisation', in which this type of rational organisation of social life is spreading throughout society, not just in the United States, but also across the globe. In this sense, it is also a leading example of a particular way of organising our activities: it is about the globalisation of culture and everyday life,

and the impact that the rational pursuit of profit has on the everyday human experience.

Like Weber, Ritzer argues that this development is essentially 'tragic', because it creates a sense of meaninglessness within our culture and stifles human creativity and freedom. Although our commonsense approach to understanding eating at McDonald's is to treat it simply as somewhere to have a meal, from a sociological perspective it is also a window onto our culture's tendency to measure, calculate and control human experience in the pursuit of individual and corporate wealth.

## SOME BASIC CONCEPTS

The aim of most sociological research, writing and argument is to encourage and develop a **reflexive** consciousness of the ways we are socialised within particular cultural contexts, the social construction of individual behaviour, and the cultural norms underlying what gets regarded as 'normality'. The aim is to engage with the world around us intelligently and, above all, actively, rather than being passively pushed around by surrounding social forces. As you read through this book, you will encounter many concepts and ideas that are either new or being used in new ways. Much of the process of learning to think sociologically is like learning a new language: the first step is to become familiar with the vocabulary and grammar.

This section begins the process of acquiring a sociological vocabulary by introducing some of the discipline's basic concepts: social construction, structure, culture, agency, socialisation and identity, modernity, colonialism, settler-colonialism and postcolonialism, and globalisation. Many equally important concepts – especially power and inequality – are discussed in later chapters.

### ? REFLECT and APPLY

What is meant by the idea that sociology is a reflexive discipline?

## Social construction

An important aspect of any critical analysis of social life is the idea of the 'social construction of reality' (Berger & Luckmann 1971). Instead of seeing the social world as natural, God-given or based on the relatively unchangeable dimensions of human individuals, such as their biology, sociologists emphasise the ways human behaviour, interaction and social institutions change over time and

vary across social and cultural contexts. For example, to see gender as 'socially constructed' is to say that what humans understand and experience as 'masculinity' and 'femininity' is not just based on biology, because the ideas, practices and institutions surrounding gender are different in different historical periods and cultural settings.

The role of language is central to the social construction of reality. It makes an enormous difference whether a name for a phenomenon exists at all, as well as how it is defined. For example, the term 'child abuse' is relatively recent, becoming widespread in relation to physical abuse only in the 1960s and to sexual abuse from the 1980s onwards, even though the behaviours it refers to have always existed. Another example is what it means to be a refugee or an asylum-seeker. This is determined not just by the raw facts of the experience itself, but also by the particular form taken by the concept of 'refugee' or 'asylum-seeker' and how it is linked to other concepts such as 'migrant', 'dole bludger', 'terrorist' or 'queue-jumper'. Individuals in that situation will adjust their behaviour and choices in relation to such socially determined definitions.

To the extent that any event or thing exists only *in the human world*, subject to human perception and forms of knowledge, which are in turn socially organised, it could be argued that everything is socially constructed, because everything has to pass through the (essentially social) filter of human knowledge production.

## Structure and system

The concept of **social structure** expresses the idea that social relations are organised along patterned lines that endure over time and that act as a constraint on the individuals living within them, even though they may not be aware of it. When we are born, we are born not into a social vacuum but into an existing set of social arrangements that are accompanied by expectations of how we should behave and the sense that we transgress these at our peril. The term 'structure' implies something relatively hard, concrete and immovable, and this association reflects its meaning in sociology.

The recognition of the existence of social structure was central to the emergence of sociology as a distinct discipline. Structuralist perspectives in sociology rest on the assumption that human action should be understood primarily as a product of an underlying *social structure* (or *social system*) composed of a variety of *social institutions*, such as the education system, the family, the economic system, the political system, the mass media, the military and the legal system. A structuralist perspective was nicely captured by the German philosopher Karl Marx

when he wrote: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness' (Marx & Engels 1951, p. 329). The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) agreed, writing that:

I consider extremely fruitful this idea that social life should be explained, not by the notions of those who participate in it, but by more profound causes which are unperceived by consciousness, and I think also that these causes are to be sought mainly in the manner according to which the associated individuals are grouped. Only in this way, it seems, can history become a science, and sociology itself exist.

(1897 in Winch 1990, pp. 23–4)

Durkheim used the term 'social fact' to express the notion of social structure. He stressed that who we are and how we behave in society necessarily operates within the framework of obligations, expectations and patterns that exist outside of us as individuals. Even if the performance of a man's duties as a brother, husband or citizen, wrote Durkheim, 'conform to my own sentiments, and I feel their reality subjectively, such reality is still objective, for I did not create them; I merely inherited them through my education' (1938, p. 1). He defined social facts as 'ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion' (1938, p. 3; see also Chapters 16 and 17). This did not mean that we are all the same; social life is in fact characterised by 'a whole scale of individual gradations'. Nonetheless, 'the area of variations that are possible and tolerated is always and everywhere more or less restricted ... sooner or later, we encounter ... a limit that we cannot transcend' (Durkheim 1964, p. 368).

Structuralist sociology generally makes use of some variety of *functionalist analysis* (you may encounter the term 'structural-functionalism') and it can be divided into *consensus* and *conflict* versions (see 'The dominance of functionalist theory' later in this chapter). Often only consensus approaches are seen as functionalist, but in fact there are considerable similarities in the ways in which functionalist and conflict theories approach the understanding and explanation of society. The main difference concerns the way they *evaluate* the existing social order. Whether or not a sociological approach is functionalist is really quite a different question from whether it falls within a consensus or conflict perspective.

## Culture

Understanding **culture** – what it is, how it changes, who shapes it and how it relates to other aspects of social life – is central to the sociological imagination. It encompasses

much of what sociologists mean by the terms 'social' and 'society', and sociologists will often use the concept of culture as an alternative to biological or psychological explanations of social phenomena. Cultural factors have a great deal to do with how societies both change and are maintained. Cultural dynamics at global, national and local levels contribute to the establishment of communal feeling within groups and also to conflict between them.

Culture refers to the symbolic, learned and socially constructed aspects of society that include language, morals, values, meanings, beliefs and lifestyles, as well as scientific knowledge and technology (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1994, p. 98). The term emphasises a community's shared meanings, values and way of life and which distinguish it from other communities. The German sociologist Georg Simmel, for example, contrasted the culture of complex, modern, urbanised societies with that prevailing in smaller, traditional, rural settings.

At one level, the importance of culture is obvious. The kind of activities people engage in, the tools they use, the way they earn their living and their mannerisms and expectations are all shaped by their cultural environment, the ways in which particular meanings are given to all aspects of their lives. At another level, the influence of culture is less apparent. This is the way in which culture shapes our view of the world, influencing the ways in which we think and feel, the outlook we have on life and the meanings we give to situations. Emile Durkheim (1912) pointed this out when he noted that every culture makes assumptions about fundamental phenomena such as relations of time, space and number. These form a framework for the experience of the world and, although they are relative to each culture, they are experienced as absolute, unquestioned truths.

The beliefs that organise people's lives can be seen as constituted by both values and norms. The *values* people hold identify what is worthwhile in life, what they ought to aspire to, such as a good education; a well-paid job; having children; living in a city (or a particular part of it); being kind to strangers; preventing climate change. **Norms** are the translation of values into rules of behaviour about how people should behave, such as that one should not neglect children or steal. Sometimes there is general consensus about values and norms, but often there is not, with greater or fewer differences across different social and cultural groups. Values and norms can also be inconsistent and contradictory, and people may often act in ways that contradict their own values and norms. These nuances and complexities are an important topic of sociological research.

More recently, sociologists influenced by theories of language have emphasised the way that social life is based on a system of signs and symbols that we unconsciously learn and that give meaning to our world (Baudrillard 1983). These symbols (or signifiers) include language, clothes, smells, physical gestures such as hand waving and images such as traffic lights. Words are aural or visual symbols that have meaning only insofar as we distinguish them from other symbols, rather than having a direct relationship to the external object to which they are meant to refer. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1973, 1984) organises much of his work on contemporary social life around the concept of culture, approaching the symbolic realm of language and meaning as central to the sociological analysis of power, inequality and social change. In a wide variety of fields – education, art, sport, the media, politics, social movements, status differences, even warfare – it is clear that power relations operate as much in the world of symbolic interaction as they do through more objective material means. Just as we can speak of the accumulation and unequal distribution of *economic* capital – money, property, stocks and shares – it makes sense to speak of the accumulation and unequal distribution of *cultural* capital – education, status, legitimacy, knowledge, information, recognition and fame.

## Agency

One problem with structuralist accounts is that they tend to suggest human beings have no control over their lives, but simply act according to the requirements of the social structure. Moreover, we need to explain where the structure itself comes from. After all, individuals and groups make up the social structure and it is their decisions and activities that keep the structure going, not some invisible hand pulling the strings of human puppets. The changing position of women during the last century is a good example of this. While we can certainly identify structural forces creating opportunities for women – the effects of the Second World War, the influence of new forms of contraception and the growth of the service industry – women themselves acted in ways that influenced that change. On the whole, they tended to embrace the opportunity to move out of the home, and a minority of them actively encouraged women's rights, including their freedom to work as equals with men. There was no objective necessity for this to happen, no iron rule forcing women to change their roles.

A more adequate representation of social reality would be the puppet theatre, with the curtain rising on the little puppets jumping about on the ends of their invisible strings, cheerfully

acting out the little parts that have been assigned to them in the tragi-comedy to be enacted ... We see the puppets dancing on their miniature stage, moving up and down as the strings pull them around, following the prescribed course of their various little parts. We learn to understand the logic of this theatre and we find ourselves in its motions. We locate ourselves in society and thus recognize our own position as we hang from its subtle strings. For a moment we see ourselves as puppets indeed. But then we grasp a decisive difference between the puppet theatre and our own drama. Unlike the puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards freedom. (Berger 1963, p. 199)

If the human world is a world of socially constructed meaning in which our actions take place on the basis of shared understandings, this suggests that we are not mechanical dolls blindly following the dictates of social forces, but are reasoning, thinking beings. As the American sociologist Harold Garfinkel argued, the tendency in sociology is often to treat people as 'cultural dopes', as individuals who simply reproduce, automatically and unthinkingly, the dominant cultural patterns of behaviour (1967, p. 68). Garfinkel believed that we construct our own interpretation of our situation and often respond in ways that cannot be reduced to the dull weight of external social forces. These behaviours can be fully explained only by turning to the concept of **human agency**, by understanding how people interpret their situation and negotiate with those around them according to that interpretation and the opportunities available to them. This concern is clear in the sociology of Max Weber and the American symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists, and was later given further emphasis by Stuart Hall (1981a) and Anthony Giddens (1979b).

In 1970, Alan Dawe argued that there are in fact 'two sociologies': one that asserts the priority of a social system over its participants, organised around the concepts of 'system' and 'structure', and one that sees social systems as the creation of their members, organised around the concepts of 'action' and 'interaction'. Anthony Giddens (1984) subsequently popularised this distinction between sociologies of structure and action as a central problem in social theory, and this led many sociology textbooks to highlight the difference between the relative emphasis placed on *social structure* as opposed to *social action*. Giddens proposed a way of transcending this dichotomy with his theory of *structuration*, in which he argued that humans are knowledgeable agents who impose their meaning on the world although they are simultaneously constrained by structural forces.

This idea that people are both created by, and the creators of, society is not in itself new, and in many



respects Giddens' theory of structuration was a long footnote to Karl Marx's (1818–83) observation that:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx & Engels 1951, p. 225)

In other words, social formations are the result of human activity and choice, but at the same time this activity and choice is limited by prevailing social arrangements. Or the other way round: human action is constrained by prevailing social arrangements, but those arrangements are themselves the ongoing product of human activity and choice.

### ? REFLECT and APPLY

Consider the way notions of sexuality have changed since the 1950s. What has been the role of human agency in those changes?

## Socialisation, the self and identity

The concept of **socialisation** refers to the transmission or reproduction of socially patterned behaviours that exist within their culture. It is a continuous process that takes place from the moment of every individual's birth until their death.

Both sociologists and psychologists are interested in the process of socialisation, but their level of analysis differs. Psychologists tend to focus on the immediate environment of the individual, such as the influence of family, whereas sociologists focus on broader social forces operating at the level of institutions and systems, such as the education system, the state, the economy and the media. They are also concerned to demonstrate that socialisation is not a one-way street in which individuals

are moulded into a pattern determined by society. Instead, they see it as a complex process in which individuals make choices, react and respond to the influences around them. They emphasise the role of agency in the way social patterns are formed and maintained.

Socialisation takes place at many different levels, from learning the characteristics that make us recognisably human, to absorbing the patterns of sexuality that are regarded as normal within the community in which we live. At the most basic level, socialisation is about learning fundamental human characteristics such as walking upright or communicating through language. These skills are not innate but learned through interaction in human communities. This form of learning is universal. Cases of children brought up with limited human contact (feral or 'wolf' children) suggest that without social interaction, human beings lose most of the qualities we associate with our species (Davis 1940). The basic faculties of speech, reason, posture and movement are discovered only through human interaction. It is only through living in social groups that we become recognisably human.

However, our sense of self is dependent on our cultural context. Sociologists use the term **identity** to refer to the characteristics that people regard as part of their self but which are derived from their social environment. They challenge assumptions that our identities are derived from a combination of genes and psychology. While not denying these have a role, sociologists argue that a substantial part of our identity is derived from our social environment. For example, we tend to take for granted that our education system encourages us to compete against one another and assesses us according to our individual abilities. Yet this **individualism** is culturally specific in the same way that our notions of time and space are. Our experience of gender is also filtered through a cultural prism. Aspects of our personality that we unquestioningly accept as part of our innermost being are shaped by these kinds of cultural expectations of behaviour. (A more detailed discussion on this is provided in Chapter 4.)

## Modernity

Sociology's concern to understand the social forces that shape contemporary life has led to the analysis of the key features of contemporary societies, the social trends that have shaped them in the past and that are likely to shape them in the future, as well as the problems and conflicts that they generate. These issues were central concerns of the classical sociologists, including Comte, Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel, all of whom set out to understand what it was that was distinctive about the societies of their

Source: Alice McBroom/Pearson Education Australia Pty Ltd.



The concept of socialisation is partly due to the focus on the immediate environment of the individual, such as the influence of family.

## SOCIOLOGICAL SPOTLIGHT

### Changing cultural attitudes towards women



Source: Photo © Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images.

*Odalisque* by Henri Pierre Picou (1824–1895), oil on canvas, painted in 1858. Western cultural attitudes towards women have changed, putting pressure on women in the search for the perfect body.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger (1972) argued that the portrayal of the nude in classical European painting unconsciously reflects Western cultural attitudes towards

women. The women are portrayed as passive objects, there for the pleasure of the male observer. They present with a self-consciousness and self-awareness of their bodies that is normal for women in Western culture. Berger writes: 'Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (p. 47). This is quite different from the portrayal of men, whose bodies are displayed in very different ways as observers of objects external to them, rather than as the object of observation. This portrayal contrasts with the imagery of Eastern cultures, such as Taoist and Hindu societies, in which nudes of both genders are active participants. The way the West's cultural assumptions regarding the female body have persisted and evolved in response to the feminist movement is analysed by Naomi Wolf (1991) in her book *The Beauty Myth*. Wolf points out how young women today are subjected to ever-stricter standards of beauty, and examines the linkages between this and the changing power relations between men and women, as well as the way the search for the perfect body and face benefits today's consumer economy.

time (that is, Western societies, especially Britain, Western Europe and North America), how they differed from other parts of the world, how those societies had developed from their pre-industrial origins and what the destructive effects of that development were, as well as their likely future direction.

Sociologists generally use the term **modernity** to describe the complex range of phenomena associated with the historical process, commencing in the 17th century, which saw Western societies change from an agricultural to an industrial foundation, and from a feudal to a capitalist economy. These changes occurred as people migrated from rural, village settings to towns and cities, as well as moving beyond Western Europe to colonise much of the rest of the world. The origins of modernity are usually seen as lying roughly in 17th-century Europe before becoming the dominant form of social organisation in the 20th century, radically transforming people's lives – sometimes for the better, but often for the worse – in virtually every part of the globe. Sociologists identify the following features as some of the central components of modernity:

- An economic structure that is both *industrial* (organised around mass production, the increasing use of

machines, the ever more efficient use of large reserves of energy) and *capitalist* (based on the accumulation of *profit* and ever-increasing levels of *consumption*).

- The *nation-state* becomes the principal form of political organisation. The emergence of geographic regions with fixed, stable borders and strong, centralised governments that held ultimate military power within their borders was vital for the development of industry and **capitalism**.
- An increasing adherence to the principles of *rationality*, rather than those of tradition or emotion. Rational principles are those that emphasise the use of logic, observation and experimentation as the basis of what to believe in and what actions to take. This was accompanied by a faith in the power of science to solve society's problems.
- A belief in *progress*. Both human beings and human society are believed to be evolving into a more perfected state in which injustice, poverty and inequality will be eliminated.
- A growing focus on *individuals* as bearers of rights and freedoms, and an increasing recognition of a private sphere of individual choice and preference. The development of *bureaucracy* and the growing

intrusion of the state and other organisations into the daily lives of its citizens.

- The ‘export’ of all these characteristics of modern society beyond Western Europe through the dynamics of *colonialism*, including to North and South America, India, Africa, Australia and South-East Asia.

The concept of ‘modernity’, therefore, can be used to capture the whole complex of ideas, political forms, economic structures and cultural patterns that dominated the first Western societies since the Industrial Revolution and then the rest of the world through colonialism and other mechanisms of modernisation. Sociology is often described as essentially a ‘critique of modernity’. (See also the discussion of *postmodernity* in the following section.)

## Colonialism, settler-colonialism and postcolonialism

An important concept to place alongside that of modernity is **colonialism**, which captures the ways in which European modernity has also been associated with the spread of empire by the British, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Germans, Dutch and Belgians in India, South-East Asia, Indonesia, Fiji, New Caledonia, the Middle East, the Caribbean, most of Africa, and Central and South America. The primary political and geographical allegiance of European colonists was the ‘mother country’, which continued to be the source of their political and economic power, while they remained a numerical minority.

It has also become important to recognise the role played by the colonial character of European societies in the 19th and early 20th centuries in the formation of sociological thought. It is possible to see sociology as a discipline that emerged in the attempt to understand the impact of dramatic social changes like industrialisation and urbanisation on the structure of social life. However, R. W. Connell has argued that most early sociology was actually more concerned with the contrast between Western Europe and the rest of the world, or, as Connell puts it, the ‘metropole’ and the ‘periphery’. For Connell, then, it is important to see the foundations of sociology as closely linked to the existence of a ‘world order’ based on a relationship of domination between Europe and many other parts of the world, including Africa, India, South-East Asia and South America. Connell writes: ‘Sociology was formed within the culture of imperialism and embodied a cultural response to the colonized world’ (1997, p. 151).

*Settler-colonialism*, in contrast, refers to situations where Europeans take up a more permanent presence in the non-European land and make it more absolutely

their ‘own’. Settler-colonists tend to outnumber the indigenous inhabitants and appropriate more land through ‘settlement’, at times effecting dispossession through genocide (Wolfe 1999). The parts of the world captured in this way include North America, New Zealand, Australia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and South Africa (although the last three are particular cases because the European settlers remained outnumbered) (Good 1979, p. 347).

Although the European colonial empires were dismantled in the period after the Second World War, the effects of the colonial relationship between the European nation-states and their colonies did not simply come to a sudden end, but continued in various forms into the postcolonial period. Many of the characteristics of the modern world beyond the metropole – Africa, the Middle East, South America – have their roots in the colonial period, making it important to see the social structures and dynamics of many parts of the world as marked by their postcolonial character; that is, as former colonies (for example, see Sadiki 2004).

Sociological thought about colonialism and postcolonialism has also been influenced by Edward Said’s (1978) argument that the perception of the rest of the world by Europeans remains strongly marked by ‘Orientalism’, a way of thinking that divides the world into binary opposites – Occident and Orient, West and East, or often just the West and the rest – with the West portrayed as superior and advanced, and the rest of the world as inferior and backward.

## Globalisation and deglobalisation

**Globalisation** can be described as the process by which people’s daily lives are increasingly influenced by the growing technological and economic, political and legal, social and cultural integration of people and communities around the world. It includes ideas about mass culture, the effects of information technology, the power of global corporations and the growing web of international agreements that change the nature of national sovereignty. **Deglobalisation** refers to the ways in which globalisation processes can also change direction and go into reverse, so that there are times when the world can become *less* integrated across the dimensions of economics, politics and culture. The period between the two world wars is one example of a period of deglobalisation. (This is explored further in Chapter 2.)

At the cultural level, globalisation is expressed in the idea that today people everywhere are networked into a ‘global village’ (McLuhan 1962) as a result of mass communication. The internet is only the most recent example of a set of technologies that have made it possible for people to communicate instantaneously across vast distances, to share ideas, information and

feelings. The mass media seem to have created a common culture, with television programs such as *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Dr Who*, *Roseanne*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *The Simpsons*, *Game of Thrones* and *Neighbours* being viewed in the homes of people around the world, from Nepal to Israel. Everywhere roughly the same consumer goods can be purchased: Coca-Cola and Nike are as well known in Nigeria and China as they are in Australia and the United States.

At the political and economic level, the integrity of the nation-state is increasingly being challenged by a variety of transnational arrangements and organisations, such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as global corporations like Exxon Mobil, Microsoft, Apple, Royal Dutch Shell, BHP, McDonald's, Starbucks, Google, Facebook, Amazon and IKEA. These political and economic organisations all influence the decisions of national governments in ways that directly affect their citizens. Sociologists generally argue that the trend towards globalisation is today so strong that any understanding of how society works must place it within the global context.

One of the conceptual consequences of this argument is that sociologists need to move beyond the concept of 'society' being contained within the boundaries of the nation-state, so that we speak of 'Australian' or 'French' society. There is a complex relationship between the global and the local. The way in which globalisation disrupts local cultures and customs and creates material instability has also led to a reassertion of local traditions and identities. This is reflected in deglobalising phenomena such as the rise of nationalist movements around the world, the development of community-based organisations, and the shift to regions as the basis for economic development. At the cultural level, the same goods may be consumed by people across the globe, but it is possible to argue that their local meaning and significance may be very different. The concept of globalisation is examined in more detail in Chapter 2.

### REFLECT and APPLY

What do you think are the main differences between the way you have been socialised throughout your childhood and the way your parents were socialised? What does this tell you about the way that society has changed?

## SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

We have said that the study of sociology will encourage you to achieve a critical and systematic understanding of the society around you and your place in it. At the same time,

it is important to be aware that there is no single, 'correct' way of 'thinking sociologically'. Sociological analysis takes place through an ongoing conversation or debate between a variety of different *perspectives* on any given issue or problem. Sociology, like any science, cannot provide the truth about human society, only a way of understanding it. This may sound surprising or disheartening if you are looking for 'the' truth about anything, but final answers are beyond the reach of any intellectual discipline, including the natural sciences. This is an important aspect of what makes sociology a particularly modern way of thinking about the world, with its constant testing of its knowledge against different ways of gathering and explaining data.

All knowledge of cultural reality ... is always knowledge from particular points of view. (Weber 1949, p. 81)

Thomas Kuhn (1962) explained in his influential book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* how the natural sciences operated within the framework of particular **paradigms**. These constitute a 'way of seeing' the world that affects both what is seen and how it is seen. Kuhn's insights into the way scientific knowledge progresses (discussed in detail in Chapter 16) is relevant to the social sciences, but rather than a single paradigm, there are multiple paradigms, or perspectives, coexisting alongside each other. Although it is possible to distinguish good and bad sociological reasoning and analysis, the complexity of the social world means that no one 'way of understanding' it can definitively claim superiority over the others. Sociology is best approached not as a single set of undisputed truths (laws, explanations) but as a set of multiple 'ways of seeing', each of which has something useful to say about human beings and social relations, and each with different and distinctive vocabulary, concepts, modes of analysis, explanations and conclusions.

Throughout this book, in every chapter we will familiarise you with the theoretical perspectives that are most important and influential in relation to that particular topic. You will also encounter a number of key conceptual standpoints, so in this next section we outline some major issues and debates running through differing sociological perspectives that you are most likely to need to familiarise yourself with.

There are a number of ways, often overlapping, in which we can divide up the field of differing sociological perspectives. For example, a threefold distinction is often made in sociology textbooks between (1) consensus or functionalist theories, (2) conflict theories and (3) interactionist approaches. Recently Michael Burawoy (2004, 2005) mapped out four different orientations to the production of sociological knowledge: (1) professional,

(2) policy, (3) critical and (4) public sociology (discussed later in this chapter). In *Perspectives in Sociology*, Cuff, Sharrock and Francis (1998) distinguished between two umbrella perspectives: (1) structuralism and (2) sociological theories of meaning. The first was in turn divided into three sub-perspectives (consensus, conflict and critical theories) and the second into two (**symbolic interactionism** and ethnomethodology). These theoretical orientations are discussed in Chapter 15, which distinguishes between the foundations of four traditions in sociological theory flowing from Durkheim, Marx, Weber and Simmel, and then explores some more recent developments.

In the following section, we examine Peter Hamilton's (2002) 'mapping' of the field of sociology, where he outlines what he considers to be the three central 'traditions' in sociology – although we could also call them 'perspectives' or simply 'ways of doing of thinking sociologically'.

## Science, politics or interpretation

Hamilton distinguishes between three sociological traditions:

1. a 'rational-scientific' tradition, in which sociology is seen as a 'science of society' and 'an intellectual practice designed to elicit objective information open to scrutiny and debate' (2002, p. 6)
2. a 'political' tradition, in which sociology is seen as 'inherently political because it deals with the organization of society', and the validity of the knowledge produced by sociologists can be established only in practice, in the real world
3. an 'expressionistic' or interpretive tradition, adopting a position detached from both science and politics, taking a more literary or humanities-based approach towards grasping the meaning of human social life, without making any appeal either to the objective validity of its knowledge or to its political effects.

These three perspectives, traditions or approaches are also reflected in the different settings in which sociological work takes place: differing university contexts with varying national intellectual traditions, contract research, and policy research in government and administration. They are not mutually exclusive, in the sense that any particular sociologist or sociological study will often span more than one perspective.

### Sociology as science

The question of whether sociology should be approached as the 'science of society' is not entirely

settled, but a sociological analysis of any issue or problem is scientific to the extent that it is systematic, by which we mean based on the collection and analysis of information and data, the making of observations that are recorded and compared with each other, the development of theories and generalisations to explain the data, and an overall concern to relate whatever is said by one sociological researcher to the work of other researchers in the same field.

Sociologists often study the same kinds of topics and issues that are dealt with in novels, television series and films, but their claim to be listened to and taken seriously has a different basis. We experience a work of literature as 'good' or 'true' for reasons that are hard to define, on the basis of how well-written it is and how well it resonates with our intuitive understanding and feelings. On the other hand, although the quality of writing of a work of science will make a difference to its persuasiveness, the work bases its claim to having any authority on different qualities: how comprehensive, systematic and well-designed its research is, and how well its analysis and arguments stack up against those of competing explanations.

In this perspective, although sociologists have values and normative preferences like everybody else, if they are to mount persuasive arguments in public debate, they need to appeal to different sorts of legitimisation of their ideas. Key figures in this tradition include Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Robert Merton, Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu. A strong emphasis is placed on providing support for sociological analysis with empirical evidence, and there is sometimes an inclination to see an affinity between the social and the natural sciences. A core aim in this perspective is *value-freedom*, although the exact meaning of this can range from pure objectivity and complete detachment from any conceptual constraints arising from one's social position or value orientation to Weber's more modest concept of value neutrality, requiring sociologists simply to refrain from declaring their personal views on questions of sociological fact.

### Sociology as politics and critical theory

The critique of the idea of value-freedom is essentially that it simply is not possible. That is, whether social scientists are aware of it or not, they cannot avoid their value orientations structuring the kinds of questions they ask, the topics they choose to research, the silent premises and presuppositions they place beyond discussion, the approaches they adopt, the answers they are more likely to be responsive to, the audiences they direct their work towards, the debates and issues they choose to highlight and so on. A central example here was the tendency to

research social life and social history only in terms of the experiences of men, which was always presented as a neutral, objective perspective to adopt, rather than examining the experiences of women.

From this perspective, the role of sociology is not simply one of accumulating knowledge, but 'one of emancipation and change'. Important inspirations for this approach are two of Karl Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*: the eighth, 'All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice'; and the eleventh, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it' (Marx & Engels 1970). A key proponent of this approach to sociology was the American sociologist Alvin W. Gouldner (1920–80), beginning with his 1962 article, 'Anti-minotaur: the myth of value-free sociology', where he suggested that 'the only choice is between an expression of one's values, as open and honest as it can be, this side of the psychoanalytical couch, and a vain ritual of moral neutrality which, because it invites men to ignore the vulnerability of reason to bias, leaves it at the mercy of irrationality' (1962, p. 212). The current proponents of this perspective are more likely to refer to their work as 'critical theory', organised around the idea that all social scientific knowledge is produced from a particular value position and social standpoint, and that this always has to be taken into account in assessing its validity and persuasiveness.

### Sociology as interpretation

The third perspective is more influenced by anthropology and literature, aiming to interpret and give expression to interesting aspects of social life 'without pretensions to offer scientific knowledge or to claims of political significance' (Hamilton 2002, p. 27). Although, in practice, sociology and literature have generally been competitors for authority in interpreting the human condition (Lepenies 1988), this approach moves close to the position of the humanities, simply providing a range of possible perceptions of human social experience, distinguished primarily by a variety of narrative orientations. For Hamilton, philosopher Jean Baudrillard's approach to circulating his work in 'articles in newspapers, books, lectures, photographs, exhibitions and interviews' is a central feature of the 'expressionistic tradition'. Hamilton sees the ideas of Georg Simmel and Erving Goffman as key representatives of this perspective and the prevalence of qualitative methods such as ethnography as an indicator of its ongoing presence in sociological research, even if sometimes combined with claims either to scientific validity or critical impact.

Hamilton suggests that these three traditions 'really exhaust the range of possible perspectives about sociology' (2002, p. 27), but invites us to decide for ourselves whether we agree with his interpretation. There are certainly other ways of mapping the sociological field, as indicated earlier, and next we outline two additional important areas of debate that affect the distinctions between different sociological perspectives.

### ? REFLECT and APPLY

Take one example of an important aspect of recent social change and explain how it would be approached differently from the perspectives of sociology as science, as politics and as interpretation. Is there a way of combining all three perspectives?

## Gender and feminism

Until the advent of **feminist theory** in the 1960s, sociology had virtually ignored half the population: women. Research focused on the male-dominated public world of work and politics, with the domestic sphere considered to be irrelevant to sociological inquiry. This gender bias was reflected in sociological thought itself: until the 1970s, when sociologists referred to 'people' or 'individuals' they implicitly referenced men's experiences, with women's experience left out of the picture. For example, studies of **class** focused exclusively on men. The position of women was presumed to be determined by their male partner so that stratification studies dealt only with the partner's occupation. The sociology of work and industry ignored the contribution of women's work – both in the workforce and in the home.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the re-emergence of the women's movement and with it a new generation of female sociologists, such as Ann Oakley, Carol Smart, Sheila Allen, Diana Leonard, Dorothy Smith and Rosabeth Kanter, who placed women at the centre of their social analysis. They examined the position of women in society, their experiences and the issues that concerned them. They provided explanations for the embedded nature of female inequality. Feminist sociology has made an immense contribution to sociological theory, methods and empirical research, including:

- explaining how gender is socially constructed, challenging assumptions that women are 'natural' carers whose primary role is that of mother and wife
- developing theories that explain the position of women in society, including how this intersects with class and race

## CASE STUDY

## Politics and misogyny

Although Australia was the second nation to grant women the vote in 1902, it was another 108 years before a female prime minister came to power. Before she took office in 2010, Julia Gillard enjoyed considerable popularity, but her standing was damaged by the controversial way she came to power, with the incumbent Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, being forced to resign, as well as the introduction of a carbon tax despite an apparent assurance before the 2010 election that this would not be her government's policy. When Sydney radio presenter Alan Jones claimed her recently-deceased father had 'died of shame' and branded her 'Juliar', the term became part of political currency. The theme was used in Parliament by the then Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott, to challenge her credibility.

For some observers, the attacks on Gillard were more than the usual political sparring, focusing in particular on her identity as woman. When Tony Abbott moved a motion in October 2012 to have the Speaker, Peter Slipper, removed because of the misogyny characterising texts Slipper had sent, Gillard found this unacceptable coming from a man who had stood in front of signs saying 'Ditch the Witch'. In a reply attacking Abbott's double standards that generated worldwide attention, Gillard pointed out that it was Abbott himself who had mastered the art of misogyny, giving numerous examples from Abbott's past statements on gender difference. She declared: 'If he wants to know what misogyny looks like in modern Australia, he

doesn't need a motion in the House of Representatives, he needs a mirror'. The public debate that followed was divided between people who claimed the attacks on Gillard were no different from those any political leader was subjected to and others who felt that the attacks were personally aggressive and demeaning in a way that was distinct from those on male politicians. Alan Jones, for example, issued the claim that Gillard 'should be put into a chaff bag and thrown into the sea'.

In a detailed analysis, feminist author and journalist Anne Summers showed the violent and sexualised nature of the words and images used against Gillard. Some were so virulent and aggressive they met Commonwealth definitions of bullying 'in the sense that they are solely designed to demean and diminish her, humiliate and intimidate her' (Summers 2012a). Terms used against Gillard such as 'bitch, barren, childless, hag, slut, witch, cow' had no equivalent in the vocabulary used against male politicians and belonged to a 'vocabulary of words that describe, and demean, women' (Summers 2012b). Summers argued that the hostile environment that female public leaders face, almost without fail, contributes to the relatively small number of women who enter public life.

Following Gillard's speech, the editors of the *Macquarie Dictionary* expanded the definition of misogyny beyond 'hatred of women' to one more in keeping with its contemporary usage, 'an entrenched prejudice against women' (Woodhead & Daley 2012).



Source: The Sydney Morning Herald/Fairfax.

Tony Abbott's attacks on Prime Minister Julia Gillard – misogyny, gender and politics.

1. Find Gillard's 'misogyny speech' on the internet and read Summers' analysis of the attacks on Gillard (<http://annesummers.com.au>). How are gendered constructions of the body implicated in these issues?
2. Today, women are often regarded as having achieved equality with men. Visit the Australian Bureau of Statistics website ([www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)) to discover evidence to (a) support and (b) dispute this claim. What is your own view?
3. Some of the attacks using social media are a form of cyberbullying that has generated public debate. How would a sociological analysis of cyberbullying differ from a psychological one?

- identifying and explaining some of the effects of male regulation and control of women; this began with work pointing to the previously unaddressed issues of domestic violence; it also focused on women's labour market experiences, developing concepts such as the glass ceiling and analysing how and why women dominated the casual, part-time sector; this work was often linked to an activist social agenda concerned with addressing social injustices experienced by women
- understanding cultural aspects of women's experience, especially in relation to the role of the media in gendered constructions of the body
- challenging binary assumptions of human sexual identity and demonstrating the diversity of sexual identity.

Feminist sociological theory is examined in more detail in Chapter 17.

### ? REFLECT and APPLY

Explore the possibilities for developing a feminist sociological analysis of an aspect of the world around you that has changed recently and that does not at first glance appear to be amenable to feminist arguments – say, the global financial crisis of 2007, climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The question of postmodernity

The perspective known as 'postmodernism' first emerged in architecture, where it was used to describe the transition from the ever-progressing rational application of scientific knowledge to one of playful and ironic mixtures of apparently incompatible elements. The influence of postmodernist arguments now extends to the humanities and social sciences. Although there is no unanimity about how concepts like postmodernism and postmodernity

### SOCIOLOGICAL SPOTLIGHT

## Sociology and postmodernity

Sociological analyses of the directions being taken by modern societies centre on two core observations about how social life works today.

1. Sociologists need to re-evaluate the importance of the *symbolic* or *cultural* dimensions of the social. Structuralists tend to see the symbolic world of culture and ideology as reflecting the social structures underpinning them, with the latter being somehow more 'real' and determining the nature and dynamics of the former. One of the central observations about postmodernity is that this placement of greater weight and significance on structures and material relations has not applied to social life since the middle of the 20th century. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the representations of social reality, particularly in the mass media, have become more 'real', in the sense of more significant, than what they are supposed to represent. This also means that the role of consumption is much more important in postmodernity than it was in modern society: it is no longer our occupation or profession that defines our identity, but the clothes we wear, the beer we drink and the mobile phone we use. The old modernist concepts of the subject, meaning, truth and reality have been replaced by a new world of information, communication and signs (Baudrillard 1983).
2. Sociology highlights the significance of the plurality and fragmentation of contemporary social forces, so that notions of a unified 'society' or 'social structure' are now difficult to sustain. Class relations may be important in their own terms, but they may have limited influence on politics or culture. A structuralist and modernist would assume that someone with a working-class background would present themselves as a unified 'package': this person would vote for the Australian Labor Party, enjoy going to the footy, drink beer (and dislike people that drink wine) and watch *Neighbours* and *The Footy Show* on television. Structuralist theories had assumed that every individual contained a coherent core that responded to external influences in a consistent fashion. As individuals, it was assumed we had a fixed identity that had integrity and uniformity. Under the conditions of postmodernity, the possible identity 'package' is much more variable and diverse, with no assumed linkages between different aspects of a person's identity. In a postmodern society, a person can be working class, go to the opera, drink wine and watch both *Married at First Sight* and subtitled SBS movies.



should be understood and used, there is, nonetheless, a common core of ideas that relate to the changes that have taken place in society from about the 1960s onwards.

The concept of **postmodernity** refers to the new social order that is believed by some sociologists to be replacing 'modernity' in advanced industrial societies. It assumes enlightenment beliefs in science, rationality and the idea of progress are no longer unquestioningly accepted. People are less likely to believe in 'grand narratives', such as that reason can conquer superstition, that human beings can be perfected or that political change can produce a perfect society (Lyotard 1984, p. xxiv). Inequality can be explained as an unavoidable component of postmodern society, the pursuit of its elimination often generating different, sometimes even worse problems. This is associated with growing cynicism about the benefits of science, a questioning of the authority of experts and an associated rise in 'alternative' lifestyles and beliefs. The supposed boundary between science and literature is questioned, and scientific explanation is often approached as another story or 'narrative', a 'truth claim' rather than 'the truth'.

The reception of postmodernist ideas in sociology has not, however, been entirely uncritical, and many sociologists see themselves as combining the insights of both modernist and postmodernist sociology. Jürgen Habermas (1996), for example, sees postmodernism as a form of neo-conservatism – its rejection of the metanarratives of rationality and science as a recipe for surrender to existing power relations, and a removal of any basis for genuine critical analysis of social life. (Postmodern sociological perspectives and other approaches to the development of modernity are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 15.)

### ? REFLECT and APPLY

Using today's news reports, which of the perspectives examined above seems most relevant to the material they contain? How would you explain in sociological terms the difference between modernity and postmodernity?

## SOCIOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

The problems and issues that sociologists engage with are closely related to their social and historical context so that sociological thinking necessarily changes in response to changes in society itself.

The development of sociology can be divided into a number of phases:

1. its origins in the mid-18th century, when it was met with optimism as a new science that would help humanity's progress
2. its establishment as an academic discipline at the beginning of the 20th century – this phase is associated with the pessimism of this *fin de siècle* (end-of-the-century) period
3. an interactionist phase between the First and Second World Wars
4. a functionalist phase from the Second World War to the early 1960s
5. a conflict phase from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s
6. the influence of feminism from the 1970s onwards
7. increased concern with postmodernity and globalisation
8. the question of 'public sociology'
9. the increased internationalisation of sociology, often referred to as the emergence of 'Southern' sociology.

Each phase can be distinguished by its relationship with the prevailing social, economic and political climate, its key concerns and its view of its status as a science.

## Sociology's European origins in the age of revolutions, 1840s–1870s

The roots of the sociological imagination in Europe are often seen as lying in the 18th century, in the writings of philosophers such as David Hume (1711–76), Adam Smith (1723–90) and Adam Ferguson (1723–1815) in Scotland, John Locke (1632–1704) in England and Montesquieu (1689–1755), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) and Voltaire (1694–1778) in France. Its 'take-off' period is generally regarded as lying later in the 18th century, when the French philosophers Claude Henri Saint-Simon (1760–1825) and August Comte (1798–1857), who coined the term 'sociology', argued for a 'science of society'.

Two revolutions in this period, the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, radically transformed Western societies. Alongside momentous technological changes, the process of industrialisation triggered massive population movements, rapid urbanisation, changing family structures, enormous changes in social relationships and a range of new ideas. It was associated with an increased responsiveness to science and reason as the legitimate foundations for authority, as opposed to the authority of the Church.

The French Revolution paralleled at the political level the effect of industrialisation, shaking the 18th-century European world to its foundations. The slogan of the French Revolution, 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity', expressed ideals that were to become embedded in Western political culture. Their roots can be traced back to the Enlightenment, which questioned traditional beliefs

and prejudices, especially religious ones, and emphasised the importance of reason, strict scientific method and the possibility of progress to a new and better society. This is why this period in European history is often described as the Age of Reason. It was closely associated with the growing secularisation of social life, in which religious thinking and religious institutions ceased to dominate all aspects of life. Until this period, all knowledge had been located within the framework of a Christian values and beliefs. Most areas of life were also closely tied to the Church. Enlightenment thinking challenged both the institutional dominance of the Church and these religious-based ways of thinking. It sought answers to questions of causation (what causes phenomena to happen) by asking *how* they worked, instead of questions of meaning (*why* they worked). This shifted attention from transcendental, supernatural explanations to worldly, material ones.

The impact of a rational, materialist approach to the study of phenomena was not limited to the natural sciences, but began to pervade many other areas of human thought. Karl Marx (1818–83), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) and Comte sought to apply this rational approach to the analysis of how society worked. The chaos and violence of this period led some people, such as Saint-Simon, Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59) and Comte in France, and Marx in Germany, to inquire into the nature and causes of stability and change. They sought to discover underlying principles in the hope that they could control human destiny more effectively. This concern has remained a central theme in contemporary sociological thought. The aim of a ‘science of society’ was to facilitate the emergence of a new era based on reason and equality, one that transcended the superstition and oppression of the past. From its beginnings, sociology has been both a product and a critique of modernity and Enlightenment thought.

This was reflected in the work of the early social theorists including Marx, Spencer and Comte, who each developed evolutionary theories of social change that argued all societies went through stages of development. In the work of both Marx and Comte, these culminated in a utopian or ideal stage in which inequality would be eliminated and all social groups would flourish. They conceived of sociology as a scientific discipline, modelled on the principles of the natural sciences; that is, the use of objective observation, experimentation and measurement. This approach is called **positivism** and it has remained an important, although criticised, approach to the study of social life (for a discussion of positivism, see Chapter 14). It was closely tied to the expectation that

society was subject to universal laws similar to those that natural scientists had discovered applied in the physical world. For the sociologists of this period, their task was to discover these laws in order to enable people to better understand how they should act. Comte believed that the new scientists of sociology would serve as guides and replace the role played by priests in the past.

## Sociology’s establishment as an academic discipline, 1880s–1910

In the 1850s, sociology had not yet found any academic home. No-one was employed to undertake sociological research and there was no systematic attempt to study society. ‘Sociology’ existed only in the minds of a handful of brilliant, innovative and sometimes eccentric individuals. Durkheim was appointed to the first Chair of Social Science at the University of Bordeaux in France in 1887, while the German lawyer and economist Max Weber pursued his sociological studies from his position as Professor of Economics at the University of Heidelberg.

The Age of Reason had given way to a more realistic assessment of the benefits of industrialisation and a *fin de siècle* pessimism about the direction society was taking. Although industrialisation had brought material benefits to the population, it was accompanied by an increasing regulation of social life. Industrial development required a high degree of organisation, which was expressed in the *bureaucratisation* of large areas of existence, with their increasing subjection to organisation arranged along fixed, hierarchical lines with written rules and regulations. Weber wrote about the dominance of instrumental rationality in all areas of social life and argued that the price of the fruits of industrial capitalism was that the human spirit was placed within an ‘iron cage’ of discipline and regulation.

Despite this rather bleak picture of life in the industrialising West at the turn of the 19th century, there remained an expectation that sociology could shed light on what made society work, how it changed and what we needed to do to improve it. The grand evolutionary theories of Marx, Spencer and Comte gave way to an empirically grounded positivism that sought to establish a systematic method for the study of social formations. For Durkheim, society existed *sui generis* – independently of the meanings people brought to a situation. Sociology was about the scientific study of the objective, observable ‘social facts’ of society, the social patterns that exist separately from subjective interpretations of society. Durkheim believed sociology need not concern itself with

how individuals and groups experienced their world, and in this sense he continued the positivist tradition of his predecessors.

Weber agreed with Durkheim that sociology was the disinterested study of objectively observable phenomena. However, unlike Durkheim, he argued that sociologists should also account for the *meanings* people brought to their situation. Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) was an example of how a social group's interpretation of the world shaped social development, how Protestantism 'meshed' with the emergence of capitalism. The pessimism of this period also forms the backdrop to Weber's recognition of the limitations of knowledge. He was one of the first writers to point out that all science (including sociology) could do was to tell us *how* something had occurred and what we might do to influence its occurrence in the future. It could not answer the more important questions of what we *should* do or any other question involving a value judgement about what was best for society (Weber 1949).

This period of sociology's development can therefore be characterised as one in which sociology established itself as an academic discipline with realistic, achievable claims about its value to society. Its concerns remained those of the earlier period – how societies change, how order is maintained, the nature and causes of inequality, the relationship between culture and economy – but these were set against a backdrop of disillusionment with industrialisation and a concern with its dehumanising effects.

## The emergence of interpretivist sociology, 1920s–1930s

The early decades of the 20th century saw sociology being only slowly introduced into university departments in the United Kingdom and Europe. Where it was introduced, for example into the London School of Economics in 1904, it was closely linked to a reformist political agenda. Most English sociologists saw the discipline as a means of improving the human condition by describing social problems and discovering solutions to them.

Sociology was introduced earlier and more rapidly into the United States, the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology being founded in 1892 and growing rapidly in the 1920s. This department attracted some of the best social thinkers of the time, including Albion Small, W. I. Thomas, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess. These writers shared a similar social background to their overseas counterparts and, like them, they were concerned with the problems of

poverty and urbanisation. Most of them also came from rural areas, and the disorder they encountered in Chicago was in sharp contrast to their previous experiences. At this time Chicago was a rapidly expanding city, taking in migrants from Europe as well as from the countryside. Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation created social problems, including juvenile delinquency, vagrancy, organised crime and corruption. Gangs operated by crime figures such as Al Capone ran illegal gambling and drinking businesses, often with the cooperation of corrupt police.

Their belief that sociology was an objective science meant that the sociologists at the University of Chicago sought to develop knowledge for its own sake rather than linking it with the direct improvement of social life. In the seamy underside of Chicago city life in the 1920s, they had the perfect social laboratory in which to investigate their ideas and develop their theories. The rapid expansion of Chicago resulted from the migration of groups from a diverse range of backgrounds including Anglo-Saxon Americans, Italians, Hispanics and African-Americans. These subcultures had values and beliefs that were often distinct from those of mainstream society. In order to understand the existence and behaviour of these groups, the Chicago sociologists developed research methodologies that allowed the investigator to experience and give credence to the world of subcultures.

This development was helped by their incorporation of the work of the social psychologist and philosopher George Herbert Mead, as well as other psychologists and philosophers located at the University of Chicago. Mead made a major contribution to the theory of symbolic interaction, which emphasised the way the meanings people bring to a situation are socially relevant. He also made the seminal observation that we live in a world of meaning that is socially constructed by active agents through the use of symbols, the most important of which is language (see Chapter 15). Mead emphasised the extent to which social life is the outcome of an ongoing process of negotiation in which people actively construct their lives and the lives of those around them. This perspective has continued to surface in many forms, including postmodern theory.

## The dominance of functionalist theory, 1940s–1960s

The United States continued to dominate developments in sociology after the Second World War, but the focus shifted from the micro-perspective, which is concerned with social interactions at the level of individuals and

small groups, to a macro-perspective, which focuses on large-scale institutions and structures.

Functionalist theory dominated sociology in the post-Second World War era up until the late 1960s, partly due to the influence of Talcott Parsons (1902–79). Parsons' sociology was developed in the economic upheaval of the Depression of the 1930s and the trauma of the Second World War. At one of the darkest periods of the 20th century, Parsons sounded an optimistic note with his prediction that the social system not only would survive but also would recover to its former strength. His optimism appeared to be vindicated by the success of the Allies and the prolonged period of affluence that followed. This period was the closest that sociology ever came to having a single set of theoretical principles for the study of social life, leading Kingsley Davis (1959) to assert that **functionalism** was indistinguishable from sociology itself.

Functionalist theories about questions such as the family, politics and social inequality reinforced the values and beliefs of conventional, white, male, middle-class America. Parsons argued that in Western democracies, the answer to the question 'How is order maintained?' lay in the existence of a social consensus on values and beliefs. His views coincided with a period of political stability and economic security, when it seemed that few doubted the enemy was communism and that the United States had God on its side.

## The rise of conflict theory, 1970s

The political and social conservatism of the two decades following the Second World War began to crumble in the 1960s. The United States' complacent view of itself was shattered in the face of protest movements that pointed to the continued existence of deep, structural poverty and disadvantage. The black civil rights movement was only one of a number of similar movements that challenged the image of the United States as a land of equality and freedom. The environmental movement pointed out the damage caused by the Western world's high levels of consumption and its technological exploitation of the land. Youth movements in the form of the hippie movement also transformed the cultural scene. These rebelled against the conservative social values of the previous generation and rejected the materialism of American culture. They reacted against the alienation of industrial life, stressing instead human spirituality and creativity. Many of these movements were associated with left-wing politics. They reached their fullest expression in the anti-Vietnam War movement, which drew the American left together in a concerted attempt to get the United States Government to withdraw its troops from Vietnam.

These social movements made it very difficult for sociologists to maintain that society was characterised by consensus. The prevailing cultural atmosphere was one of division and disagreement, and it was against this background that different theories began to dominate sociology, including Marx's humanistic writings, which emphasised the alienating effects of the capitalist mode of production and stressed the significance of creative self-expression. This, together with Marx's emphasis on inequality and disadvantage, resonated with the cultural climate of the day, in sharp contrast to functionalism.

**Conflict theory** suggests that contemporary Western societies should be seen as based on the exploitation of the many by the few rather than on harmonious consensus, and that this produces social problems that affect everyone. Although conflict theory shared functionalism's focus on social structure, it asked how society changes rather than how order is maintained. It answered this question in terms of structural arrangements for inequality, especially economic inequality in the form of class. It also criticised positivism, arguing that sociologists were part of society and therefore could never be disinterested, objective observers.

Many sociologists were influenced by Marxism and were generally critical of the status quo in Western democracies. Its iconoclastic tendencies made sociology popular among young people who were also rebelling against mainstream social values. For the same reason, it was often criticised by conservative politicians and public servants, who saw it as an irrational and destabilising influence on society. Nonetheless, it was during this period that the discipline underwent its most rapid expansion in universities. This included its establishment in Australia, where Morven Brown was appointed to the first chair in 1959, at the University of New South Wales.

This period can therefore be characterised as one in which sociology both reflected and contributed to the radicalism of the late 1960s and 1970s. The primary focus of sociology was on issues relating to power and social inequality in which the Marxist idea of class was the principal explanatory tool. Consequently, the sociology of this period focused on the male world of work and, from the mid-1970s onwards, on the role of the state in the creation and maintenance of unequal access to resources.

## Feminist and interactionist sociology, 1970s–1980s

The 1960s saw the resurgence of feminism in many Western societies, including Australia. It was associated with an increasing number of women

entering the workforce and higher levels of educational participation. By the 1970s, women were entering the academy and their interests and concerns began to influence sociology. Sociologists such as Bryson (1972) in Australia, Oakley (1972, 1974) in the United Kingdom, and Smith (1990) and Chodorow (1978) in the United States pointed out the gender blindness of sociology. They saw that in disregarding women's experiences and the domestic sphere, sociology had missed essential areas of social life. They also critiqued the methodological approaches of sociology, which emphasised quantitative methods and ignored interpretivist ones that examined meaning and subjectivities. They pointed out that these interpretivist approaches allowed a focus on human agency that was often missing from structuralist accounts.

The work of feminist sociologists on women's housework, their involvement in crime, their experiences in the workplace and their relationship to the state identified new areas of theoretical and empirical knowledge. Studies on gender revealed the complexities of arrangements for inequality, challenging the emphasis on class and economic factors and resulting in approaches that acknowledged the intersection of gender, class and race.

Initially, the work of feminist scholars was tied to a social activist agenda that drew attention to formerly unacknowledged areas of female oppression, especially family violence. These approaches drew on Marxist theory, linking women's oppression with ideas of capitalist exploitation. But these accounts provided an inadequate understanding of the marginalisation of women from public life and provided little insight into women's self-understandings. This eventually resulted in poststructuralist approaches and a social constructionist approach to explanations of gender.

## Postmodernity, 1980s–2000s

By the 1980s Marxist social theorists came to realise that processes of **individualisation** were changing contemporary social formations, reducing the salience of structuralist explanations such as social class. The speed of social transformations further undermined structuralist theories. If society is an ongoing social construction resulting from the creative acts of individuals and groups, Durkheim's dictum to treat social life as a social fact is an impossibility. It seemed, then, that the subject of sociological endeavour is not an objectively observable phenomenon – Durkheim's society *sui generis* – but a world of socially constructed meaning, expressed in symbols. These ideas influenced the development of post-structuralist sociology,

which emphasised the relative nature of knowledge and the importance of culture and symbols, especially language. The work of Foucault became influential, especially his concept of discourse, which identified knowledge as the source of power in modern society.

Today, the concepts of modernity, postmodernity and globalisation are central to sociological theory and research. Just as the early sociological thinkers concerned themselves with the transformation from an agricultural to an industrial society, sociologists today analyse where current social trends are taking us. The distinction between modernity and postmodernity signals the idea that technological developments, especially the computer and the internet, have resulted in profound social transformations. Modernity is characterised by a belief in progress, industrial production and collective identities. Postmodernity is characterised by risk and uncertainty, consumption and individualisation. Bauman (2005) has described this transition as a movement from a world of 'the way things are' to one of 'the way things are to be made'. He compares the experience of modernity to that of raftsmen, following the course of a river that guides them along their path, and the experience of postmodernity to that of sailors, who are provided with no direction but instead must find a compass to guide them.

### ? REFLECT and APPLY

How has the development of sociology in Western Europe and North America been linked to surrounding social changes? Explain how this has influenced the emergence of the concept of postmodernity.

## Public sociology

Since 2004, following the work of the American sociologist, Michael Burawoy (2004), sociologists have paid closer attention to questions of whether and how sociological knowledge shapes process of social change and transformation. Burawoy developed a fourfold typology of sociological perspectives, according to whether sociological knowledge is (1) seen as either *instrumental* – focusing on 'providing solutions to predefined problems' (2004, p. 1606) – or as *reflexive* – being 'concerned explicitly with the goals for which our research may be mobilized, and with the values that underpin and guide our research' (p. 1606); and (2) whether sociology's principal audience is either purely academic or directed towards other groups, such as policymakers, contract research clients, interest groups, NGOs, social movements and the general public.

The four different sociological orientations, traditions or perspectives are:

1. professional sociology
2. critical sociology
3. policy sociology
4. public sociology.

Each of these four orientations has a distinct approach to the nature and legitimation of what constitutes valid knowledge, to the audience which it regards itself as accountable to, and each has its characteristic forms of politics and pathologies. For example, whereas professional sociology is concerned with pure knowledge, and in its pathological form risks becoming overly self-referential, policy sociology is concerned with policy interventions and in its pathological form risks becoming overly servile to those who fund its research.

For Burawoy, the challenge is not to identify a preferred perspective but to establish dialogue between the four approaches. The perspective that has generated most debate is that of public sociology because of concerns that sociologists have paid too little attention to the need to generate dialogue between sociologists and the general public. Burawoy observes how all the sociological studies that have had the greatest impact are those which have been directed towards a wider audience, such as David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and Robert Bellah's *Habits of the Heart* (1985).

Burawoy also distinguishes between 'traditional' public sociology, with sociologists simply having a say in public debate, usually through the media, and 'organic' public sociology, with 'sociologists working with a labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations' (2005, pp. 7–8). He argues that whereas sociologists in the global south are often centrally involved in public issues, this is not the case with sociologists in the global north. In Burawoy's view, American sociologists at least should exert more effort to institutionalise various forms of public sociology, enabling the discipline to play a more significant and meaningful role in processes of social transformation.

In a world tending toward market tyranny and state unilateralism, civil society is at once threatened with extinction and at the same time a major possible hold-out against deepening inequalities and multiplying threats to all manner of human rights. The interest of sociology in the very existence, let alone expansion, of civil society (even with all its warts) becomes the interest of humanity – locally, nationally and globally. If we can transcend our parochialism and recognize our distinctive relation to diverse publics within

and across borders, sociologists could yet create the fulcrum around which a critical social science might evolve, one responsive to public issues while at the same time committed to professional excellence. (Burawoy 2004, p. 1616)

The idea of public sociology has been the subject of considerable debate, and not everyone agrees that it is the best or the only way to understand sociology's position in the world. Charles Tittle thinks that public sociology is 'a bad idea because it endangers what little legitimacy sociology currently has, which is precious little' (2004, p. 1641). Tittle argues that by aligning themselves with particular political or normative projects, sociologists lose the one claim they have to intellectual authority and persuasiveness, which is precisely the production of knowledge that is autonomous from politics and morality. Tittle gives the example of a debate in a US state legislature to restore the death penalty, where it became clear that the legislature 'did not regard sociologists or criminologists as scientists, did not believe their research, and most of all, did not trust their motives in interpreting accumulated research and setting forth its implications' (p. 1642). John Holmwood generally agrees, suggesting that 'political neutrality is central to the corporate organization of sociology, not because social inquiry can, or should be, value-neutral, but because corporate political neutrality creates the space for dialogue and is the condition for any sociology to have a voice' (2007, p. 46). Nonetheless, the basic issue to which Burawoy has drawn attention remains a central concern: for whom and for what purposes is sociological knowledge actually useful, and to what extent do sociologists need to converse with more people than just each other?

### REFLECT and APPLY

How do you see the relationship between the four approaches to sociology identified by Michael Burawoy: professional, policy, critical and public? What are the arguments for and against the idea of public sociology?

## Internationalising sociology

Like the world generally and all academic disciplines, sociology is structured globally in terms of a distinction, very roughly, between a core and a periphery, with a semi-periphery lying between them. Often the core–periphery distinction is termed the North–South division. The origins of social science lie in the North, in the colonial powers of Europe, Great Britain and the United States, and its concerns and points of reference remain there today. The South – Asia, Australia, Latin America – has

been incorporated only as a source of exotic data or as an adjunct to northern knowledge. Raewyn Connell, for example, observes that contemporary social theory ‘embeds the viewpoints, perspectives and problems of metropolitan society while presenting itself as universal knowledge’ (2007, pp. vii–viii).

The Singaporean sociologist Sayed Farid Alatas identifies the core countries as the United Kingdom, the United States and France in their domination of social science production and prestige, although historically one would also have to include Germany and Spain (Alatas 2003, p. 602). There are enormous differences between core and periphery in total research and publication output, the response to sociological theory and research, and the provision of PhD training. Certainly, all theoretical development is seen as coming from sociologists in the North, with a special emphasis placed on those located at what are perceived to be the most prestigious universities. A central observation by sociologists concerned with this issue (Alatas 2000a, 2000b, 2006; Keim 2011; Sinha 2000) is that most collaboration between sociologists from the North and South consists of Northern sociologists appropriating the production of knowledge about other parts of the world, while Southern sociologists continue to seek publication in British, European and North American journals and pursue degrees from Cambridge, Princeton or Harvard.

Alatas (2003, pp. 604–5) highlights a number of ways in which social scientists working in the periphery are dependent on those in the core:

1. the production of theory and ideas
2. the distribution of ideas and research results through journals, books and conferences
3. the domination of the technology surrounding the circulation of social science scholarship
4. the funds available to support research activity – research grants, the purchase of books and journals, the support of visiting scholars
5. direct investment in higher education institutions
6. the greater provision of research opportunities in the West, facilitating a ‘brain drain’.

Alatas argues that all these forms of global intellectual dependency constitute a serious obstacle to the development of a genuinely international sociology capable of coming to an adequate understanding of the structure and dynamics of a globalised social world.

The problem raised by the critique of the Eurocentrism or North Atlantic domination of sociological theory and research is the question of how sociological thought can or

should be modified to address this issue. The next step in addressing this problem is the development of local forms of sociology in the periphery that are connected with local problems. Weibke Keim (2011) gives the example of the sociology of work and industry in South Africa, which has produced analyses of problems and issues in the sociological analysis of labour relations, which in turn have generated a number of important theoretical innovations. Raewyn Connell (2011) adds another step, the development of conceptual concerns that are by definition ‘trans-local’. She gives the example of feminist analyses of gender relations (p. 289), but this category would include any form of sociological thought characterised by an explicit awareness of the role of colonialism and postcolonialism in the formation of the modern world.

An important challenge for sociological theory and research now and in the future, then, is how to move beyond the marginalisation of the thinking and research of sociologists in the current core centres of social science production, towards the inclusion of insights developed in all sociological research, wherever it is produced, and a genuine international dialogue that recognises and respects the contributions to sociological thought being made in all parts of the world.

## AUSTRALIAN SOCIOLOGY

Sociologists form an international community, sharing a vocabulary, broad conceptual frameworks and research concerns. However, there are also specific features of the types of sociology practised in different parts of the world that make it possible to distinguish between the different sociological perspectives within that international community.

In Australia, sociology has been shaped by the history of white Australian society as invading and dominating Aboriginal society, its period as a British penal colony and then a colony of British immigrants, the multiculturalism generated by successive waves of migration, patterns of urbanisation and suburbanisation, class and gender relations, and Australia’s geopolitical and cultural relationship with other countries.

Sociology first gained a significant presence in Australian universities in the early 1960s, although the first Chair in Sociology was established at the University of New South Wales in 1959. During the 1960s and 1970s it expanded considerably in response to the growth of the university sector, its popularity among students and its contribution to professional programs, including education, social work, nursing and the allied health professions.

The range of research interests that engage Australian sociologists has developed over time: a core of topics that continue to attract attention is accompanied by new areas developed in response to changes in Australian society. The core topics include class, gender and ethnicity; the Australian state, social welfare and social policy; health and illness; patterns of migration and settlement; the family, childhood, domestic labour and fertility; the media, communications and culture; and urban, rural and community studies.

The size of Australia's population relative to that of the United States, the United Kingdom and Western Europe produces a comparatively small marketplace for sociological writing and research, making it more difficult to find publication outlets for studies that focus specifically on Australian society. Consequently, Australian sociologists often look to Europe, the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, the United States for new and leading theoretical developments. Australian sociology has generally been derivative of developments in the north at the expense of its self-understanding as a settler

society in geographical proximity to Asia and its attention to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge. In a study of Australian intellectual workers, Connell, Wood and Crawford observed that when '[a]sked whether "In order to keep up with developments in my field, one must read books and journals published abroad", 75 percent of our respondents agreed' (2005, p. 17). In this sense, Australia can be described as lying in the semi-periphery of global social science, defined by Alatas as:

... a social science community that is dependent on ideas originating in the social science centres, but which themselves exert some influence on peripheral social science communities by way of the provision of research funds, places in their universities for post-graduate students and post-doctoral fellows from the Third World, the funding of international conferences, and so on. (Alatas 2003, p. 606)

However, the conceptual traffic is not all one way: many sociologists located in Australia have an impact on theoretical developments in sociology worldwide, and many Australian sociologists make important contributions to international sociological discussions. (For a useful

## SOCIOLOGICAL SPOTLIGHT

### The 10 most influential books in Australian sociology

One way to get a sense of the scope of the work undertaken by Australian sociologists is to look over the list of the 10 most influential books in Australian sociology that emerged from a survey of the members of The Australian Sociological Association in 2003 (Skrbis & Germov 2004).

1. R. W. Connell (1977), *Ruling Class, Ruling Culture: Studies of Conflict, Power and Hegemony in Australian Life*: on class and class consciousness in Australia
2. M. Pusey (1991), *Economic Rationalism in Canberra: A Nation-building State Changes its Mind*: a study of Canberra's senior public servants and the way in which state bureaucrats had shifted from a welfare-state discourse to economic rationalism
3. A. Summers (2002), *Damned Whores and God's Police: The Colonization of Women in Australia*: on the hidden role of women in Australian history, and the cultural duality between 'damned whores' and 'God's police'
4. R. W. Connell (1987), *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*: an analysis of the power relations built into gender and sexuality
5. R. W. Connell (1995), *Masculinities*: a study of masculinity as a social construction and its intersection with class, ethnicity and race
6. R. W. Connell, D. W. Ashenden, S. Kessler and G. W. Dowsett (1982), *Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division*: a study of the class dimensions of the school system
7. B. Turner (1996), *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*: an outline of how individual concerns and social dynamics are experienced through our bodies; the role of the body in identity formation
8. A. Game and R. Pringle (1983), *Gender at Work*: on the way in which the workplace is a central site for the social construction of gender and gender relations
9. E. Willis (1989), *Medical Dominance: The Division of Labour in Australian Health Care*: a study of the medical profession and its relationship to various forms of inequality
10. J. Braithwaite (1989), *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*: on the role of shame in crime control and the possibilities of less punitive forms of social integration.



overview of sociology in Australia and New Zealand, see Baldock 1994; Germov & McGee 2005; Harley & Wickham 2014.) Locating Southern histories, social thinkers and concerns at the centre rather than assuming them to be less worthy than their Northern equivalents would provide an opportunity for a distinctively Australian sociology that recentres the periphery.

Sociologists have stopped talking about ‘society’ in a general, abstract sense and are giving increasing recognition to the specifics of geographical location, history and culture. The further we move into the 21st century, it is possible that the old divisions between the core and the periphery of the sociological community may become increasingly irrelevant, so that Australian

sociologists will continue to develop their presence in the world sociological community.

Connell provided perhaps the best perspective on how Australian sociologists can and should see themselves in relation to the rest of the world when she argued for a ‘locally based social science with the capacity to speak globally ... both internationally, and between or across social locations in a region’ (1991, pp. 74–5).

### REFLECT and APPLY

In what ways do you think Australian sociology should be different from the sociological research undertaken in other countries? In what ways should it be the same?

## Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to introduce you to some of sociology’s fundamental concerns, its goals, theories and concepts. As you progress in your studies, you will become more comfortable with these ideas so that later, when you look back at this chapter, the ideas presented here will seem familiar and easy to understand. You will discover for yourself what Mills describes as the promise of sociology (1959): new ways of explaining the world around you so that your ability to engage with and negotiate its complexities is enhanced.

Sociology is the study of the social world. It develops concepts and ideas that identify the underlying patterns that shape society and which explain social change. To possess a sociological consciousness – what Mills (1959) described as a sociological imagination – means being able to identify the connection between individual experiences and the broader social forces that shape them.

Sociologists have developed a ‘toolkit’ of concepts that enables them to analyse the social world, such as agency and structure, modernity and globalisation. These provide a language designed to develop and test their ideas about society and to share these with other social scientists, and with the broader community.

Because the social world is always changing, sociologists must constantly develop new theories and concepts that reflect new social, political, technological and cultural social forces. Sociological theories such as conflict theory, symbolic interactionism and postmodern theory emerged at specific periods in history. Feminist theory is an example of this. As women began to enter the public sphere, extending their role beyond that of the home, so sociologists developed new theories that took account of the position and contributions of women to social, political and economic life, challenging what, until then, had been a male-dominated and male-centric discipline.

Sociology today is understood to be a social science. It shares with science the goals of discovery and explanation, but it must also take account of the way the human world is one of meaning and interpretation. There are also an almost infinite variety of factors that shape social existence so that ‘laws’ of human society rarely exist. Sociology therefore uses a combination of methods and ideas, including objective observation of the empirical world as well as interpretative approaches which pay attention to questions of meaning. Different theories such as interpretive sociology, feminist sociology and postmodern sociology give different weight to these concepts and methods. It is the combination of these different ways of examining society that enables sociologists to provide new knowledge and to challenge assumptions about social life.

Sociological knowledge can be used in a variety of ways. It can be used to guide public policy, discover new ideas, critique contemporary arrangements and beliefs, and contribute in a reflexive way to public debate. The sociologist Burawoy has argued that all four are needed, but it is the public sociology that has garnered particular attention. At a time of rapid social transformation and environmental crisis, sociologists have a responsibility to ensure that the knowledge they generate is shared with the general public.

Australian sociology has been shaped by a number of unique features, including its history of colonisation and historical relationship with the United Kingdom, its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population and its multiculturalism. This has given rise to a range of concerns and interests, including those relating to the experiences of working class people, women and migrants. Historically, Australian sociology has followed traditions established in the United Kingdom and Europe, and to a lesser extent the United States. More recently, it has engaged more closely with the sociology of its Southern neighbours in Asia.

## Tutorial exercises

1. Outline some examples of how particular concerns such as, for example, climate change, social media or social inequality have both a 'public issue' and 'private trouble' dimension, and explain what difference it makes to connect the two.
2. What are some examples of a tension between explanations of how people behave in terms of 'structure' or 'agency'?
3. What does it mean to say that sociology is a science? What else could it be?
4. Examine the ways in which at least one public debate is based, implicitly or explicitly, on particular ways of understanding Australian society that could be analysed from a sociological perspective.
5. How do you think Australian society is different from other parts of the world, and how is this reflected in Australian sociology?

## FURTHER READING

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## VIDEO AND MULTIMEDIA

### *I, Daniel Blake* (2016)

This movie portrays what it's like to live be unemployed and dependent on state benefits. Set in the north east of England, it examines the lives of an older unemployed man and a young woman struggling to bring up her young child. A key theme is the punitive nature of the welfare system and the difficulties the main characters face in their efforts to improve their lives.

### *The Castle* (1997)

A classic Australian comedy, *The Castle* concerns efforts by developers to push a working class family out of their home to make space for an adjacent expanding airport. The movie provides a humorous portrayal of the working-class Aussie battler fighting the forces of greedy capitalists, with themes of suburban life in the 1990s.

### *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002)

Set in Western Australia in 1931, this movie tells the true story of three young Aboriginal sisters who were part of the Stolen Generation. Forcibly removed from their family and community in Jigalong by the Chief Protector of Aborigines, who was the legal guardian of all Aboriginal and part-Aboriginal people under the age of 16 in the state of Western Australia, it follows their efforts to return to their family 1500 km away across their mission station near Perth. The movie illustrates issues of race, inequality and colonisation.

**Please visit these author-curated channels for additional content and perspectives:**

[www.youtube.com/c/IntroductiontoSociologyChannel](http://www.youtube.com/c/IntroductiontoSociologyChannel)  
[www.facebook.com/Sociology.Pearson](http://www.facebook.com/Sociology.Pearson)

## WEBSITES

**Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS): [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)**

The website of Australia's official statistical data collection agency contains social surveys of Australia and some analyses of many different aspects of Australian social life, including social trends as well as some helpful articles. Some of the information is free, some involves a fee. Many libraries subscribe to the ABS, so full access to ABS material can be gained through them.

**Australian Institute of Family Studies: [www.aifs.gov.au](http://www.aifs.gov.au)**

This is the website of Australia's agency for research into family matters. It contains research, publications and links on the family and related areas of Australian social life.

**Australian Social Science Data Archive:  
<http://assda.anu.edu.au>**

This is the social science data archive, which is the main repository of sociological survey research in Australia. Data from quantitative studies and reports are available, although sometimes there is a fee.

**Discover Society: <https://discoversociety.org>**

A website providing social commentary and analysis by sociologists and social policy academics. It provides short articles, videos and images of new research covering a wide range of (mostly British and European) social issues.

**Finallyfeminism101:  
<https://finallyfeminism101.wordpress.com>**

An often humorous blog about gender equality and social justice issues from the perspective of feminist theory. It is designed to provide a space to discuss basic feminist theory and ask questions about it. The blog includes lots of resources

to learn more about feminist theory and frank discussion of feminist debates and issues. There's also a Facebook page at [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com).

**Wikipedia – Sociology: <https://en.wikipedia.org>**

A good starting point for an overview of the sociology discipline, outlining many of the core themes and theoretical perspectives. Not the final word on anything, but providing an entry point for many sociological topics.

**International Sociological Association (ISA):  
[www.isa-sociology.org](http://www.isa-sociology.org)**

The site for the international professional association of all the world's sociologists, providing information about forthcoming conferences, the activities of all of ISA's research committees, fellowships, grants and prizes, the Junior Sociologists network and publication opportunities.

**Reinvention:  
[www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/iatl/reinvention](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/reinvention)**

This online, peer-reviewed journal is dedicated to the publication of high-quality undergraduate student research. It is produced, edited and managed by students and staff at Monash University and the University of Warwick. It is published biannually and only houses papers written by undergraduate students.

**The Australian Sociological Association: [www.tasa.org.au](http://www.tasa.org.au)**

This site has information about the professional association of Australian sociologists, as well as helpful links to sociology resources in Australia and overseas.

**The Conversation: <http://theconversation.com/au>**

The Conversation is a website providing short articles written by academics and researchers, pitched at a general audience interested in current affairs. It offers understanding of complex, contemporary issues through knowledge-based journalism, based on cutting edge research, covering both the sciences and the social sciences. It is both fact-based and editorially independent.