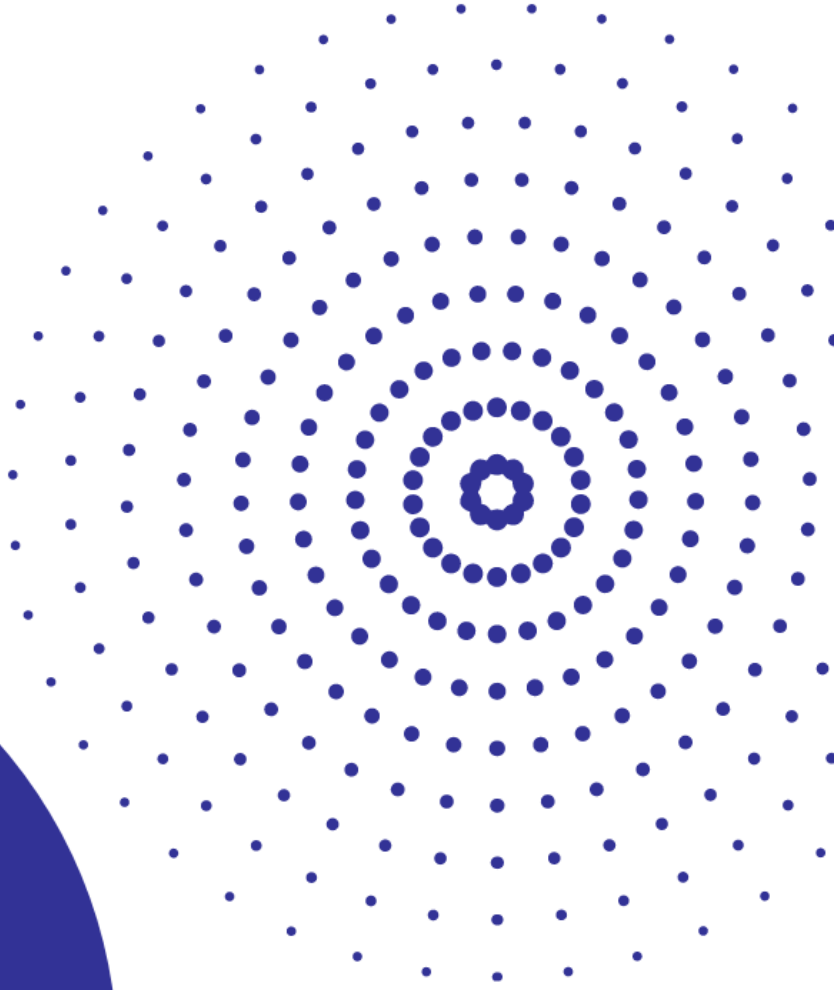
# Exploring Sociology in the Antipodes

## INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY

1st Australian Edition



THERESA PETRAY &
NICK OBALDISTON

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# Exploring Sociology in the Antipodes: Introduction to Sociology – 1st Australian Edition

# EXPLORING SOCIOLOGY IN THE ANTIPODES: INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY – 1ST AUSTRALIAN EDITION

THERESA PETRAY AND NICK OSBALDISTON

James Cook University

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

At James Cook University we acknowledge with respect the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first peoples, educators and innovators of this country. We acknowledge that Country was never ceded, and value the accumulation of knowledge and traditions that reflect the wisdom of ancestral lines going back some 60,000 years, and recognise the significance of this in the ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are custodians of Country. As a University, we will continue to learn ways to care for and be responsible for Country, and we will collectively seek to build a future that is based on truth-telling, mutual understanding, hope, empowerment, and self-determination.

Kassandra Savage (JCU Alumni), 'Coming Together and Respecting Difference', acrylic on canvas, 2014, 90cm x 90cm. © Kassandra

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Associate Professor Theresa Petray** (she/her) is an Associate Professor in Sociology and Head of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences academic group, at James Cook University. Her research and teaching both centre on the concepts of agency and social change. Theresa is committed to using her academic work to contribute to social justice.

Theresa is a Research Fellow of The Cairns Institute (TCI) and Theme Leader of the Social & Environmental Justice group at TCI.

Her primary research focus is on Aboriginal activism and self-determination. Her current research, with the Gugu Badhun nation, looks at economic development and nation-building through the lens of self-determination. This research has led to important partnerships with researchers around Australia and internationally and was funded by an ARC Discovery Award, administered through UTS 2019-2023.

Theresa has researched Aboriginal protest movements in North Queensland as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social media activism. In particular, she is interested in the ways that seemingly marginalised people exercise agency to speak back to power.

Theresa also has research and professional interests in gender equity. From 2018-2022 she was Coordinator of JCU's Gender Equity Action & Research team (formerly Gender Equity Self-Assessment Team). In this role, she led the development of JCU's SAGE Athena Swan Bronze Award application and the subsequent implementation of the Gender Equity Action Plan.

Theresa supervises JCU students in sociology and related disciplines and has been on supervisory panels for research students from the University of Sydney, the University of Copenhagen, and Ben Gurion University. In 2022, Theresa was awarded JCU's *Advisory Panel Member of the Year* award, and in 2016 JCU's *Early Career Advisor of the Year* award.

**Associate Professor Nick Osbaldiston** is a sociologist who joined James Cook University in 2015. He has previously worked at the University of Melbourne, Monash University and Federation University (Gippsland). Nick currently works in the College of Arts, Society and Education and is a teaching and research academic. He is also currently a research fellow with the Cairns Institute.

Nick's research work predominantly covers the areas of lifestyle migration, internal migration, social theory, place and Australia's coasts, higher education labour and climate change adaptation. In the past, he has published several books including *Understanding Lifestyle Migration* with Professor Michaela Benson (Palgrave, 2014), *Seeking Authenticity in Place, Culture and Self* (Palgrave, 2012) and *Towards a Sociology*

*of the Coast* (Palgrave, 2019). He has also published widely on higher education labour culminating in the book *The Social Structures of Global Academia* with Dr Fabian Cannizzo (Routledge, 2019).

Nick is currently working on several projects including work with colleagues from the University of Sydney investigating internal migration within Australia. In addition to this, he is working on a project detailing return migration of domestic migrants into regional places, such as Tasmania and has produced reports on internal migration to Tasmania in the past. Nick is also working on a follow-up monograph on Australian coasts as places of historical and future importance for Australia.

He has extensive experience with honours and PhD students in sociology, geography, planning and theory. Currently, he is supervising students in various areas and is available for supervision, especially in areas of population and sociology.

Nick currently serves also as the Australian Sociological Association Social Theory Thematic Group co-convener and on the editorial board of *Australian Planner* and *Societies*.

# ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

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# INTRODUCTION

The key goals and objectives of this chapter are to understand the following:

- thinking like a sociologist can help us see the complexity of things we take for granted in our everyday lives and better understand why things happen and what their impacts might be
- sociology shares some approaches with other disciplines, and including a sociological approach can enhance your study and practice in areas like social work, psychology, politics, anthropology, science, and more
- the way sociologists think is shaped by the origins of the discipline, but it is relevant to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand today
- this online textbook has a range of features to help learners of all kinds make sense of a range of sociological areas.

## Overview

Every day, about three in every four people in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand drink at least one cup of coffee. Some make their coffee at home or while they are at work, while others purchase their flat whites, lattes, and cappuccinos from cafes and restaurants. While coffee is probably on our minds a fair bit, rarely do we think too deeply about how we come to drink it, what it means, and how it connects us to others.

Are you a coffee drinker? (If not, ask the same questions about your favourite beverage!) Think back to when you started drinking coffee. Do you remember your first taste? Did you like it right away, or was there some other reason you persisted in drinking it until you developed more of a taste for it? What are your main reasons for continuing to drink coffee regularly – is it about the caffeine hit, the routine, the social aspect of getting a coffee with friends, or something else?

**Figure.** Paper coffee cups and sugar cubes in cafeteria by Santeri Viinamäki is licensed under CC BY SA 4.0 licence

Whether you normally buy your coffee in bean form to brew yourself, or prepared for you from a café, do you think about the way these purchases connect you to others? Think about the networks that are created by your purchase – there are staff at the café or shop you interact with, but also the farmers who produce the coffee beans, and possibly the sugar and milk that goes into your cup, and the people who package and sell those products along the way.

One thing that we are more likely to think about, socially speaking, is the environmental impact of our daily beverage. There has been a lot of attention on disposable coffee cups and their environmental impact. You may have a favourite reusable coffee cup or one that you forget to bring with you when you're heading to the café. You might try to buy organic beans to support more sustainable practices. Or you might be sceptical of the impact that individual choices like this have on the larger scale. Recently there has even been considered criticism about the use of paper cups, designed to reduce our reliance on plastic ones! (See Carney Almroth et al., 2023).

If any of these thoughts pique your imagination, you might be thinking like a sociologist. Sociologists ask questions like this of our everyday habits to better understand the world around us. Specifically, sociologists consider the interconnectedness of social action with others, as demonstrated by the following video [8:36] by Ben Cushing on the topic of coffee!

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=4#oembed-1*

What is sociology though? The word "sociology" is derived from the Latin word *socius* (companion) and the Greek word logos (speech or reason), which together mean "reasoned speech or discourse about companionship". How can the experience of companionship or togetherness be put into words or explained? While this is a starting point for the discipline, sociology is actually much more complex. It

uses diverse theories and methods to understand, study and explore a wide range of subject matter. Like all disciplines, sociology then attempts to apply these studies to the real world.

The object of study therefore for sociologists is the 'social'. This itself is a rather abstract term, and defining it is difficult. British sociologist Bryan Turner defines the social as firstly "patterns or chains of social interaction and symbolic exchange" (Turner, 2006, p. 136). Secondly, he contends that the social involves, "the patterns of interaction" that inevitably "cohere into social institutions" (Turner, 2016, p. 136). In other words, the social is a range of actions, interactions, relations and importantly institutions and structures that underpin our everyday lives. Sociology's job is to unpack these, rather messy, worlds that we live in through the systematic and scientific study of all those aspects of life. Turner (2006, p. 136) continues that sociology's major focuses have been the institutions where we will find the 'social' in practice. This includes areas of life like work, the family, nations, religions, law, schooling, health care and other areas where the social has formed 'institutions' or structures. Sociology concerns itself with a range of practices including how we relate to one another, how institutions (such as the above) are formed and change over time, how society functions, how we experience different aspects of life (such as politics), and even how we understand ourselves and our identities. The discipline, as you can imagine, sometimes overlaps with other social sciences and sciences such as economics, anthropology, geography, psychology (especially social psychology), and philosophy. As you learn more about sociology in this textbook, you will find some material that comes from other fields of study.

## The Sociological Imagination

We use the term **sociological imagination** to describe the way that we can ask questions of the social world that help us to understand the structures and relationships that surround us. The term was coined by American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916-1962), who suggested that we cannot understand individuals unless we also understand the society and the structures within them that they emerge from, and vice versa. Mills (1959/2000) directed sociologists' attention to the relationships between individuals and social systems, and his approach is based on the assumption that studying one without the other would give an incomplete picture. For instance, consider a homeless person that you walk past on the street. We can study their conditions, their choices in life, or choices made for them, to understand how they managed to become homeless. However, this would ignore the broader structures in society that underpin homelessness, such as inequalities in income, policy decisions of governments, welfare systems, and community responses to the public issue. By doing so, we take the individual's situation and unpack the wider public contexts that led to their current dilemma. In other words, we see the forest from the trees.

The sociological imagination, then, is the capacity to see an individual's **private troubles** in the context of the broader social processes that structure them. This enables sociologists to examine what Mills (1959/2000) called 'personal troubles' as **public issues** of social structure and vice versa. Mills reasoned that private troubles like being unemployed, having marital difficulties, or feeling purposeless or depressed can be purely personal in nature. It is possible for them to be addressed and understood in terms of personal,

psychological, or moral attributes — either one's own or those of the people in one's immediate milieu. In an individualistic society like ours, this is in fact the most likely way that people will regard the issues they confront: "I can't get a break in the job market;" "My spouse is unsupportive," and so on. However, if private troubles are widely shared with others, they indicate that there is a common social problem that has its source in the way social life is structured. At this level, the issues are not adequately understood as simply private troubles. They are best addressed as public issues that require a collective response to resolve.

By examining individuals and societies and how they interact through this lens, sociologists are able to examine what influences behaviour, attitudes, and culture. By applying systematic and scientific methods to this process, we try to do so without letting our own biases and preconceived ideas influence our conclusions.

The video below features Australian sociologist Robert van Krieken discussing the sociological imagination and applying it to what we find funny [7:32].

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=4#oembed-2*

### 🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit: Activating the Sociological Imagination

Australian sociologist Evan Willis (2011) suggests five questions to help activate the sociological imagination.

These are:

1. What is happening?
2. Why?
3. What are the consequences?
4. How do you know?
5. How could it be otherwise?

*Ask these questions of the following scenario*:

**Figure**. Old Meter Machine by Matt Noble is licensed by Unsplash

Joanna was a 20-year-old university student who was employed part-time at a local coffee shop. She enjoyed the social interactions with people and relied on her pay to finance her accommodation, run her car and pay for groceries. However, in 2020 Australia experienced the start of the COVID-19 pandemic which disrupted the functioning of society as we know it. The government imposed restrictions through a series of lockdowns which included the closure of Joanna's coffee shop. Joanna lost her job and her financial means of survival and had to move back home to live with her parents. She became anxious and her self-esteem plummeted due to the lack of social connectivity with her previous customers and friends. She began to question herself about her inability to find other jobs despite applying for many jobs online. She desperately needed a solution to her current situation...

Is Joanna's unemployment in this scenario about her lack of skills and qualifications, or is it linked to broader social issues? Statistics confirm that the proportion of Australians in paid employment dropped in 2020 to the lowest level since 2003 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2023). If we assume personal troubles are to blame, is the explanation that so many Australians became unworthy of employment all of a sudden? Of course, we know that restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic affected the economy, which in turn meant a rise in unemployment and underemployment, and that this especially impacted workers in sectors like hospitality. While Joanna's self-doubt is understandable, a sociological perspective means we can see the multiple factors that result in her unemployment.

## Benefits and Criticisms of a Sociological Perspective

Since the discipline's creation, scholars and others have contributed to the development of ideas, research methods and theories for the advancement of the discipline's intellectual foundations. However, many

sociologists have used the discipline not simply to understand society but to improve it in different ways. Sociology has thus contributed widely to political, social and policy reforms in issues like equal rights for women in public and private life, the improved understanding and treatment of those with physical and mental disabilities, increased recognition and accommodation for people from different ethnic backgrounds, the development of legislation against 'hate crimes', the rights of indigenous populations across the world to preserve their land and culture, and the reforming of prison systems.

Australian sociologist Evan Willis (2011, p. 185) suggests that sociology's job can feed into the answer for social policy broadly of how we can "achieve the social conditions for the maximum realisation of human potentiality". Certainly, as listed above, sociology has contributed significantly to the development of policies that attempt to answer this question and more. However, the benefits of thinking sociologically are diverse and wide-ranging.

Sociology challenges the status quo or 'taken for granted'. It raises a consciousness beyond one's own existence in everyday life, but also towards the relations we have with others, and their own plights. Willis (2011) describes this as being '**reflexive**', which effectively means setting aside one's own interpretations of the world and experiences of life and trying to step into the shoes of others. Sociologists, as German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) once saw it, should be able to understand the plight of others, without actively knowing their lives intimately. In the development of his brand of sociology, which you will discover later is called **interpretive sociology**, Weber argued that our task is to interpret the actions and understandings of others, not simply ourselves.

Sociology teaches people not to accept easy explanations. It teaches them a way to organize their thinking so that they can ask better questions and formulate better answers. As Willis (2011, p. 34) suggests, a major question we ought to ask ourselves is 'how do we know?' This question alone causes us to ponder the different ways people understand the world, and makes us realise not all think the way we do. It increases our willingness to adopt Weber's position to try to see the world from other people's perspectives. As a result, sociology allows us to understand others better, thus enabling us to live and work in an increasingly diverse and complicated world. Looking at ourselves and society from a sociological perspective enables us to see how we are connected to different groups based on the many different ways they understand themselves and how society classifies them in turn. It raises awareness of how those classifications — such as economic and status levels, education, ethnicity, or sexual orientation — affect perceptions.

**Figure**: Max Weber, 1894 is in the Public Domain, CC0

Sociologists are interested in the experiences of individuals and how those experiences are shaped by interactions with social groups and society as a whole. To a sociologist, the personal decisions an individual

makes do not exist in a vacuum. Cultural patterns and social forces put pressure on people to select one choice over another. Sociologists try to identify these general patterns by examining the behaviour of large groups of people living in the same society and experiencing the same societal pressures. When general patterns persist through time and become habitual or routinized at micro-levels of interaction, or institutionalized at macro or global levels of interaction, they are referred to as social structures.

Consequently, sociological thinking allows people to become more acutely aware of the suffering and marginalisation others experience in our societies, and globally. As the video above from Cushing showed us, the very things we experience in everyday life can be linked to difficulties and trials others might experience elsewhere in the world. As the chapter on digital sociology will show, the devices that you are using to read this text, have a history going right back to the mining of rare earth minerals (REMs). Unfortunately, the supply chain and production of your phone, laptop or other device is possibly mired in inequality and even potential human rights abuses. The sociological perspective thus encourages us to tackle these difficult issues head-on, revealing their structures, and the institutions that sustain them. In short, as sociologists we have an ability to ensure, and the capacity to unpack, the suffering of other people.

*Of course, sociology is not without criticism.*

One of the most difficult issues that sociology has to overcome is the nature of social life as messy, difficult to pin down, and of course, ever-changing. Furthermore, defining exactly what the 'social' is and how we study it, and understand it, is a matter of opinion as we shall see throughout this textbook. We are, as sociologists, *part of* the social that we seek to study. As such, a question of bias arises — in that our own interpretations of the world may well colour how we see data, how we understand social dynamics, and how we study society generally. Important questions have arisen over time about the ability of a discipline which emerged from Europe, fundamentally to understand European society, to be imported into places like the antipodes (which is a term used historically in Europe to refer to the lands in the southern hemisphere, and later came to refer to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand more specifically). As such, sociologists like Australian Raewyn Connell (2007) have argued that sociology needs to be adapted to local issues and integrate the knowledges, theories, concepts and ideas that exist inside different countries and cultures. Everywhere operates differently and distinctly from Europe and North America for her, and sociology needs to change accordingly.

Another major criticism of sociology can come from the advancement of other sciences dedicated to understanding the human condition. Sociology, with the emphasis on the social nature of life, tends to ignore some of these scientific knowledges and theories. In particular, an evolutionary legacy still found in humans in certain behaviours is rather ignored by sociologists in pursuit of other explanations to social action. For instance, researchers in evolution have argued that emotional responses to threats have driven humans forward in the past and still impact us today. Furthermore, neuroscience and cognitive psychology have made significant inroads into explaining some of the dynamics of social life that impact our cognition, how we see the world, and how our brain behaves in response to certain external stimuli. For instance, research on adolescent development of the brain and risk-taking/risk-aversion strategies,

where young people in mid-teenage years are prone to taking more risks, is starting to yield some very intriguing results. However, sociology tends to shy away from adopting many of these findings into its work. Mostly due to the nature of the discipline, sociologists often privilege explanations like social conditioning, structures, socialisation, culture and other social issues for behaviour. In sociology's defence, most disciplines produce these boundaries between their knowledge and understanding of the world and other disciplinary knowledge.

Lastly, sociology (like any academic discipline) does not always speak to the wider social world enough, trapping a lot of its knowledge behind fancy language, difficult-to-understand theories, and complex concepts. Willis (2011) makes this point by arguing that sociology can be rather complicated in how it approaches issues both in terms of methodology, but also in terms of the style of writing we adopt. Furthermore, sociology for American Michael Burawoy (2005) needs to step forward in defence of civil society more and become 'public', researching issues that affect the population and those in marginalised spaces, and using the knowledge and expertise within the discipline to improve lives, rather than simply 'navel gazing' for career or professional improvements. However, despite these criticisms, sociology as a discipline continues to flourish not only across the major nation-states in Europe and America, but also here in the antipodes.

## Where Sociology Comes From

You could say that humans have been fascinated by the nature of society, and the relations between each other, for centuries. Ancient philosophers from the Middle East, Asia, and of course the Greeks, have all laboured over the human condition, and how we understand our worlds. For the Greeks in particular, how, not just what, we know about the world has echoed through the ages until we reached enlightenment, where disciplines like sociology and others were born. For instance, the philosophical study of the nature of life, our limitations and our perceptions and knowledge of the world around us, called epistemology, started with Aristotle (384-322BC) and continues to this day in sociology. We shall revisit this in the chapter on social research methods.

The discipline of sociology itself does not emerge in name, though, until the 19th century with the ever-increasing push for enlightenment in the West, particularly in Europe. During this time, traditional interpretations of life had begun to lose their ability to explain the world. Traditional institutions such as religion were losing ground to the increasing push for scientific knowledge. Myths, superstitions, and the 'irrational' as Max Weber would describe it, lost traction, replaced with the cold and calculated **scientific method** and the ever-expanding economic system of **capitalism**. It was also during this time that the church, as the legitimate intellectual authority of a state, was replaced by the **nation-state**. Of course, the French Revolution (1775-1783, and 1789-1799) also severed ties in France from the monarchy and created a push across Europe for democracy. Technology, through the Industrial Revolution, was also transforming much of how we did life, including labour. As a consequence, European societies were rapidly changing, and what we call **modernity** had kicked off in earnest.

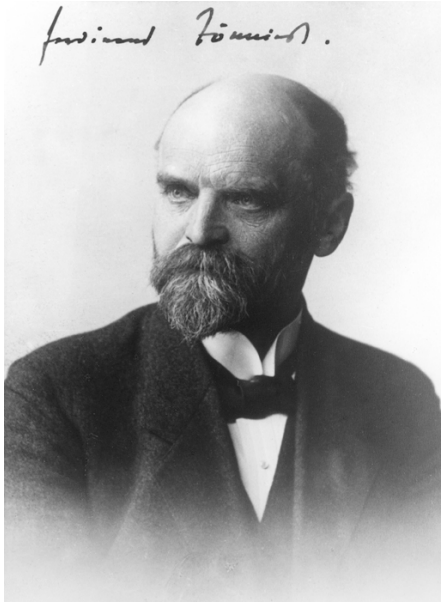

**Figure**. Ferdinand Tonnies (1855-1936) is in the Public Domain

Sociology was born out of these contexts, which is important to understand. In particular, theorists like the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and the Englishman Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) were increasingly intrigued by the sciences of the time and argued for a 'science of society' to emerge that would be called sociology (see next chapter). Sociology, as a disciplinary knowledge and science, took hold in mostly French and German universities to begin with, rapidly developing different methods and theories associated with understanding society. During this time of great upheaval and concern in Europe, sociologists rose to prominence in their attempt to understand changes to society. For instance, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), who is largely considered a forefather of French sociology, became increasingly concerned with the rapid rise of capitalism, the growth of the cities, and the loss of religion. In particular, Durkheim worried that life was increasingly individualised. In other words, people were less connected to their communities than ever before, leading him to increased risk of individuals feeling isolated and alone. Durkheim wanted sociology to fulfil the role of ensuring this was reversed, and that society was cohesive, and bound together. Others, like the German Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936), argued that society was transitioning from what he called *Gemeinschaft* (community), bound by traditional values and community-mindedness, to *Gesellschaft* (society), where self-interest and rational thinking dominated. This is especially seen in the transformation of cities into larger metropolises where population sizes grew, capitalism took hold, and bureaucracies became the organising institutions of our lives.

Sociology grew in popularity and size during this time due to the work of the aforementioned theorists such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Over time, and through the influence of others like Karl Marx (1818-1883), Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), W.E.B Du Bois (1868-1963), Jane Addams (1860-1935), and Charles Cooley (1864-1929), sociology adopted different focuses from the consideration of social injustices, through to deeper concerns with the nature of society, and the everyday interactions that make up life. What you will find as you progress through this textbook, is the distinct impression that sociology is not just a one-size fits all discipline. The knowledges, methods and theories are diverse. As mentioned above, the reason for this is rather simple. Society is a complicated thing! As humans, we all have different backgrounds, situations, contexts and geographies that make up who we are individually and collectively. Consequently, sociology was destined to never be simple. As you find in this introduction to the discipline, there are many approaches across the world, including in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, that continually develop to make the best sense of our social world.

# A Word on Theory

Sociologists focus their studies on a range of social processes, events, and dynamics. As noted above, sociology began as an attempt to create a science of society, hence why it belongs in the social sciences today alongside other cognate disciplines like anthropology, geography and demography. As a result, sociology has developed a range of methods to obtain data on social life – we explore these in detail in the social research methods chapter. However, sociology also has a significant amount of theory embedded in its knowledge base.

Theory comes from the Latin *theoria* and the Greek *theōria* which effectively means to contemplate, speculate, consider or look at. As the word evolved in the English language over time, it denoted something more specific, such as explaining phenomenon based on intellectual reasoning and observing. Today, you could argue, we all theorise about the world around us using our background knowledge, our thoughts, our experiences and our social encounters. However, sociologists have long used theory as a way to make sense of the world intellectually, through observation and at times data. Max Weber was perhaps one of the earliest 'theorists' of his time, arguing in particular that sociology ought to understand, observe and theorise the transformations of society through history to the present day. He wanted us to be historically aware of the way something like the family was orientated in the past, and how it had changed to the present to mean something different. This required understanding how culture, religion, the government, economy and law (along with other institutions) challenged, shaped and altered the status quo.

While not as important for you to understand for this textbook, there is a difference between what we might term 'social theory' and 'sociological theory'. Social theory is closely aligned with philosophy as a cognate discipline and underpins many of the different disciplines inside the social sciences generally. For instance, Karl Marx's theory of capitalism and the relationship between individuals and class has had significant influence on a variety of areas, not just sociology. This includes political science, geography, cultural studies and anthropology. Sociological theory, on the other hand, tends to emerge from sociology itself and relies more exclusively on objectivity, science, and impartiality. An example of sociological theory would be Talcott Parsons' (1951/2013) attempt to understand how society operates functionally in America. His theory was founded on observation of life generally in modernity, theory from others including Durkheim, and on how society operates across institutions from the family to government, in what he later called structural functionalism. In this textbook, you will come across a range of 'theories' – some are social theories, others are sociological theories, and others still (like the symbolic interactionists) are blurred between both. While it is not important for you to demarcate between the two, it is important to recognise that social theory does at times feed into multiple social sciences, which is why in other subjects you might encounter similar ideas!

Consequently, in the chapters that follow you will engage with many of these theories, paradigms and ideas. Each chapter will provide overviews of these within different and distinct sociological topics. It is vitally important that you understand you do not have to agree with anyone's theories in this book! We encourage you to think of what follows as nothing more than a broad outline of how different sociologists understand

society. Do not let yourself be too constrained by these theories, and think critically about all of them. In the end, our task is to teach you what these different people have argued over time and how to understand their research and theories. Your task is to learn, grow and think reflexively about them all. We hope that with your teachers and classmates, you will appreciate the complexity of sociology, and make up your own mind about who might be right or wrong.

## How to Use This Book

This online textbook has a number of features that we hope you'll find useful as you study sociology. We start each chapter with some key learning objectives – the important takeaways that you should quiz yourself on if you want to check your understanding. We finish each chapter with a summary of those key objectives. Across the chapters, we have different sections that allow you to dig deeper, learn more specifically, and introduce you especially to cases that are unique to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

🧠 **Learn More**

A good strategy while studying is to put things in your own words. This can help you grasp the real meaning of a concept, which then lets you level up and apply something outside of the context in which you are learning it. Of course, you need to ensure you still reference the original source of the ideas, but saying something differently is a great way to learn it. Explore more study tips for university students on the Studying 101: Study Smarter Not Harder web page.

As an online textbook, we have tried to include links to further information, for example about the life and work of theorists you should know about. The textbook has embedded videos that you can watch to hear and see explanations of some of the material you are also reading about. In particular, keep your eye out for these features that you can find in most chapters:

🔍 **Look Closer**

These boxes provide you with case studies or deep dives that illustrate the ideas in that chapter. In particular, we try to engage with you with the research and cases that reflect Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit

You've seen this one already in this chapter. When you see the Sociological Tool Kit, you will get an explanation of a particular concept or tool that sociologists use, and some questions for you to consider or discuss with classmates or in your own studies.

🧠 **Learn More**

These shaded blue boxes are usually a brief mention of something you might investigate further if you are interested in this topic, usually with a link out to kickstart your independent learning – like the one just above.

🎞️ Sociology on Screen

If you're anything like us, you probably watch TV and movies pretty regularly, or maybe you grew up watching them. If so, this box is for you! In some chapters, we highlight movies and shows that illustrate the topics we discuss. If you have not yet seen the things we refer to, you might consider seeking them out and watching with your sociological imagination activated.

Finally, we had to put the book in some kind of order, but use it in the way that best suits your learning. You might interact with later chapters in the book before early ones. You might read the Summary of the chapter before reading the chapter itself. You might move through all the activity boxes before reading the paragraphs. The joy of learning is figuring out what works best for you. In addition, all references from the text are provided at the end of the chapter for you to find, read and investigate.

### In Summary

- The sociological imagination is a way of seeing the world that links individual experiences with the processes of social systems and structures, and we can use it to understand everything from unemployment to catching up with friends for coffee.
- Sociologists ask questions about the links between people and institutions and does not rely on simplistic explanations of phenomena, which makes it a useful perspective to combine with other fields of study.
- Sociology emerged as a discipline in the context of the scientific turn, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution, and this context still shapes how the discipline understands the world around us. However, its continued use by scholars in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand demonstrates that the discipline is still very important for understanding contemporary societies.
- We have included features in this textbook that should help a variety of learners make the most of their studies in sociology, including activities, links, and videos alongside the text.

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# CLASS AND STATUS IN CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY

Nick Osbaldiston

The key goals and objectives of this chapter are to understand the following:

- a brief introduction to the development of sociology as a discipline in Europe
- the classical sociological theories and ideas that relate to key areas of class and status
- the development of class and status in contemporary sociological theory
- explore and identify issues of class and status in contemporary Australia and New Zealand.

## Overview

Sociology, like many other social sciences, utilises and draws upon theory to help it make sense of the data that it gathers on society. As you will find in the chapter on social research methodology, these theories are intrinsic to helping us understand our results in research and also help us push for new research directions as we attempt to unpack social phenomena. Theory is at the heart of the discipline's historical formation with key sociological thinkers like Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and George Herbert Mead all playing significant roles in developing the discipline. In other first-year textbooks, we would normally go about exploring all these contributions in some detail, dividing them up into schools of thought. However, in this textbook, we do away with this approach and instead introduce you to four key areas that sociology has theorised within that contribute widely to the discipline's research areas. These are class, status, identity and culture. This is by no means exhaustive and of course, there are several key areas that impact society today that we will miss. However, in this limited space and over the next two chapters, we aim to provide you with a solid understanding of where sociology has theorised in the past and today in the present, and how it might help us understand our society today.

# Brief Introduction to the Emergence of the Discipline of Sociology

Sociology's emergence coincides with the organisation and development of other disciplines in the **enlightenment** period of European history. Before this, the supposed 'dark ages' stifled progress and tended to be dominated by more traditional modes of thinking – especially religious. Systems of authority, the organisation of the economy and the role of society were largely the responsibility of kingdoms. However, with the decline of these and the challenge to religious authority over knowledge established by the Reformation period, a great "awakening in intellectual thought, art, commerce, politics and other human pursuits" occurred in what is known as the **Enlightenment** (Turner et al., 2011, p. 1). This led to some significant changes to the structure of our society, but also to the organisation and pursuit of knowledge. Science in particular had grown as a dominant force in the understanding of our world.

This also coincided with some dramatic changes that occurred across Western Europe during the 18th Century. These included the rapid growth of cities such as Berlin, Paris and London, along with significant advances in industry, the advancement of capitalism as the dominant force of economic exchange, and the expansion of government through the impersonal authority of the state and bureaucracy. Changes were happening to everyday work, culture, social relations, family and how we understood ourselves (Harrington, 2014). We call this period **modernity** – and you will hear this term repeatedly throughout your sociological journey. It was within this context that the discipline of sociology (along with others) was born – a knowledge created out of both a scientific and humanistic need to understand what these changes were doing to modern life, and what it would mean for the future of societies (Turner et al., 2011).

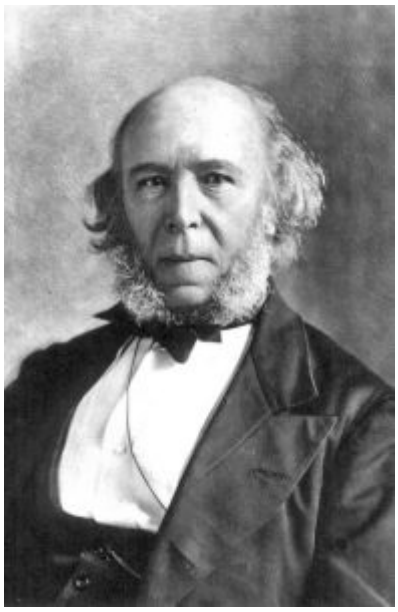

**Figure**. Hebert Spencer by Unknown is in the Public Domain, CC0

While there are many who we can accredit to the rise of sociology during this time, two figures appeared as most influential in the development of sociology as a discipline – the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). For Comte, as you will read in our chapter on methods, social sciences (and indeed sociology) should follow the same principles as science in the seeking for truth. This is founded upon his **positivist** philosophy in which he saw sociology as integral to the understanding of societal phenomenon. In other words, Comte thought that sociology would be a science not unlike biology, and generate knowledge to understand general rules of how societies and individuals act. Spencer, somewhat like Comte, also considered sociology as a discipline that could understand societal changes and controversially focused on the theory of evolution to explain societal transformation. While his approach through evolution has been heavily criticised and was largely dismissed in the 1930s, his collected works especially in the dual volume *Principles of Sociology* published in the 1860s set the tone for sociology. His work especially to understand societal

structures and institutions, such as the economic and religious, had a profound impact on the burgeoning field of sociology.

The growth in popularity of sociology across Europe led to the development of key critical junctures where different schools of thought grew as a result of different influential thinkers. As you will see in this chapter on class and status, and as we hope you will appreciate in your study of sociology, understanding something as complicated as the 'social', means that, unlike other disciplines such as biology, there are multiple perspectives that can be taken. Most sociology textbooks will provide you with three major names in this, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), Max Weber (1864-1920) and Karl Marx (1818-1893). While Marx never formally called himself a sociologist, he was influential in the development of **critical theory**, utilised throughout sociology up to today. The French Durkheim on the other hand, heavily influenced by Comte, developed a sociological approach that would later be popularised as '**functionalism**' by the American Talcott Parsons and others, and still today influences **cultural sociology**. Finally, the German Max Weber developed both a historical sociological tradition, and of more importance, a sociology that was opposed to science, **interpretive** sociology. This approach from Weber is largely responsible for contemporary traditions such as **symbolic interactionism**, and micro-sociology.

Sociology covers several different areas of our social lives, and it is difficult to capture all of that, even through these different foundational thinkers. However, there has been consistent concern right up into today with several features – class, status, identity and culture. In this chapter and the next, we seek to unpack what we see as four foundations for sociological thought, utilising not just these classical thinkers, but also a range of contemporary theorists from recent years. In what follows below, we focus on two areas that are dominant in the history and present of sociological thought – class and status.

## Class – the Early Writings of Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx

One of the areas of undoubted significance to the development of sociology was the interest in the impact of **capitalism** on society. Driven in part by political economists like the Scottish philosopher Adam Smith (1723-1790) and his widely consumed book *The Wealth of Nations*, capitalism had driven changes to how Europeans worked, consumed and lived their lives. For Smith (1776/1970), the importance of the market economy lay in its ability to advance people's livelihoods through profit and exchange. Specifically, Smith (1776/1970) viewed capitalism as the answer to the ills of society and argued that the market economy should simply be left to run without interference from government. In doing so, consumers and producers would be free to exchange as they needed or saw fit (supply/demand economics) and over time, people would grow their wealth and society would prosper.

A growing number of scholars during this time argued that there were inherent flaws in this sort of approach to economics. German philosopher and businessman Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) for instance, wrote a response to the ideas presented by Adam Smith in a paper called 'Outlines of a critique of political economy' in 1844. In it, Engels (1844, pp. 8-9) provides a scathing assessment of capitalism, arguing that the system of economics is inhumane, as it firstly allows "robbery in monopolising the land" for owners of private property who can rent out previous common land for profit, and secondly, as it drives a "division of mankind (sic) into capitalists and workers". This last point is significant, as Engels (1844) saw this as a separation of people into two classes that would only deepen with time – those who work, and those who own the **means of production** and earn profit on the backs of the former. He argued further that while certain sections of the population may well benefit from capitalism, a large portion of society would not, continually being stuck in poverty (Turner et al., 2011). This was even more evident in his next piece which he published in 1845 entitled *The Condition of the Working Class in England* where he focused his writing on the transition of the city of Manchester from one of an agrarian rural society, into a deeply inequitable place defined by the separation of two classes mentioned – infamously called the **bourgeoisie** and the **proletarians** (Engels, 1845/1987). In particular, he argued that the bourgeoisie who were able to acquire wealth through working-class labour were able to shift away from the dirty and polluted city, while the proletariat lived in a state of poverty in slum-like conditions while labouring in the factories of the wealthy during the day. Engels' work is an example of a significant debate that developed during this time around that of class which would influence sociological discussions for years to come.

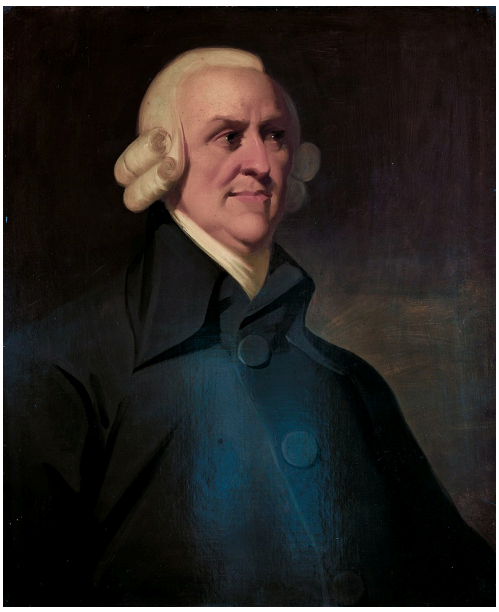

**Figure**. The Muir Portrait of Adam Smith by Unknown is in the Public Domain, CC0

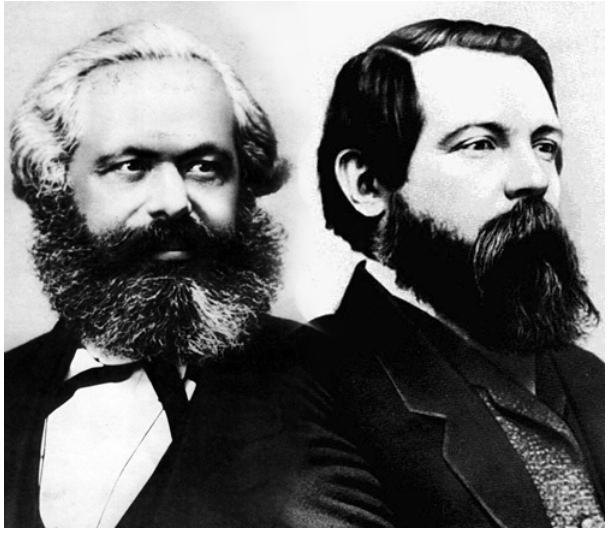

**Figure**. Montage of Marx (Friedrich Karl Wunderand) and Engels (by George Lester) by Unknown is in the Public Domain, CC0

Another key theorist here, and probably one more recognisable by name, was Engels' friend and co-author the German philosopher and political theorist Karl Marx (1818-1883). For Marx, like Engels, capitalism and the arguments of philosophers like Adam Smith were flawed in that wealth would only ever be attained by one class of people – namely the **bourgeoisie**. In his 3 volume critique, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Marx goes into some detail to outline some key problems with unfettered capitalism. In particular, he critiques the changing nature of the **commodity**, arguing that the bourgeoisie have little interest in the use-value of the commodity and only in the exchange value or in simpler terms, the profit that can be made. The labour costs in the production of the commodity are of significance to the bourgeoisie, as the lower the costs (in other words how much the owners pay the workers), the higher the profit. All this serves to increase the division between those working in the factories and those who were earning wealth from it.

To understand this further, we need to examine some of the key concepts of Marx's (1981) work here briefly. Firstly, Marx viewed **capitalism** as deeply inequitable as we have outlined above already. However, he also saw some of the significant problems of capitalism that he argued were hidden away. In particular, due to the changing nature of the production of goods, in other words, workers now working in factory assembly lines, consumers were no longer in direct social contact with those who produced goods. In other words, there was a separation of consumers away from the actual people who made products. Think about it this way, do you have direct contact with the person who made the computer screen you are reading this book through? For Marx (1981), this serves as a problem as it further separates and isolates social relations, but provides what he described as a fetishisation of the commodity (where the object itself is the only thing you have a relation to). In the example of your computer screen, you have zero social contact with those who constructed your device, but right now, you are using the results of their labour. The commodity or product is the only reference you have to the whole process of capitalism.

Secondly, Marx and Engels both wrote in the now infamous *Communist Manifesto* (1848) that capitalists (the bourgeoisie) were largely protected those who governed society through politics, law, the state but also even ideology and religion. Law, for instance, for them, is a mechanism that only serves to protect the interests of people who own private property and not the rights of the working class and their labour. The state, and its politicians, therefore only debate and develop legislation that continues to serve the interests of this group, and fail, for Marx and Engels, to adapt their work to examining the needs of the proletariat (Vincent, 1993). Thus, the **nation-state** (or government) is not there to support collective needs, rather is there to uphold the interests only of the one ruling economic class, the bourgeois.

A large support for capitalism however does not come institutionally but through something called **ideology** for Marx and Engels. This can be understood as the prevailing beliefs, ideas and values that underpin society. For these two, ideology is vital to the continued support of capitalism as without it, individuals would revolt and eventually overthrow the economic system due to the inequality it produces. We can see this for instance in Marx's dismissive critique of religion as the "opiate of the masses" (cited in Schnabel, 2021, p. 990). In this, he contends that society turns to religion to find meaning and comfort in life, even if there are dreadful situations that people live in (as Engels points out in his work above). Consequently, like other ideologies (such as freedom, responsibility, hard work, etc), this only serves to limit how one sees their current position in life, by promising a future happiness (eg. a heaven for poor people in Christianity). For Marx in particular, this sort of ideology promotes what he described as a **false consciousness** – which in short is the inability of people to see how they are being exploited and/or oppressed by the dominant classes. Ideology for Marx and Engels tends to legitimise the social conditions that capitalism creates, and thus justifies issues like poverty and inequality.

Manifest
der
Kommunistischen Partei.
Veröffentlicht im Februar 1848.
Proletarier aller Länder vereinigt Euch!
London.
Gedruckt in der Office der „Bildungs-Gesellschaft für Arbeiter"
von J. E. Burghard.
46, Liverpool Street, Bishopsgate.

**Figure**. Cover of the initial publication of the Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848 by Unknown is in the Public Domain, CC0

The significance of this is paramount for Marx and Engels (1848/2012) who argue in the *Communist Manifesto* that the working class must rise up, understand their exploited conditions, and take back control of the means of production and the system that supports it. In order to achieve this, a revolution needed to take place where proletarians would eliminate, especially private property, and seize control of the state. Once this was achieved, Marx and Engels argued that the state would need to reform a range of issues. These would include a heavier form of taxation to produce equality, public/state control over banking, state ownership of all the means of production, and even free education (Turner et al., 2011). It is worth noting that several nation-states have attempted this in their own ways (see chapter on political sociology). The most infamous being the Russian Revolution in 1917 which led to the creation of the United Soviet Socialists Republics (USSR) in 1922, one of the first genuine attempts to implement **communism** as a political and economic system, and one of the few attempts to run an alternative economic system to capitalism.

The driving force of Marx and Engels' work ultimately was the removal of the bourgeoisie and the eventual transition into a classless society. However, it is worth noting that in later work, Marx (1981) also predicted that capitalism would inevitably fail for the following reasons.

1. Workers would finally recognise that they are being exploited for their labour as capitalists seek to lower costs.
2. Workers would also be unable to own private property and eventually would tire of these conditions.
3. Capitalism is volatile and increased competitiveness would lead to the failure of many businesses, again exposing the true costs of capitalism to the proletariat.

4. The market economy will always produce economic misery (via depressions for instance) which will expose capitalism's follies to society, creating a need for change.

However, Marx's predictions were wrong, and instead of failing, capitalism continued to grow and remains the dominant economic system in the world today. Only a few nation-states remain that operate under a communist system (most notably China). Yet, the impact of Marx and Engel's work on class was substantial and their work still resonates today with several sociologists.

🛠️ Sociological Toolkit: Was Karl Marx right?

In the short video [3:22] below, the economic magazine *The Economist* overviews some of the things that Marx got right in his analysis of capitalism, but also some of the things that he got wrong, along with a critique of the communist system that he advocated for. While watching this video, ask yourself a few questions:

- What do you think of Marx and Engel's idea of the working class? Importantly, do you think that the working class (as proposed by them) exists today in Australia and/or New Zealand?
- What is we put this on a global perspective? Is there a working class globally in relation to the developed world? In other words, can we implement Marx and Engel's analysis to the manufacturing of our goods (eg. our clothing, our technology)?
- Why do you think communism failed in places like the USSR?

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=140#oembed-1*

## Status – the Sociological Interpretations of Max Weber

One of the most important figures in the development of sociology in the early 'modern' period was German scholar Max Weber (1864-1920). Like others, Weber was concerned with the changes that were happening in modern society and had broad interests in the impact of science on modern life. However, like Marx and Engels, Weber also saw class as an area of some importance (Weber, 1922/2019). Unlike the two communist advocates, however, Weber (1922/2019) recognised class as a position within the market economy that could be objectively identified, but which extended beyond merely two classes as identified

by Marx and Engels. Weber also strongly criticised communism/socialism on the basis that it would require significant bureaucracy or a proletarian dictatorship to run, which he thought would create conditions that stifled freedom (Mommsen, 1977). He also argued against socialist critiques of capitalism by showing that despite the existence of the bourgeois class, broadly everyone was getting richer as products became cheaper and wages grew in value (Mommsen, 1977). In some respects, Weber was correct. Wages did increase in value and created, inevitably, conditions that led to the rise of living standards in the developed western nations. Conversely, in the USSR where communism prevailed, large-scale bureaucracies and the Stalin-led dictatorship did little to improve economic standards of the poorest people and also created the conditions that destroyed freedom.

As noted, Weber (1922 /2019) agreed however with Marx and Engels that class was indeed important for sociological analysis. He further agreed that there were certainly two broad classes – the propertied (those who owned property) and the nonpropertied (those who did not). But within these groups, there were various different subsets of classes that existed. For the propertied classes, Weber (1922/2019) distinguished the **rentiers**, those who lived off the income of their properties (such as landlords), away from the entrepreneurs who made money through economic activity within professions that developed wealth (such as bankers, business owners, etc). The important distinction between the two for Weber was that the latter had less social status or prestige than the former, who largely came from established wealthy families already. Status is something that is of importance to Weber as we shall see soon.

Weber (1922/2019) also identified four different class groupings within the nonpropertied categories, the middle class, skilled workers, semi-skilled workers and unskilled workers. Although he did not articulate much on the latter three, Weber spent some time detailing what the middle classes were. For him, the middle-class was largely made up of what we might call white-collar workers today. Importantly for Weber (1922/2019) these were people who did not own property, but unlike the proletariat, they did not labour in factories like 'blue-collar' workers might. For instance, the middle classes tended labour in areas that did not produce, but rather served the community for profit such as bankers, teachers, academics, and public officials or bureaucrats. Unlike the capitalists in Marx and Engels' analysis, these people were those with some form of **status** in society. However, their social standing did not come from wealth or other forms of private property. Rather their standing or status was achieved at times through occupational prestige, position within the community, and other areas. The latter three classes conversely (the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers) in Weber's analysis were those who we might term the blue-collar workers – those with skills, those with some, and those without any. Skilled workers for instance such as tradespeople still held some social standing and were still able to accumulate wealth through their labour, but not often private property.

The important thing for Weber (1922/2019) here, which you might have noticed already, is that status, prestige and honour were important to consider, not simply class position. People in modernity use status to compare with and contrast against other groups unlike class which is relatively fixed for people like Marx and Engels according to your economic position as a worker or owner of a capitalist enterprise. For Weber (1922/2019), class is merely a position that you occupy in the market economy whereas status is understood as the judgements and comparisons that individuals within groups make towards others on the basis of sociological categories such as occupation, familial background, character, social networks, and standing in the community. **Status groups** therefore are more important than class for Weber, as people who believe they share similar values, ideas, and character, come together in a type of exclusive membership.

**Figure**. Max Weber, 1894 is in the Public Domain, CC0

These status groups are important. Weber (1922/2019) argues they operate within everyday life within society, in a manner that includes and excludes others. Specifically, people will mix socially only with those who they deem to be of equal status, thus reducing social interaction with those outside of their status groups. This results, for Weber (1922/2019), in certain limitations and functions in a society of social groups. This could include limiting who they will marry, ensuring that they marry only those within their status, working, living and raising children in geographical areas of the same status, and conducting business and leisure with those in the same groups. This is especially important for Weber (1922/2019) in relation to labour, where status groups will close off entry from others. For instance, lawyers will make it difficult for outsiders to understand and then practice law, closing off opportunities for others from other status groups to participate in the occupation.

We can see status groups throughout our societies where we live, work and play. For instance, across the world, colloquial terms are used to designate different social groups with different levels of status, sometimes in a negative manner. A classic case in Australia is the term 'bogan', which denotes not just someone who may come from the poorer classes, but specifically as Chris Gibson (2013, p. 64) argues, someone who has "an absence of cultivated aesthetics or tastes". *Bogan* is synonymous with other labels with give to other status groups who have distinct aesthetics in what they wear, their education, what occupation they might have, their mannerisms, and their geographical location. In Australia there was even an ABC comedy television series entitled *Upper Middle Bogan* (2016) that followed the plight of a relatively wealthy suburban woman who is also a medical doctor, adopted at birth, who discovers her real biological parents are *bogans* who own a drag racing team. The comedy builds on a tension between the two status groups, *posh* vs *bogan*, to make light of the differences between their mannerisms, values and expectations.

🛠️ Sociological Toolkit: Where do you see status as important in your social interactions?

For someone like Weber (1922/2019) one's social status, or status group, means that in certain contexts you could have more prestige than others. For instance, as a university professor on campus, we might have a certain level of status and prestige that students might not. However, in another context, the student might have more status than us. As an example, Nick (the author of this chapter!) once taught a first-year class where he had one student, let's call him Fred, who he held status over due to the power given to him by the university. However, a week after the first class, Nick attended his local football match as a player, and was astounded to find Fred was his referee. Fred was held in high esteem by the players as one of the best referees in the competition. Nick conversely was new to the competition and did not know many people. Fred in this situation held more status amongst the players, but also of course, had power over Nick during the game! Luckily for Nick, he didn't receive any yellow or red cards from Fred.

What different status groups can you identify in your local community/society? Think about the following sociological categories and ask, what groups have more social standing/prestige than others and why?

- occupation
- education
- geography (what suburb/town someone lives in)
- family
- ethnicity.

## Class and Status – Pierre Bourdieu's Attempt to Embrace both

The interesting question then is what should we privilege in our discussions around modern society – class or status (or neither!)? This question was taken up by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) in his book entitled *Distinction: A social critique on the judgement of taste*. Crucial to Bourdieu's (1984) analysis is that of the concept of **habitus**. For him, habitus refers to the dispositions, ideals, values, or tastes that an individual has which predisposes them to certain behaviours (Power, 1999). While an individual still carries with them agency (or the ability to choose), our habitus or predisposed ways of thinking, means that we will act in accordance to our habitus in different social conditions, contexts or structures that present themselves to us. Habitus is not something you are born with, rather it emerges through socialisation and cultural conditioning over time, usually in one's childhood.

This is slightly difficult to comprehend so let's use an example of this. Let's say that a child is born in a middle-class family in Sydney with two parents who have a university education and are both working as professionals. The parents take the education of their child seriously, sending her to a private school in inner-city Sydney, where the school teaches her the importance of study and provides her with the appropriate resources to do so. Both parents take an active role in the development of her education, teaching her the importance of doing well, but also learning areas that align with middle-class professions such as law, healthcare and so on. As time progresses, the child becomes predisposed to furthering her education, and when she graduates, having succeeded in school, she chooses to attend university, studying a law degree. While the child had a choice to do what she wished, her upbringing socialised certain predispositions (habitus) in her, which encouraged her to take the pathway of higher education. The ability to choose is always there, but we often choose according to Bourdieu (1984) in keeping with our habitus, albeit unconsciously.

For Bourdieu (1984) though, habitus is not just exhibited in choices we make about careers. We can see habitus in a range of our choices, tastes, and even bodily dispositions. For instance, the music that we listen to, the food we eat, the way we speak, the sport we are more likely to play, how we dress, our extroverted or introverted natures, and what we value or appreciate in life. Take a moment to consider your own habitus. What sorts of things are you predisposed to because of your upbringing? Consider that your habitus is not simply defined by your parents, but also those who surrounded you in your childhood, and even today.

🔍 **Look Closer:** Case study. Bourdieu, the boom and the cashed-up 'bogan'

In much of what we read in sociology, there is a heavy European emphasis, and Bourdieu's (1984) work is no exception. For the most part, his writing emerged out of an analysis of French social/cultural life. English scholars such as Bev Skeggs, however, have used his work in England but also claimed that this might not work in Australia, which could be more driven by economic wealth. Pini and

The other side of Bourdieu's (1984) theory then relates to how we operate or practice in the world we live in, carrying these dispositions. For Bourdieu (1984), unlike Marx and Engels, and to a degree aligned with Weber's thoughts, our social worlds are made up of fields. **Fields** are "structured spaces organised around particular types of capital, consisting of dominant and subordinate positions" (Power, 1999, p. 50). Every area of modern life consists of these fields from law through to university education. Each field has its own rules, like a sport, but also consists of its own knowledge, ideas, goods, and capital. The important point for Bourdieu (1984) is that in each field, individuals strive for status and capital within. To succeed within these fields, one must have the necessary capital to spend, to increase status, and dominate.

There are different types of capital in Bourdieu's (1984) theory that allows an individual to succeed in the different fields of social life – and each of them are linked to habitus in different ways. Of course, economic capital is important for Bourdieu (1984) as this is what we hope to acquire,

but also can open up different pathways (eg. private school education) that has a distinct impact on habitus. **Social capital** is also important as it allows for connections that are linked to ones social position/status as Weber points out. Social capital can provide opportunities but also can impact on someone's habitus. **Symbolic capital**, also important, refers to the accumulated prestige or honour one has afforded to them in a society or community. Importantly, this symbolic capital is the intersection between class and status. An individual can come from the middle-classes, but hold low social status for a variety of reasons, and vice-versa. Consider the prestige or honour that American society gives to those from the military as an example. Or the prestige or honour that Olympic gold medalists receive, even if they are not from the middle-classes. For Bourdieu (1984), both class and status are important to how people perceive other people.

Privet (2013) set out to investigate this by exploring the boom for mining that created significant wealth for former 'working class' people. The authors in particular wanted to know how much status the 'cashed up bogans' (CUBs) (as newspapers described them) have now, and how much economic opportunity this provided them. They found that, while there was an increase in wealth, CUBs were still held back due to their "lack" of "cultural competencies and skills legitimated by the middle class to such an extent that they are unable to enhance their social status as a result of their material success" (Pini & Privet, 2013, p. 265). While there were limitations to the study, it demonstrates the potential importance of Bourdieu's (1984) work in the antipodes.

The most regularly discussed capital though that Bourdieu (1984) theorises on is that of **cultural capital**. There are three types of cultural capital that are of importance to our discussion here that reflect class and status – embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Embodied cultural capital refers to those dispositions, skills, knowledge and ideas we referred to in habitus which we carry throughout our lives that are important to social status in particular. If I have a disposition to a particular career path that is associated with the middle classes, say economics, then as Weber might argue, I will be predisposed to pursuing this career path, accumulating knowledge and skill in that area. Conversely, if I have a disposition that privileges working with tools, I might follow the career path of a tradesperson. This embodied capital, Bourdieu (1984) argues, generally means you are surrounded by those with the same social class as you, which then tends to provide certain opportunities for social mobility within that class. Your embodied capital is significant to how you navigate fields. Objectified cultural capital is similar in that the cultural goods that we surround ourselves with, reflect our habitus (but also our class and status). For instance, I might drive a Mercedes Benz, as this reflects my social status, but also evidences my class position. Lastly, institutionalised cultural capital refers to the awarding of status via social institutions like schools and universities. If I have a degree, say from Harvard University, in Law, I may have advantage over others

who have degrees from less prestigious universities. Institutionalised cultural capital is of course heavily influenced by ones upbringing, class position, and habitus.

The argument here for Bourdieu (1984) is that your habitus, which develops from birth, reflects your class position. The cultural capital in particular which you embody, display and own is significantly linked to class. An individual then uses that cultural, and social, capital in such a way to succeed in different **fields**, and essentially increase your chances for economic capital or status within that field itself. For Bourdieu (1984), this is a more complex way of showing that class reproduction exists in society – not simply through class, but through our lifestyles, labour, and status. Children born into the lower classes, for him, will find it far more difficult to navigate their way into middle or upper class society, due to these different types of capital that act to preserve class distinction. There is far more to Bourdieu's (1984) work here that we do not have space to discuss. However, his legacy continues throughout sociology today.

If you are still unsure of what cultural capital is, hopefully this short video [5:29] might help in understanding this term.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=140#oembed-2*

## Class and Status Reconsidered for Contemporary Society

Attempts to re-interpret Marx and Engels, and Weber's work, into more modern approaches have been undertaken not just by Bourdieu (1984) but by others including Wright (1997) in the United States and Goldthorpe (1979) in the United Kingdom. In the case of Wright (1997), class relations were expanded upon from Marx and Engel's initial reading of the bourgeoisie and proletariat to include different types of owners of the means of production from petite bourgeoisie (those who do not hire), the small businesses (those who hire small amounts of people but also work) and the large bourgeoisie (those who employ labour but do not work). He then distinguished the proletariat by their skills and demonstrated that there were managers, supervisors and workers with varying degrees of skills with the true proletarian being the unskilled labourer with no authority. In his research in the 1980s, he discovered that 40% of the American workforce were true proletarians.

Conversely, Goldthorpe (1979, with Llewelyn and Payne's collaboration) expanded on Weber's approach to class/status through empirical analysis and categorized three classes, the service, intermediate and working class, with structural layers within each. The service class had two types, the higher-skilled and paid professionals, and the lower-skilled and lesser-paid professionals. Conversely, the intermediate classes held a mix of non-manual workers, small business owners, farmers and skilled technicians. Finally, the working class held a mix of skilled manual labourers, semi-skilled workers, and unskilled workers in both primary/agricultural production and manufacturing.

In recent times there have been calls to refresh this again and investigate how class operates in today's modern world. Savage et al. (2013) worked with the British Broadcasting Corporation to undertake the 'Great British Class Survey' to explore the changing nature of class in Britain using Bourdieu (1984) and others as a guide. They found by investigating people's economic, cultural and social capital, there were in fact seven classes which are as follows: Elite, Established Middle Class, Technical Middle Class, New Affluent Workers, Traditional Working Class, Emergent Service Class, Precariat. Through this survey, Savage et al. (2013) demonstrate that social class is still a major issue in the United Kingdom, but is complicated by a relatively large middle-class, and those on the outer including the elite and the precariat.

The category of the precariat is one that has occupied the mindsets of social scientists recently. **Precariat** workers are not necessarily under-educated or under-skilled people in some analyses. The economist Guy Standing (2014, p. 10) for instance describes the precariat as a group of people with unstable employment such as those in casual and part-time positions and/or short-term contracts. They are also identifiable by their lack of secure income in cases of sickness or holiday. Those in this category tend to find themselves self-funding for things that full-time workers attain in their employment contracts – such as annual leave. Finally, Standing (2014) argues that the precariat are also those who struggle to obtain support from the nation-state. He writes (2014, p. 11), "they are supplicants, reduced to pleading for benefits and access to public services, dependent on the discretionary decisions of local bureaucrats who are often inclined to moralistic judgments about whose behavior or attitude is deserving". As noted, precariat workers do not necessarily have no skills. As Mauri (2019) demonstrates in his research, even those with PhDs working in the university sector, can find themselves in a cycle of casual and short-term contract labour that is unstable.

Jill Sheppard and Nicholas Biddle (2017) replicated the work undertaken by Savage et al. (2013) above to investigate whether the same 'classes' they discovered in the United Kingdom would be found in contemporary Australia. Influenced heavily by their work along with Bourdieu (1984), Sheppard and Biddle (2017) surveyed over 1200 Australians, measuring social class via metrics in social, economic and cultural capital. In their analysis, unlike the United Kingdom, they found 6 classes operating in Australia – the Established Affluent, Emerging Affluent, Established Middle, New Workers, Ageing Workers and Precariat. These are detailed in the table below.

**Table. Classes in Australia Class Survey with their Characteristics (Adapted from Sheppard & Biddle, 2017, pp. 505-509)**

| Class | Average/ Mean Age | % of Sample | Characteristics |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Precariat** | 56.2 years | 13% | Lowest in household income, lowest property/savings, educational achievement, participation in cultural activities, low social contact, lowest occupational prestige. |
| **Ageing Worker Class** | 58.2 years | 14% | More resources than precariat overall, moderate rates of household income, property and assets, educational attainment higher than precariat, parental occupational prestige higher than precariat comparable to new worker class. |
| **New Worker Class** | 51.34 years | 24% | Higher rates of educational attainment, income, savings, property and social/ cultural capital than ageing workers. Lower occupational prestige but greater wealth. |
| **Established Middle** | 51.95 years | 24% | Slightly higher income, educational attainment than new workers. Higher social/cultural capital and parental occupational prestige. Advantages higher over worker class |
| **Emerging Affluent** | 51.09 years | 15% | Greater economic, social, cultural capital than all except the established affluent class. Lower wealth than the affluent class and established middle class. |
| **Established Affluent** | 52.42 years | 11% | Greatest economic, social, cultural capital than all classes. Very high rates of occupational prestige. Highest rate of educational attainment. |

The work of Sheppard and Biddle (2017, p. 512) exemplifies the need for social class analysis in Australia which has often been described by commentators and even other academics as "comparatively egalitarian, having forsaken the class hierarchies of its British antecedent". For instance, the importance of the classes identified for sociological and economic analysis is apparent in the table above. The precariat class as identified in this research in particular, represents a group of people who are relatively underprivileged and under-resourced in Australian society today. These are not just young people looking for work or students in universities. The precariat also represents a large section of retirees (36%) who are reliant on government pensions and other welfare services. In addition to this, the ageing worker class includes 35% of people who are recipients of welfare (Sheppard & Biddle, 2017). When we consider statistics like this, we can also examine government payments such as pensions and ascertain whether this is enough to live or whether it drops below the poverty line (Saunders et al., 2022).

🛠️ Sociological Toolkit: What social class are you?

As highlighted, Sheppard and

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, sociologist Charles Crothers (2013; 2014) argues that there has been a reluctance, like Australia, in interrogating class in the past due to the belief that the country was inherently classless. However, in his analysis of survey results and census data, he argues that conceptually there are six classes in Aotearoa/New Zealand including an upper class which have significant power and wealth, the upper middle who are highly educated professionals who are relatively wealthy, the lower middle

comprised of managers and semi-skilled professionals, skilled and semi-skilled workers categorised mostly by trades/craftspeople, the unskilled workers who are often under-employed and finally the 'lumpen proletariat' who are reliant on the state for welfare and services (Crothers, 2014, p. 91). Importantly in his analysis, Crothers (2014) highlights that despite a history of considering the country as egalitarian, many New Zealanders are actually quite aware of class, and openly identify their social class position. Similarly, Sheppard and Biddle (2017) found that in their survey, when presented with the class options, many Australians correctly identified their social class. This is an interesting finding in relation to both countries, and highlights the importance of the category or concept of class to everyday life.

Of course, there is much more to the analysis of class and status in sociological literature that could be covered in a chapter like this. Arguably, there could be an entire textbook written just about these two concepts. What we hope you have understood in this chapter is the significance of these sociological concepts, and their role in shaping sociological analysis not only in the inception of sociology as a discipline, but through to today.

Biddle (2017) found in their research that those surveyed were able to correctly identify their social class relatively well, once they had been explained to respondents. What about you? Using their research, do you think you could correctly identify what social class you belong to?

What do you think about the concept of class from what you have read here? Do you think that class is an important concept for those living in the antipodes or is it becoming an outdated category today?

Here is a link to a condensed quiz provided by the ABC where you can check your answer, and what social class you might actually belong to. You might be surprised!

## In Summary

In this introductory chapter to sociological foundations you have learned about the following key points

- The conditions and contexts through which the discipline of sociology emerged with specific reference to the works of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer.
- The work of Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx and their description and critique of political philosopher Adam Smith, and capitalism more generally.
- The concepts from Engels and Marx of class, false consciousness, ideology, bourgeoisie,

and proletariat.

- The work of Max Weber in his critique of class by examining the function of status in modernity especially through status groups.
- The contribution of Pierre Bourdieu in his work on cultural capital in his attempt to understand class via means other than wealth.
- The work of contemporary sociologists on class including the new social class analysis of Australia.

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# IDENTITY, SELF AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGY

Nick Osbaldiston

The key goals and objectives of this chapter are to understand the following:

- the concepts of culture and identity in sociology
- foundational theories of culture and identity in classical sociological literature
- contemporary theories and sociological work in cultural sociology
- contemporary theories and sociological work in symbolic interactionism
- engage case studies/examples for deeper analysis.

## Overview

As the previous chapter discussed, sociology has its roots in the turn towards science during the Enlightenment period and beyond in the 19th and 20th Centuries. As sociology started to expand throughout the Western world, so too did the different sites of social life that it sought to interpret and understand. While class and status remained important concepts for sociological examination, new ideas and concepts like ethnicity, gender, culture and identity grew in popularity. Importantly, these concepts allowed sociologists the opportunity to develop their own 'style' of sociology as we will see in this chapter. Like any discipline, sociology has many different approaches that privilege certain variables in the development of theory and research. In this chapter we will examine some of these in detail, however, there are far too many different fields of inquiry to cover here. Rather, we will focus on some of the major contributions to identity and culture in what follows. However, later in this textbook, you will find other important concepts such as politics, deviancy, technology, health, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, that all feed into the discussion around identity and culture.

# Some Key Background Concepts and Ideas

Of the many different concepts you will learn about, **culture** is one of the most difficult and slippery to define and identify. Early meanings given to culture, especially out of anthropology, identified it as the system of morals, values, laws, customs, rites and rituals that underpin a community or society. Other anthropologists like Clifford Geertz (1973) defined culture as a whole system or way of life that includes not just morals and laws, but also artifacts, rituals, social interactions and layers of meaning invested in everyday life. Over time, however, and through sociological insights, culture has been interpreted by theorists through different conceptual lenses. Georg Simmel (1858–1918) who you will encounter below, considered culture to be a complex relationship between how people engage with the world symbolically, and how different facets of cultural life (such as art) created meaning for people's lives.

On the other hand, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and his students focused on culture being a great organiser of morals and values, as people come together in collective energy and unite around **sacred** things (see below). In recent years, cultural sociologists who follow the Durkheimian tradition use notions of collective values and the binary opposition between the sacred and the **profane** to understand all aspects of cultural life from war, political discourse, incivility, place and even sport.

Conversely, postmodernists like Jean Baudrillard (1983) contended that culture is effectively made up of signs and symbols, many of which become like language in everyday life. We use these signs and the cultural artefacts around us to demonstrate our identities or portray certain characteristics about ourselves in everyday life. Consider for instance the red rose. On its own, the rose is simply a flower, that has a certain texture and character to it. However, through cultural meaning, and shared understandings of what the red rose signifies, we understand it to be part of the ritual of love or romance. For Baudrillard (1983) though, our culture is filled with things that are representations or symbols of reality, but which have for him become 'real'. A classic example would be a chicken nugget. Layers of symbolism have been advertised/marketed to us over the years presenting this as 'real' chicken. The reality is that the ingredients are a mixture of chicken and other additives. Furthermore, 'chicken' has bones, gristle, skin, and so on. Whereas the chicken nugget removes all of this. For Baudrillard (1983), much of our modern experience is now filtered through what he calls the **simulacra** of life – the fantasy, the unreal, the fake, now presented as real – so that it becomes 'real' to us.

American sociologist Anne Swidler (1986) utilised some of these approaches to develop a sociological understanding of culture as 'meaning-making'. From her perspective, culture can be seen as a 'toolkit' where individuals use different ideas to unpack and make meaning out of different social situations in modern life. While individuals draw from cultural resources to assist them in understanding their lives, they also through their actions remake culture, creating social change. In other words, culture does not stay stagnant for Swidler (1986) and individuals are not simply governed by cultural norms, morals and values. Rather, individuals have agency, and will selectively use tools to assist them in meaning-making, in active ways. From this perspective, culture can be a driving force for social change (not always in positive directions) and as you will see, cultural sociologists like Jeffery Alexander and Philip Smith (2018), argue

that culture is an independent variable, rather than a dependent one. For instance, Smith (2008) in his book on punishment argues that it is culture, not the nation-state and not disciplinary expertise, that pushes for change in punitive systems. This is contrary to such arguments from others such as Michel Foucault (1975).

**Figure**. Close up photo of colour pencils by Marcus Spiske is licensed by Unsplash

Of course, culture can also denote the artifacts and activities that people participate in across society. This is where we can distinguish potentially between classes, or status (see prior chapter), where individuals from higher classes might participate in '**high culture**' whereas others in '**low culture**'. Critical theorists (and Marxists) Adorno and Horkheimer (1997) in their examination of the *Culture Industry* critique cultural life by arguing that our obsession with things (material objects and commodities) take us away from authentic matters such as our human condition or social relations (Woodward, 2007). In particular, the culture industries no longer serve to produce social good or challenge status quo thinking. Rather, as they argue, it serves only capitalism – and profit. Furthermore, the cultural industries distract people away from understanding and challenging the exploited nature of capitalism. For these theorists, and others who formed what is known as the Frankfurt School, culture industries, along with consumerism, serve only to uphold capitalism and repress revolutionary potential.

As alluded to above, the link between our culture and who we are as 'selves' is important in sociological analysis. Instead of discussing the 'self', which philosophers tend to focus on, sociologists often use the term **identity**. **Identity** refers in principle to the complex make-up of who we and others think we are. Identity emerges from our socialisation throughout our youth, but also in our relations to culture, context, other people and of course, biological, psychological, and genetic make-up (though sociologists have avoided these last three matters – see below). The difficulty we face when discussing identities is to balance issues like genetics, with the broader environmental contexts that impact who we are as people. This is difficult to assess at times, but sociologists try to explore the way social interaction occurs, and how this impacts our understanding of who we are, and the roles we play in everyday life.

Most sociological theorists are interested in identities, but a group of American scholars known as the symbolic interactionists that included significant names such as George Herbert Mead (1963-1931), Herbert Blumer (1900-1987), Erving Goffman (1922-1982), Harold Garfinkle (1917-2011), Robert Park (1864-1944) and pioneer female criminologist Ruth Shonie Cavan (1896-1993). Fundamental to the development of this approach was Mead who argued that our experiences as individuals living in everyday life are essentially social. In other words, every day, you and I engage with others, humans and non-humans, which have symbolic meaning to us. We communicate with each other, share interactions with

one another, and adopt different roles in each context because of this interaction we share. We will explore this in more detail below in the chapter.

Of course, identities are made up of different layers of sociological constructs from gender (see chapter on gender), ethnicities (see chapter on ethnicity), class (see chapter on class) and ideologies (see chapter on political sociology). In this contemporary age where social media is so prevalent, identities are challenged daily by digital data and our interactions with one another online (see chapter on digital sociology). Generally, sociologists tend to agree that modern life has become less governed and structured by traditional norms and values, as well as institutions. British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) for instance argues in his seminal work *Modernity and Self-Identity*, that identities are freer than ever before. We have become, for Giddens (1991), critical of past traditional institutional norms, such as marriage, and subsequently make our own lifestyle choices accordingly. The choices we make impact who we are, and for Giddens (1991), individuals in modernity now create their life biographies or narratives via them. While we are freer than ever to make these decisions, they come also with risks. While in the past in traditional premodern societies, your choices such as occupation were more or less made for you, in late modern societies your choices are open, but also laden with risks of failure. Thus, people become **reflexive**, examining carefully the choices available to them, weighing up options, and importantly, consulting widely with different expertise before making a choice (see also Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2005). For someone like Giddens (1991), but also Bauman (2005) and Beck (1992), we have no option but to make lifestyle choices now and face the consequences of our choices without the support of traditional institutions and the state.

There is only so much space that we can dedicate to all these ideas. At the end of the chapter, there is a list of recommended readings that may prove useful if you want to know more about concepts and ideas not covered below. However, what follows is a curation of ideas/theories/concepts on the topics of culture and identity. We focus here specifically on the development of the sub-disciplinary area of cultural sociology through Emile Durkheim's initial work on religion, the more bleak approaches to culture via Georg Simmel and Max Weber, and the symbolic interactionist approach to identity via social interaction. As noted already, most of the chapters that follow this delve into other sociological concerns of 'identity' and 'culture', including questions of gender, race/ethnicity, global politics, deviancy and crime, and our ever-growing digital lives.

## Cultural Sociology: Durkheim and Beyond

One of the most pivotal thinkers you will hear about in most sociology textbooks is that of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858-1917). Durkheim is considered to be the father of French sociology and also has been labelled as one of the most important figureheads in the development of the discipline generally. Often, the Frenchman is attributed to the school of thought known as '**functionalism**'. However, Durkheim had a significant impact on the development of a sociology that is attuned to the question of culture, and the influence that it has on social change or cohesion.

Influenced by a number of thinkers including Auguste Comte, Durkheim initially started his sociology by exploring and examining society from a macro perspective (Turner et al., 2007, p. 279). This is evident especially in the widely cited (and taught!) debates he had through *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893/1964) where Durkheim laid out his concern for the transformation of the organisation of the social. In particular, Durkheim (1893/2013) was worried about how integrated individuals would feel in a society that was shifting dramatically into diversified roles and expectations. In short, Durkheim (1893/2013) emphasised the need to understand how to keep people socially integrated, in an increasingly individualised society. As Turner et al. (2007) suggest, it is this concern that underpinned Durkheim's work and influenced others right up until today.

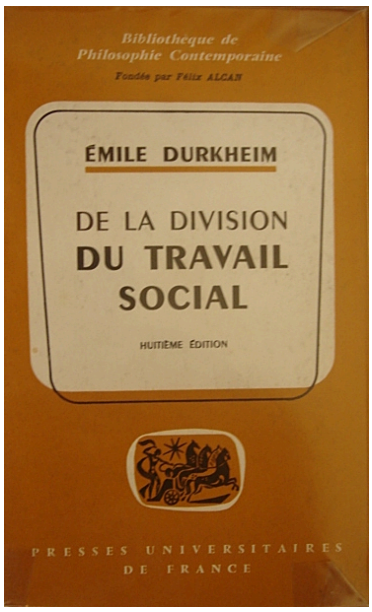


**Figure**. Cover of the French edition of the Division of Labor in Society by heurtelions is used under a CC BY-SA licence

Three major points need to be made here to provide the foundation for Durkheim's later and more influential work on religion in relation to culture. Firstly, Durkheim (1893/2013) emphasised the importance of collective values, ideas and norms in his work, labelling this the '**collective consciouness** or 'collective representations'. We can see this, in his words, as "the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society forms a determinate system with a life of its own. It can be termed the collective or common consciousness" (Durkheim, 1893/2013, p. 63). We might prefer here to term this 'culture' – as culture holds all of our collective values, ideas, norms and expectations of which we ascribe to. As individuals, we both add to this through our actions, but also are constrained by it. For instance, consider an everyday life norm such as civility and good manners. There is a cultural expectation placed upon us to say 'please' and 'thank you', while we also hold others to account in this regard as well. This is the collective consciousness, for Durkheim (1893/2013), in action.

Secondly, Durkheim (1893/2013) argued that **modernity** led to the transition of society from what he called mechanical to organic social solidarity. Premodern societies were often characterised by their small community/communal setting, often bound together by kinship ties, well-defined roles, and importantly, socially defined by strong collective conscience – what he terms **mechanical solidarity**. Importantly, societies like these are often deeply religious, with a collective commitment to sacred values and collective worship. Conversely, contemporary societies, such as big cities that expanded greatly through early modernity, were characterised by large-scale populations, bound together by diverse and impersonal ties (especially through exchange in a capitalist market), and weaker collective consciousnesses – what he terms **organic solidarity**. Unlike mechanical solidarity, societies that evolve in this state tend to be secular or hold to religions that are largely individualised (in other words, emphasise individual worship, rather than collective worship).

Thirdly, Durkheim (1893/2013) envisioned the transition into organic solidarity as somewhat inevitable for Western societies like France. This raised concerns for Durkheim that individuals would fall into

'**anomie**'. This refers to the transition of society to one that emphasises the individual, drawing them away from the collective, towards their own interests, their own values, their own ambitions, and so on (Lukes, 1973). This was a concern for Durkheim (1893/2013) for individuals would become less integrated, deeply isolated, and exposed to the crushing nature of **capitalism** and the industrialisation of life. Furthermore, and somewhat like Marx and Engels, Durkheim (1893/2013) thought that it would inevitably lead to social unrest and potential revolutions. Thus, it could be argued that Durkheim's (1893/2013) fundamental concern was how modernity was turning people into individuals who felt no connection to their society, or culture.

This anxiety towards the future of modern society led Durkheim (1912/1995) to analyse religions across societies considered premodern in his work entitled *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Using 'totemic' cultures from some of the Aboriginal nations of Australia, Durkheim (1912/1995) attempted to understand what were the building blocks of religious/spiritual life, in places that still represented **mechanical solidarity**. It is important to note, that the Frenchman never undertook ethnographic work in any of his work. Rather in this work, Durkheim (1912/1995) relied on the ethnographies of others like Baldwin Spencer and Francis Gillen's *The Native tribes of Central Australia* (1899). Subsequently, there are errors that we are aware of now in contemporary society including the criticism that trying to find the roots of religion in Indigenous Australians was nonsensical. For Geertz (1973), this was Durkheim trying to impose his already established heuristic onto a people who the theory did not really fit. Nevertheless, Durkheim's (1912/1995) theory has had a significant impact on both anthropology and sociology since publication.

**Figure**. Emile Durkheim is in the Public Domain, CC0

For Durkheim (1912/1995) religion is fundamentally based on the **sacred**, and the opposition this has to the **profane**. The world for him is divided between these two poles – the sacred, being those things, ideas or beings which society attributes "virtues and powers" to, and the profane, being the everyday world around which the sacred requires protection from (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 34). The sacred can be anything for Durkheim (1912/1995, p. 35), "a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything", even people. What is important for him is less the item of interest, but rather the power the item has to a community or society because of the collective valuation they place on it. These sacred things/beings, importantly for him, must be protected from the defilement of everyday life, otherwise it would lose that value. Following this dichotomy of the sacred and profane, Durkheim (1912/1995, p. 44) arrived at the conclusion that religion, "is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, thing set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into a one single moral community called a Church, and all those who adhere to them". In all religions, you will find the sacred for him – around which is organised worship, rituals, and rites.

Important to Durkheim (1912/1995) is less the sacred objects themselves, and more the interactions that occur around them. The organisation of people, coming together in a collective revelry, ritualistic worship and even a "state of exaltation" (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 220). He saw religion as enacting a type of force that enabled people to feel that they belonged to something larger than themselves, which would ultimately achieve two main points. One it would allow people to feel connected and integrated into a wider community whole, and second, it would provide a place for the reinforcing of commitment to the morals and values of the collective. In short, religion allowed people to feel like they belonged to larger than themselves – and then recommit to a wider culture.

For Durkheim (1912/1995), the building blocks of religion might hold the secret to overcoming the ills of modernity. Religion for him would not survive in a secular modernity – much like what Marx and Engels argued. However, instead a new 'sacred' might be created or appear that allows similar collective membership and belonging. He saw, importantly, that it might well be the state and nation that take the place of religion – creating sacredness organised around what it means to belong to the country/culture. Consider the national flags that adorn our public places, or the flags that represent our culture/ethnicity. These in particular provide a sense of identity, along with organising us into collectives and at times, are sacred in that we perform rituals under them such as singing the national anthem. In some cases, it is a significantly immoral thing to desecrate the flag, even to the point of imprisonment in some nation-states. Or consider the sacred power of the emblem for a sports team. Importantly here, the crest of your favourite sport's team identifies you as one of the fans, but also separates you from other fans of other clubs. This is then intimately tied to your identity.

Durkheim's students continued to work on the sacred alongside him and well after his death in 1917, focusing on the nature of these imaginative templates in cultural life. For instance, Henri Hubert (1905/1999), researched the nature of sacred times cut off in the calendar of everyday life such as Christmas or other religious festivals that served to bring people together in collectives. Durkheim's own nephew Marcel Mauss (1906/2013) also examined the nature of seasons for Inuit people showing that wintertime in particular was full of certain intense religiosity and important taboos. He also is famous for his work on the nature of gift-giving, showing that the practice of reciprocal gift-giving as a form of cultural exchange is not limited to Western societies (Mauss, 1925/1990) which has had a tremendous impact on anthropology. Robert Hertz (1909/2009) examined how in rituals, the right hand would often be the one used, whereas the left would be considered the evil, or profane. Hertz (1909/2013) also emphasised the dual nature of the sacred, being both something that can inspire and create collective emotional energy, but also horrify and distress creating tension and anxiety. Anthropologist Mary Douglas' (1966/2003) masterpiece *Purity and Danger* follows a similar trend in the analysis of society broadly through the twin poles of purity and pollution. For her, tracing the meanings of dirt to different societies, what is considered clean and unclean is a matter of cultural context – and laws/taboos/norms around these were cultural forms of boundaries. What is right, what is wrong, what is clean, what is unclean – are all the result of wider cultural ideas and values contextualised by place and time.

Since Durkheim's (1912/1995) engagement with the sacred as a concept, there has been significant work

across the social sciences grappling with how it operates in modern culture. Riley (2010) illustrates in his work that the intellectual *habitus* built into modern intellectual life, especially in France, of researching the sacred, the profane, rituals and taboos, led major theoretical works from George Bataille, Jean Baudrillard, and even Michel Foucault. However, it is within cultural sociology today that we see the impact of Durkheim (1912/1995) more acutely.

There is a division between those who study culture in sociology and those who are cultural sociologists. Sociologists of culture examine aspects of our modern lives that are shaped, produced or altered as a result of outside forces. For instance, Max Weber's **rationalisation** thesis argued that modern cultural practices, such as art or music, were being heavily routinised and disenchanted as rules or norms on how to do it appear, to be efficient, but also effective in profit making. Cultural sociologists on the other hand argue that society, and the institutions/structures within them, are at their core cultural. The 'new' Durkheimians such as Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith (2018) construct a program of cultural sociology that envisions cultural codes, values, ideals, and imaginative life, as a collective force on structures in our society. In other words, culture is independent, it enables us to make meaning of the world, experience it, and at times change it. Conducting analysis on culture requires unpacking the imaginative templates, like the sacred and the profane, impure or pure, good and evil, that culture uses to make sense of the world around it, but also at times govern or change it.

Several scholars have emerged in sociology down here in the south organised under this umbrella. For instance, Brad West (2022) unpacks the nature of Australian and New Zealand tourism to Gallipoli (the site of one of the first conflicts in World War One for Australian and New Zealand troops – ANZACS) as a form of cultural pilgrimage embedded with deep meaning. He argues that these trips are symbolic, and when amongst the sites of war at the place of Gallipoli, individuals are collectively engaging in the sacred through ritual. Osbaldiston and Petray (2011) also argue that these are places where people experience both the positive affirmation of the sacred, but also the negative horrors of it when confronted with symbols of death. Others such as Ian Woodward (2007) spend time locating the cultural force that we give to objects and the cultures that form around them such as we can see in vinyl record collecting today (Bartmanski & Woodward, 2018). Margaret Gibson (2008) further examines the ways objects of the dead, surround us personally and are invested with significant value, and power, long after people have passed away.

Important to cultural sociology then is a collective narrative or theme, that underlines our cultures which produces agreement on certain things, but also governs behaviour. For instance, Philip Smith (1999) shows in his paper on place, how cultural framing of certain places can impact how one behaves when in that area. In some cases, places might have a sacred quality to them, which encourages a reverent tone, or a quiet solemn approach.

🛠 Sociological Tool Kit: Sacred

For instance, walking to the Pool of Reflection in the War Memorial in Canberra, an individual must walk past the names of fallen men and women in combat. The cultural narrative here is one of reverence for those passed. What

do you think would happen to someone who violated these norms? For Smith (1999) though, there are other places too – ones that horrify and disgust us creating rituals of destruction or avoidance. There are also places that encourage the unshackling of restraints where morals are loosened – such as a casino. Here, places are defined by 'letting loose' – such as Las Vegas. As you can see, however, cultural sociology today tends to examine how cultural templates or imaginations such as the sacred, exist and influence society today.

**places? Mundane spaces? Profane places?**

Smith (1999) argues that culture positions certain places as 'sacred' which invokes a change of behaviour and emotion in a person that can quiet the breathing, slow you down, and make you encounter 'reverence'. He also argues there are places that disgust or horrify us – and can create rituals of avoidance or even destruction. All these things sit separate from mundane spaces that exist in everyday life. Can you think of any places that cultural has turned into 'sacred'? or 'profane'? What background or narratives exist that have turned these places from mundane ones into what they are today?

## The Rationalisation, Disenchantment, and Tragedy of Modern Culture?

One of the figureheads of sociology that you will hear mentioned a lot in this text and in others is that of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920). Best known for his approach to sociology through the '**interpretivist**' tradition (see chapter on methods), Weber's sociology was founded on an approach that tried to examine society from an individual standpoint. In particular, unlike Durkheim and others, Weber's approach to sociology was one which rejected the positivist approaches to research. Instead, he argued that understanding modern life could only be achieved by interpreting individual social actions. The individual becomes both an actor but also a reflection of the society that they live within.

Aside from his methodological positions, Weber (1919/2012) also produced some of the most important sociological theories of modernity, including his concept of **rationalisation** and **disenchantment**. Put simply, Weber argued that in premodern life, before the **enlightenment** period and especially before the scientific advancement of knowledge, societies or communities acted in accordance to myth, religious or spiritual information. Life in this state, for him, presented to people a mystical reason for different events, but also provided life with a certain unknown quality with attribution for it given to the gods or divine above. For instance, if a natural disaster struck, this was the work of the gods in divine punishment or discipline of their people. As such, life had a mystical quality that could not be weighed, measured or understood. God's ways are mysterious, as the biblical saying goes.

For Weber (1919/2012) the period of Enlightenment advanced scientific knowledge significantly, creating rational knowledge about the world that we live in. Things could be measured, understood, and unpacked scientifically – also known as rationalisation and disenchantment for him. From his perspective, science is like the metaphor of Pandora's box. Once opened, the world as mysterious, unknown and mythical would never again be recaptured, and life would increasingly be dominated by the rational knowledges. In his famed lecture *Science as a vocation*, he argues the following:

Max Weber, 1894 is in the Public Domain, CC0

> It is the fate of our age – with the rationalisation, the intellectualisation and, above all, the disenchantment peculiar to it – that precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have withdrawn from the public sphere, either in the realm of mystical life in a world beyond the real one or into the fraternity of personal relations between individuals. (Weber, 1919/2012, p. 352)

Modernity, and the modern push for rational ways of understanding life, meant that not just the sciences, but all spheres of modern life would become rationalised eventually. Weber (1905/2002, p. 13) described the culture that developed as a result as a hard "immutable shell" in which individuals are "obliged to live". Everything is subjected to rationalisation. Life for him has become cold, calculating, intellectualised and reasoned. Not only does this extend to the most obvious places, such as the economic world where goals can be achieved through heavy statistical calculation, but also for Weber across cultural life, the aesthetic, the political and even the romantic. The point for him is that in each area of culture, we develop a strong understanding of how to do this most effectively, and efficiently, to achieve goals. Consider dating in the contemporary age as an example. Dating you could argue once was achieved through luck, opportunity, or chance. Love was conceived of, almost as mystical. However, dating services and apps, via scientifically measured and constructed algorithms, attempt through probability to match people with those who, statistically speaking, will lead to a successful relationship. What does this do to romance? For Weber, it reduces it rationally, removing the irrational from the equation perhaps.

For Weber (1919/2012, p. 348) though, the more widespread and deeply embedded this process of disenchantment happens, the more likely it is that people will also seek out the *irrational*. As Barbara Adam (2009, p. 11) describes it, rationalisation means we yearn for "spiritual fulfilment, sublime values, and in the most general sense, all that escapes the iron grip of rationality in the social world". It also meant for Weber an increase in an appreciation for those leaders who might buck the 'status quo' through **charisma** in modern politics (see political sociology

🔍**Look Closer:** Liquid love? Dating apps, sex, relationships and the digital transformation of intimacy (Hobbs et al., 2016)

Dating apps have become

commonplace now in the world of romance and intimacy. Not to mention also the impact of social media on how we find intimate partners, or future relations. In this paper, Hobbs et al. (2016) examine this issue via surveys with people in Australia. Some major findings from their work are as follows;

- Dating apps provide a sense of more 'romantic and relationship possibilities' for people today than prior generations.
- Some participants felt that they were 'missing out' as they felt that only attractive people could benefit from dating apps.
- Others argued that dating apps turn people into 'commodities' to be swiped left or right.
- However, most of the participants felt dating apps increased their potential to find dates, lovers and life partners.

Weber, as we have seen, would argue this is clearly rationalisation in effect,

chapter). In short, as life grows ever more calculative, and in some respects predictable, individuals will seek out escape within cultural life. The interesting question for us might be whether that does exist in our contemporary culture today? What areas of cultural life do you see us seeking out for the 'irrational' or the 'sublime'?

American sociologist George Ritzer (2010; 2011) throughout his career adapts Weber's thinking through his analysis of modern society. Initially in his book *The McDonaldisation of Society*, Ritzer (2011) argues that our institutions, including our cultural life, are standardised, predictable, efficient, and controlled. Ritzer (2011) bases his theory on the organisation and production cycles found in McDonalds. He contends that this giant food chain operates on the principles of rationality that Weber described. Everything is standardised in McDonalds, managed and controlled with precision, to produce food in the most efficient, quick, and cost-efficient manner. Additionally, the fast-food chain grew successfully across America, and the world, creating a standardised experience for all. In short, you can enter any McDonalds and expect some of the same food on the menu. Ritzer (2011) argues that this reflects cultural life generally as well. Art, literature, movies, sport, leisure and other forms of our culture are heavily standardised, and predictable, based on efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Above all, the corporations and businesses that operate within our cultural life know what 'sells', and will produce commodities, artifacts and productions based on this knowledge. We might ask if Ritzer (2011) is right – does our cultural life seem to follow the same model of a McDonalds? Does our cultural life seem overly predictable and standardised? Consider movies for instance. Are they mostly predictable today?

Ritzer (2010) also examines our attempt to re-enchant our culture through the spectacle of consumption. Using examples like Las Vegas, the shopping centre, sports stadiums, universities, and tourist locations, Ritzer (2010) argues that the owners and businesses in these places create magical worlds and spectacles to construct what he calls

"cathedrals of consumption". Take for example the shopping centre, which is fundamentally a place for consumption, or the buying of goods and services. Ritzer (2010) contends that these are now quasi-religious places, where we gather not just to shop, but also to eat food, watch movies, enjoy entertainment, and have fun. Also, these places create landscapes within to blur boundaries between the real and the unreal – for instance the building of mini eco-systems including trees and ponds (coupled with fish!) inside. The shopping centre is therefore a place of experience, not just to consumption. For Ritzer (2010) this is just one example where consumerism attempts to re-enchant life with the spectacle. However, the spectacle is also only designed to do one thing, to keep you inside the walls of the place, and to keep you consuming.

removing the elements of chance or luck. Is that a bad thing in your estimation though? What other benefits come from dating apps?

**Figure**. Shopping Center in Melbourne by Heidi Fin is licensed by Unsplash

Not all agree with Weber and others like him, however. Social theorist Jane Bennett (2001) argues in her work *The Enchantment of Modern Life* that there is still much that is wonderful in a world that has been made 'known' by science. She argues that modern life is full of enchantment and the unknown – arguing especially that in the sciences, wonder on how organisms work, even the most mundane things, is deeply meaningful, enlightening and enchanting. This also includes of course, some of the bigger questions that we have around the nature of our universe, and the sublime feelings that come from knowledge of how large and expansive it is. Furthermore, Bennett (2001) contends that to be ethical in a modern world, we need these experiences of enchantment in order to create empathy, generosity and produce deeper meaning in our lives. What do you think of her argument and that of Weber's? Is there wonder and enchantment still in our cultural life? Or is the world increasingly predictable, rational, efficient, and calculable?

Another name you will hear often in sociology is that of the German sociologist and contemporary of Weber, Georg Simmel (1858-1918). Simmel was much less recognised than his peers however, mostly due to the essayistic style of his work and metaphysical approach to sociology which covered everything from the bridge, the door, the meal, the adventure through to larger deliberations on economic life in his book *The Philosophy of Money*. However, Simmel's work on culture follows a similar trajectory as Weber in that he foresaw concerns within the direction of modernity. In particular, Simmel (1991) argued that culture can be divided into two areas, *objective* and *subjective*. Objective culture, represented as the cultural forms, institutions and artifacts in our society generally – for instance, the technologies, arts, religions, government, norms and so on. Simmel (1991) argued that we use these as obligatory points through which

we cultivate ourselves – and make sense of our place in the world. Take for instance literature or the arts, used, he would argue, to reflect on who we are as individuals, but also our place within the wider culture. For Simmel (1991), objective culture like this is important for a society to grow and develop – but also give a sense of self and connection to individuals – which he describes as our subjective culture.

**Figure**. Georg Simmel by unknown is in the Public Domain

The 'tragedy' of modern life for Simmel (1991) however is that modern objective culture has grown too large, and has become separated from the needs of subjective culture (us). He argued that objective culture has become "independent" imposing its "content and pace of development on individuals, regardless of or even contrary to the demands that these individuals ought to make for the sake of their own improvement, that is the acquisition of culture" (Simmel, 1991, p. 91). The objective cultural world has developed its own logic, and reason for being, independent of the need to produce meaning or cultivate individuals in society. However, these industries demand of society that they know of them, engage with them and consume them. In other words, objective culture has dominated cultural life to the point that these things, institutions, and industries dictate individuals on how to live (Pyyhtinen, 2018, p. 119). As Pyyhtinen (2018) illustrates, consider how much fashion and other 'stylistic' industries dictate how we consume but also dress ourselves and thus create our identities. Or consider how movies or music have dominated our cultural lives, no longer serving to increase understanding, but rather simply existing to make money. For Simmel (1991), the tragedy in all this is that we lose our place for cultivation, and become overwhelmed by objective culture. This includes not simply culture industries like movies, but also bureaucracies, governments, institutions, and so on.

Later in his life, Simmel (2010) turned towards trying to understand life generally in relation to culture and how individuals develop their ethics or 'ought' on how to live. Simmel (2010) developed a complicated approach to this. However, we simplify it as a constant negotiation between our life experiences and our personal reflections. In other words, the world that we inhabit and the relations we have with others (throughout our lives), create the foundation for what we feel life 'ought' to be (Simmel, 2010). Subsequently, there is no overarching objective 'truth' that emanates from culture from above (contrary to Durkheim), rather our own personal ethics on, for instance, the 'good life', emerges through a constant negotiation, reflection and experience of everyday life with others. Thus, our understanding of what we 'ought' to be thinking, feeling and doing is in constant flux – always changing with our relationships around us, impacting on our choices and how we understand and make meaning. This is what we call in sociology 'relational', which effectively means that much of our social, cultural and individual lives is shaped by the experiences and relations we have with others. This approach of Simmel's in some ways is the foundation of another group of theorists called the symbolic interactionists.

🔍 **Look Closer:** Simmel and city life

Following the theme of the overtaking of objective culture over subjective life for Simmel, is the famous essay he wrote in 1903 entitled 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'. In this highly insightful essay, Simmel (1991) argues the following:

**Figure**. Flinders Street Station, Melbourne by Matt Zhang, is licensed by Unsplash

- In large cities, people become socially reserved, not wanting to talk to others and keeping largely to themselves
- People also become 'blase', or dulled, to the world around them, as the cities assault their senses with lights, sounds and smells.
- The city is the home of capitalism, and as such is a vibrant, large commercial hub, creating a mammoth amount of cultural artifacts – this overwhelms the individual as stated above.
- The city allows for people to hide away, and not be too exposed – one can become part of the crowd by dressing similarly and not standing out.
- However, unlike the country or rural places, city folk do not have as much connection to one another. He infamously argued that people in the city do not even know their neighbours' faces, let alone their names.
- However, unlike the country, people in the cities do not have their everyday lives constantly monitored or gossiped about, unlike those in smaller places.

What do you think? Does the city overwhelm us and make us socially reserved and blasé? What differences, if any, do you see between culture in the city versus culture in regional or rural towns in Australia or New Zealand?

## Symbolic Interactionism – the Self and Beyond

Hopefully, by now you can see that someone like Durkheim imagines culture as a force that gives meaning but also constrains from the top down and can be studied accordingly, whereas Weber and Simmel saw the world as far too complicated for that, arguing that culture can be seen in individuals, and how they negotiate and reflect on the world around them. This division can be seen in the methodology of

**positivism** vs **interpretivism** which you will encounter in the next chapter. However, the idea that society and culture are built from the ground up (not the top down), is the foundation of the works of the **symbolic interactionists**. In particular, how we come to understand who we are as people, and our identities, is for this group of scholars a constant ongoing development through our interaction with groups, people, ideas and thoughts. In what follows we unpack this idea further, focusing instead on the notion of identity and how we all cobble this together in the contemporary world.

The founder of symbolic interactionism is generally considered to be the American philosopher and sociologist George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) who emerged from a line of thinkers known as 'pragmatists' (along with scholars like John Dewey (1859-1952), Charles Peirce (1839-1914) and Jane Addams (1860-1935). Fundamental to pragmatics is the contention that individuals encounter symbols, language, people and ideas in everyday life, which they engage with, reflect on, and think through, that has influence on their actions/ideas. Furthermore, pragmatists consider that humans do have agency in their relationship to surrounds (including the economy contrary to Marx), and can influence the direction of society generally. Jane Addams in particular engaged positively with this idea, arguing for social change through the direct action of people into democratic processes – attempting to combine theory into action. She became, as a result, instrumental in the women's suffrage movement in the early 1900s. For others like Peirce (cited in Turner et al., 2007, p. 322), pragmatism required interpretations on how people encounter language, symbols and relations that caused them to "self-control". In any account, the point of this style of thinking is to study on-the-ground impacts, consider that humans can create change, and accept that people are also rational human beings who will interpret according to logic and reason.

**Figure**. Jane Addams by Bain News Services is in the Public Domain

Some of the most important contributions of Mead (1934/1972) come in his book *Mind, Self and Society* in the areas of the mind, symbols and role-taking. Firstly, the mind for Mead (1934/1972) exists only due to the interaction that we have in our everyday lives and within different contexts. He argues that "we must regard mind, then, arising and developing within the social process, within the empirical matrix of social interactions", where the individual cannot be conceived of as, "in isolation from other individuals" (Mead, 1934/1972, p. 133). In other words, the mind does not exist alone, it comes to being through social relations we have. While the brain of course exists in isolation biologically, the behaviours we learn, experience, interpret and produce meaning through, happen because of our relations with others.

These, however, are importantly not simply language. We arrange our social relations through a range of verbal and non-verbal communication including gestures, symbols, certain words, sounds and the responses of those who are receiving them. Unlike animals who all gesture to one another to display certain emotions (for instance consider a cat growling and hissing to another cat), humans for Mead (1934/1972) are more complex and encode shared understanding of symbols in word and gesture. This can only exist for him based on role-taking. A person receiving the symbolic gesture can understand it only because they are able to place themselves (even unconsciously) in the role of the other person. For example, if a lecturer comes to class and slams his books onto the table, shaking his head and peering at his students with narrowed eyes and a frown, it does not require explaining to the students how he is feeling. This is not an automated response though for the students encoded into their biology. Rather, this exists for Mead (1934/1972) only because we share an understanding culturally of what that gesture means, and students understand the lecturer's role, and can attribute actions based on that role. Symbolically, how we act and react to others is a form of culture, that exists in the everyday where we share meaning and understanding of each other, even strangers.

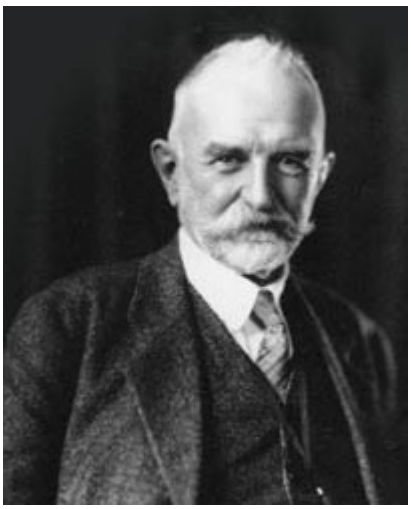

**Figure**. George Herbert Mead by unknown is in the Public Domain

Role-taking, and understanding, feeds directly into our understanding of our 'selves' or identity for Mead (1934/1972). In particular, there are two aspects of the self that needs to be understood here – firstly the 'me' which is your understanding and relation of yourself in different roles (eg. student/teacher above) and secondly 'I' which is your own understanding of who you are as a person. This latter part of your self emerges in accordance to the relations you have with other people. This includes the way they respond to your behaviour and what your reactions are to them. For instance, you might come to class and start to behave jokingly in front of other students, causing them to laugh, and eventually come to know you as 'funny'. This identity that they have is cast upon you, changing their behaviour, but also causing you to perhaps adopt the role of the 'funny' person from hereon. Your actions and the positive support of them from the others (such as laughing at your jokes), will only enhance your identity further. For Mead (1934/1972) this is not something you just acquire overnight however. Throughout your life, your self-concept is developed within the initial stages of childhood where you learn roles and notions of the self, and through to later life as a child and teenager where you learn more complex ideas of who you are. This then extends throughout your life as you constantly shape and reshape your identity based on new roles and new responses to behaviour from others.

Mead's (1934/1972) influence extended to the scholarship of his student Herbert Blumer (1900-1987). Blumer (1969) developed Mead's work further into a school of thought, symbolic interactionism, constructing methodological and theoretical premises to this form of sociology. There are effectively three of these as follows;

1. Humans act/react on the basis of meanings which they give to different objects, events or people. In other words, people do not simply act in some form of biological determinism. We are social creatures, and our actions are not simply automated through some form of unconscious programming (like animals).
2. Meaning is constructed or derived from the interaction that individuals have with others. In other words, meaning is not fixed forever, but changes accordingly through action and reaction over time. Norms of behaviour are therefore, never 'normal' or fixed, but rather shaped according to the actions and reactions of people in interaction with one another.
3. Meanings are understood, and modified, through an interpretive process undertaken by the individual with agency. People do not simply make sense of the world around them through norms created for them, but negotiate these according to different ideas and values. People are indeed creative, and not simply conditioned to act certain ways by society or culture (as Durkheim might contest). We reflect, ponder, engage, reject and question meaning all the time. These actions (as per premise 2) impact how we see the world, and can create social change.

We can simplify this for you with an example. Imagine you are queuing up with your friend to get some food at a cafe. You line up behind others ahead of you until someone walks directly up to the cash register and starts to order food. The other people in the queue get annoyed and whisper to themselves, but no one says anything. Your friend turns to you and says something derogatory about the person who jumped ahead. You nod in agreement. What sorts of symbolic norms are being shared amongst the people in the queue? What sorts of gestures do they have in common in shared understanding? How would you react? Can you think of any other shared interactions like this where the premises of Blumer (1969) can be used to analyse them?

**Figure**. People lining up for restaurant service by Michał Parzuchowski is licensed by Unsplash

Contrary to mainstream sociology of his day, but also of the past sociologists like Durkheim, Blumer (1969) saw sociology's main task is to understand that society, culture and the self, are not simply fixed. Rather, through an ongoing process of interaction, interpretation and reflection, these things are constantly in flux. People are always interacting, creating meaning, sharing that meaning, and at times challenging those meanings creating new ideas, values and norms. The self, or your identity, is never completed and is always developing as you are introduced to new roles, new situations and as such new meanings of who you are as a person. We are not simply products of culture, but rather, agents with agency with creative potential – but acting with others in a constantly changing culture.

Perhaps one of the more common names you will hear associated with this school of thought is that

of Erving Goffman (1922-1982). Importantly, Goffman (1959/2002) coined the term 'dramaturgical sociology' in his now well-cited book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which, to a degree, reflects the great metaphor from Shakespeare 'all the world is a theatre'. Goffman, like the other symbolic interactionists, focused his work on the deeper underlying meaning that exists in life at the everyday level. While the world is not a theatre in the explicit sense for him, our everyday lives and interactions are far more like a play than what we might admit. As such, your notion of who you are, your identity, emerges from the roles you play in life, and the 'performances' which you give in public life (and private perhaps too).

Important for Goffman (1959/2002) is that notion of the role. Like an actor or actress, we all play different parts in the everyday. With those roles come certain norms, expectations, ideals, and traits which, like a performer, require the individual to adopt or adapt in order to 'look the part'. For instance, as a lecturer at a university, there are certain traits and norms that come with the role. That includes how to dress, act, behave, emotions and even the mannerisms that one uses when teaching. These things have to be done properly, otherwise, the audience (the students) will not believe the authenticity of the lecturer, and perhaps reject them altogether. Think about all the roles you play in everyday life – what sorts of norms, even dress standards, do you think are required to perform them?

Watch this short presentation [1:58] on Goffman's 'performed self' for a brief explainer of his theory.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=890#oembed-1*

For Goffman (1959/2002), the action of performing the role, or in other words your identity, is not a one-way communication, as the above video makes clear. Rather, just like being on stage as a performer, your success in convincing people of your performance is reliant on audience participation, and their response to you. Goffman (1959/2002) argues that if the audience does not believe, or does not accept your performance, they will not accept you or be influenced by you (very important in politics), and may even provide negative responses (think of audiences booing for instance). He also argues (1959/2002, p. 17) that the performer themselves needs to be convinced of the "impression of reality" – in other words, you need to be convinced yourself that you are suited to the role. When you and the audience have favourable communication verbally and non-verbally to one another, your identity (in that role) and your sense of self is affirmed. If the communicative act/performance breaks down, then your identity in that role is challenged or maybe even rejected. As an example, let me (the author) share an experience. When I first started lecturing as a casual staff member, I taught a business class. I came from a humanities and social science background where people dressed a little more casually than most. When I entered the class to tutor for the first time in an evening class, I noticed that most of the people were professionals, dressed in office attire, having come from their work. One of the members of the class said to me from the outset, 'We did

not think you were the teacher but a student in the wrong class!' The comment made me feel like I was not suited to the role – and next week I showed up in office attire!

**Figure**. Crowd at lecture by Miguel Henriques is licensed by Unsplash

Goffman (1959/2002) admits that not *all* the world is a stage though. We do perform our roles mostly publicly or amongst others, following rules, norms and expectations. Metaphorically, this is what Goffman (1959/2002) calls the 'front stage'. However, Goffman (1959/2002) also refers, to the 'backstage' where people can loosen themselves from the roles of everyday life, and adopt different props, clothes, mannerisms and actions that would otherwise contradict their front-stage performances. They are also places where people prepare, away from the audience's eyes for their roles on the front stage. Simone de Beauvoir (1952/2023) for instance described the different activities that a woman has to go through in order to prepare herself for the front-stage performance of being a 'woman'. Importantly, the backstage is a place kept hidden from view. It contains both the secrets of the performance, but also, the potential for discrediting information about our public identities, that we seek to keep away from view. Unfortunately, the audience can at times discredit our identities, even when in view.

This might seem ultimately silly to think about, and maybe obvious. However, for someone like Goffman (1959), this playing of roles and the audience response is fundamental to how we live our lives and develop our identities. At times, we also live our identities according to the ideas or expectations that people have of our external traits or characteristics. Our ethnicities, gender, height, weight and so on, can be laden with norms or stereotypes about who we are by other groups/people. Howard Becker (1928-2023) in his work, described this phenomenon as 'labelling'. Becker (1963) argued that at times, we tend to view how people act or present themselves as deviant. Specifically, "whether a given act is deviant or not depends in part on the nature of the act [...] and in part what other people do about it" (Becker, 1963, p. 33). As such, there are no inherently 'deviant' people out there (remember symbolic interactionism rejects biological reasoning here), rather the process of labelling someone or some action as 'deviant' is founded in the relational. In other words, if a group of people collectively agree that something is deviant (or someone) they will declare it as such. Unfortunately for someone like Becker (1963), if someone is labelled deviant, they might adopt what he calls a deviant identity.

Goffman (1963/2009) takes this further by arguing that through dramaturgical analysis, we can see how the audience will carry with them certain ideas that will stigmatise certain people. For Goffman (1963) there are three general types of stigmas, physical, character and ethnicity or religion. Stigmas work to degrade someone's identity and sense of self in the interaction that exists between the performer and the audience. A stigma can limit someone's role, discrediting them immediately in the eyes of the audience, or worse still pre-empting their behaviour through certain degrading ideas. Stigmatisation involves reducing

the person to the traits that an audience identifies in them, and as a result, positions them as abnormal, an outsider, and even potentially, below human. Stigma can operate in various ways in our society and interactions with others, from the micro-level to the macro as we have seen throughout history with genocides. For Goffman (1963), it is just as important to recognise what stigmas are, as it is to understand how the stigmatised person responds. For him, some people may try and correct their identities, and overcome stigma. For others, they may adopt the stigma into their personality or sense of self and accentuate their differences. Furthermore, for others, their stigmas might lead to success in certain areas of life, but this only serves to reinforce stereotypes, and the person's identity.

Symbolic interactionism is a significant attempt in sociology's history to try and understand identity, and how they are constructed, not through macro cultural concepts (as Durkheim might argue), but rather as an emergent process of interaction. One of the criticisms of this approach is that it focuses too heavily at times on the micro, meaning that we can never say anything of substance to broader society (Alexander & Smith, 2018). Furthermore, and this is potentially a criticism of sociology, there is a heavy emphasis on identity, action and behaviour, being constituted through social interaction. This tends to deny other important contributors, including our genetic, biological, evolutionary, and neuroscience makeup (Kivisto, 2011). Symbolic interactionists dismiss these, and in some respects deny a more holistic view of human interaction. We know for instance, that certain responses we have to different social stimuli can be entirely automatic, according to neurological changes that are programmed into us. For instance, flight, fight or freeze responses to overly stressful or threatening situations are defence mechanisms developed via evolution (Donahue, 2020). We also know that emotions are deeply important to decision-making, and not all our reflections on who we are come from places of logic or reason (Stets, 2005). Regardless of these critiques, symbolic interactionism is a unique sociological approach to understanding identity in the contemporary world.

## In Summary

The key takeaways from this chapter are as follows:

- Culture and identity are hard to define as several theorists have defined them in different capacities.
- Durkheim contested that culture in a secular society could still have elements of the sacred and profane to increase feelings of collective togetherness.
- Weber argued that rationalisation, and disenchantment, were having a major impact on cultural life, standardising and rationalising all.
- Simmel argued that modern culture had grown too large, overwhelming the individual,

and disabling an ability to cultivate identities.

- The symbolic interactionists argue that our roles in everyday life define much of who we are as identities, and we reflect on these through our relations with others.
- Goffman's presentation of the self arguments, further this by arguing that we present ourselves in our roles, but need the audience to be convinced of our performance.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, there is too much to cover for one chapter on culture and identity. Below is a list of recommended resources to assist in developing knowledge of these two important concepts.

**Recommended Resources**

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# UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL RESEARCH METHODS AND PERSPECTIVES IN SOCIOLOGY

Nick Osbaldiston

The key goals of this chapter are to:

- understand the principles of research methodology in sociology
- explain the differences between positivism, interpretivism and constructivism
- understand the basics of quantitative and qualitative research
- explain the differences between quantitative and qualitative research
- examine the different approaches to methodology that exist in sociology
- consider the critiques of social science research via Indigenous worldviews.

## Overview

As a discipline, like any other social science, sociology undertakes research to explore and understand the phenomenon it studies. Traditionally, sociology uses either **quantitative** or **qualitative** research methods or a mixture of both in research projects. Central to understanding this are some fundamental differences in how sociologists, and philosophers, have understood the world around them, how we can best understand that world, and what methods we can use to get the best data. Unlike the natural sciences, sociologists cannot take their research subjects into the laboratory and conduct experiments on them (thankfully!). Rather, social research requires entering a social world full of complexity and utilises the best tools available to understand how people act, interpret, and engage within that. In recent times, however, sociology has expanded its approach to social research, engaging in diverse ways of knowing, including Indigenous perspectives in Australia and New Zealand. These matters will be discussed and considered in detail throughout this chapter.

# Foundations of Methodologies

A useful place to start our discussion of the different methods employed by sociologists is to examine the different perspectives that underpin these. While there are many perspectives including that of Indigenous ways of knowing that align with research methods, we will briefly focus here on roughly three areas, **positivism**, **interpretivism**, and **constructivism**. Each of these areas leads to different approaches to how we undertake research, and how we understand the notion of 'truth'.

## Positivism: Sociology as Science

During the period of enlightenment in Europe, traditional ways of knowing the world were challenged by the rise of science and other forms of logic. Worldviews based on supernatural, superstition or vague abstract thought, which in the past dominated how Europeans saw the world around them, broke down, replaced instead by a modern scientific approach to understanding life. This shift was labelled by French philosopher (and forefather of sociology), Auguste Comte (1798-1857), as 'positivism' though the roots go right back to Greek philosopher Plato (Todd, 1993). Positivism here should not be understood as a general optimistic outlook! Rather, it is a 'matter of fact' approach that studies phenomenon through observable data.

Comte, the inventor of the term, argued that there were three phases of history that led to the development of a scientific understanding of the world (Bourdeau & Pickering, 2018). Firstly, humans, especially Europeans, understood their world through a theological or religious lens – attributing life to the divine or supernatural. Secondly, and moving into the different intellectual discussions that occurred even within theology, questions of **metaphysics** developed – that were somewhat disconnected from religion, but still considered the world through abstract and vague interpretations and knowledge. The last moment in human history for Comte led to the development of scientific understanding where understanding life took on a matter-of-fact approach. In other words, we no longer relied on supernatural or metaphysical knowledge. Rather hard observable facts about how the world works and operates dominated our understanding and pursuit of truth (Pickering, 2011).

**Figure**: Auguste Comte (c.1851) by Johan Heindrich Hoffmeister is in Public Domain

At a general level, positivists like Comte (Pickering, 2011) held a strong belief in the power of evidence, and would not entertain an understanding of the natural and social worlds beyond facts. Our world and how we understood truth had to be measurable and knowable through empiricism which requires undertaking scientific reasoning through data. His approach had a major influence at the time on the burgeoning social sciences, including Emile Durkheim's approach to sociology. For Durkheim (1895/2014), in his *Rules of Sociological Method*, sociology ought to be like a natural science, observing only what he deemed as the 'social facts' that exist distinct from individuals and hold sway over them. **Social facts** here for Durkheim (1895/2014) can be understood as customs, rites, rituals, norms, beliefs, and values that are collectively developed and agreed upon, which exert a power on individuals to conform. He argued initially for the use of statistics to unpack social facts, as these help to understand the general rules which impact social behaviours. This approach he took up in his famous investigation into *Suicide* in 1897. Durkheim's approach to sociology had a major impact on various others, including Talcott Parsons who led the development of sociology in The United States of America (see the identity, self and culture chapter).

For the most part, positivism advocates for the use of statistics, as the most appropriate **scientific method**, in order to understand society and rejects any attempt to establish 'truth' via other methods. As you will see later, this includes demographic, statistical and survey data that can be studied mathematically, to explore general social trends which impact us all as individuals in society. We loosely describe these approaches to research **quantitative** methodology. In positivism, there is a fundamental belief in an independent truth that can be acquired, studied and turned into knowledge, via statistical measurement.

In recent times though, there has been a movement against pure positivism across the social sciences in what we might call '**post-positivism**'. Broadly speaking, post-positivists tend to argue that the world we study is not disconnected from our own impressions, world-views and values as researchers. Truth should still be found, but we cannot ignore the impact researchers have in naming, framing, describing and even publishing what that 'truth' is. The problem of a purely 'objective' truth is that we are always involved in the process of bringing that truth to light. Our social, cultural and even historical contexts matter, and the development of knowledge on what is real is mediated through human interaction. For this to exist, we must recognise according to post-positivists, that we have biases, that can shape the way information is presented. We also have limitations of knowledge, so that even if researchers are careful, precise and have well-developed methods, there might always be 'unknowns' that impact reality. Post-positivists remain committed to scientific methods of understanding truth but are cautious about their results due to these unknown factors along with potential biases and other issues. This means we can never declare in our research that there is a universal truth (Panhwar et al., 2017). Reality is messy, and as such, we need to try and get as close to the truth as we can. Post-positivists therefore will talk of correlation and not 'causation' in statistics, but also push for data triangulation which involves using all available resources including **qualitative** research, to obtain a broad explanation, as much as possible, of the thing being studied.

**Figure**: Research meeting by Headway is licensed by Unsplash

## Interpretivism: Sociology as Understanding

Several criticisms have been levelled at positivism over the years, including from German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). For both, the disciplinary fields of the natural sciences were starting to dominate the understanding of reality or social life (Hammersley, 2012). Max Weber in particular constructed a new approach to sociology based on the German term ***verstehen*** which incorporates understanding of the context, intentions and perceptions of the individual when analysing social behaviour (Tucker, 1965). In other words, instead of trying to understand social behaviour as a 'matter of fact', Weber argued for an understanding of social life as dependent on the context, and the individual's perceptions, rather than seeking generalised social facts as Durkheim would.

This led to the cultivation of a new trend known broadly as interpretivism in the social sciences. Broadly, interpretivism entails a wide appreciation of our social lives beyond mere natural laws and facts. Rather, we live in complex social and cultural worlds, where a range of factors including culture, history, social relations, values, and personalities, impact on how we see and view the world around us. Social scientists, to really understand how people behave, try and incorporate as much of this as possible into their analysis. This is not achieved, for people like Weber, in the sorts of positivist approaches that theorists like Durkheim advocated for (Harrington, 2004). Rather, the social sciences ought to examine how individuals make meaning out of life, by interpreting their behaviour as closely as they can. For disciplines like anthropology then, this entails spending significant time with communities of interest, documenting behaviour, examining, and asking questions of people, and building a stronger understanding of cultural norms, ideas, values, rituals and everyday behaviour. For sociologists, this approach usually results in researchers speaking to participants, and providing space for them to explain their perceptions and explanations on the phenomenon being studied.

Important for interpretivists is the ability to switch off (as best as one can) any preconceived ideas about society when entering the research field. Rather than dismissing or even criticising the behaviour of other people, researchers need to document and treat all behaviour as meaningful to those who are being studied (Hammersely, 2012). This is known broadly as being reflexive, which entails setting aside your own pre-existing morals and values and having empathy for those you are researching with. For instance, you might have strong political views about a certain issue, and when researching find people who have alternative or opposing views to your own. As a social scientist in this case, interpretivism argues that one ought to suspend judgement and focus instead on building an understanding of why people believe what they do, and why they may indeed voice their opinion differently. This is easier said than done!

Interpretivism heavily impacted the development of sociology starting with Max Weber's interpretive

sociology, leading into the symbolic interactionist traditions of the Chicago school scholars of Harold Garfinkle and Erving Goffman, through to the feminist researchers and critical theorists. Importantly, it has led to the development of qualitative research in sociology, which, unlike statistics, focuses on exploring the individual's lives via interviews, ethnography, biography and other spoken or written data.

**Figure**: Women interviewing by CoWomen is licensed by Unsplash

## Constructivism: Sociology as Sceptical

Somewhat like interpretivism, constructivists will reject the positivist way of understanding truth and the reliance on the scientific method. However, **constructivism** has its roots in a sceptical approach to knowledge which treats social life as an emerging process wherein even knowledge, ideas, values, concepts, and norms is a process of continuing relations between actors. Unlike interpretivism, constructivists question whether we can really ever have an understanding of other people and argue that we can never really truly be objective in the development of knowledge.

Social constructivism is difficult to really understand at first. It involves being sceptical about our knowledge of the social world – arguing that things are the result of human beings actively and reactively developing their understanding of everything in life (Fox, 2008). For instance, love for a social constructivist is an emotion whose meaning is developed via a range of actors over time. This includes not just everyday individuals but past romantic writers and present-day romantic movies and so on which are not fixed. In other words, in the future, new framings of love will emerge as our understanding/knowledge of love shifts with new ideas. What we perceive as the definition or understanding of a particular thing, is contextual, and will change over time.

This theory is the product of several sociologists and philosophers including Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann who in 1967 wrote a book entitled *The Social Construction of Reality*. In this work, Berger and Luckman (1967) argue that our reality developed via a process they call habitualisation. This involves actions that are frequently repeated, which will eventually become a norm over time. However, this is not universal but will change in the future as societies change and actions alongside them. For now though, actions that humans undertake eventually become a type of 'common sense' which appears as reality, but which ultimately becomes an independent entity of sorts that can be governed by institutions such as the state. For instance, certain actions that we have considered abnormal in the past, such as homosexuality, have in time become an accepted norm. Whereas in the past, the aversion to homosexual practices was reinforced by disciplines like psychiatry and the state.

For philosophers like Michel Foucault (1926-1984), constructivist thinking is important when we start to

unpack norms that we consider 'common sense'. For him, historical processes, language and importantly, expertise, creates ideas about what is normal behaviour in society. For instance, what is considered throughout modernity as 'madness' (what we might deem mental unwellness today) is the direct result of both a history of dealing with abnormal people and the growing power of psychiatry that owned 'knowledge' of what it meant to be normal. As a consequence for Foucault (1990), knowledge is power and determines what can be declared as abnormal behaviour. This is important as these ideas distill into society who come to govern themselves according to what is scientifically known as normal or abnormal. But constructivists are sceptical of the idea of normal/abnormal as these are usually contingent on certain representations of reality that have been agreed upon and taken up by society in general.

Consequently, constructivists are interested in unpacking what reality is by examining the fluid nature of meaning throughout time, place and context, arguing that these things are context-specific (Hammersely, 2012;. Nothing is 'real' per se, but rather the result of different actors agreeing and disagreeing to certain definitions of thing being studied. Important, social scientists are themselves a significant actor in this process. Through research, certain behaviour is defined and labelled via concepts and thus researchers provide a reality for the thing being studied. Thus, social scientists themselves contribute to the social construction of reality. However, for the most part, constructivists will lay claim to the idea that all realities are constructed through the conglomeration of social, cultural, technical, political, scientific and other knowledge that has a direct impact on how we as individuals envisage our reality (and renegotiate with these at an individual level). Thus social scientists in this domain study how these processes come about, while also acknowledging the role they play in developing social life.

**Watch this short presentation on what constructivism is in the philosophy of research for further information** [3:15].

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=142#oembed-1*

# Indigenous Worldviews

Social research today has a complicated relationship with people who are marginalised relative to the dominant groups in society. This is because research has been used throughout history to bolster power, and to justify practices that we now recognise as harmful to cultures and communities. In the context of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, this is especially the case for Māori, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. These groups have been subject to considerable amounts of social research since the beginning of European colonisation, and yet still experience considerable disadvantage and inequality relative to the rest of the population (Rigney, 1999).

However, as more First Nations people earned academic qualifications and began working in formal social research settings, a few things happened. One was a response to the problem outlined above – that a lot of unhelpful, and sometimes harmful, research was done *on* and *about* First Nations people, without meaningful input from them. Scholars such as Graham (2008) suggest that Aboriginal worldviews share a common approach to land and community that differs considerably from Western worldviews. This is a fundamental difference that can't be adequately captured by outsider researchers. Another was an articulation of long legacies of research amongst First Nations cultures directly. Long before colonisation, First Nations people studied everything from the environment and animals around them, to the stars in the night sky, to healing and medicine, to people and social interactions. First Nations researchers in academic settings drew on those traditions and worldviews to underpin their own approaches to research.

First Nations worldviews, and their impacts on research, have been well laid out by a number of scholars. These include Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou, Māori), whose book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (first published in 1999) both critiqued the development of the scientific method for its racist practices and exploitation of First Nations peoples and knowledges, and also laid out an argument for how research can be used to decolonise settler-colonial institutions. Lester-Irabinna Rigney (Narungga, Kaurna and Ngarrindjeri) is another influential thinker in terms of research methodologies. Rigney (1999, p.109-110) defined an approach to research that can "contribute to self-determination and liberation struggles" on First Nations' own terms. He terms this an 'Indigenist' methodology, which is based on three principles which overlap with one another:

- an emancipatory imperative of resistance, or research that aids survival, healing, and self-determination
- political integrity or research conducted by First Nations people themselves, who are responsible to their communities
- a prioritisation of Indigenous voices in research outputs.

First Nations researchers utilise a variety of research methods, but they ask different research questions, interact with their research field, analyse their data, and construct research outputs differently. There are often more culturally appropriate versions of particular research methods that can be applied. For example, instead of structured or semi-structured interviews, a researcher might adopt a *Dadirri* approach to research conversations with First Nations participants. *Dadirri* is about place and Country, and also about deeply listening (West, et al, 2012; Ungunmerr-Baumann, et al, 2022). A quantitative sociologist must follow the principles of good data collection outlined above, but will seek to subvert the dominant approach to statistics that homogenises First Nations people, does not adequately consider the contexts for findings, and often takes a blame-worthy approach (Walter, 2018).

While researchers who come from non-Indigenous backgrounds can never fully adopt an Indigenous worldview, they can follow key principles to adopt a decolonising approach as much as is possible. These include a commitment to self-determination, undertaking research that responds to community priorities, and considering Indigenous Data Sovereignty, which is explained briefly in the video below [3:32].

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=142#oembed-2*

# Sociological Methods

In sociology, multiple methods are utilised in the design of research and subsequently analysis of data. To understand societal patterns, behaviours, attitudes and opinions, there is perhaps an endless list of approaches we can take to get as much information as we can. However, for the most part, sociology is divided into three main camps – which are a direct result of the above perspectives and debates on what is truth and how it can be found in our discipline's history. These are quantitative, qualitative social research methods, and a combination of the two in what is known as 'mixed methods' approaches.

The two main approaches (quantitative and qualitative) are underpinned by something broadly known as theory. Theory is a way of making sense of the social world that we live in, via observation, by developing ideas, concepts and even ideologies that explain what we find as researchers. Importantly, theory allows us to make comparisons between different cultures, societies and histories. In the case of the latter, comparing how different things are today to how they were say 100 years ago, is pivotal to the ongoing development of sociology.

To develop theory though, we need firstly to obtain observations (or data). There are usually two strategies in the production of theory in sociology – these are generally known as theory building and theory testing. The first is more specifically known as **inductive** reasoning where the researcher begins with some understanding, description or knowledge of the phenomenon being studied, and then enters the research field to obtain data. Inductive research involves gathering data first, and then as time progresses, turns to data analysis techniques to make sense of what is observed. Through this process, theory comes together as we attempt to make sense of the results of the study (Blaikie and Priest, 2019; De Vaus, 2013). Put another way, inductive reasoning means building theory from the ground up!

The other approach to this is what we might call theory testing, or **deductive** reasoning. In this instance, we utilise theory to predict or hypothesise what the results of our research will be. This approach recognises past research in particular, by examining the theories or concepts that emerge out of other studies, and then developing predictions based on what others have discovered. Another way of describing this process is that of constructing and then testing hypotheses. Once we gather our data, we test to see if the theory fits with the results of our research. If the results confirm the theory, we can say that the theory is correct and build on this further using future research. If the results do not align with the theory, we can conclude that the theory is either wrong, does not work in the context of the study (i.e. the population we are studying or the place where the research is conducted), or potentially that our data collection exercise was flawed.

There are other approaches to reasoning now that exist that go beyond theory building/testing recognising that these approaches are too rigid. For instance, Blaikie and Priest (2019) describe retroductive and abductive styles where theory is not simply a process of either building from the group up or testing from the top down – but an integrative process as one develops and then proceeds to gather data (see also Meyer and Lunnay, 2013). From this perspective, the reality of research is never as clearly divided as inductive/deductive strategies indicate. Rather, at times researchers participate in the development of their theories. However, in this text, we want to follow the basics first! Below you will find an overview (unfortunately by no means exhaustive!) of the different methods of research in sociology with some examples from the antipodes.

## Quantitative Research Methods

Unpacking the different methodological styles of research means understanding the different types of data we can use. For quantitative research methods, data is usually statistical, aligning with the principles of positivism and post-positivism for the most part (see above). Statistics can be found everywhere in our contemporary life. In fact, we produce statistics daily ourselves every time we log onto the internet and search for something, click on a link, like a video or post on social media or even when we walk if we own a smartwatch! Statistics in this sense is also known as **Big Data**, which represents a challenge to sociology (see chapter on digital sociology).

Quantitative sociology tends to use statistics that come from two areas, population data and survey data. In the case of the former, we all are measured and counted in various population data sets across our nation-states including via the instrument known as Census. Censuses collect information from us all, usually once every five years, on important variables to sociology such as sex, marriage status, family types, income, language, nationality, migration movement, occupation, and chronic health conditions. Data from these censuses are provided back as a public service by the state which the public can access whenever they please. Sociologists use this data to examine sociological issues from poverty through to migration. This data is invaluable as it is one of the few sources that holds information on all of the population of the country.

🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit: Explore Australia and New Zealand via statistics

Census is undertaken every five years in both Australia and New

The second type of data that is often used in quantitative research is that of survey data. As Census is only run every five years, we cannot rely on this instrument alone. Furthermore, national surveys like Census do not necessarily answer questions that we might have in our respective research areas. For instance, Census might inform us that families are having fewer children now compared to the baby boomer generation, but this does not answer the question as to why. Subsequently, survey research is helpful in that it can (1) allow us an opportunity to design questions on issues that are relevant to the research we are undertaking,

and (2) provide us with the opportunity to ascertain further information such as attitude, across the population.

Unlike census data though, researchers do not have the time, resources or the funds to deliver surveys to all of the population of a country! We also do not have the capacity to force people to do surveys if they do not want to. As such, surveys, and statistics more generally, depend on one vital scientific understanding, **probability sampling** or theory. Probability can be best described as the ability to "say with a specific degree of confidence, how likely the patterns in a sample are to reflect those in the wider population" (De Vaus, 2013, p.66). In other words, probability suggests that we do not have hand surveys out to everyone in a population. Rather, we can hand surveys out to some in the population and make inferences about how we all think on that basis.

Probability is reliant on what is known as the bell curve. This is something you probably have heard of before. It is based on the idea that most of us when measured on different things (such as weight, blood pressure, and IQ) will be quite similar to one another. We tend to group around what are known as measures of central tendency – which are mean (average), median (middle) and mode (most common). Take for instance the average height for an adult male in New Zealand which is 178cm. Average (or mean) is calculated easily by adding all the heights of adult men, and then dividing that by the number. Mathematically then, this would mean that most of New Zealand's male population would be around 178cm tall. However, some men will be far taller than that, some will be far shorter!

Zealand with the data taken publicly available for all. Have a look at either the Australian Census Data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, or the New Zealand/Aotearoa Data provided by Stats NZ Tatauranga Aotearoa.

See if you can find the answers to the following questions

- What is the population of the country?
- What is the median age of the country? Has that changed since last census?
- What is the median personal income of those living in the country?

To obtain a good understanding of the population, you need only take a *sample* of the population. Think about it this way. Let's say you have a group of 100 students who are in your class and you want to know how many chocolate frogs they eat in a year. If we surveyed all 100 of them, we might find that the average (or what we call mean) is 55 (which isn't that many let's be honest). However, if we grabbed randomly, 30 students, and surveyed them, we might find that the mean for them is 53. So we are about 2 frogs off the real population mean. The difference is what we call **sample error**. We could keep sampling each student until we got to the actual average, but in probability, we do not need to do this. Simply put, we do not need to talk to everyone in the country! If we use good sampling techniques, we can obtain a good representation generally (remembering that most people are not unlike each other in the bell curve) of the population we are studying. How do we know, however, if our group is like the population if we do not know what the population mean is? This is where we use something called **confidence intervals**.

Watch the next two videos explaining the Bell Curve [1:04] and Confidence Intervals [5:34]**:**

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=142#oembed-3*

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=142#oembed-4*

In short, we will not be certain about whether our sample is truly representative of the population – but we use confidence intervals to suggest that we are fairly sure – usually 95% – or in other words, there is a 5 percent chance we made a mistake in our sampling process. Thus, social science statistics is never 100%.

In research, the most important thing is the **variable**. This is the thing that you are measuring and can be as simple as age, gender, location and so on or as complicated as trying to measure happiness, altruism, or motivation. We can measure one of these variables in a sample, which is called **univariate** analysis. As demonstrated in our example of chocolate frogs above, we found that the average our group ate in a year was 55. That is interesting information and might be good for a report to the local chocolate manufacturer! However, we wanted to know if there were differences in our sample of students.

This is where we introduce **bivariate** analysis – which basically means taking one variable (an independent variable) and seeing if it causes a difference to another variable (dependent variable). For instance, we might want to see if international students eat more or less chocolate frogs than domestic students. We examine our data again and find that domestic students eat on average 33 chocolate frogs a year whereas international students eat on average 65 a year. What we have here is a statistical difference between two cohorts – and there is some indication that the independent variable (student type) is having an impact on how many frogs one eats in a year (dependent variable). We can begin to infer that there is something going on here that demands explanation (maybe the local shop where international students live near markets to them heavily chocolate frogs!). However, we need to do some serious mathematical statistical testing to show how confident we are that it is indeed this independent variable that matters most (don't worry we won't teach that here!).

However, what if we were interested in differences between domestic and international students, and within that whether age had a role to play in determining chocolate frog consumption? This is something called **multivariate** analysis, which involves multiple independent variables, and even dependent variables. In our example, we might examine the cohorts and find that as international and domestic students get older, they consume far fewer chocolate frogs. Thus, we can begin to infer that, age plays a role as well

in how many frogs people eat. Our results would suggest that younger international students eat more chocolate frogs than anyone else in the sample!

🔍 **Look Closer:** Survey research on religion following the Christchurch Earthquake of 2011

On February 22nd, 2011, Christchurch suffered a significant earthquake that killed 185 people and changed the landscape and townscape of the city even to this day. Sibley and Bulbulia (2012) were interested to see if people had turned more to religion during this period following what is known as the religious comfort theory. They conducted a survey to collect information from a nationwide survey instrument and analysed data from 2,305 women and 1,440 men. The research found the following:

- Religion did become more appealing to those who had suffered during and following the earthquake – though they do raise caution in these findings as conversion to faith is complicated.
- Those who were faithful did not experience any significant 'buffering' in subjective suffering or health over those who were not in a faith. The findings suggest that religion perhaps does not provide the level of comfort above those who are not religious.

This study provides a good example of survey research, and the ability to take a significant issue such as natural disasters, and conduct widespread research across society.

## Qualitative Research Methods

Following the patterns of **interpretivism** and **constructivism** (above), qualitative research methods start with the premise that we cannot understand society through scientific methods. Rather, to explore social behaviour, we need to get down to individuals and collect information/data on how they perceive, experience, interpret and understand life. Furthermore, remembering what constructivism argues, we also need to understand how people 'construct' their worlds through their values, ideas, and actions.

Qualitative research tends to follow a pattern that separates it from quantitative research. Firstly, qualitative data gathering exercises are often **inductive**, in that there is little theory testing and more development of theory as one goes through the research process. This requires some flexibility in the design of the research, and an ongoing assessment of what data is being gathered, as the researcher meets with and works with participants (Hammersely, 2013). Furthermore, methods tend to be far more unstructured, unlike the statistical work of quantitative research. As Hammersely (2013, p.12) points out, "there is little pressure to

engage in formal counting, ranking, or measurement" as most of the data is based on observations in the natural world and verbal/non-verbal communication from the participants in the project.

Secondly, in qualitative research, the foundation is to analyse and interpret human behaviour by getting as close to people as we can, and in natural settings. Quantitative research tends to do the opposite by either putting people into experimental conditions (such as in a lab) or having them take questionnaires with little room for the participant to elaborate their responses. As such, a criticism of qualitative research is this need for the researcher to be close to their participants, creating potential for bias, and for the research to have less objectivity than quantitative work. In qualitative research, this is not a major issue, however. All research has the potential to be influenced by the researcher. However, to overcome this, researchers try to exercise **reflexivity** to understand how their own values, ideas, and even theoretical positions, might influence the data that they see. To be short, reflexivity means identifying your own worldviews and trying to reduce the influence of these on your data analysis and reporting.

Lastly, research in qualitative work is not designed to be representative in the same way that quantitative research is and does not rely on **probability sampling** techniques. For researchers in this space, there is no unitary truth to be found as we all have very different backgrounds, ideas, values, socialisation and so on which means the amount of variables that could impact a dependent variable is endless. It is rather, better to get as close to the behaviour or people we are studying as possible to obtain quality data that can be interpreted later. As such, qualitative researchers tend not to worry too much about how many participants they have, nor that the data is truly representative of the population. Rather, the qualitative tradition focuses instead on interpretation of behaviour, perceptions, and ideas of those we research with.

Unlike quantitative research methods, the data obtained in qualitative research are usually text-based or words (though they can be other things – see below). As such, there are multiple styles of research that exist in the qualitative tradition. Below are some of the major approaches used by sociologists (and social scientists) in their work. Although as we will show towards the end, the list is potentially endless with new innovations in qualitative research happening consistently.

## Ethnography

**Ethnography** is one of the oldest forms of qualitative research emerging out of the discipline of **anthropology** from the 1900s onwards. In general, ethnography is a practice that aims to obtain a "detailed, in-depth description of everyday life and practice" (Hoey, 2014, p.1). It involves the researcher entering into the field (where the community that they want to research lives) and engaging in what is known as **participant observation** to develop an understanding of culture especially. As Hoey (2014, p.2) suggests, "to develop an understanding of what it is like to live in a setting, the researcher must become a participant in the life of the setting while also maintaining the stance of an observer". This entails a level of **reflexivity**, in ensuring that every day, one is ensuring that their own worldviews and values are not impeding the process of understanding the community you are researching with.

Fieldwork for ethnographers involves a myriad of things including participating with the community in active everyday life, asking questions of people to understand further actions or perceptions of different behaviours and/or life, and taking numerous 'field notes' along the way. Writing is an important aspect of ethnographic work, as these notes become data later when doing analysis. Every day, ethnographers take an account of the things that they have learned, observed, or have been told and look for patterns of behaviour to give eventually what Clifford Geertz (1973) calls a "thick description" in reporting later. Your task as an ethnographer is to gather as much information as you can on what you are observing, what it means for others, how people understand others, how social interactions are organised, when people do different things and what sorts of relationships people have. This means gathering data on verbal and non-verbal communication. For instance, we might do an observation in a classroom and note how students act while a lecturer is giving a lesson – noting how they're sitting, interacting with their bodies, and verbally engaging with the class.

Hoey (2014, p.7) argues that writing never ends for an ethnographer and that "fieldnote writing is an interactive, iterative process" meaning that you go back and forth trying to understand what you have observed, and then looking for gaps that need filling in your data gathering. However, once you are finished, analysis requires you to have an "intimate relationship with your notes" so that you have a strong understanding of what you have found, and that you can if required, "make notes on your notes" (Hoey, 2014, p.8).

Ethnography as a research method can be incredibly important to understanding not simply cultures overseas, but within our own communities as well (see box out). However, ethnography can be time-consuming and often results are not forthcoming immediately. It also requires patience as a researcher, and trust from the community you are researching with. Without the latter, people may struggle to open up to you, and provide you with information. Furthermore, if you are researching with communities where you do not speak the language, the capacity to learn and understand is somewhat hindered. Nevertheless, ethnography is the oldest form of qualitative research and consistently demonstrates its value to a wider audience.

**🔍 Look Closer**

Example of Ethnography: Arlie Hochschild *Strangers in their Own Land*

Arlie Hochschild, a heavily influential sociologist in the United States of America, conducted a long ethnography with those in Louisiana Bayou country, to understand their views and opinions in relation to American politics. Her research paved the way for a greater understanding of those labelled in negative ways by those with progressive political

worldviews. Watch this video interview [16:54] with her to see how participant observation allowed her to interpret and thereby understand those in these places.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=142#oembed-5*

## Interviews

One of the most popular forms of qualitative research, especially for sociologists, is that of **interviews**. Unlike **ethnography**, interviews are quicker forms of data gathering that require the researcher to meet with the participant and ask a series of questions to elicit understanding. Importantly for sociologists, interviewing is a moment of interaction, where the researcher can meet, discuss and explore their research topics with others. Social interaction, as we know from the class and status chapter, is a very important area for sociologists!

Like ethnography, the point of interviews is to investigate the research topic within natural settings by eliciting understanding from participants. There are three different types of interviews that occur generally. The first is the structured interview which involves a set schedule of questions, not deviating from them, in a one-on-one situation (or more as the case may be – for instance if you're questioning partners or colleagues). The advantages of the structured interviews are as follows;

- allows for comparison of answers to the same questions with different people in the sample
- allows for the researcher to focus their interviews on the specific issues that they want to find information on
- provides a more structured format to analyse later and is far less prone to issues of subjective interpretation
- is a far more formal process that can be used in professional settings – such as interviews with workplaces
- allows for a more survey-like approach where questions are closed and easier to analyse even using statistics later
- provides an opportunity to understand what is missing from the research at the conclusion.

Conversely, structured interviews that follow a set list of questions limit how much the interviewer can

deviate and explore interesting areas/topics that the interviewee may mention. In other words, using structured interviews means you leave little room for surprises in your research. It also means that you limit how much an interviewee can explain things and follow their own thoughts into different areas (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

**Figure:** Life in Durres by Juri Gianfrancesco is licensed by Unsplash

The more common approach in sociology is to follow a semi-structured approach in the design and then implementation of interviews. Like structured interviews, the semi-structured approach requires an interview schedule with a list of questions. However, the questions are always open-ended, unlike a survey, allowing the participant to explore the topic, and provide more information. The questions also serve as prompts to elicit further discussion if needed. If the interviewee brings up something in a response to a question, the interviewer can press further asking them to elaborate further, or follow the thread of the conversation to other topics that were not expected. In short, this style of research is about providing the researcher more freedom to introduce new lines of inquiry into the research and may well prompt them to follow up on these in later interviews. The advantages of the semi-structured interview then, are as follows:

- still allows the interviewee to follow specific questions that need to be answered for the research, that can be compared across interviewees
- provides an opportunity for the interviewer to follow topics that emerge in the interview and stray from the interview schedule if needed
- allows for the researcher to refine their research topic further as new ideas, thoughts and issues arise during the interviews
- provides the opportunity for the interviewee to explore their own thoughts and connect the topic to other areas that might be important to the research
- is less formal and can be used in multiple settings
- provides thicker data as the interviewee can talk with more freedom with open-ended questions.

Of course, one of the issues associated with interviews in this manner is that the data produced is complicated and often conversational. This data can take significantly longer to analyse as the researcher has to sift through pages of transcripts trying to pick up on commonalities in the research. Furthermore, due to the nature of the data, semi-structured interviews are prone to questions of subjective bias. We might be more likely to impose our own worldviews onto the research data. Additionally, this sort of data

might mean we find conclusions that align with theoretical inclinations in the form of confirmation bias. To overcome this, most qualitative researchers advise keeping notes on decisions made during data analysis and/or follow guidelines strictly on how to analyse data (Blaikie and Priest, 2019).

The final approach to interviews is that of the fully unstructured interview. Much like **ethnography**, the researcher here sets out to conduct interviews with freedom, following up with participants on a specific topic and being guided by discussion later. The interviewer here operates much like an ethnographer, attempting to understand culture, social interaction or the setting further in an exploratory fashion. Often, unstructured interviewing goes hand-in-hand with the ethnographic methods of **participant observation**. People go about their day-to-day lives and researchers ask them questions about what they are doing. Furthermore, researchers can also move with participants in their daily activities, asking questions on the meaning of different things, or trying to get interviewees to elaborate on repeated actions (such as rituals). In **human geography** in recent years, there has been a push for a type of unstructured interview that enables both the interviewer and interviewee to move through places/spaces in a walking interview (Evans and Jones, 2011). This is especially useful when the researcher wants to know how people view and experience different landscapes, settings, or spaces. It also provides an opportunity for the interviewee to be reminded of different past events as they walk through places, enabling the researcher to elicit meaning of place.

The advantage of the unstructured interview is therefore as follows:

- allows the researcher complete freedom to obtain as much meaning as possible from the research topic with interviewees.
- provides more chances to immerse oneself into the culture of the participant.
- creates conditions where the conversation between the researcher and participant is more natural – potentially making the interviewee more comfortable.
- additionally, the nature of the interview may provide a relationship of trust to develop, meaning the participant might open up further about difficult topics.
- the style of interview can lead to stronger and more nuanced understanding, especially as they tend to be longer than other forms.
- allows the interviewer to refine their research topic further as time progresses.

The natural style of unstructured interviews results in disadvantages not unlike semi-structured interviews. The most significant of these is that the data is often long and harder to organise. Researchers in this space will need to analyse a substantial amount of data, and in some cases will do so as the interviews proceed, rather than waiting until the end. Furthermore, these types of interviews take a long time in comparison to surveys or structured interviews. Additionally, the data that emerges is not easily compared as each unstructured interview may have different topics in comparison to others.

### 🔍 Look Closer

Example of Interviews: Deborah Lupton and John Tulloch and Risk Epistemologies of Australians

What do you think of risk? Do you think we try and avoid risks at all costs or even insure as much as we can against it? This is the question Deborah Lupton and John Tulloch asked in 2002 by conducting research in Australia with several Australians. Conducting interviews with them, they were able to challenge some of the dominant thinking of sociologists at the time like Ulrich Beck who argued that we have entered an age where people try hard to avoid risks at all costs. Rather, Lupton and Tulloch (2002) found:

- different perceptions of risk exist depending on a range of factors including age, gender and sexual identity. We do not all experience risk the same – especially young people.
- Many people take risks as a form of lifestyle. For instance, activities and sports like mountain biking, skydiving and surfing embrace risks as part of the experience. We also take risks daily with other things such as starting a new romantic relationship or investing in the stock market. All these things could end badly, but we embrace them nonetheless.

The interviews conducted by these researchers help us to understand that the risk theories of sociology at the time may need some reconsidering in different contexts.

We focused here on the role of interviews with one or two people. However, in some cases, sociologists and social scientists like to interview groups of people all at once. This style of interview is known as **focus groups**. You may have seen a focus group (or been part of one) when companies bring people together to elicit their opinions about a topic or even product. Focus groups within sociological research however allow us to bring a group of people together, and allow them to interact with one another on topics of importance to the research. As researchers, our task is to facilitate this discussion and provide the opportunity for all members of the group to interact, engage and even disagree with each other. Importantly, this style of research allows us to understand, especially in organisational settings, important issues such as power dynamics. For instance, we might find that one or two people within an organisation tend to dominate conversation, and/or disagree with comments made by other colleagues. Focus groups might also allow for groups to come together to evaluate their individual positions and provoke understanding amongst themselves. In addition to this, focus groups provide an opportunity to obtain significant amounts of data (in terms of people talked to) in a short period of time. However, the focus group tends to be difficult to organise at times, and can also cost money as researchers may need to arrange a venue. Furthermore, individuals within the focus groups, especially those who are introverted, may find

it difficult to have a voice in large groups. Finally, researchers have little control in their moderation of focus group discussions, and as such they can lead to limited information/data that is useful for their research.

Alternative forms of qualitative research also exist using interview techniques as a guide. Photo elicitation is one such approach where researchers utilise visual imagery to guide interviews along the way (Harper, 2011). Interviewees may also provide images (such as photographs or videos) to evoke feelings, and memories or talk about certain topics. In addition to this, photo voice is another style involving imagery where participants are enabled to take photos or videos of their community, culture or setting in everyday life, and discuss the meaning of the images with the interviewer (Wang and Burris, 1997). This is especially important for those doing research to empower communities through a style of research called participant action research.

**Figure:** Close up of photograph being taken by Bailey Mahon is licensed by Unsplash

Technology is also useful in interviews. This includes for instance the use of mapping software where interviewees are able to make use of maps to show different places and pull together their life history for the researcher showing where they might have lived, where different important events of their lives occurred and even where they might want to go in the future (Buckle, 2020). Other forms include creating paintings (Balmer, 2021) which might be especially useful when researching with children, using sound to elicit understanding of place (Duffy, Waitt and Harada, 2016), and using diaries from participants in collaboration with interviews (Thille, Chartrand and Brown, 2022). In short, qualitative research and interviews are far more flexible than statistical analysis, and scholarship in this space is always innovating new methods to obtain deeper understanding.

## Mixed Methods – a Pragmatic Approach to Research

You might be thinking by now that the division between qualitative and quantitative research based on the philosophical ideas we presented earlier in the chapter feels a bit too constraining. Maybe, like others, you find both forms of research appealing. In this case, there is good news! One of the styles of research that has garnered interest in recent times is that of **mixed-methods** approaches. In short, mixed methods provides an opportunity for the researcher to utilise whatever style of research is useful to answer the question and gather as much data as possible to gain a better perspective. This style of research is based on a pragmatic philosophy or worldview that Creswell (2014, p.10; Creswell and Creswell, 2018) describes in the following,

> Pragmatism as a worldview arises out of actions, situations, and consequences rather than antecedent conditions[...] There is a concern with applications – what works – and solutions to problems. Instead

of focusing on methods, researchers emphasize the research problem and use all approaches available to understand the problem.

In short, from this perspective, there is no 'right way' to conduct your research. Each method has advantages and disadvantages, and in the end, your research problem needs to be answered with the best methods on offer. Knowledge as we have seen above, is diverse and by using multiple methods in our research, we can obtain the best possible answers to our research problems. From this angle, we need to strip away the philosophical questions of 'truth' and focus instead on what the problem is we need to solve.

The mixed methods approach needs to be defined properly here before outlining some of the styles. Firstly, this pragmatic research method involves both gathering and analysis of quantitative and qualitative research. However, it might also involve the gathering of multiple forms of quantitative or qualitative data. Nevertheless, important to mixed methods is that whatever is done, is not separate from the other. In other words, we collect qualitative research to add to the quantitative data we have, or vice-versa (see below). As such, the methodologies of qualitative/quantitative research need to be followed appropriately and in keeping with the current research expectations.

Secondly, this style of research must be set out appropriately and methodically in a timeline. Mixed-methods approaches are not an anything-goes approach. Nor do we select different methods within the project for the sake of data gathering. Each method has a role to play in explaining or developing knowledge to answer a research problem. Lastly, this approach allows the researcher to cut across different research problems in a practical manner. For instance, statistics might assist the researcher in providing answers to organisational bodies, while qualitative data might assist in explaining that within community settings. The data produced can be aligned with the needs of different stakeholders.

There are multiple types of approaches to mixed methods that can be utilised (Creswell, 2014). Here we want to explore three. Firstly and one of the more popular, as Creswell (2014, p.219) outlines, is the parallel mixed methods design where the collection of qualitative and quantitative data occurs and is then compared with each other to ascertain differences or similarities of responses. For instance, we might conduct a survey with a large sample of people (let's say 500) and then interview a smaller group (let's say 20) and then compare the data we have. By doing so, we can elaborate further also on the data we get from statistics, and vice versa. This approach provides us with detailed insights at the individual level, while also giving large-scale data with a broader sample that can be used to both generalise to the population and provide nuance at local levels.

The next approach two approaches involve using one method to refine another method. Explanatory sequential mixed method design for instance involves a two-phase process where initial statistical work is done first and then followed up with qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Important to this approach is the quantitative component. Gathering this data and then analysing it, provides the foundation for what types of questions we need to ask in qualitative research. For instance, let's say we want to research understanding student love and attachment to sociology. We start by doing surveys with 400 students across the university. When we analyse the data we find that students who are most attached to sociology

are those within the humanities and social sciences programs (hardly unsurprising!). Following this, we devise research through interviews to ascertain why students in these programs are, and also why others are not. You can hopefully see here that those with stronger skills in quantitative research would prefer this approach, as the grounding for the project remains in quantitative skills.

Conversely, exploratory sequential mixed methods are the reverse of the previous process. Firstly, we explore a research topic through qualitative research, perhaps using inductive analysis to build hypotheses. Following the analysis of this data, we then test potential variables at a broader level using quantitative measures (most likely survey research). Let's say for instance that in the previous example, we start by exploring why students love sociology. After 20 or so interviews and analysis, we find that several interviewees express attachment to the discipline due to specific lecturers in the university. We hypothesise that students who have had these lecturers will be more attached to sociology than others. We then devise a broader survey instrument with 400 students across the university and statistically test our hypothesis. Those who are stronger at qualitative research will find this approach more suitable as it builds upon interview data, constructing a theory or hypothesis from within (Creswell, 2014).

These three styles are not the only way to do mixed-methods approaches in sociological research, but they are representative of two types of approaches. Firstly, to complement the data from both styles of research, and secondly, to take one form of method, and expand on that using another form. There are several other approaches such as embedded mixed methods where one style of research is embedded within a larger body of research, transformative mixed methods where all data is used to create change, and multiphase mixed methods where longitudinal information on both qualitative and quantitative data is collected side by side (Creswell, 2014).

There are significant benefits to this approach as outlined above. However, limitations to mixed-methods approaches are centred on the assumption that all data is useful, which can be critiqued by the different theories/philosophies we explored earlier. Furthermore, these approaches require skills in both qualitative and quantitative research and this might create difficulties if the researcher is not skilled in both areas. It is also possibly time intensive, requiring a lot of work to gather the data, and then analyse it all. Overall, though, this approach is well-developed and again, innovation within mixed-methods research is frequent.

## Other Styles of Research – the Digital World

There are several forms of research that we have not covered here in this chapter. These include document analysis, socio-historical analysis, autoethnography, visual ethnography, experiments (which we do not do a lot of in sociology), case studies, social networks, and longitudinal analysis. One of the burgeoning areas of social research today is the incorporation of the internet and/or social media. Our everyday lives are now lived both in the offline and online worlds. As such, researchers such as Christine Hine (2020) and Robert Kozinets (2015) contend that the Internet needs to be considered a serious site for investigation in this contemporary age.

On the one hand, we establish several virtual communities in our online spaces which we engage with daily, including that of social media but also social or community groups. Kozinets (2015) argues that these online communities deserve attention as these groups, and online interactions, are meaningful to us. Consider a virtual gaming community of people who do not meet in real life at all, but perhaps collectively come together of an evening to play together. Their interactions and experiences represent a community of sorts, only lived in the online space. However, as Milton and Petray (2020) show in their research, sometimes these communities demonstrate some of the sociological problems that exist in our society. For instance, in their research into online crime forums, they find a clear division between those who consider themselves legitimate citizens and those they believe are not, and often this is based on age and/or race. This type of 'us' vs. 'them' mentality exists across many social media forums and perhaps exacerbates already established (although maybe unspoken in everyday life) biases towards other minority groups (see digital sociology chapter).

**Figure**: Three people in front of computers by Brooke Cagle is licensed by Unsplash

However, unlike Kozinets (2015), Christine Hine (2020) argues that there should not be a separation between 'online' and 'offline' communities when we conduct our research. Rather, Hine (2020) challenges us to think about life as lived concurrently in both online and offline spaces. She pushes for what is known as multi-sighted ethnography, which seeks to overcome the boundaries geographically in how we study. In short, the field sites that we journey to, and interview or participate with people in, have to embrace the complexity of life. We do not simply live, work, and play in one specific place. Furthermore, for Hine (2020), this includes the online spaces where we meet, talk, socialise, plan and so on in our everyday lives. Her work intends to get researchers thinking about how the life is embodied and experienced every day in both real and virtual worlds. Consider for instance if we were seeking to research the study patterns of students taking this subject. If we conducted an ethnography where we observed them in the library, we would only capture so much information. However, if we embrace the fluidity of modern life, we might find online social forums where students meet together to share tips and hints, as well as organise study groups face to face. Hine (2020) encourages us to realise that the internet is here, and it is embedded in our everyday lives seamlessly, and in our research, we need to incorporate it.

## In Summary

This chapter introduces you to the foundations of social research methods, while also preparing you for advanced studies in both qualitative and quantitative research into the future. Main points to take away here are as follows:

- Sociology has a long history of research methods stemming back from the classical period of Durkheim and Comte.
- Positivism and post-positivism are based on the assumptions that the best way to attain data is through quantitative research – usually statistics and based on the scientific method.
- Interpretivism and constructivism on the other hand argue that life is far more complicated to be understood statistically, and as such propose alternative approaches to obtain the best data which is normally qualitative research.
- Pragmatism, however, argues that the best approach to answering a research problem is to use whatever data sources are available and not get swamped by philosophical differences in method.
- Quantitative research entails a range of statistical measures and depends largely on the idea of the normal distribution (bell curve).
- Qualitative research is far wider in scope and includes everything from interviews through to digital ethnography.
- Indigenous world-views however criticise the approaches in social research as delegitimising the validity of other knowledge.

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# RACE, ETHNICITY AND INDIGENEITY

Theresa Petray

*Content notes: This chapter discusses violence and inequalities related to racism, including extrajudicial killings of black and Indigenous people. It also contains images and videos of deceased people.*

The key goals of this chapter are to explain that:

- race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity are different (but overlapping) concepts, and we will explore what these terms mean in the context of Australia and New Zealand
- race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity are social facts – in other words, they are socially constructed but with real material consequences for people's lives
- there are key differences between stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and structural racism that are important to understand sociologically
- despite some narratives about multiculturalism and inclusion, Australia and New Zealand, like many other parts of the world, continue to be characterised by high levels of inequality based on race, ethnicity and Indigeneity
- strengths-based approaches to these inequalities show us that problem-solving needs to be based on consultation and solutions from within communities are generally the most effective.

## Overview

The #BlackLivesMatter (#BLM) movement officially began in the United States of America back in 2013. On 26 February 2012, George Zimmerman shot black teenager Trayvon Martin, who was unarmed but considered 'suspicious'. Zimmerman faced trial for murder but was found not guilty – a decision that

sparked protests across America (Nummi et al., 2019). These actions coalesced as a social movement (see social movements chapter), notably using social media (see the digital sociology chapter).

Over the next several years, the #BLM movement remained active, especially in response to the tragic deaths of black Americans, often killed by police officers. In May 2020, it peaked again following the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. This time, the protests spread around the world, including Australia and New Zealand. In both places, the campaigns focused not just on Floyd's death and the extrajudicial killings in America, but made connections to overpolicing of Maori, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and migrants, particularly from Pasifika and African backgrounds (Moran & Gatwiri, 2022).

**Figure:** Black Lives Matter – Melbourne (Australia) Rally by Matt Hrkac is licensed under CC BY 2.0

In Australia between 1991 and 2021, at least 432 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people died in custody – while being detained by police, or in prison, and First Nations people are dramatically overrepresented in Australian prisons (Gatwiri & Townsend-Cross, 2022; Watego, Singh & Macoun, 2021). The Australian #BLM movement especially picked up on the threads of the existing campaign to stop Black/Blak[1] Deaths in Custody. On social media #AboriginalLivesMatter became a phenomenon in its own right (Dejmanee et al., 2022).

The movement against these deaths at the hands of police, prisons, and vigilantes shows how relevant the concept of race remains today. It also demonstrates the global dimensions of race, at the same time that it highlights the importance of understanding local contexts. We will explore both throughout this chapter.

# Definitions

Scientific knowledge systems emphasise classification – all living creatures are organised in classification systems, as are minerals and rocks, chemical elements, and more. Classification systems focus on some similarities and differences to decide which group something belongs to.

**Race** is a commonly used classification system amongst humans. The idea of race refers to superficial

1. In Australia, Black and Blak often refer to First Nations people in general. As Yadira Perez Hazel (2018) notes, "The term 'blak' has been used since the early 1990s, and continues today, by Indigenous artist-activist scholars and community members, to reclaim historical, representational, symbolical, stereotypical and romanticised notions of Blackness. This particular spelling is also associated with Creole and Aboriginal English language rules."

physical differences that a particular society considers significant. Race is generally determined by superficial physical characteristics – features like skin colour, facial features, and hair type. In the past, theorists have posited categories of race based on various geographic regions, ethnicities, skin colours, and more. Their labels for racial groups have connoted regions (Mongolia and the Caucus Mountains, for instance) or denoted skin tones (black, white, yellow, and red, for example).

However, this typology of race developed during early racial science has fallen into disuse, and **racialisation** (the social construction of race) is a far more common way of understanding racial categories. According to this school of thought, certain groups become racialised through a social process that marks them for unequal treatment based on perceived physiological differences, which we will discuss more below.

**Ethnicity** is a term that describes shared culture — the practices, values, and beliefs of a group. This might include shared language, religion, and traditions, among other commonalities. Ethnicity, like race, continues to be an identification method that individuals and institutions use today. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019) uses ethnicity to refer to groups who share one or more of the following characteristics:

- a long shared history, the memory of which is kept alive
- a cultural tradition, including family and social customs, sometimes religiously based
- a common geographic origin
- a common language (but not necessarily limited to that group)
- a common literature (written or oral)
- a common religion
- being a minority (often with a sense of being oppressed)
- being racially conspicuous.

Indigeneity is a broad term that refers to the First Peoples of a specific regional area (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). The term 'Indigenous' is an adjective used globally, and it encompasses more than 370 million people around the world. Common features of peoples who identify as Indigenous include: (1) historical connections to pre-colonial societies; (2) strong connections to a particular territory; and (3) distinct identities and practices from other social groups now living in those territories. Indigenous peoples are often minorities, either in terms of population size and/or in terms of access to power structures.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the First People are the Maori, who arrived from eastern Polynesia at least four centuries before Europeans. Almost 800,000 people, or 16.5% of the population in Aotearoa New Zealand identified as Maori in 2018, the second largest ethnic group following Pakeha, or New Zealanders of European descent.

In Australia, there are two broad groups of First Peoples and great diversity within these two groups. Aboriginal peoples have connections to the mainland of the Australian continent, while Torres Strait

Islander peoples traditionally occupy the lands and waters between the tip of Cape York and Papua New Guinea. There are over 250 language groups across Australia, and the best approach for speaking about people respectfully is to find out how they identify (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Studies, 2020).

🧠 **Learn More**

See an interactive map of Australia showing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language, social, or nation groups.

See a [PDF] map of Aotearoa New Zealand with iwi identified for different parts of the country.

Who are the First Nations or iwi of the places you are familiar with?

## Census Statistics

As we said above, the two largest ethnic groups in the 2018 Census of Aotearoa New Zealand are Pakeha, or European New Zealanders. Census respondents might choose more than one ethnicity, so the total numbers add up to more than the 5.1 million people counted in the Census.

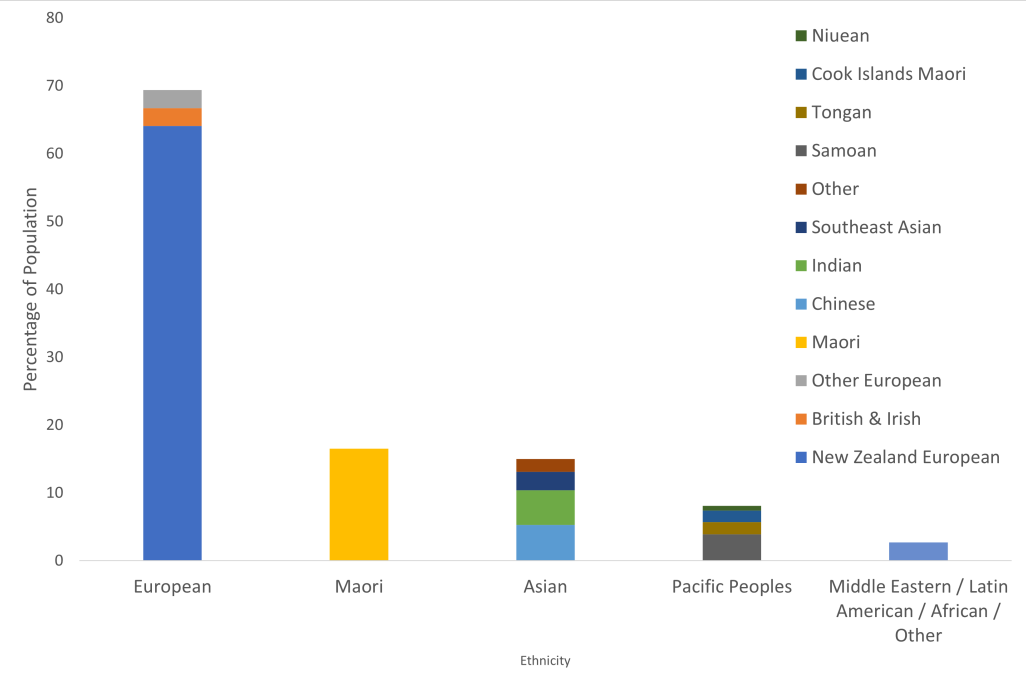



**Figure:** Ethnicity of Aotearoa New Zealand population, 2018. Each bar shows the total percentage of the major ethnic groups in New Zealand, with different colours within each bar showing more specific ethnicities within each group. Data source: Stats NZ.

The Australian Census asks about ancestry and country of birth. In the 2021 Census, 27.6% of people in Australia, or more than 7 million people, were born overseas (ABS, 2022). The most common countries of

birth, besides Australia, were England, India, China, New Zealand, and the Philippines. Respondents to the Australian Census can nominate up to two ancestries.

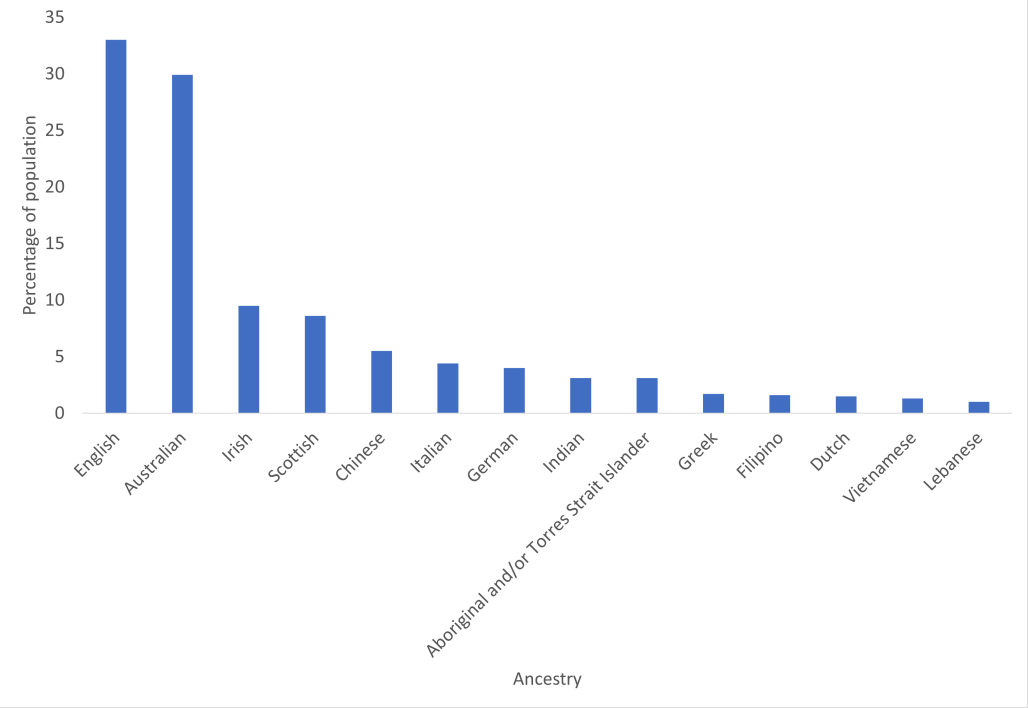



**Figure:** Ancestry of Australian population, 2021. Each bar shows the total percentage of most commonly identified ancestries within Australia. Data source: ABS.

## Identities and Labels

When discussing race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity, individuals may choose to identify in a particular way, and at the same time they may be identified by others in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. For example, many Indigenous people in Australia have light skin and in some contexts are considered 'too white', and in other situations they are considered 'black' – regardless of how they may think of themselves. Watch the video below [6:46] to hear some experiences of this.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=37#oembed-1*

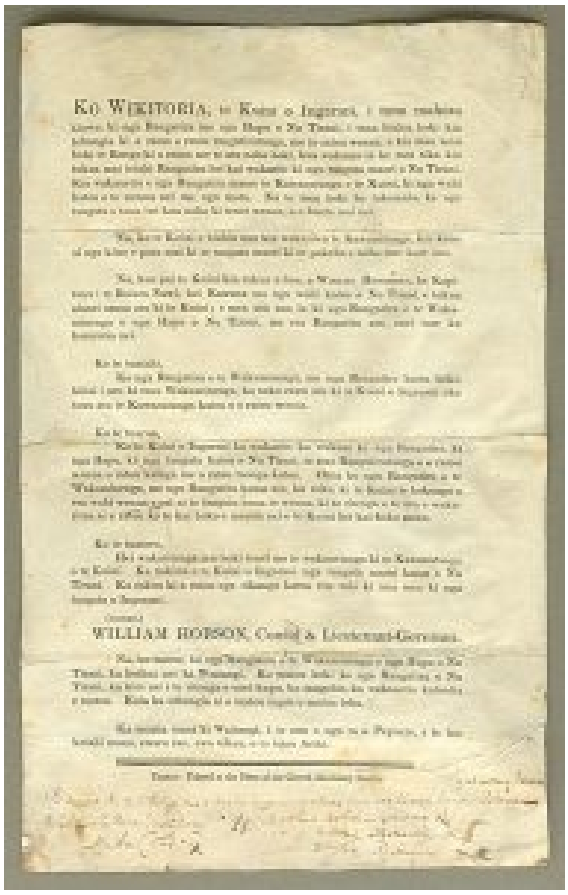
To add another layer of complication, many people have multiple identities. That is, they may have parents or ancestors from different races or ethnicities, and identify with more than one of these categories.

Remember to let people identify themselves and use their terms whenever you can. Check trustworthy sources for the most appropriate ways to use language – for example in Australia, 'Indigenous Australian' used to be the norm but now it is more appropriate to use 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', or 'First Nations' (Reconciliation Australia, n.d.).

Some terms attempt to encompass a range of identities. For example, 'people of colour' or POC, has

spread from the United States to other English-speaking countries. BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) is common in the UK. More recently, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) has tried to recognise that Black people and Indigenous peoples have particular experiences of racialisation. The problem with all of these terms is that they group together diverse ethnicities and might have the effect of homogenising the groups into a single category, and erasing the specific experiences that different groups have. However, they have political meanings that recognise the hierarchies that exist which place whiteness in more powerful positions than all other categories (Ooi, 2020; Pearson, 2017).

## Settler-Colonialism


KO WIKITORIA, te Kuini o Ingarani, i mana tuaruru

WILLIAM HOBSON, Consul & Lieutenant-Governor.

**Figure:** One of the nine documents that make up the Treaty of Waitangi. This Waikato copy is the only surviving printed copy, signed at the bottom by five chiefs from Ngāti Pou (Waikato) and Ngāti Te Wehi (Raglan). Printed in Paihia on 17 February 1840 by CMS printer, William Colenso. Treaty of Waitangi by Archives New Zealand is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

When James Cook and his ship the Endeavour arrived in Poverty Bay in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1769, and in Botany Bay in Australia in 1770, he and his crew found lands that did not need 'discovering' since they were already occupied. However, sealers, whalers and traders moved to Aotearoa New Zealand in the last few decades of the 1700s, and convict ships began arriving in Australia from 1788. Later, migration to both places came primarily from Britain, Ireland, and western Europe. In 1840, the British presented the Treaty of Waitangi to a gathering of Maori people before it was signed by more than 500 Maori chiefs across the two islands. Disputes remain between the English-language and the Maori-language versions of the Treaty, but one key thing it did was pave the way for the British crown to consider New Zealand part of its sovereign lands.

Colonisation in Australia did not engage with a treaty process, instead relying on the legal concept of *terra nullius*, the belief that Australia was land that belonged to no one. Thus, British sovereignty was declared and recognised in international law.

Both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand became settler-colonies. A settler-colonial system is a kind of colonialism where the settler society replaces the First People – this is different from extractive colonialism where, for example, colonising nations extracted natural resources but only small numbers of colonisers relocated to that new place. Settler-colonies develop a

national identity and political structures that eventually become distinct from the country of origin, but from the perspective of the First Peoples, they remain *colonial* structures (Veracini, 2015).

Australia began, as many people know, as a penal colony, with 80,000 involuntary migrants arriving between 1788 and 1840. Free settlers soon saw the continent as an opportunity, beginning in the 1830s. The 1850s, though, saw a big wave of settlers arriving in search of wealth. The vast majority were from Britain, Ireland, and Europe. A small number of these free settlers were Chinese and other Asian migrants seeking economic gain in the gold fields and pearl shell diving industry. An even smaller number were Pacific Island labourers brought to Australia as contract labourers to work on sugar cane farms in a practice known as 'blackbirding'[2]. Post-WWII, Australia gradually began increasing migration from other parts of the world – southern and eastern Europe, then Asia (especially in the Vietnam War era), the Middle East and Africa.

Likewise, Aotearoa New Zealand grew dramatically in the mid-1800s as mostly British settlers arrived in droves. By 1858, Europeans outnumbered Maori people. From the 1990s onwards, migrants from non-European backgrounds began to arrive in larger numbers, especially from Asian and Pacific backgrounds.

Today, our societies are multicultural, although the extent to which this multiculturality is embraced varies. But as settler-colonial societies, Australia and New Zealand "retain pervasive colonial dynamics, which continue to structure (hierarchical) ethnic relations" (Broman et al., 2021, p. 2110). Attempts to assimilate both First Peoples and migrants into a supposedly cohesive national society have been central to the histories of Australia and New Zealand (van Krieken, 2012).

## Social Facts

Although race may be treated as a 'scientific' classification scheme, and the categories that people fall into are ostensibly based on physical characteristics, there is actually nothing about race that makes it an objective fact. As we explain above, the process of racialisation explains how society becomes built around the perception that race is an important way to construct hierarchies. However, the categories, and the values we attach to them, are *socially constructed*.

Genetic research shows that 99.9% of human DNA is identical, regardless of geography or ethnicity. In other words, we have far more in common across races than some might think. The physical characteristics that are relied upon to racially categorise people are a bit arbitrary, and other physical markers would result in very different groupings of people. If these ways of categorising people into races were value neutral, we

2. Blackbirding refers to the form of indentured labour which saw workers from the South Sea Islands, in the Pacific, brought to sugar cane farms in Australia for work. Some workers were kidnapped, and others were convinced to come freely but experienced considerable inequalities when they arrived. This period of "slavery-like conditions" in Australia was coercive and remains largely unrecognised, though contemporary South Sea Islanders continue to assert their identity and their history (Stead & Davies, 2021).

probably would not include a chapter in a sociology textbook about it. But as we will discuss further below, racialisation results in some pretty significant inequalities around the world, including in Aotearoa New Zealand and in Australia.

One way that we can see evidence of the social construction of the categories is the way that names for the categories change with time. For example, in the very earliest days of Australia's colonisation, the First Peoples were referred to as 'Indians'. This shifted to 'Aborigines', a category which included Torres Strait Islander people – despite the social, cultural, and linguistic differences between the two broad groups. In the 1990s, the term 'Indigenous Australians' became popular, again encompassing both people from Aboriginal and from Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Now, the common terminology is to name both broad groups – 'Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples'. But increasingly, we are seeing terms like 'First Nations', 'First Peoples', and more common references to specific Nation groups (e.g. Wiradjuri, Wulgurukaba, Larrakia). These terminology changes are not as simple as just using different words, but in fact represent different ways that, as a society, we think about the groups.

Another example that helps us to identify race as a social construction is the changing perceptions of who falls within the categories, across time and in different contexts. 4.4% of Australians identify their ancestry as Italian, and people of Italian ancestry began arriving in Australia with the First Fleet in 1788. However, the *Immigration Restriction Act (1901)* was often used to refuse admission to Italian migrants who were racialised and treated as 'primitive' and 'inferior'. Mass migration from Italy to Australia began after WWII, and today Italian is often considered an ancestry or an ethnicity, rather than a separate racial category.

**Figure:** Emile Durkheim is in the Public Domain

It is helpful to think about race as a *social fact*. This term comes from sociologist Émile Durkheim, and are used to understand factors outside of the individual which shape their choices. These factors might be institutions, normal values, beliefs, class structures, roles, or laws – or racial categories. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1999, p. 899) explicitly defines race as a social fact, noting that although it is socially constructed, "highly malleable and historically-bounded", it is a central principle around which contemporary societies are organised.

According to Durkheim (1982/1895), social facts exist beyond the awareness of individuals, but they compel individuals to follow their rules. This is most obvious when we try to resist social facts, which can result in punishments ranging from social exclusion to violence. The short video below [3:59] explains Durkheim's conceptualisation of social facts.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=37#oembed-2*

Durkheim was a structural functionalist, meaning that he studied social structures and how they influence individuals (rather than the other way around). Society, for Durkheim, is a persistent structure that individuals merely pass through – it has its own logic and rules, rather than merely being the sum of the various individuals:

> The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society forms a determinate system with a life of its own. It can be termed the collective or creative consciousness. (Durkheim, 1893/1984, pp. 38-9)

In other words, the collective consciousness is the shared understandings of social norms and values in a society. We know that the collective consciousness is socially constructed because these norms and values differ across context, and do change over time.

Race is a social fact because it does not rely on the actions of individuals to continue to exist. It is a fact because, even though it is socially constructed, race (and particularly the hierarchies that emerge from racialisation) have actual, material effects on people. Remember above where we discussed the way that some people might identify in one way, but be categorised in others? This is an example of what Durkheim means about social facts existing above the level of the individual. Someone who moves through the world with brown skin will be treated by others in particular ways, no matter how they identify themselves. That going against the norms "is never without being forced to fight against them", as Durkheim (1895/1982, p. 51) puts it.

Hierarchies attached to racism mean that some races and ethnicities become subordinated while others maintain dominance. Scapegoat theory, developed initially from John Dollard's (1900-1980) frustration-aggression theory, suggests that the dominant group will displace their unfocused aggression onto a subordinate group (1939). History has shown us many examples of the scapegoating of a subordinate group. An example from the last century is the way that Adolf Hitler was able to use the Jewish people as scapegoats for Germany's social and economic problems. In Australia in 1996, One Nation MP Pauline Hanson used Asian migrants as scapegoats, which harkened back to laws enacted around Australia to reduce the rights of Chinese migrants during the Gold Rush. For example, in New South Wales in the 1860s, Chinese diggers could only work goldfields specifically declared open to them (Curthoys, 2001, pp. 115-6). In practice this meant Chinese diggers would have access to a gold field after it had begun declining in productivity. Other parts of Australia had similar measures in place to discourage Chinese immigration (Woods, 2018).

🧠 **Learn More**

View Pauline Hanson's maiden speech to the Australian Parliament House of Representatives, in 1996, where she expressed her fear of Australia being "swamped by Asians". The article also includes statistics about the proportion of Australians born in Asia in the two decades following Hanson's speech. Learn more about Chinese experiences on Australia's goldfields, including short videos and written stories.

## Prejudice and Discrimination

The terms stereotype, prejudice, discrimination, and racism are often used interchangeably in everyday conversation. But when discussing these terms from a sociological perspective, it is important to define them: **Stereotypes** are oversimplified ideas about groups of people; **prejudice** refers to thoughts and feelings about those groups; while **discrimination** refers to actions toward them.

As stated above, stereotypes are oversimplified ideas about groups of people. Stereotypes can be based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation — almost any characteristic. They may be framed as compliments (for example, the belief that Asian people are good at maths or music) but are often negative (such as when members of a dominant racial group suggest that a subordinate racial group is stupid or lazy). In either case, the stereotype is a generalization that doesn't take individual differences into account and reduces people to singular details.

Prejudice refers to beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes that someone holds about a group. A prejudice need not be based on experience; it is a prejudgment that may originate outside of actual experience. Many people think of racism as a type of prejudice – a belief that one racial category is superior or inferior to others. However, as we will discuss further below, a sociological analysis is interested in racism beyond individual thoughts and feelings.

While prejudice refers to biased thinking, discrimination consists of actions against a group of people. Discrimination can be based on age, religion, health, and other indicators. Discrimination based on race or ethnicity can take many forms, from unfair housing practices to biased hiring systems. In both Australia and New Zealand, as in many other parts of the world, overt racial discrimination is part of history. The impacts of discrimination are still felt today, as we will explore later in this chapter.

The opposite is also true – many people today have benefitted from the lack of racial discrimination affecting their lives. This is often referred to as white privilege, though this is a topic that makes many people uncomfortable. While most white people are willing to admit that non-white people live with a set of disadvantages due to the colour of their skin, very few are willing to acknowledge the benefits they receive

simply by being white. White privilege refers to the fact that dominant groups often accept their experience as the normative (and hence, superior) experience. Failure to recognise this 'normality' as race-based is an example of a dominant group's often unconscious racism.

### 🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit

**Figure:** Peggy McIntosh by PeggyMcIntosh is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

**What are some ways that you have experienced unearned disadvantage in your life? What are some ways you have experienced unearned advantages in your life?**

Feminist sociologist Peggy McIntosh wrote an essay called "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1989). In it, she describes several examples of "white privilege." For instance, white women can easily find makeup that matches their skin tone, and white people can be assured that, most of the time, they will be dealing with authority figures of their own race. White children have an easy time finding toys with a similar appearance, and see children who look like them in picture books and cartoons.

**How many other examples of white privilege can you think of?**

It is important to remember that acknowledging privileges that accrue to some people and not others is not about placing blame or making anyone feel guilty. Instead, this activity lets us see that racialised inequality is bigger than just individual beliefs, attitudes, and practices. Other forms of inequality, like those based on gender, sexuality, or age might also lead to privilege – unearned advantages – in the lives of people in the dominant group. Intersectionality considers the ways that multiple factors relate to each other to determine someone's overall privileges and disadvantages in society.

### 🧠 Learn More

Unconscious bias refers to hidden beliefs that we all hold, that influence how we behave. Researchers at Harvard University have developed a series of Implicit Association Tests that

allow you to uncover potential unconscious biases based on race, religion, gender, disability, and more attributes. Project Implicit has a web page to explore the tests further. Identifying unconscious bias is just the first step, and institutions seeking to reduce the impacts of unconscious bias must identify specific actions beyond just acknowledging its existence.

Institutional racism refers to the way in which racial distinctions are used to organise the policy and practice of state, judicial, economic, and educational institutions. Institutional racism may be set up to purposely exclude people based on race, or the outcomes may be due to unconscious bias.

Institutional racism that is widespread begins to systematically reproduce inequalities along racial lines. They define what people can and cannot do based on racial characteristics. It is not necessarily the intention of these institutions to reproduce inequality, nor of the individuals who work in the institutions. Rather, inequality is the outcome of patterns of differential treatment based on racial or ethnic categorizations of people.

**Figure:** Eduardo Bonilla-Silva by bourgeoisbee is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

This becomes what is known as systemic or structural racism, or the perpetuated discrimination within a system. Structural racism is deeply embedded throughout whole systems and upheld by structures, like political systems, legal systems, health care systems, or school systems (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Braveman et al., 2022). All forms of racism – individual, interpersonal, and institutional – are underpinned by structural racism. Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (1997) identifies differential allocation of economic, political, social, and psychological rewards based on race, and racial hierarchies that guide the actions of members of a society as key features of structural racism. When we consider racialisation as a structure, according to Bonilla-Silva (1997, p. 475), we understand that racialisation "becomes an organizing principle of social relations in itself". Although this structure of society exists well above the level of individuals, Bonilla-Silva (1997) acknowledges that it changes over time and place.

🔍 **Look Closer:** The White Australia Policy

**Figure:** 1910 White Australia Badge was a badge from a group known ironically as the Australian Natives' Association. White Australia badge by Australian Natives' Association is in the Public Domain

The so-called 'White Australia Policy' was actually a group of laws implemented from the beginning of Federation in 1901 until the 1970s. The first three of these laws were:

- the *Immigration Restriction Act (1901)*, which restricted Asian and Pacific Islander migration to Australia
- the *Pacific Island Labourers Act (1901)*, which allowed most Pacific Islanders working in Queensland and northern New South Wales to be deported after 1906, and limited immigration of any additional Pacific Islanders between 1901 and 1906
- the *Post and Telegraph Act (1901)*, which required ships carrying Australian post to employ only white workers.

The laws avoided using racialised terms but were written in a way that they could be applied differently based on a migrant's race. Read more about these laws and how they worked. A key component of the *Immigration Restriction Act (1901)* was a dictation test, which enabled Customs officers to selectively require migrants to undertake a dictation in any European language. The test was not required of all migrants and was generally reserved for those considered 'undesirable' because of their race and/or country of origin. The test could be given any number of times, so in some cases, migrants who passed once were given another language to transcribe, until they failed.

The effect of the laws was powerful, with non-white migrants avoiding attempts to move to Australia, and in some cases being denied tickets for ships headed to Australia. The White Australia legislation was slowly dismantled, beginning with the introduction of the *Migration Act (1958)*, and then the *Racial Discrimination Act (1975)*.

## Some Sociological Understandings of Racialisation

Sociology utilises a number of different theoretical approaches, and conceptual tools, to make sense of the reasons for, and impacts of, racial hierarchies and inequalities. We explore some specific inequalities in the

section below, but here want to outline some key tools to help you use your sociological imagination when considering race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity.

## Whiteness Studies and Critical Race Theory

🧠 **Learn More**

Critical race theory has become a topic of discussion, especially amongst politicians in North America, in recent years. Read about these debates.

Primarily, the arguments are around whether schools should be teaching 'critical race theory'. This demonstrates a misunderstanding of what a theory is and does – a theory is a framework for understanding why society is the way it is, mostly used by academics (like sociologists) to make sense of the world. It is not something that exists in the world more broadly. Although schools might be delivering a curriculum that has been informed by the tenets of critical race theory, it is unlikely they are teaching the theory itself, especially in primary schools.

Racialisation is an important focus in sociology, identified by African American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois in 1903 as "the problem of the 20th century" (Du Bois, 1903/2009, p. 1), and argued by Trawlwoolway sociologist Maggie Walter and Bundjalung and Worimi sociologist Kathy Butler, it remains the problem of the 21st century (Walter & Butler, 2013). In Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, a sociology of race *must* include consideration of Indigeneity. To understand the societies of Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, both must be considered holistically (Bargallie & Lentin, 2021; Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

Critical race theory is an explanatory tool that has received a lot of attention in recent years, becoming the focus of political debates especially in the United States. Critical race theory has roots in the US Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. Foundational scholars in the field are Kimberle Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Derrick Bell, amongst others. Critical race theory recognises the social construction of racialised hierarchies that become normalised in social interactions. Experiencing racism, then, becomes an everyday occurrence that is very difficult to identify, especially by those who benefit from its perpetuation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). There are five tenets of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2021), which we expand on below:

- the belief that racism is a normal feature of society, not an aberrant occurrence or isolated incident
- the focus on interest convergence, or the expectation that people who hold power within a structure will only move towards justice for marginalised people if it is also in their own interests

- the understanding of race as a socially constructed category rather than a scientific one, but one with real social power to impact people's lives
- attention to the intersections between race, gender, class, nation, sexuality, disability, and more work together to compound hierarchies
- the importance of counter-storytelling and an awareness that history is told from the perspective of power-holders and leaves out many valuable perspectives.

Thus, one task of critical race theory, for which it is often criticised, is 'counter-storytelling' – re-examining historical events and understanding them through a lens of structural racism. This is not about changing history, but rather adding nuance to our understandings of that history. This is a deliberate act in a time when some powerholders would prefer a 'post-racialist' discourse that considers contemporary states and societies as 'colourblind', 'post-colonial', and no longer built on racism. This rhetoric positions attempts to acknowledge historical and ongoing racial inequalities as 'divisive'. For example, the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017), which seeks amongst other things a First Nations Voice to Parliament, is opposed by commentators like Andrew Bolt because it positions First Nations people as "greedy and irreverent" (Shulz et al., 2019, p. 3).

🔍 **Look Closer:** The Uluru Statement from the Heart

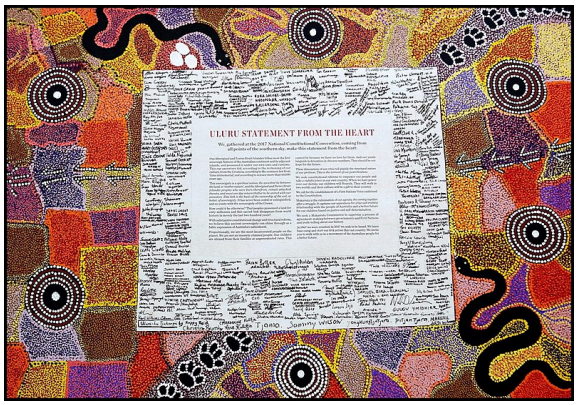



**Figure:** Uluru Statement from the Heart, May 2017 by BrownHoneyAnt is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

The Uluru Statement from the Heart was presented to Australia in May, 2017 and signed by 250 First Nations delegates to the National First Nations Constitutional Convention. This Convention ratified the decisions that had been made by a series of First Nations Regional Dialogues about constitutional reform, held throughout 2016 and 2017. Thus, the Uluru Statement is broadly representative, and built on processes of Aboriginal decision-making.

The Uluru Statement calls for a First Nations Voice to Parliament to be enshrined in the Australian Constitution. This was the biggest focus of conversation for a few years, due in part to a commitment by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, elected in 2022, to hold a Referendum on the matter. In October 2023, 60% of Australian voters indicated they did not support changing the Constitution as proposed.

However, there are two other calls made within the Uluru Statement: a process of truth-telling (which we might, perhaps, think of as 'counter-storytelling'), and a *makarrata* commission to oversee a process of treaty-making.

**Figure:** Denise Bowden, CEO of Yothu Yindi, signing the Uluru Statement from the Heart, in Central Australia by Australian Human Rights Commission is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Unlike Aotearoa New Zealand's Treaty of Waitangi between Britain and Maori, Australia has no formal treaties with First Nations peoples. A treaty-making process in Australia would challenge the 'white possessive logic' (Moreton-Robinson, 2011) that we discuss below. From a critical race theory perspective, proponents of the treaty-making process might ask what interest convergence there will be, and highlight that in their campaigns to non-Indigenous Australians.

You can read the Uluru Statement, or listen to it, and explore videos and timelines explaining how it came about.

Another tenet of critical race theory is that racism is a normal and effectively a permanent structure, at least in society as we know it. This does not mean it cannot be dismantled, but that it has not been yet. Discourses of 'post-racism' fail to consider the ongoing inequalities that emerge from structural racism. One way that this occurs is by whiteness becoming a taken-for-granted norm against which all other races are measured. This process, known as 'othering', creates an invisible normal and a highly visible 'other' (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2019). These 'other' groups are often the subject of research, policy-making, and program development aimed at 'fixing' the problems that prevent the 'other' from being more like the group against which the norms are set. However, understanding where those norms come from is perhaps a more telling mechanism of understanding inequalities. Thus, another important focus of critical race theory is an examination of whiteness.

Critical race theory has been criticised by some academics for focusing more on the legacies of slavery in the Americas than on issues of Indigeneity, colonisation, and dispossession (Velazquez et al., 2022). In attempting to weave the two together, some scholars focus on 'whiteness as property', which offers a point of convergence between understanding the experiences of First Nations people who were dispossessed by white colonialism, and other people of colour, especially in the context of slavery and indentured

servitude (Harris, 1993). One way that white colonialism justified itself was the belief that First Nations' relationship to land was ambiguous, unclear, and not equivalent to European conceptions of property ownership. Likewise, Quandamooka scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2011) seeks to understand the 'white possessive logic' that allows racial hierarchies to flourish. This possession is focused on land, access to resources, and power within and over nations. White possession has become naturalised, normalised, and the invisible universal (similar to the process of whiteness and othering described above).

## Multiculturalism and Social Exclusion

Throughout Western history intergroup relations (relationships between different groups of people) have been subject to different strategies for the management of diversity. The problem of management arises when differences between different peoples are regarded as so insurmountable that it is believed they cannot easily coincide or cohabit with one another. A strategy for the management of diversity refers to the systematic methods used to resolve conflicts, or potential conflicts, between groups that arise based on perceived differences. How can the unity of the self-group or political community be attained in the face of the divisive presence of non-selves or others? As Richard Day (b. 1964) describes it, the template for the problem of diversity was laid down at least as early as the works of the ancient Greeks Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle: "the division of human individuals into groupable 'types,' the arrangement of these types into a hierarchy, the naming of some types as presenting a 'problem,' and the attempt to provide 'solutions' to the problem so constructed" (2000, p. 7). The solutions proposed to intergroup relations have ranged along a spectrum between tolerance and intolerance. The most tolerant form of intergroup relations is multiculturalism, in which cultural distinctions are made between groups, but the groups are regarded to have equal standing in society. At the other end of the continuum are assimilation, segregation, expulsion, and even genocide — stark examples of intolerant intergroup relations.

Whereas constitutional democracies like Australia and New Zealand are typically based on the protection of individual rights, multiculturalism implies that the protection of cultural difference also depends on protecting group-specific rights or group-differentiated rights (i.e., rights conferred on individuals by virtue of their membership in a group). Kymlicka (1995) notes that there are three different ways that the principle of multicultural group-specific rights can be conceived: (1) as self-government rights in which culturally distinct nations within a society attain some degree of political autonomy and self-determination to ensure their survival and development as unique peoples; (2) as polyethnic rights in which culturally distinct groups are able to express their particular cultural beliefs and practices without being discriminated against, and (3) as special representation rights in which the systematic underrepresentation of minorities in the political process is addressed by some form of proportional representation (e.g., reserving a certain number of parliamentary seats for specific ethnic minorities or language groups).

Issues around multiculturalism continually bring up the problem of ethical relativism, the idea that all cultures and all cultural practices have equal value. In a fully multicultural society, what principles can be appealed to in order to resolve issues where different cultural beliefs or practices clash? Richard Day (2000) has argued that rather than resolving the problem of diversity, official multiculturalism has exacerbated it.

"Far from achieving its goal, this state sponsored attempt to design a unified nation has paradoxically led to an increase in both the number of minority identities and in the amount of effort required to 'manage' them" (Day, 2000, p. 3).

## Strengths-Based Approaches

Maggie Walter is a Trawlwoolway sociologist. One focus of her work is on statistical representations of Indigeneity, and she pushes for a resistance to 'BADDR' data (which she explores in several books and papers). What Walter (2018) means by BADDR is:

- Blaming – contrasting First Nations and non-Indigenous, suggesting the problem is Indigeneity
- Aggregate – grouped at state- and/or nation-wide levels, implying homogeneity of First Nations experiences
- Decontexualised – isolating individuals or families without important context
- Deficit – focused on problems as prioritised by governments
- Restricted – collected by, and only available to, government agencies and researchers rather than communities themselves.

Walter is focused on quantitative, statistical data about First Nations peoples, but her discussion is relevant to qualitative research, sociological theories, community development and government programs, and broader understandings of race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity. Walter (2018) wants to replace these BADDR approaches with those that are useful, comprehensive, and nuanced. Understandings should consider cultures, communities, resilience, goals, and successes, and should do so with an acknowledgment of cultural and geographic diversity and socio-political contexts.

One way to answer Walter's calls for better data is to take a strengths-based approach. A strengths-based approach is built on the principle that "social critique alone is sorely inadequate" (Shulz et al., 2019, p. 2). It is an important starting point to identify what problems exist in society, but this approach suggests is an inadequate ending point. Instead, consideration should be given for alternatives, either suggesting them, trialing them, or examining attempts already in process. It is important to note that "there is more than one way to challenge racial inequality" (Shulz et al., 2019, p. 3), and strengths-based approaches are not seeking a universal solution. One of the best places to find strengths-based approaches to race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity is from researchers and communities outside of dominant groups.

Bronwyn Carlson and Ryan Frazer, along with other colleagues, research First Nations peoples' use of social media. Their work is a good example of a strengths-based approach to sociology, because it is built on an analysis of the problems of racism in online spaces. However, they also identify the opportunities that social media provide First Nations people to resist and reject violence, identify and be identified on their own terms, and imagine and create alternatives (Carlson & Frazer, 2020; Carlson, Frazer & Farrelly, 2020; Carlson & Kennedy, 2021).

In Summary

- Race refers to physical difference in appearance that have been socially constructed as important; ethnicity is based on shared practices, values, beliefs, and may also feature common language, religion, and traditions; Indigenous or First Nations peoples are those with continuing connections to particular places that link back to pre-colonial societies. All three categories overlap, and all are often used in society as the basis for hierarchies.
- Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia are both settler-colonial societies, meaning that colonists moved in to stay, and this dynamic contributes to the ongoing marginalisation of First Nations peoples. There are similarities with the marginalisation of other groups based on race and ethnicity, but First Nations peoples have unique experiences of dispossession that it is important to understand.
- Using our sociological imaginations, we can understand the differences between stereotypes and prejudice, which operate at more micro scales, and discrimination, structural racism and systemic racism, that exist at the macro level of society.
- Critical race theory is one sociological tool that we can use to understand the way that historical events, like colonisation and restrictive immigration policies, continue to shape society today.
- Research and policy-making that focuses on high-level statistical data can take a deficit-focus that does not consider the contexts which provide important explanations for the outcomes under study. Shifting to a strengths-based approach does not mean ignoring the problems that need to be solved, but focuses on potential or actual solutions to those problems to focus on what is working.

## Expanding on Race, Ethnicity and Indigeneity

If you would like to learn more about this topic, explore the books and articles we have referred to throughout the chapter, and do further research on any topics, concepts or theories that interest you. A valuable general overview is provided by Peruvian-Australian sociologist Zuleyka Zevallos. Zevallos and her colleague, Alana Lentin, created a series of videos applying the sociology of race to COVID-19 pandemic responses.

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# GENDER, SEXUALITY AND FAMILIES

Theresa Petray

The key goals of this chapter are to explain that:

- sex, gender, and sexuality are different concepts that sometimes overlap but they are all essential to understand as socially constructed
- the social construction of gender is shaped by families (and schools, media, and more), and social understandings of gender shape how families are structured
- society has *normative* beliefs that push people towards certain expressions of gender, sexuality, and family
- although they are socially constructed, categories of sex, gender, and sexuality serve as important foundations for inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia (and beyond)
- there are many theoretical perspectives a sociologist may use to critically analyse gender, sexuality, and family.

## Overview

In Tokyo in August 2021, an Olympic athlete from Aotearoa New Zealand made history – not for the weight-lifting records she broke (she did not advance to the final in her competition). Laurel Hubbard is an openly transgender athlete who was given permission to compete in the Women's Weightlifting competition at the Tokyo Olympics. While she isn't the first openly trans athlete to make headlines, her participation in the event attracted a lot of attention and controversy (Scovel et al., 2022).

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) updated their approach in 2015, paving the way for Hubbard and others to participate. The IOC framework aims to balance inclusion and non-discrimination with fairness. However, the majority of sporting competitions, especially at elite levels, are organised along binary, gendered lines. According to their 2021 framework, the IOC encourages athletes to compete in the category (men's or women's) that best aligns with their 'self-determined gender identity', so long as they do not have a disproportionate advantage or present a safety risk to other athletes (IOC, 2021).

Examples like Hubbard's highlight the complex nature of gender identity, how it intersects with biology, and the way these issues are highly politicised in contemporary society (Burbery, 2020). Trans participation in sport is one topic among many that attracts heated debate in the mainstream media.

In this chapter, we will discuss sex and gender, and we will also discuss sexuality and families. These are different areas of study but they overlap considerably, so we discuss them here together so you can think about how they influence one another.

# Definitions

## Sex and Gender

**Figure:** Gender reveal cake by Jim from USA is licensed under CC BY 2.0 Cakes, decorated to hide the colour within, are often used at "gender reveal parties" held to announce the sex of unborn babies.

When filling out a document such as a job application or school registration form you are often asked to provide your name, address, phone number, birth date, and sex or gender. But have you ever been asked to provide your sex *and* your gender? Most people think that sex and gender are interchangeable terms. As another example, we can look at 'gender reveal' parties held for unborn babies. These are gatherings where guests – and often the future parents themselves – are surprised in some way with pink or blue to indicate whether they will have a girl or a boy.

However, sociologists and most other social scientists view sex and gender as conceptually distinct. **Sex** refers to physiological characteristics that have been associated with maleness or femaleness. **Gender**, however, refers to cultural and social understandings of masculinity and femininity. These two do not always align.

Australian philosopher Cordelia Fine (2017) writes about the relationship between biology and sex and provides examples from numerous animal species that complicate our understandings of the nature vs. nurture debate. Her discussion of biological sex is what we will focus on here. The physical characteristics most commonly used to determine sex are the genitals – when a baby is born (or even before), we look for a penis or a vulva. However, most of the time we move through the world without anyone seeing our genitals! So what characteristics do people use to assume our sex?

**Figure:** Australian philosopher Cordelia Fine by Daniel Lende is licensed under CC BY 4.0

🧠 **Learn More**

Cordelia Fine identifies three Gs that form our understandings of biological sex – genitals, gonads (or reproductive organs), and genetics (XY chromosomes for males, XX chromosomes for females). However, what happens if these don't fit neatly into categories? It is possible to have a combination of these three Gs that don't all align with one sex. It is also possible to fall outside of the binary altogether.

Intersex people are a very diverse group whose innate sex characteristics (one or more of their three Gs) differ from medical norms for male or female bodies. It is hard to accurately measure how many people are intersex, but Intersex Aotearoa estimates 2.3% of the population has some intersex variation, and Intersex Human Rights Australia estimates are around 1.7% of the population.

In general, people make assumptions about who we are based on our gender expression. This includes some physical characteristics, like facial hair, but a lot of this is also the result of choices we make about our appearance, like our hairstyle and clothing. **Gender identity** is how we feel – like a man or like a woman, and our gender expression is whether we 'perform' in masculine or feminine ways. Increasingly, people are identifying as non-binary or agender, meaning they do not identify predominantly with either masculinity or femininity.

Contrary to the common understandings, gender is not determined by biology in any simple way. The experience of **transgender** people demonstrates that a person's biological sex does not always correspond

with their gender. In contrast, the term **cisgender** refers to people whose gender aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth. Therefore, the terms sex and gender are not interchangeable.

**Gender roles** are society's concepts of how men and women are expected to act and how they should behave. These roles are based on norms, or standards, created by society. In Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, for the most part, masculine roles are associated with strength, aggression, and dominance, while feminine roles are associated with passivity, nurturing, and subordination.

**Figure:** Shelves in a toy aisle featuring pink toys and baby dolls. Pink girls section of toy store by OttawaAC is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Role learning starts with socialisation at birth (see the culture, socialisation chapter). One way children learn gender roles is through play. Parents typically supply boys with trucks, toy guns, and superhero paraphernalia, which are active toys that promote motor skills, aggression, and solitary play. Girls are often given dolls and dress-up apparel that foster nurturing, social proximity, and role play.

The drive to adhere to masculine and feminine gender roles continues later in life. Men tend to outnumber women in professions such as law enforcement, the military, and politics. Women tend to outnumber men in care-related occupations such as childcare, health care, and social work. These occupational roles are examples of typical gendered behaviour, derived from our culture's traditions.

## Sexuality

**Sexuality** refers to a person's capacity for sexual feelings and their emotional and sexual attraction preferences. Generally, we think about sexuality as determined by what gender someone is attracted to. However, it may not surprise you to hear that this way of understanding sexuality is too simplistic! Sexuality also refers to someone's sexual identity, the kinds of experiences they seek out, their desires, their drive for physical pleasure, their approach to achieving physical pleasure, and more. So while the spectrum of sexuality certainly includes heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality, it includes a whole range of other identities, too.

🔍 **Look Closer:** Spectrums of Sexuality and Relationships

Alfred Kinsey was among the first to conceptualise sexuality as a continuum rather than a strict dichotomy of gay or straight. To classify this continuum of sexuality, Kinsey created a seven-point rating scale that ranges from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. In his 1948 work *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Kinsey writes, "Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats ... The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects" (Kinsey et al., 1948, p. 639).

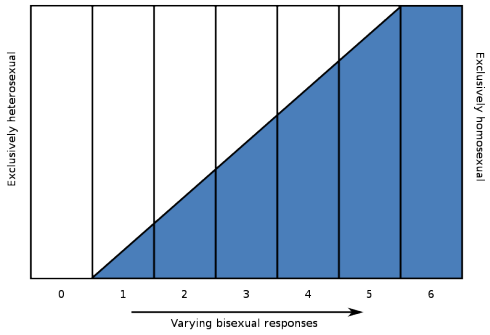


**Figure:** The Kinsey scale is a tool that enables an individual to select a response on a scale between heterosexual and homosexual. Kinsey Scale by Sexual Behavior in the Human Female (1953) is in the Public Domain

Later scholarship by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick expanded on Kinsey's notions. She coined the term 'homosocial' to oppose 'homosexual', describing nonsexual same-sex relations. Sedgwick recognised that in North American culture, men are subject to a clear divide between the two sides of this continuum, whereas women enjoy more fluidity. This can be illustrated by the way women in Western societies can express homosocial feelings (nonsexual regard for people of the same sex) through hugging, hand-holding, and physical closeness. In contrast, men's behaviour is subject to strong social sanction if it veers into homosocial territory because of societal homophobia (Sedgwick, 1985).

It can feel like there is a mind-boggling array of terms relating to sexuality. The article, 47 terms that describe sexual attraction, behavior, and orientation, for example, has almost 50. Consider the value of labels such as those defined in the link. Is it beneficial to find a label that explains your experiences, or do labels constrain our understandings of ourselves as fluid and complex beings?

In addition to sexuality being related to which gender one is attracted to, it is tied up with gender in other ways, too. For example, there are different social norms and expectations of men's sexuality as compared to women's. There are stereotypes that men have higher sex drives than women, and this can be used to explain things like infidelity and sometimes even sexual violence. It also leads to significant differences in sexual pleasure between women and men (Mahar et al., 2020). One explanation might be that female bodies are less capable of achieving sexual pleasure – however, the statistics for women in relationships with other women suggest otherwise.

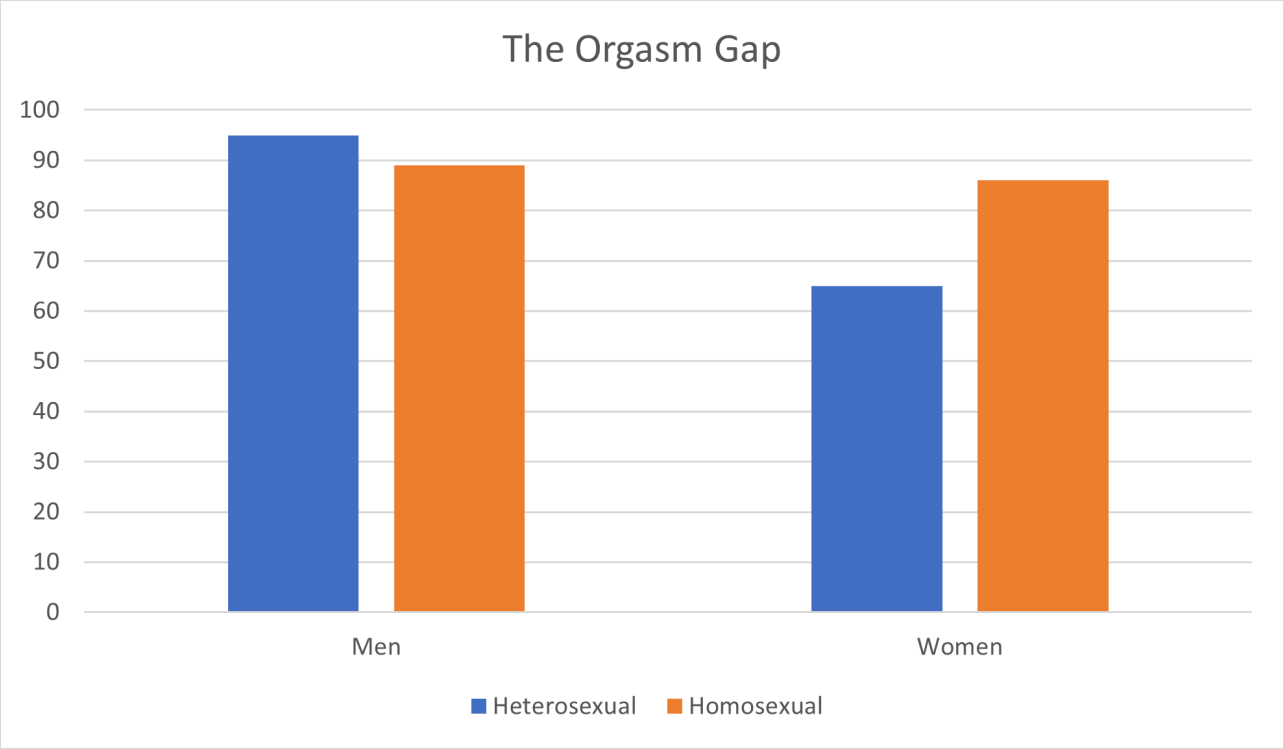


**Figure**: The Orgasm Gap. Blue (left, heterosexual) and orange (right, homosexual) bars show the percentage of people who report they have reached orgasm usually or always in the past month. These data are based on a survey of over 50,000 people. The data for this graph are from "Differences in orgasm frequency among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual men and women in a U.S. National sample," by D. A. Frederick, H. K. John, J. R. and E. A. Lloyd, E. A., 2018, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *47*(1), 273. (https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-017-0939-z). Copyright 2023 by Springer Nature.

You may be familiar with some variations of the acronym LGBTQIA+. This is an umbrella acronym that includes a range of sexualities and gender identities – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, and the plus sign indicates there are many other labels not directly included in the acronym, but included in the spirit of the grouping.

# Family

**Figure:** How traditional is the nuclear family? by Perpetual Fostering is licensed under CC BY 2.0

**Families** are often considered the most basic social unit upon which society is built. The question of what constitutes a family is a prime area of debate in family sociology, as well as in politics and religion. Social conservatives tend to define the family in terms of a 'traditional' nuclear family structure with each family member filling a certain role (like father, mother, or child). Sociologists, on the other hand, tend to define family more in terms of the way members relate to one another. Here, we will define family as a socially recognised group joined by bonds including blood relations, marriage, or adoption, that forms an emotional connection and serves as an economic unit of society. Much recent attention has also been paid to families *of choice*, which refers to groupings that may not cohabitate, and may not have legal or blood relations, but do serve as essential emotional support networks.

Based on Georg Simmel's (1908/1950) distinction between the form and content of social interaction, we can analyse the family as a social form that comes into existence around five different contents or interests: sexual activity, economic cooperation, reproduction, socialisation of children, and emotional support. The types of family forms in which all or some of these contents are expressed are diverse: nuclear families, polyamorous families, extended families, same-sex parent families, single-parent families, blended families, zero-child families, etc.

The forms that families take are determined by cultural traditions, social structures, economic pressures, and historical transformations. They also are subject to intense moral and political debate about the definition of the family, the 'decline of the family', or the policy options to best support the well-being of children. In these debates, sociology demonstrates its practical side as a discipline that is capable of providing the factual knowledge needed to make evidence-based decisions on political and moral issues concerning the family.

The 'traditional nuclear family' is the product of white Western society, and it rose to prominence following WWII (Gilding, 2001). Although it only lasted as the predominant family form for around two decades – declining again when divorce became more accessible and women gained increased rights and freedoms – it maintains a powerful hold on our ideas of what families 'should' look like.

While the nature of families may change over time and in different social contexts, the importance of belonging to a family does not. Humans are social animals. Being intimately bonded to others is a shared feature of all human societies.

# Socialisation

In the identity, self and culture chapter, we discussed the concept of socialisation. We discuss it again here because gender and sexuality are two ways in which we can clearly see the effects of socialisation – and families are a key agent of socialisation (along with education, peer groups, media, and other secondary agents). Agents of socialisation create and maintain normative expectations for behaviour based on gender and sexuality. Socialisation occurs repeatedly over time and becomes seen as natural and innate rather than a product of social construction.

Gender socialisation within families occurs in a number of ways. It includes the gendered roles that parents play, which children absorb. Many households are characterised by gender roles, with recent research in Australia suggesting over 75% of heterosexual couples divide household labour on traditional gender roles (Siminski & Yetsenga, 2022). Children observe this division of labour and may consider it natural that women do the bulk of unpaid labour within the home.

Gender socialisation also includes the ways that boys and girls are spoken to and about, the rules and expectations of their behaviour, and even the chores they are given. Even when parents set gender equality as a goal, there may be underlying indications of inequality. For example, when dividing up household chores, boys may be asked to take out the garbage or perform other tasks that require strength or toughness, while girls may be asked to fold laundry or perform duties that require neatness and care. It has been found that fathers are firmer in their expectations for gender conformity than are mothers, and their expectations are stronger for sons than they are for daughters (Kimmel, 2000). This is true in many types of activities, including preference of toys, play styles, discipline, chores, and personal achievements. As a result, boys tend to be particularly attuned to their father's disapproval when engaging in an activity that might be considered feminine, like dancing or singing (Coltrane & Adams, 2008). It should be noted that parental socialisation and normative expectations vary along lines of social class, race, and ethnicity. Research in the United States has shown that African American families, for instance, are more likely than white families to model an egalitarian role structure for their children (Staples & Boulin Johnson, 2004).

In schools, boys are permitted a greater degree of freedom regarding rule-breaking or minor acts of deviance, whereas girls are expected to follow rules carefully and to adopt an obedient posture (Ready, 2001). Schools reinforce the polarisation of gender roles and the age-old 'battle of the sexes' by positioning girls and boys in competitive arrangements.

Mass media serves as another significant agent of gender socialisation. Research of children's movies indicates that of the 101 top-grossing G-rated movies released between 1990 and 2005, three out of four characters were male. Out of those 101 movies, only seven were near being gender balanced, with a character ratio of less than 1.5 males per 1 female (Smith, 2008). More recently, the Geena Davis Institute releases research annually on diversity and inclusion in media. Their report includes popular programming (ten most popular shows amongst children ages 2-11) and current programming (new shows, and existing shows with new seasons) based on US statistics in 2021. The findings are an improvement on Smith's

(2008) findings, with 61.6% of lead characters being male-identified, although there are differences between the two data sets (Meyer & Conroy, 2022). However, this improvement is still not representative of gender parity.

## Social Constructions of Gender and Sexuality

Gender, sexuality, and norms around family structure seem natural and innate. Here we will focus on sex and gender to explore the idea of social construction.

In our societies, the dominant gender schema is an ideology that serves to perpetuate inequalities in power and status. This schema states that: a) sex is a biological characteristic that produces only two options, male or female, and b) gender is a social or psychological characteristic that manifests or expresses biological sex. Again, only two options exist, masculine or feminine.

For many people this is natural. It goes without saying. However, if one does not fit within the dominant gender schema, then the naturalness of one's gender identity is thrown into question. This occurs, first of all, by the actions of external authorities and experts who define those who do not fit as either mistakes of nature or as products of failed socialisation and individual psychopathology. Gender identity is also thrown into question by the actions of peers and family who respond with concern or censure when a girl is not feminine enough or a boy is not masculine enough. Moreover, the ones who do not fit also have questions. They may begin to wonder why the norms of society do not reflect their sense of self, and thus begin to feel at odds with the world.

As the capacity to differentiate between the genders is the basis of patriarchal relations of power that have existed for 6,000 years, the dominant gender schema is one of the fundamental organising principles that maintains the dominant societal order. Nevertheless, it is only a schema: a cultural distinction that is imposed upon the diversity of the world. Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) argues that a body's sex is too complex to fit within the obligatory dual sex system, and ultimately, the decision to label someone male or female is a social decision.

Cordelia Fine's (2017) research, which we introduced above, finds that there is greater variation *within* the categories of male and female than there is between them. Some animal species differ greatly between the sexes, but humans are not one of them. Further, Fine shows us that it can be almost impossible to differentiate between innate biological drivers, *socialisation* and norms that influence how people behave. Rather, she points out that the collection of characteristics we have defined as male versus female are themselves social constructions. This is similar to our discussion, in the chapter race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity – actual physical differences are given social meaning beyond their physical effect, and society builds hierarchies around them.

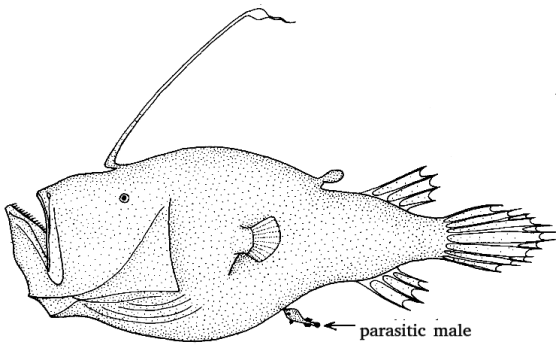


**Figure**: The Cryptosaras couesii, or the Triplewart Seadevil, is one animal with extreme sexual dimorphism, or dramatic physical differences between males and females. In contrast, human males and females only differ by about 15% (Larsen, 2003). Cryptopsaras couesii triplewart seadevil by Commons sibi is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

When people perform tasks or possess characteristics based on the gender role assigned to them, they are said to be doing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Whether we are expressing our masculinity or femininity, West and Zimmerman argue, we are always 'doing gender'. Thus, gender is something we do or perform, not something we are. When the performance matches social expectations, it is unremarkable but, as with sex, is considered natural and normal. However, their work argues that there are no biological foundations for gender differences and these roles are socially constructed. As West and Zimmerman follow Goffman's (1959) approach to dramaturgy, they focus on social interactions and suggest that the nature of the (gender) role that we play may change depending on which setting we are in.

Gender as a performance is most overt when we think about drag – the exaggerated performance of gender roles, featuring caricature-like depictions of femininity or (less often) masculinity. But West and Zimmerman, along with other theorists like Judith Butler (2004), suggest that all gender is a performance and drag merely makes visible the performative nature. For an example, watch the video below [3:46].

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=146#oembed-1*

The signs and characteristics of gender vary greatly between different societies. Anthropologist Margaret Mead's cross-cultural research in New Guinea, in the 1930s, was ground-breaking in its demonstration that cultures differ markedly in the ways that they perceive masculinity and femininity (Mead, 1935). Unlike the qualities that defined masculinity and femininity in North America at the time, she saw both genders among the Arapesh as sensitive, gentle, cooperative, and passive, whereas among the Mundugumor both

genders were assertive, violent, jealous, and aggressive. Among the Tchambuli, she described male and female temperaments as the opposite of those observed in North America. The women appeared assertive, domineering, emotionally inexpressive, and managerial, while the men appeared emotionally dependent, fragile, and less responsible.

The dichotomous view of gender (the notion that one is either male or female) is specific to certain cultures and is not universal. In some cultures, gender is viewed as fluid. Some First Nations groups in North America use the term *berdache* or two-spirit person to refer to individuals who occasionally or permanently dressed and lived as the opposite gender (Jacobs et al., 1997). Samoan culture accepts what they refer to as a 'third gender'. Fa'afafine, which translates as 'the way of the woman', is a term used to describe individuals who are born biologically male but embody both masculine and feminine traits. Fa'afafines are considered an important part of Samoan culture (Manoa et al., 2019).

**🧠 Learn More**

First Nations people around the world have different understandings of gender and sexuality than their colonisers, though in some cases these understandings have been suppressed by the colonisation process. You can read more about traditional transgender identities in Maori and Pasifika societies. In Australia, non-binary gender identities include Sistergirls and Brotherboys.

# Normativity

Part of the power dynamics sociologists investigate in studies of gender, sexuality, and families has to do with so-called normality, and who determines what is normal or not. What is considered 'normal' in terms of sexual behaviour is based on the mores and values of the society. Societies that value monogamy, for example, would likely oppose extramarital sex. Individuals are socialised to sexual attitudes by their family, education system, peers, media, and religion.

These norms determine the degree of ease in which we can live within our own bodies and assume gender and sexual identities. Having a gender or sexual identity is only experienced as normal or natural to the degree that one fits within the dominant gender schema — the ideological framework that states that there are only two possible sexes, male and female, and two possible genders, masculine and feminine. Sexuality is a component of the dominant gender schema in as far as — in heteronormative society — to be a man is to be attracted to women and vice versa. The dominant gender schema therefore provides the basis for the ways inequalities in power and status are distributed according to the degree that individuals conform to its narrow categories.

In heteronormative societies like ours, we assume heterosexuality as the normal and natural mode of being. This heteronormativity means that people who identify as LGBTQIA+ may feel the need to 'come out' in a way that heterosexual people do not. Although the idea of coming out as heterosexual, or as a masculine man or a feminine woman, might seem absurd, this absurdity is grounded in the norms of heteronormative society that are so deeply entrenched as to make them appear natural. The social processes of acquiring a gender and sexual identity, or of 'having' a gender or a sexuality, are essentially the same, yet the degree to which society accepts the resulting identities is what differs.

🔍 **Look Closer:** The History of Homosexuality: Making Up People?

Sociologists often confront a legacy of entrenched beliefs concerning innate biological disposition, or the individual psychopathology of persons who are considered abnormal. The sexual or gender 'deviant' is a primary example. However, as Ian Hacking (2006) observes, even when these beliefs about kinds of persons are products of objective scientific classification, the institutional context of science and expert knowledge is not independent of societal norms, beliefs, and practices. The process of classifying kinds of people is a social process that Hacking calls 'making up people' and Howard Becker (1963) calls 'labelling'.

19th century definitions of homosexuality defined a kind of person: the sexual 'invert'. This definition was 'scientific', but in no way independent of the cultural norms and prejudices of the times. The idea that homosexuality was characterised by an internal, deviant 'inversion' of sexual instincts depended on the new scientific disciplines of biology and psychiatry (Foucault, 1980). Homosexuality as deviance was defined first by the idea that heterosexuality was biologically natural (and therefore 'normal') and second by the idea that, psychologically, sexual preference defined every aspect of the personality. Within the emerging field of psychiatry, it was possible to speak of an inverted personality because a lesbian woman who did not play the 'proper' passive sexual role of her gender was masculine. A gay man who did not play his 'proper' active sexual role was effeminate. After centuries during which an individual's sexual preference was largely a matter of public indifference, in the 19th century, the problem of sexuality suddenly emerged as a biological, social, psychological, and moral concern.

The new definitions of homosexuality and sexual inversion led to a series of social anxieties that ranged from a threat to the propagation of the human species, to the perceived need to 'correct' sexual deviation through psychiatric and medical treatments. The powerful normative constraints that emerged based largely on the 19th century scientific distinction between natural and unnatural forms of sexuality led to the legacy of closeted sexuality and homophobic violence that remains to this day. Nevertheless, they depend on the concept of the homosexual as a specific kind of person.

As Hacking (2006) points out, the category of classification, or the label that defines different kinds of people, actually influences their behaviour and self-understanding. It is a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'. They begin to experience the world and live in society in a different manner than they did previously. Important contemporary work by LGBTQIA+ scholars focuses on rejecting such classifications, and the normative expectations that only certain genders, sexualities, and family types can be considered worthy of respect and attention in society (Clark, 2015; Newman, 2019; Sullivan, 2018).

In sociological terms, something can be common – experienced by a majority of people, for example. This is often called 'normal', but normativity is when there are expectations and hierarchies attached to that thing. Heterosexuality may be common, but it is normative when our social structures are built as if everyone is and should be heterosexual. The same is true for cisgender identities, and for traditional nuclear families.

## Inequalities

Although gender may be socially constructed, normative gender expectations mean that inequalities emerge that have real impacts on people. Gender stereotypes form the basis of sexism. Sexism refers to prejudiced beliefs that value one sex over another. Unequal treatment of women continues to pervade social life, at both the micro- and macro-levels. Many sociologists focus on discrimination that is built into the social structure; this type of discrimination is known as institutional discrimination (Pincus, 2000).

The organisation of society is profoundly gendered, meaning that the 'natural' distinction between men and women, and the attribution of different qualities to each, underlies institutional structures from the family, to the occupational structure, to the division between public and private, to access to power and beyond. Patriarchy is the set of institutional structures (like property rights, access to positions of power, and relationship to sources of income) which are based on the belief that men and women are dichotomous and unequal categories.

### 🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit

**How does the 'naturalness' of the distinction between men and women get established? How does it serve to organise everyday life?**

The phrase 'boys will be boys' is often used to justify behaviour such as pushing, shoving, or

other forms of aggression from young boys. The phrase implies that such behaviour is unchangeable and something that is part of a boy's nature. Aggressive behaviour, when it does not inflict significant harm, is often accepted from boys and men because it is congruent with the cultural script for masculinity. The 'script' written by society is in some ways similar to a script written by a playwright. Just as a playwright expects actors to adhere to a prescribed script, society expects women and men to behave according to the expectations of their respective gender roles. Scripts are generally learned through socialisation, which teaches people to behave according to social norms.

**How do the distinctions between men and women, and the social attribution of different qualities to each, serve to organise our institutions (the family, occupational structure, and the public/private divide, etc.)? How do these distinctions organise differential access to rewards, privileges, and power? In society, how and why are women not treated as the equals of men?**

Stratification refers to a system in which groups of people experience unequal access to basic, yet highly valuable, social resources. According to George Murdock's classic work, *Outline of World Cultures* (1954), all societies classify work by gender. While the phenomenon of assigning work by gender is universal, its specifics are not. The same task is not assigned to either men or women worldwide. But in Murdock's examination of the division of labour among 324 societies around the world, in nearly all cases the jobs assigned to men were given greater prestige (Murdock & White, 1969). Even if the job types were very similar and the differences slight, men's work was still considered more vital.

Our societies in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia are also characterised by gender stratification. Evidence of gender stratification is especially obvious within the economic realm. In Canada, women's experience with wage labour includes unequal treatment in comparison to men in many respects:

- Women do more unpaid labour in the household — meal preparation and clean-up, childcare, elderly care, household management, and shopping — even if they have a job outside the home (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022; Ministry for Women, 2019). This double duty keeps working women in a subordinate role in the family structure and prevents them from achieving the salaries of men in the paid workforce (Hochschild & Machung, 1989).
- Women's participation in paid work has increased. In Australia, women made up just 30% of the paid workforce in 1966 but about half the paid workforce in 2020 (ABS, 2021). In Aotearoa New Zealand, about 42% of paid workers in 1986 were women, compared to about 48% in 2019 (Stats NZ, 2019). However, occupational gender segregation means that many women-dominated industries are lower-paying and lower-status than industries dominated by men. In all industries, men dominate in leadership roles (Workplace Gender and Equality Agency [WGEA], 2019).
- Gender pay gaps persist, even when comparing full-time salaries – in Australia, there was a 13.3%

difference in average men's salaries versus average women's salaries (WGEA, 2023). In Aotearoa New Zealand, men earn 10% more on average than women do (Employment New Zealand, 2023).

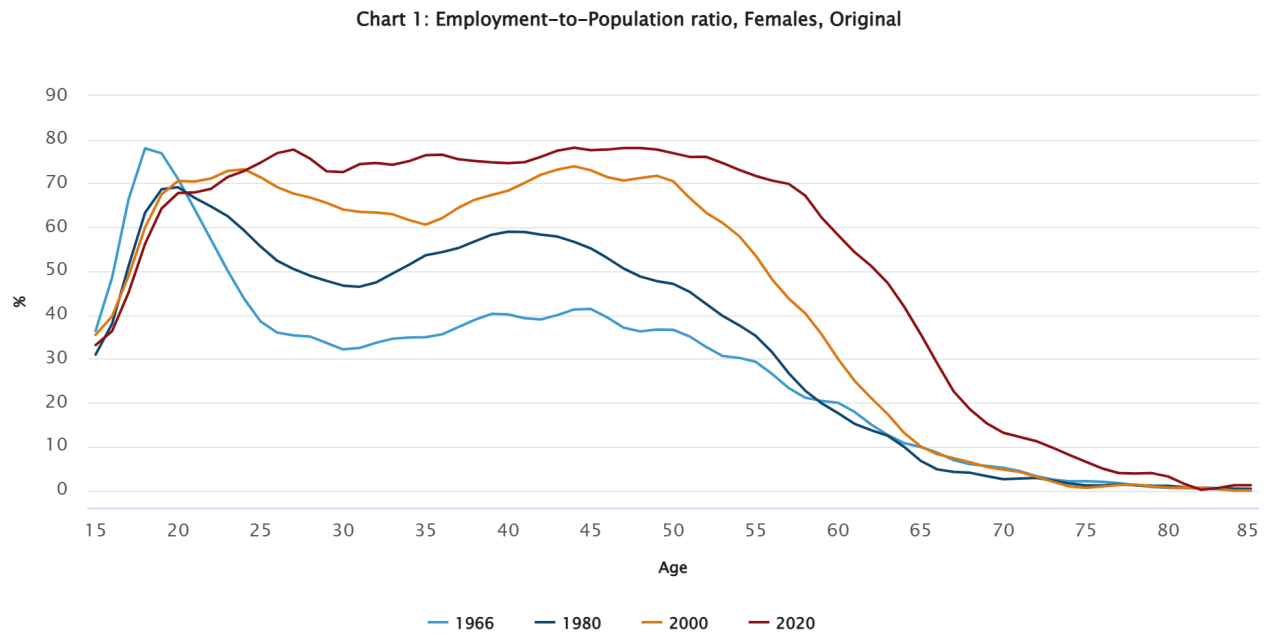


**Figure:** This graph from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) compares the percentage of women in paid employment over time. What key differences do you notice between the years represented? "Chart 1: Employment-to-Population ratio, Females, Original" by ABS is licensed under CC BY 4.0

The reason for gender pay gaps is fourfold. Firstly, there is gender discrimination in hiring and salary. Women and men are often not rewarded equally for the same work. Secondly, as we noted above, men and women tend to be concentrated in different types of work which are not equally paid. Thirdly, the unequal distribution of domestic duties, especially child and elder care, means that women often work fewer hours than men and experience disruptions in their career path. Fourthly, the work typically done by women is arbitrarily undervalued with respect to the work typically performed by men. It is certainly questionable that early childhood education occupations dominated by women involve less skill, less training, or less significance to society than many trades dominated by men, but there is a clear disparity in wages between these typically gender segregated types of occupation.

### 🧠 Learn More

We do not have good data on intersectional pay gaps in Australia. However, data from the United States show considerable differences in pay based on race *and* gender. We know

that in Aotearoa New Zealand, Maori and Pasifika women earn around 23% less than Pakeha men do (StrategicPay, 2022). We also know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia have lower incomes than the national average (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2021). Thus, we can assume that additional research into Australia's intersectional pay gap is likely to find similar compounded inequalities.

Beyond the economic sphere, there has been a long history of power relations based on gender. Compared to the past, society has made great strides in terms of abolishing some of the most blatant forms of gender inequality, but the underlying effects of patriarchy still permeate many aspects of society.

🧠 **Learn More**

Look at a snapshot of recent Australian statistics that show some of the extent of inequity based on gender, and Aotearoa New Zealand gender statistics. Australian data about inequalities experienced by LGBTQIA+ folks are represented in an infographic from the Australian Human Rights Commission. For Aotearoa New Zealand, have a look at the information about social and legal inequalities facing LGBTQIA+ people.

Similarly, discrimination based on LGBTQIA+ stereotypes, misinformation, and homophobia — an extreme or irrational aversion to homosexuality – is unfortunately common. Major policies to prevent discrimination based on sexual orientation have not come into effect until the last few years. In 2017, the Australian government amended the *Australian Marriage Act (1961)* to allow for same-sex marriages. Marriage is defined, now, as "the union of 2 people to the exclusion of all others, voluntarily entered into for life" *(Marriage Act 1961* (Cth) s. 2A). In Aotearoa New Zealand, amendments came a few years earlier in 2013. Some argue that focusing on marriage appeals to heteronormative values, rather than presenting a real challenge to social norms (Richardson-Self, 2012).

## Theoretical Approaches

Already in this chapter we have introduced you to a range of theoretical approaches that sociologists use to understand gender, sexuality and families. In this final section, we will briefly summarise those we have already discussed, and explain a few others. We will only lightly touch on these here and encourage you to look further into any of the ideas that you find interesting, or those that you disagree strongly with!

## Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism has been a major influence on research in the social sciences, including gender studies. Viewing the family as the most integral component of society, assumptions about gender roles within marriage assume a prominent place in this perspective. Our discussions of the family as an important site of gender socialisation, above, is informed by functionalist perspectives.

Functionalists argue that gender roles were established well before the preindustrial era when men typically took care of responsibilities outside of the home, such as hunting, and women typically took care of domestic responsibilities in or around the home. These roles were considered functional because women were often limited by the physical restraints of pregnancy and nursing, and unable to leave the home for long periods of time. Once established, these roles were passed on to subsequent generations since they served as an effective means of keeping the family system functioning properly. According to Talcott Parsons (1943), gender roles in families enabled a clear division of labour to ensure the needs of the family were met.

When it comes to sexuality, functionalists stress the importance of regulating sexual behaviour to ensure marital cohesion and family stability. Since functionalists identify the family unit as the most integral component in society, they argue in favour of social arrangements that promote and ensure family preservation. From a functionalist standpoint, homosexuality poses a potential dysfunction in terms of both the procreative role of the family and the unifying myths that the traditional family provides. The functions of the traditional family structure need to be served or satisfied by different family structures for a working social equilibrium to be restored. This analysis suggests that sociologists need to examine new structural forms that provide the functional equivalents of traditional marriage structures: the increasing legal acceptance of same-sex marriage; the emergence of new narratives about what makes a marriage legitimate (e.g., the universality of the 'love bond' rather than the rites of tradition); and the rise in gay and lesbian couples who choose to bear and raise children through a variety of available resources.

Anthropologist George Murdock defined the family narrowly as a group of people who live together, cooperate economically, and comprises children and at least two adults who engage in sexual relationships considered socially appropriate, with a focus on reproduction (Murdock, 1949). Murdock conducted a survey of 250 societies and determined that there are four universal residual functions of the family: sexual, reproductive, educational, and economic (Lee, 1982). In each society, although the structure of the family varies, the family performs these four functions.

## Critical Sociology

According to critical sociology, which includes feminist perspectives, society is structured by relations of power and domination among social groups (e.g., women versus men) that determine access to scarce resources. When sociologists examine gender from this perspective, we can view men as the dominant

group and women as the subordinate group. According to critical sociology, social problems and contradictions are created when dominant groups exploit or oppress subordinate groups. Our discussions about normativity and inequalities, above, is informed by contemporary critical sociological perspectives.

Friedrich Engels, a German sociologist, studied family structure and gender roles in the 1880s. Engels suggested that the same owner-worker relationship seen in the labour force is also seen in the household, with women assuming the role of the proletariat. Women are therefore doubly exploited in capitalist society, both when they work outside the home and when they work within the home (Engels, 1845, as cited in McGregor, 2021).

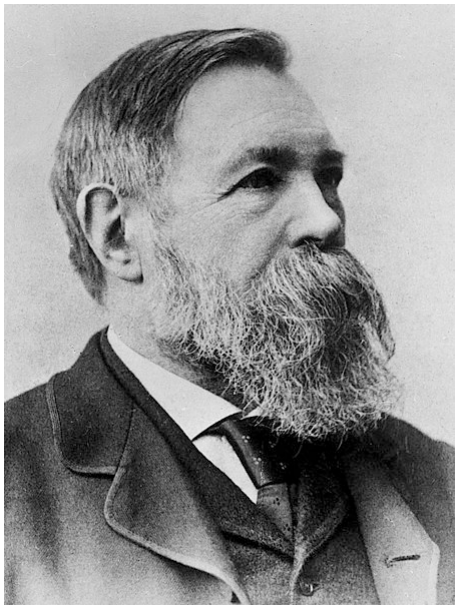

**Figure:** Friedrich Engels, 1820-1895. by Unknown author is in the Public Domain

From a critical sociology point of view, a key dimension of social inequality based on sexuality has to do with the concept of 'sexuality' itself. Sexuality is caught up in the relationship between knowledge and power. The first definition of homosexuality was 'scientific' (at least in terms of the science of the time), but it was in no way independent of the cultural norms and prejudices of 19th century society. It was also not independent of the modern expansion of what Michel Foucault calls 'micro-powers' over an increasing range of facets of the life of individuals (Jessop, 2014). As a public concern, sexuality became a danger to be controlled, surveilled, corrected, and in the worst cases, institutionalised. As Foucault (1980) describes, the sexual lives of children, 'perverts', married couples and the population as a whole became increasingly subject to interventions by doctors, psychiatrists, police, government administrators, moral crusaders, and families.

The feminist slogan of the 1960s and 1970s — 'the personal is the political' — indicates how feminists began to draw attention to the broad social or public implications of matters long considered private or inconsequential, including inequalities within families. As women's roles had long been relegated to the private sphere, issues of power that affected their lives most directly were largely invisible.

One focus of critical sociology, therefore, is to highlight the political-economic context of the inequalities of power in family life. The family is often not a haven but rather an arena where the effects of societal power struggles are felt. Blood and Wolfe's (1960) classic study of marital power in heterosexual couples found that the person with the most access to value resources held the most power. As money is one of the most valuable resources, men who worked in paid labour outside of the home held more power than women who worked inside the home.

The political and economic context is also key to understanding changes in the structure of the family. The debate between functionalist and critical sociologists on the rise of non-nuclear family forms is a case in point. Since the 1950s, the functionalist approach to the family has emphasised the importance of the nuclear family — a married man and woman in a socially approved sexual relationship with at

least one child — as the basic unit of an orderly and functional society. In reality, though, this household type is not the norm. In Australia, couples with children made up just 29.7% of households in 2021 (IDCommunity, 2023), and in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2018 couple-with-children households were 27.3% of all households (Stats New Zealand, 2020). Critical perspectives emphasise that the diversity of family forms does not indicate the 'decline of the family' so much as the diverse response of the family form to the tensions of gender inequality and historical changes in the economy and society. The nuclear family should be thought of less as a normative model for how families should be, and more as an historical anomaly that reflected the specific social and economic conditions of the two decades following World War II.

## Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism aims to understand human behaviour by analysing the critical role of symbols in human interaction. This is certainly relevant to the discussion of masculinity and femininity, and our discussions above about 'doing gender' demonstrate the symbolic interactionist approach.

Interactionists focus on the meanings associated with gender and sexuality. Since femininity is devalued in patriarchal societies (including in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia), those who adopt such traits are subject to ridicule or disrespect; this is especially true for boys or men. Just as masculinity is the symbolic norm, so too has heterosexuality come to signify normalcy. The experiences of gender and sexual 'outsiders' reveal the subtle dramaturgical order of social processes and negotiations through which all gender identity is sustained and recognised by others. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, 'passing' as a 'normal' heterosexual person depends on one's sexual cues and props being received and interpreted by others as passable.

Interactionism might also focus on the slurs used to describe homosexuality. Stereotypes and offensive terms are often used to demean homosexual men by feminising them, and homosexual women by pointing out their failed femininity. This subsequently affects how people perceive themselves. C. H. Cooley's 'looking-glass self' is a concept which suggests that self develops as a result of one's interpretation and evaluation of the responses of others (Cooley, 1902). Constant exposure to derogatory labels, jokes, and pervasive homophobia would lead to a negative self-image, or worse, self-hate. The AIHW (2018) reports that LGBTQIA+ people have higher levels of psychological distress than heterosexual adults.

Interactionists also recognise how family status roles are socially constructed, which plays an important part in how people perceive and interpret social behaviour. Interactionists view the family as a group of role players or 'actors' that come together to act out their parts in an effort to construct a family. These roles are up for interpretation. In the late 19th and early 20th century, a 'good father', for example, was one who worked hard to provide financial security for his children. Today, a 'good father' is one who takes the time outside of work to promote his children's emotional well-being, social skills, and intellectual growth — in some ways, a much more daunting task. Symbolic interactionism therefore draws our attention to how the norms that define what a 'normal' family is, and how it should operate, come into existence. The rules and

expectations that coordinate the behaviour of family members are products of social processes and joint agreement, even if the agreements are tacit or implicit.

## Queer Theory

Queer theory is a perspective that problematises the manner in which we have been taught to think about gender, sexuality, families, and categories in general. These scholars embrace the word 'queer' and have reclaimed it for their own purposes. Queer theorists reject the dominant gender schema and the dichotomisation of sexual orientations. Rather, the perspective highlights the need for a more flexible and fluid conceptualisation of gender, sexuality, and families — one that allows for change, negotiation, and freedom. Queer theory strives to question the ways society perceives and experiences sex, gender, and sexuality, opening the door to new scholarly understanding.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=146#oembed-2*

🧠 **Learn More**

The video above gives a brief explanation of queer theory [5:36]. To hear about it in more depth, have a look at this 36-minute video essay from Philosophy Tube.

In Summary

- Sex refers to physical characteristics, gender refers to identity and expression, and sexuality refers to preferences, attractions, and desires. It is important to understand the differences between these ideas, as well as how they overlap. All three are the product of social construction because the meanings that are attached to each category are socially and culturally specific.
- Gender socialisation shapes our understandings of gender roles. Socialisation begins at birth, and happens within families, at school, within the media, and more. The gender

roles that are produced through socialisation then influence the roles that different family members play within a household and extended family.

- Normativity is where certain ways of being are expected, and society is structured around these ways of being. Our societies are heteronormative, and there are also strong normative beliefs around gender and families.
- Gender and sexuality are the foundation of substantial inequalities around the world, meaning that some people have less access to economic and socio-cultural resources than others.
- Functionalism focuses on the ways that gender roles and family structures create a stable base for society; critical sociology considers inequalities that exist based on gender, sexuality, and within families; symbolic interactionism examines the social construction of these identities, and the impacts on the self of stereotypes based on them; and queer theory invites us to look beyond categories and consider how all expressions of gender, family and sexuality are performances.

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# EDUCATION

Theresa Petray

The key goals of this chapter are to explain that:

- Education and schooling perform a variety of functions in society. These include training young people in academic fields, but also socialising them to become effective members of society.
- Mass education emerged to standardise and homogenise the training and socialisation of young people.
- Social beliefs in meritocracy, or success based on talent, may be mistaken. Inequalities in the education system suggest that educational success is based more on a student's position in social structures than their inherent talent, knowledge, or effort.
- Different sociological theoretical perspectives have a variety of understandings of the purpose of schooling and the reasons for differential success in education.

# Overview

What was your time in school like? In Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, attending some form of schooling is an almost universal experience, but that experience will differ depending on where you went to school, what kind of school it was, what time period you were in school, and who you are in society.

**Figure**. School of the Sacred Heart (Kincoppal-Rose Bay), is a private, Roman Catholic, day and boarding school predominantly for girls, located in Rose Bay, an eastern suburb of Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Kincoppal School from afar by Adam.J.W.C. is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.5

Although both Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia have a lot in common across our two societies, schooling is one place with some key differences. Just 3.6% of students in Aotearoa New Zealand attend private schools – in contrast to Australia where 35% of students are enrolled in a private school (Hernandez, 2020). In Aotearoa New Zealand, in addition to state schools (also known as public schools) and private (or independent) schools, students can be enrolled in state-integrated schools. This category of school must meet certain requirements, for example teaching the national curriculum, and receives the same funding per student as state schools, but maintains some distinct characteristics, for example, religious schools (Hernandez, 2020).

In Australia, by contrast, private schooling is much more common, especially at high school (where 41% of students are enrolled in a private school [Hernandez, 2020]). There are regular public debates about how schools in Australia are funded – with private schools often receiving substantial government funding in addition to the fees they charge (Beazley & Cassidy, 2023).

According to the global body UNICEF, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand both have education systems with high inequality, with students from disadvantaged families missing out on many of the benefits of schooling that other young people enjoy (UNICEF Office of Research, 2018).

In this chapter, we will explore the sociology of education so that you might consider the reasons for differences in choices around schooling, and the implications of schooling on individuals and society. Although learning, including explicit teaching, may happen in a range of settings including families, social clubs and sports teams, the workplace, and friend groups, in this chapter when we talk about *education* we are referring to formal systems of education including primary and high school, and higher education like universities.

# Functions of Education

Individuals *learn* from the moment they are born, right up until they die. Much of this learning is informal, involving watching, imitating, playing, and discovering. Formal education, though, typically begins in early childhood and goes through the late teenage years, and for some, continues much longer.

Our education system socialises us to our society (see the identity, self and culture chapter). We learn cultural expectations and norms, which are reinforced by our teachers, our textbooks, and our classmates. For students outside the dominant culture, this aspect of the education system can pose significant challenges. You might remember learning your multiplication tables in primary school. Maybe you were explicitly taught the social rules of taking turns on the swings at recess, or maybe you picked those up unofficially. You probably weren't told directly whose voices were more highly valued, but these details are taught in subtle ways throughout the formal curriculum. This includes everything from the authors you read to who gets called on more to speak in class.

🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit

If you are currently studying any subjects that don't just refer to a textbook, or you have recently completed high school or have children who are in school now, have a look at the reading list. Who are the authors? What kind of diversity is there based on gender, nationality, race & ethnicity? Are there any obvious examples of inclusivity based on sexuality or disability? Does the diversity of the reading list represent the diversity of the class? Are students likely to be able to identify with at least some of the authors on their reading list, and see role models with whom they have something in common?

Is the diversity of the authors something that you can discover easily, or do you need to do a lot of research to find out who the authors are? Is this a topic of discussion in your classes? In our chapter on race, ethnicity, and indigeneity we discussed the idea of unconscious bias. These biases affect people in many different domains, including education and schooling. One factor that influences unconscious bias is the representation of diversity, including in who is considered an 'expert' or worthy of studying in schools.

The video [3:45] below explains unconscious bias in the context of the classroom specifically.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=164#oembed-1*

Schools can be agents of change or conformity, teaching individuals to think outside of the family and the local norms into which they were born, while at the same time acclimatising them to their tacit place in society. They provide students with skills for communication, social interaction, and work discipline that can create pathways to both independence and obedience.

Formal education promotes two main socialising tasks: homogenisation and social sorting. Students from diverse backgrounds learn a standardised curriculum that effectively transforms diversity into homogeneity. Students learn a common knowledge base, a common culture, and a common sense of society's official priorities, and perhaps more importantly, they learn to locate their place within it. They are provided with a unifying framework for participation in institutional life and at the same time are sorted into different paths.

**Learn More**

Sociologist David McCallum (2017) writes in this article in The Conversation, about "mission schools" as a tool of colonisation. Around Australia, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were moved to reserves and missions, and schools were often used in an attempt to separate children from their families and cultures. In schools, children were taught Christianity and European ways of life but trained in menial labour to sort them into a path of servitude.

# Formal and Informal Education

**Education** is a social institution through which a society's children are taught basic academic knowledge, learning skills, and cultural norms. Education is not solely concerned with the basic academic concepts that a student learns in the classroom. Societies also educate their children outside of the school system, in matters of everyday practical living. These two types of learning are referred to as formal education and informal education.

**Informal education** describes learning about cultural values, norms, and expected behaviours by participating in a society. This type of learning occurs both through the formal education system and at home. Our earliest learning experiences generally happen via parents, relatives, and others in our community. Through informal education, we learn how to dress for different occasions, how to perform regular life routines like shopping for and preparing food, and how to keep our bodies clean.

**Cultural transmission** refers to the way people come to learn the values, beliefs, and social norms of their culture. Both informal and formal education include cultural transmission. For example, a student will learn about cultural aspects of modern history in a history classroom. In that same classroom, the student might learn the cultural norm for asking a classmate out on a date through passing notes and whispered conversations.

### 🎥 Sociology on Screen

American TV series *Never Have I Ever* (Netflix, 2020-2023) tells the story of Indian-American high school student Devi Vishwakumar and her friends as they navigate school, family, and life. In the series, we see many forms of informal education as Devi seeks to throw off her 'nerd' identity and become part of the popular crowd. Throughout the show's four seasons, Devi relies as much on passing glances, gossip, and body language as she does on advice from her friends and family about how to navigate the social world of high school. The show also gives us insights into the challenges of not fitting in based on sexuality and neurodivergence, the way that social roles can influence school performance, and more.

**Figure**. Ipswich Girls Grammar School by Unknown author is in the Public Domain, CC0

In contrast, **formal education** describes the learning of academic facts and concepts through a formal curriculum. Arising from the tutelage of ancient Greek thinkers, centuries of scholars have examined topics through formalised methods of learning. Three hundred years ago few people knew how to read and write. Education was available only to the higher classes; they had the means to access scholarly materials, plus the luxury of leisure time that could be used for learning. Wealthy families hired personal tutors to educate their children, in topics like history, literacy, geography and languages as well as etiquette and 'proper' conduct. The rise of capitalism and its accompanying social changes made education more important to the economy and therefore more accessible to the general population.

First Nations and Māori people had their own means of formally teaching young people for as long as they have lived in the places we now call Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand (Heffernan, 2021). While they may not have had school buildings, with students attending classes with a teacher for specific lessons in reading, science, and maths, they nonetheless had traditions for sharing their beliefs, social rules, stories, understandings of the natural world, and their own histories across generations.

Every nation in the world is equipped with some form of education system, though those systems vary greatly. The major factors affecting education systems are the resources and money that are utilised to

support those systems in different nations. As you might expect, a country's wealth has much to do with the amount of money spent on education. In Australia, 11.1% of total government expenditure went to education in 2019, and Aotearoa New Zealand spent 11.2% on education (OECD iLibrary, 2022a,-b).

International differences in education systems are not solely a financial issue. The value placed on education, the amount of time devoted to it, and the distribution of education within a country also play a role in those differences. For example, students in South Korea spend 220 days a year in school, compared to approximately 200 days per year for students in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia. In Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, around half of people between 25-34 years old have a tertiary education (OECD iLibrary, 2022a,-b).

Another global concern in education is **universal access**. This term refers to people's equal ability to participate in an education system. On a world level, access might be more difficult for certain groups based on race, class, or gender. There are also issues of geography, with students in remote locations not having access to schools close to home. Accessibility for all students regardless of physical disability or neurodivergence is another concern that is receiving increased attention.

Formal education as we think of it today came to Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1800s with the arrival of Christian institutions. There were schools for settler children as well as attempts to 'educate' First Nations and Māori students in European and Christian ways (Barry, 2008; Calman, 2012). The shift from primarily religious schools to mostly secular State schools happened between the 1870s and 1890s across the colonies in Australia (Campbell, 2007).

The Victorian government set up a public school system in that colony beginning in 1872 – providing free, non-religious, and compulsory education to the children in the colony. The Victorian legislation at this time required children to attend school between the ages of six and fifteen. Religious schools were still available, but they now had to compete with free public schools (National Museum of Australia, 2022). Other colonies followed suit in the years that followed. Contemporary educational systems in Aotearoa New Zealand and in Australia are the result of this progressive expansion of education. Today, basic education is considered a right and responsibility for all citizens. Expectations of this system focus on formal education, with curricula and testing designed to ensure that students learn the facts and concepts that society believes are basic knowledge.

The idea of universal mass education is a relatively recent idea and one that is still not achieved in many parts of the world. Schooling is one mechanism through which governments can invest in their citizens to maximise public welfare. Australian sociologist Michael Pusey (1991), though, argues that the shift to private schooling (and health care, transport systems, etc.) means the government has largely let go of its responsibility for wellbeing in favour of efficiency and economy.

The funding of private schools by governments in Australia is a particularly contentious political issue. A 2011 report on school funding, led by David Gonski, found that state schools enrol the vast majority of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and students who are Indigenous, have a disability

and are from a remote area (Gonski, 2011 ). The Gonski report (2011) also recommended a change to government funding that would be based on the needs of the student body at a particular school, so that, for example, a school with a high proportion of students who speak English as an additional language would get additional funds to support them. However, very few of the report's recommendations were actually implemented and the inequalities in schooling remain (Ore, 2022).

As we mentioned above, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand both rank unfortunately high on global measures of inequality in schooling systems. This matters because those with higher levels of education tend to have better health and wellbeing, income, employment, working conditions, and other social benefits (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2023).

This inequality may be one reason for the popularity of private schools in Australia, as even families from low- and moderate-socioeconomic backgrounds seek to set their children up for success and upward mobility. The schooling system itself becomes subject to a self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby families concerned about poor schools relocate their children to private schools, further exacerbating the problems in those public schools. Consider, though, why the same has not occurred in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Education, Social Mobility, and Meritocracy

Despite persistent inequalities in schooling, many Australians and New Zealanders, along with lots of Americans, Canadians, and others, believe that education is the great equaliser. This is based on a belief in **meritocracy** – the expectation that success is rewarded, that people get ahead because of their talent and achievements. The belief in meritocracy suggests that regardless of someone's socioeconomic status, race, gender, religion, or geography, they have every chance to succeed if they work hard.

In reality, though, we have seen that one's experience of schooling is different depending on their position within social structures. Students begin schooling at different starting points in terms of academic skills, familiarity with formal schooling systems, and social and emotional development. When a student comes from a background that is not well represented in the curriculum, or is not valued by society, they tend to have poorer educational outcomes. This is not because they are not as smart or hard-working as their classmates.

Students who feel a lack of belonging in school may begin to resist or reject their schooling. While we may look at this and see students setting themselves up for failure, the students themselves may consider their resistance a way of maintaining their resilience in a world they are excluded from (Bottrell, 2007).

🧠 **Learn More**

Believing in meritocracy can be harmful to disadvantaged young people, according to research. This article in *The Atlantic* outlines a study that finds that those who are already disadvantaged are likely to internalise negative stereotypes if they believe that they are being treated fairly by the system.

Statistics show us that educational inequalities correlate strongly to existing social stratification. Thus, we should think critically about claims of meritocracy in our education systems.

In Australia, some key educational outcomes include the following:

- 92% of women aged 20-24 had completed year 12 in 2020, compared to 87% of men (Hare, 2022). This equates to 90% overall but is 66% overall for Indigenous young people (AIHW, 2023).
- One-third of Australian school students did not meet minimum literacy and numeracy standards in the 2023 NAPLAN test results (Duffy & Young, 2023). 10% are identified as needing additional support.
- NAPLAN test results vary widely. Students identified as needing support are more likely to have a lower socioeconomic status, be Indigenous, and attending very remote schools (Duffy & Young, 2023).
- While Australian students' performance across *international* test scores have fallen across the board, the poorest 10% of students have fallen almost 50% faster than the wealthiest 10%, meaning the gap is increasing (Hetherington, 2018).
- In these tests, Indigenous students tend to score lower on average, though the gap has been closing in recent years as non-Indigenous student scores have declined (AIHW, 2023).
- 20% of boys in year 9 do not meet the Australian minimum standard in tests of writing, and nearly 14% do not meet the standard in tests of reading (Hare, 2022).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, here are some key educational figures:

- Aotearoa New Zealand has a large performance gap in literacy tests, with three benchmark levels between those scoring in the highest 10% of test results and those in the lowest 10% (UNICEF, 2018). This is not just due to differences in family background, but at least 25% of the variation in reading scores is due to differences in schools (UNICEF, 2018).
- In Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as in Australia, first-generation migrant children have significantly lower reading scores than non-migrant children (UNICEF, 2018).

# Theoretical Perspectives on Education

While it is clear that education plays an integral role in individuals' lives as well as society as a whole, sociologists view that role from many diverse points of view. Functionalists believe that education equips people to perform different functional roles in society. Critical sociologists view education as a means of widening the gap in social inequality. Feminist theorists point to evidence that sexism in education continues to prevent women from achieving a full measure of social equality. Symbolic interactionists study the dynamics of the classroom, the interactions between students and teachers, and how those affect everyday life. In this section, you will learn about each of these perspectives.

## Functionalism

Functionalists view education as one of the more important social institutions in a society. They contend that education contributes two kinds of functions: manifest (or primary) functions, which are the intended and visible functions of education; and latent (or secondary) functions, which are the hidden and unintended functions.

There are several major manifest functions associated with education. The first is socialisation. Beginning in early childhood, students are taught to practise various societal roles. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who established the academic discipline of sociology, characterised schools as "socialisation agencies that teach children how to get along with others and prepare them for adult economic roles" (Durkheim 1898/1956).

This socialisation also involves learning the rules and norms of the society as a whole. In the early days of compulsory education, students learned the dominant culture. This ideal is perhaps challenged by multiculturalism, where students may need to learn about multiple cultural norms, or in many cases will feel unrepresented in the education system.

School systems also transmit the core values of society through manifest functions like social control. One of the roles of schools is to teach students conformity to law and respect for authority. Obviously, such respect, given to teachers and administrators, will help a student navigate the school environment. This function also prepares students to enter the workplace and the world at large, where they will continue to be subject to people who have authority over them. Fulfilment of this function rests primarily with classroom teachers and instructors who are with students all day.

Education also provides one of the major methods used by people for upward social mobility. This function is referred to as **social placement**. University and graduate schools are viewed as vehicles for moving students closer to the careers that will give them the financial freedom and security they seek. As a result, university students are often more motivated to study areas that they believe will be advantageous on

the social ladder. A student might choose to study business courses over a class in Victorian poetry because they see business as a stronger vehicle for financial success.

Education also fulfils latent functions. Much goes on in school that has little to do with formal education. For example, you might notice an attractive fellow student when he gives a particularly interesting answer in class – catching up with him and making a date speaks to the latent function of courtship fulfilled by exposure to a peer group in the educational setting. The educational setting introduces students to social networks that might last for years and can help people find jobs after their schooling is complete. Of course, with social media, these networks are easier than ever to maintain.

Another latent function is the ability to work with others in small groups, a skill that is transferable to a workplace and that might not be learned in a home-school setting. In the classroom, students learn both how to work together and how to compete against one another academically.

The educational system, especially as experienced on university campuses, has traditionally provided a place for students to learn about various social issues. There is ample opportunity for social and political advocacy, as well as the ability to develop tolerance for the many views represented on campus.

Functionalists recognise other ways that schools educate and enculturate students. One of the most important values students in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia learn is that of individualism – the valuing of the individual over the value of groups or society as a whole. This is taught through systems of ranking, rewarding students for being the "best", achieving the highest scores, and otherwise distinguishing themselves from their peers.

Another role of schools, according to functionalist theory, is that of **sorting**, or classifying students based on academic merit or potential. The most capable students are identified early in schools through testing and classroom achievements. Exceptional students are often placed in accelerated programs in anticipation of successful university attendance. Other students are guided into vocational training programs with an emphasis on technical and domestic skills.

Functionalists also contend that school, particularly in recent years, is taking over some of the functions that were traditionally undertaken by family. Society relies on schools to teach about human sexuality as well as basic skills such as budgeting and job applications – topics that at one time were addressed by the family.

## Critical Sociology

Critical sociologists generally do not believe that public schools reduce social inequality. Rather, they believe that the educational system reinforces and perpetuates social inequalities arising from differences in class, gender, race, and ethnicity. Where functionalists see education as serving a beneficial role, critical sociologists view it more, well, critically. To them, it is important to examine how educational systems preserve the status quo and guide people of lower status into subordinate positions in society.

The fulfilment of one's education is closely linked to social class. Students of low socioeconomic status (SES) are generally not afforded the same opportunities as students of higher status, no matter how great their academic ability or desire to learn. For example in Australia, low-SES students are generally less prepared than high-SES students at school entry in terms of literacy and numeracy, emotional maturity and social competence (Lamb et al., 2020). This inequality follows them through their schooling years: 41.5% of 24-year-olds in Australia have studied or are studying a University degree, compared to only 17.9% of low-SES 24-year-olds (Lamb et al., 2020). Barriers like the cost of higher education, but also more subtle cultural cues, undermine the promise of education as a means of providing equality of opportunity.

Picture a student from a working-class home who wants to do well in school. On a Monday, they are assigned a paper that is due Friday. On Monday evening, they have to babysit a younger sibling because their mum is at work. Tuesday and Wednesday they work themselves, stocking shelves after school until 10:00 p.m. By Thursday, the only day they might have available to work on that assignment, the student is so exhausted they cannot bear to start the paper. The student's mum, though she would like to help, is so tired herself that she is unable to give the encouragement or support her child needs. Since English is her second language, she has difficulty with some of the educational materials. They also lack a computer and printer at home, which most of the student's classmates have, so they have to rely on the public library or school system for access to technology. As this story shows, many students from working-class families must contend with helping out at home, contributing financially to the family, having poor study environments, and lacking material support from their families. This is a difficult match with education systems that adhere to a traditional curriculum that is more easily understood and completed by students of higher social classes.

Such a situation leads to social class reproduction, extensively studied by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. He researched how, parallel to economic capital (as analysed by Marx), **cultural capital**, or the accumulation of cultural knowledge that helps one navigate a culture, alters the experiences and opportunities available to French students from different social classes. Bourdieu (1997) emphasised that like economic capital, cultural capital in the form of cultural taste, knowledge, patterns of speech, clothing, proper etiquette, etc. is difficult and time-consuming to acquire. Members of the upper and middle classes have more cultural capital than families of lower-class status, and they can pass it on to their children from the time that they are toddlers. Lack of cultural capital is often a means by which people are excluded from the educational system. As a result, the educational system maintains a cycle in which the dominant culture's values are rewarded. Instruction and tests cater to the dominant culture and leave others struggling to identify with values and competencies outside their social class. For example, there has been a great deal of discussion over what standardised tests such as the IQ test and aptitude tests truly measure. Many argue that the tests group students by cultural ability rather than by natural intelligence.

The cycle of rewarding those who possess cultural capital is found in formal educational curricula as well as in the hidden curriculum, which refers to the type of non-academic knowledge that one learns through informal learning and cultural transmission. The hidden curriculum is never formally taught but it is implied in the expectation that those who accept the formal curriculum, institutional routines, and grading

methods will be successful in school. This hidden curriculum reinforces the positions of those with higher cultural capital and serves to bestow status unequally. Thus, critical sociologists are especially critical of the suggestion that our schooling systems are a **meritocracy**, where talent, skill, and effort are the means of success. Instead, merit is itself a social construction and only certain accomplishments are considered worthy of reward. The video below further explains the concept of cultural capital [5:29].

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=164#oembed-2*

Critical sociologists also point to tracking, a formalised sorting system that places students on "tracks" (advanced versus low achievers) that perpetuate inequalities. While educators may believe that students do better in tracked classes because they are with students of similar ability and may have access to more individual attention from teachers, critical sociologists feel that tracking leads to self-fulfilling prophecies in which students live up (or down) to teacher and societal expectations (Zajda, 2021).

As noted above, IQ tests have been criticised for bias – for testing cultural knowledge rather than actual intelligence. For example, a test item may ask students what instruments belong in an orchestra. To correctly answer this question requires certain cultural knowledge – knowledge most often held by more affluent people who typically have more exposure to orchestral music. On the basis of IQ and aptitude testing, students are frequently sorted into categories that place them in enriched program tracks, average program tracks, and special needs or remedial program tracks. Though experts in testing claim that bias has been eliminated from tests, conflict theorists maintain that this is impossible. The tests are another way in which education does not provide equal opportunities, but instead maintains an established configuration of power.

## Feminist Theory

Feminist theory aims to understand the mechanisms and roots of gender inequality in education, as well as their societal repercussions. Like many other institutions of society, educational systems are characterised by unequal treatment and opportunity for women. On a global scale, there is a 7% gender literacy gap; in other words, while 90% of adult men are literate, just 83% of women are (Statista, 2023). These are high numbers, but feminist sociologists seek to understand the gender differences and consider how that gap may be closed.

In countries like Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, histories of poor educational attainment by girls have reversed. In Australia in 2019, 59% of higher education students were women (Workplace Gender Equality Agency [WGEA], 2021). But despite overall increases in women's participation and success in education, there are still gendered differences in their experience. Women are more likely to study

education, health, creative arts, and society and culture fields. Men are overrepresented in fields like information technology and engineering. On leaving university, men generally attract a higher starting salary than women, even where they were in the same field of study (WGEA, 2021). This leads the WGEA to conclude that women are continually undervalued in most industries (see the chapter on gender).

When women face limited opportunities for education, their capacity to achieve equal rights, including financial independence, is limited. Feminist theory seeks to understand the causes of these inequalities, and the consequences for individual women and for society more broadly. Feminist activism then seeks to promote women's rights to equal education (and its resultant benefits) across the world.

## Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism sees education as one way that labelling theory can be demonstrated in action. A symbolic interactionist might say that this labelling has a direct correlation to those who are in power and those who are being labelled. For example, low standardised test scores or poor performance in a particular class often lead to a student being labelled as a low achiever. Such labels are difficult to "shake off," which can create a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1968).

In his book *High School Confidential*, Jeremy Iverson (2006) details his experience as a Stanford graduate posing as a student at a California high school. One of the problems he identifies in his research is that of teachers applying labels that students are never able to lose. One teacher told him, without knowing he was a bright graduate of a top university, that he would never amount to anything (Iverson, 2006). Iverson obviously did not take this teacher's assessment to heart. However, when an actual 17-year-old student hears this from a person with authority, it is no wonder that the student might begin to "live down to" that label.

The labelling with which symbolic interactionists concern themselves extends to the very degrees that symbolise the completion of education. Credentialism embodies the emphasis on certificates or degrees to show that a person has a certain skill, has attained a certain level of education, or has met certain job qualifications. These certificates or degrees serve as a symbol of what a person has achieved, allowing the labelling of that individual.

Indeed, as these examples show, labelling theory can significantly impact a student's schooling. This is easily seen in the educational setting, as teachers and more powerful social groups within the school dole out labels that are adopted by the entire school population.

### In Summary

- Education is a key agent of socialisation, both via the formal curriculum and the norms and expectations we learn implicitly. Some students are encouraged to think for themselves, but generally school teaches conformity and communicates one's place within society.
- Free public education is a relatively new phenomenon in history and teach young people in the areas that are deemed socially valuable. Globally, and within Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, considerable inequalities exist in access to and success within formal education systems.
- Meritocracy, or success based on talent, is a popularly held belief that underpins our education system. However, we can see that who someone is or where they live plays a considerable part in how successful they will be in school, regardless of their inherent skills or intelligence, or how hard they work.
- For Functionalists, education is a key social institution in society which fulfills functions including socialisation, social control, social placement, ability to work in groups, and enculturation. For Critical Sociologists, schools are viewed as a site of, and contributor to, ongoing inequality. Symbolic interactionists consider ideas like labelling theory – the labels which are applied to students in school can become 'self-fulfilling prophesies' as students live up (or down) to expectations.

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# HEALTH, ILLNESS AND MEDICINE IN SOCIETY

Nick Osbaldiston

The key goals of this chapter are to explain that:

- health is not simply a biomedical issue, but also relates to socio-cultural concerns
- health and illness can be understood as a structural issue, especially in socio-economics
- there are various sociological perspectives on health and illness across the different schools of thought
- there are important cases in our history, and recent times, that illustrate some of the sociological issues regarding health
- ageing is a significant part of our health now and has become a feature of the biomedical model.

## Overview

Of all the sub-categories of sociology that you will encounter, the most significant is that of health and illness. Across the world, and within the antipodes, the sociology of health is one of the largest researched areas in the discipline and contributes theories, ideas, and empirical studies that flow into public discussion. The area has its own journal in Australia, entitled the *Health Sociology Review,* which has been publishing articles on health since 1991 (under a different name from 1991-2000). Sociologists from Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia working in this space cover a range of topics from the impact of income and wealth on health (Kendall et., 2019), the inequalities between ethnic groups in disease and morbidity (Gurney et al., 2020), to the gender/sex-based differences that exist in health outcomes (Schofield, 2002). However, the sociology of health has a long history of theory and research that stems from the classical era through to the modern and late/postmodern theorists of today (Collyer, 2015). While like most categories in sociology, there are several diverse ways of thinking about these matters, one unifying principle can be applied to all – that is the argument that sociological conditions and issues contribute importantly to the health of individuals in society. In what follows we will explore some of these theories and ideas, along with examining case studies and empirical content from Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Of course, like

all of our chapters, there is a limited amount of space to cover all of what is a massive sub-discipline. Here, we have curated content that allows for a good overview of the field and provides some food for thought regarding health in our contemporary age.

## The Biomedical Model and Social Determinants of Health

**Figure**. Hospital Room by Arseny Togulev is licensed by Unsplash

Before we can begin that journey, however, it is prudent for us to spend some time considering what is the dominant model of health in our contemporary times. If you recall in the chapter on culture, Max Weber's **rationalisation** thesis assists us in understanding a significant change in how we understand our bodies. While in the past we might have attributed a large portion of our health and well-being to the Gods or other magical properties, modernisation and the rise of science stripped away the irrational, and created knowledge based on the **scientific method**. Rationalisation, and **disenchantment**, created the conditions for the rise of biomedical knowledge and the institutions that housed it. Put simply, this **biomedical model** contrasts sharply with traditional or premodern ways of seeing the world. Modern medicine and science, importantly, focused on explaining health through the scientific method, putting aside the mythical, religious or superstitious knowledge of the past.

Secondly, the biomedical model initially treated the body and mind as separate entities and positioned the body as a mechanism (much like an engine in a car), made up of different parts and treated through knowledge separately. Hence today, we have specialists that focus on very specific areas of our bodies from our internal organs through to our hair! Lastly, the biomedical model examines only the biological reasons for ill-health or lack of well-being, exploring different medical reasons for illness, while falling short of a broader sociological analysis as to why people are falling ill. As a result of this, the biomedical industry is now one of the largest in our society. Significant specialisations and organisations have arisen within medicine, that have significant power and status in our contemporary world. Importantly, this has also created a significant commercial enterprise, the pharmaceutical industry, which alongside medicine, has a major influence on our lifestyles. Economically, medicine (and the allied health disciplines around it) account for 10.5% of Australia's and 10.03% of Aotearoa New Zealand's gross domestic product (GDP) (explore the World Bank's current data on this). Additionally, it is estimated that Australians collectively spent approximately $241.3 billion on health goods and services in 2022, which accounts for $9,365 per person (Mendez et al., 2022).

It is however widely recognised that the factors that make us healthy (or not healthy) are not simply biological or biomedical. For instance, data from across the globe concludes that there exists a **social gradient of health** for instance in relation to **socioeconomic status** (see later) – that being the poorer you

are, the more likely you will have poorer health outcomes. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has long argued that we need to factor in the social determinants of health when considering how to deal with healthcare (Marmot et al., 2012). These non-medical factors can include (but not limited to) the following;

- **Income and welfare systems** – this is especially true when analysing the poorest countries of the world against the wealthier ones. For instance, the COVID-19 virus was found to be twice as deadly in countries with relatively low incomes.
- **Education** – this appears across various health and welfare challenges in the developed and undeveloped world. For instance, Raghupathi and Raghupathi (2020) were able to find in a review of health outcomes for OECD countries that those who achieved a higher standard of education, were more likely to have better health outcomes and mortality rates.
- **Unemployment and job insecurity** – employment means income (obviously!) and depending on the country of analysis, it can also mean poverty. Some countries have safety nets (what we call the welfare system) that do not allow people to drop too far below the poverty line. However, even in Sweden which has a relatively strong welfare system, Janlert, Winefield and Hammarstrom (2015) found that long-term unemployment had a detrimental impact on health.
- **Housing and environment** – it is clear as well that housing has an impact on our health outcomes. Numerous studies in Australia for instance have shown that homelessness in all forms has a major detrimental impact on health and well-being (Clifford et al., 2019; Davies and Wood, 2018; Seastres et al., 2020). However, it is clear also that environmental conditions play a role. For instance, in a review from Coates et al., (2022) on Australia's mortality rates, it was found that 354 people have passed away from heat waves from 2001 to 2018.
- **Social inclusion/exclusion and support** – another important issue is social capital – or the amount of support that one has in their community or family. Social capital has a major role in various health outcomes. For instance, Aminzadeh et al., (2013) found in Aotearoa New Zealand that young people who belonged to communities/neighbourhoods with higher levels of social capital also reported higher levels of well-being. This finding, along with others, suggests that neighbourhoods themselves have a role to play in our health status.

A number of other areas also contribute to the social determinants of health and well-being including family environment, health structures of the **nation-state**, food security, conflict, environmental catastrophes (including human-made ones such as for instance the Bhopal disaster – see below), and early childhood education/experiences. Although the conditions we experience are often biomedical and require intervention by doctors and others, the social determinants of the health model expose what are the sociological conditions that need to be dealt with to improve society's health outcomes. The subdiscipline area within health called social epidemiology studies these issues, especially in relation to disease and the spread of viruses and so on. They also contribute to the study of the social determinants of health, demonstrating disparities in health outcomes amongst different populations of a nation-state or the world broadly.

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Environmental disasters produce significant problems for society not just in the moment, but for generations after. These can be both naturally occurring disasters, such as an earthquake, or human-made catastrophes such as the Bhopal gas tragedy that occurred in 1984. Considered the world's most catastrophic industrial accident, the Bhopal gas leak impacted over half a million people directly and indirectly, and the effects are still being felt today. This disastrous event is reviewed below in the following video by The Economist for your viewing [7:20]. However, what other human-made disasters have had deleterious impacts on the health and well-being of populations across the world? Consider for instance the Chernobyl nuclear accident of 1986, or closer to home, the 2014 mine fire in Morwell, Victoria that continues to have detrimental impacts on local communities. Sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) discussed these human-made disasters in his work on risk, arguing that technological advance has created unintended consequences, that are large, and have the potential to impact large populations (for instance consider nuclear warfare). He argued interestingly that these effects would impact both rich and poor, but later acknowledged that the rich could indeed avoid the major impacts more so than the poor. Others have argued that one of the largest human-made disasters forthcoming will be that of climate change. The World Health Organisation argues that climate change will have a widespread impact on the health and well-being of the globe, but impact significantly more on those of poorer nations.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=153#oembed-1*

## Critiques of the Medicalisation of Everyday Life

Of course, sociologists have also critiqued the biomedical model for various reasons, not just because it ignores the social conditions that create ill health. Several sociologists working in the field heavily criticise the medical industry, especially for the direct and indirect power that it holds over society. This includes, as we will see later, the ownership of knowledge on what is 'normal', unpacked by French philosopher Michel Foucault. One of the most influential analyses of the industry and the dominance of the biomedical model emerged in the 1970s from Austrian theorist Ivan Illich (1926-2002) in his work called *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis* (1976/1995). Illich's critique of the medical model, and industry, stems

from what he observed as the dominance of the medical profession and intervention in everyday life. His work focuses on what he called the '**medicalisation**' process – which effectively means the persistent and widespread uptake of medicine into individual lives. For Illich (1976/1995), problems that were once the domain of society, are increasingly subjected to medical knowledge and subsequent intervention. This meant the rise of specialist medical professionals across various areas such as childbirth, addiction, obesity and even hair loss! Illich (1976/1995) contested that these areas, once dealt with by ourselves or dismissed as part of nature (such as hair loss), are now medical problems, solved predominantly by medicine or other interventions.

Illich used the term **iatrogenesis**, as a concept to describe the situation. In short, iatrogenesis refers to the social and medical problems or what we might term 'side effects', due largely to the rise of medical intervention in our lives. There are three levels of iatrogenesis for Illich (1976/1995);

1. ***Clinical*** – Clinical iatrogenesis refers to the development of side effects in the quest to find the cures to everyday ills – such as pain medication (see our Learn More section below).
2. ***Social*** – Social iatrogenesis refers to the decline of knowledge and action on behalf of society in dealing with everyday ills. As such, society has become more reliant on the health and medical industries to deal with health and well-being, rather than becoming more adept at understanding and addressing problems as a community/society.
3. ***Structure*** – Structure iatrogenesis refers to the over-medicalisation of everyday life. Social and individual lifestyles are increasingly falling under the purview of the medical industry, and most importantly the pharmaceutical industry. For instance, we have turned ageing into a medical problem, to be dealt with scientifically, despite it being a natural process of life.

Moynihan et al., (2002, p. 888) summarise the problems of medicalisation in the following quote:

> Inappropriate medicalisation carries the dangers of the unnecessary labelling, poor treatment decisions, iatrogenic illness, and economic waste, as well as the opportunity costs that result when resources are diverted away from treating or preventing more serious disease. At a deeper level it may help to feed unhealthy obsessions with health, obscure or mystify sociological or political explanations for health problems, and focus undue attention on pharmacological, individualised, or privatised solutions.

We might want to ask, have we become 'unhealthy' in our obsession with health? Deborah Lupton (2018) for instance in her book aptly titled *Fat* demonstrates how we have not just through the medical industry, but also via government, culture and media, become obsessed with 'fat' bodies. As a result, we have turned more to the medical industry to help us deal with obesity, by seeking drugs, diet fads, and other medical interventions, to deal with any potential fatness. While there is no question that obesity is an issue for Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, someone like Illich might argue that turning to medicine to deal with it, only serves to potentially create more unintended consequences, and also further make society reliant on the medical industry.

Watch the interview with Deborah Lupton on 'Fat' below [5:25]:

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=153#oembed-2*

It is important to clarify that all medicalisation cannot be treated with the suspicious nature that Illich's (1976) thesis suggests. Prolific medicalisation theorist Peter Conrad (2007) for instance suggests that some medicalisation does produce a significant benefit for society. For instance, the creation of expertise coupled with the intervention of the medical industry has lowered rates of mortality and undoubtedly allowed us in places like Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand to live longer lives. Furthermore, Conrad (2007) suggests that there is also evidence of demedicalisation ongoing across the industry. Issues such as female hysteria, masturbation and homosexuality, once considered medical problems or deviant activities, have over time been removed, or challenged openly (such as female hysteria) for its validity. Conrad (2007) also argues that medicalisation can bring to light the suffering that some people experience, that has not been recognised or has been ignored in the past. An example here might be post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which in the past society knew little about, but in recent times has become a major talking point, especially for ex-service personnel. Nevertheless, Conrad (2007) and others like him, are still critical of the over-medicalisation of everyday life inclusive of issues ranging from sleep to ADHD, sexual function and even death.

Watch the short animation below which demonstrates what Illich and others describe as the 'medicalisation' of everyday life [1:33].

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=153#oembed-3*

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**Figure**. Assorted Pain Medication by Frank Chamki is licensed by Unsplash

The medicalisation of pain is one area where Ivan Illich's (1976/1995) thesis might apply well. Recently, the maker and distributor of the opioid pain reliever Oxycontin, Purdue Pharma, settled out of court for approximately $6 billion after it was found that the corporation was aware of the powerful addictive properties of the drug. Oxycontin and associated opioid medication helped create an epidemic of drug abuse in the United States, resulting, it is suggested, in the deaths of 630,000 Americans from 1999 to 2016 (Bernard et al., 2018). Pryma (2022) however, contends that the pain management crisis was not simply the result of big pharma. Rather, a network of specialist experts in pain management contributed through their collective selection of opioids as the most efficient way to deal with pain. Unfortunately, pain relief in this case resulted in large side-effects, that created a health crisis of its own. For someone like Illich, this is the problem of medicalisation of everyday life. Instead of society/individuals learning how to live and deal with problems, such as pain, we approach specialists or others, who medically treat the issue, but in turn, create significant social ills in the process. This is not to suggest that medical intervention in pain (or other areas) is not important. Rather, from Illich's standpoint, it can create some serious ill effects on society, as we can see with Oxycontin.

Interestingly, in Australia, a recent decision about the use/misuse of painkillers illustrates Illich's concern further. The Therapeutic Goods Administration in 2023 made the ruling that from 2025 onwards there would be restrictions on paracetamol (Panadol) purchasing. The arguments for this are found in this short video here. Several other decisions have been made by this same organisation to limit the side effects of misuse of over-the-counter pain medication, including a decision to limit codeine (such as Nurofen Plus or Panadeine) to prescription-only medication which according to one study has halved codeine-related poisoning.

This is perhaps an example of demedicalisation – where side-effects have been noted and attempts to remove them from social life, enacted.

What other areas of social life do you see as increasingly 'medicalised'? Have you seen any instances where medicalisation has been reversed and decisions made to reduce side effects on the public?

Along with Illich, thinkers like Michel Foucault (1963/2002) have critiqued the medical industry for the power that it yields in determining normal versus abnormal. In a number of his works, Foucault (2002) attempted to trace the origins of what he called the 'medical gaze'. For Foucault (1963/2002), the medical gaze is the ability of a doctor (or other specialist) to examine symptoms, narratives and other information through the lens of the biomedical model, eliminating information that is not relevant. The medical professional thus has power through 'knowledge', to define according to their expertise, what is illness or not. Subsequently, Foucault (1963/2002) argued that the doctor has a power over others, defined through their knowledge of biomedical science, thus the common adage knowledge is power, applies. For Foucault (1963/2002), this idea is not simply restricted to the hospital setting either. Expertise in a range of areas across modern life were rising during modernity in healthcare, education, policy, economics, law, etc, that means individuals in society were increasingly reliant on those with 'power' over them.

**Figure**. Michel Foucault 1974 Brasil, from the Arquivo Nacional Collection, is in the Public domain

Foucault's (Foucault et al., 2013) most significant criticism was levied at the 'psy' sciences in particular where he argued that psychiatrists had the capacity, through their knowledge base, to define, classify and then regulate people as mentally insane or not. The 'gaze' of the psychiatrist, backed by the ever-growing industry of knowledge on psychological normality/abnormality, meant that psychiatrists yielded enormous power. His main argument however is that throughout history, society has responded always to those considered 'mad'. This usually resulted in the removal of those people labelled as such from society. For instance, mental illness in the middle ages was conceived of as punishment from God, and individuals were locked away, or worse still executed (Rössler, 2016). During the Enlightenment, however, this 'irrational' way of defining and dealing with the 'mad' was removed. Foucault (Foucault et al., 2013) however argued that this process was simply turned over to psychiatrists who continued the trend of removing people from society. For instance, the asylum for him was where those in power could remove problematic individuals from society, and be placed in cells separated from others to undergo treatment by trained

psychiatrists. Patients were subordinated to medical surveillance and at times some unpleasant forms of medical treatment. For Foucault (Foucault et al, 2013) the power to define what is normal or abnormal was extremely important to understand, especially when we review the history of cases such as homosexuality or female hysteria. In both of these examples, psychiatry and associated medical knowledge constructed these as mental illness, and subsequently, for many years they were treated as such, despite what we know now (Drescher, 2015; Tasca, Rapetti, Carta & Fadda, 2012).

Erving Goffman (1961) also critiqued the mental asylum using a **symbolic interactionist** approach. Goffman took time to examine in particular how the patient in the asylum interacted not just with the doctors within, but with other staff, their environments and patients. The asylum for Goffman (1961) resembled what he would later describe as a 'total institution', in that it not only housed these people but also strictly controlled their everyday lives within it. You could say that other versions of total institutions like this are prisons, totalitarian states, and closed communities or religions (such as cults). The asylum for him though, attacked the core identity of the inmate by stripping away all notions of their original identity and imposing new identities upon them. This included removing clothing, names and other personal effects, along with putting them in cells, enforcing strict timetables, and other rules onto the everyday. For Goffman (1961), this also included rewards for good behaviour and punishment of the bad (such as solitary confinement). In short, the asylum destroyed the individual's identity entirely and created an environment of total control over the person. However, Goffman (1961) also showed that individuals would adapt to their conditions within, taking on new roles, such as the cooperative or intransient patient. Thus while they were inside this total institution, there was still room for agency in adaptation and adoption of new identities.

Feminist researchers and theorists have also critiqued the role of the medical industry in controlling women's bodies and minds. Ehrenreich and English (2010) for instance argued that women themselves are some of the major victims in medicalisation. In particular, in their book *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers*, they sketch out women's history as objects in both theology and medicine. Initially, women were subjected to the patriarchal domination of the church, which governed their conditions, proclaiming madness and even in some cases, declaring women of difference as 'witches' (for instance review the Salem Witch Trials here). However, through the process of secularisation and rationalisation (see Weber), the power of religion faded, supplanted by medical science. However, women did not lose their place as the 'object' of analysis or moral judgement. Instead, through science, the female body and mind was subjected to male-dominated approaches to health care and science. This resulted in two outcomes. Firstly, areas of social life that were once traditionally the domain of the female health care provider, such as childbirth, became the domain of male-orientated scientific study, and intervention, displacing women. Secondly, female minds were the subject of significant scientific study, emphasising the abnormal, and producing new techniques to deal with these 'constructed' issues. Women were measured against what was deemed as 'healthy' in the male mind and subsequently positioned some women into the 'unhealthy' category due to their perceived irrationality and mental health issues. Women, through sciences (mostly medical and psychological), were thus afforded a lower status (sex-based class) in society

and therefore laws including the right to vote, work and conduct other important business, were denied to them on the basis of this 'scientific' foundation.

Other feminists argue that even today, women's minds and bodies are the subject of over-medicalisation. Riessman (1983) for instance argued that the medicalisation of birth control provided women with the sense that they were sexually free, but also turned them into objects for medical intervention. For her, this made women passive to their own bodies. Specifically, women's reproductive systems were now in the hands of the medical industry, creating an improper power balance between what is a male-dominated industry and women. Furthermore, Riessman (1983) also showed how women were far more likely to be willing to submit to the medical industry than men. Women are more likely than men to visit medical professionals, more likely to go for periodic check-ups on their bodies, and furthermore, more willing to submit to psychological treatment (see also Bondi & Burman, 2001). Over the years, therefore, women's bodies and minds have been the subject of a range of interventions, more so than men's.

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One area of contention in the medicalisation of females is the condition known as 'premenstrual dysphoric disorder' (PMDD). PMDD is a condition unique to women and is characterised as a severe form of Premenstrual Syndrome. The symptoms are described on this web page. Medical professionals report that 3-8% of women suffer from this condition while many are estimated to be undiagnosed (Goswami et al., 2023). However, several feminists, including those from the field of psychiatry, have criticised the inclusion of PMDD into the DSM-V for various reasons. For instance, Offman and Kleinplatz (2004) contend that caution needs to be placed on this 'condition' as it tends to lead to medical intervention in the form of psychiatric medicine.

> This caution is pertinent in the context of the diagnosis of PMDD which is reported to affect 2-9% of women and to include severe symptomatology including depression (Freeman & Sondheimer, 2003). The use of serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) for treatment of depressive symptoms in women diagnosed with PMDD (for review, see Ackerman & Williams, 2002) appears to be shifting the balance of discourse even further toward the notion of a biological disorder (e.g., defects in the serotonergic system in the brain) in the face of what some consider to be insufficient evidence and without due consideration of alternative views. (Offman & Kleinplatz, 2004, p. 18)

Additionally, they argue that PMDD is often treated without taking into consideration comorbidities such as depression, anxiety and other mood disorders. Other feminists like Chrisler and Caplan (2002) review the history of men's understanding of PMS in particular, highlighting the fascination with women's behavioural changes, labelling them as irrational and 'out of control' during times of menstruation. They contend that a stereotype has been established over centuries of a 'Dr Jekyll and Ms Hyde', where women are conceived of as

wholly irrational, requiring potential intervention. PMDD (for Chrisler & Caplan, 2002) is just another mechanism that serves to reinforce this stereotype while further submitting women for ongoing medicalisation from the medical industry.

What do you think? Are women over-medicalised? What about other areas such as beauty, ageing, body shape, etc? How much power do women cede to the medical industry? Are both sexes now equally medicalised today?

## Doctor and Patient Roles – Parson's Sick Role

American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) developed a strong approach to sociology where he wanted to create a theory to explain societal behaviour fully. Parsons also developed a branch of sociology entitled 'structural functionalism' which brought together thinkers like Weber and Durkheim to construct an overarching idea of how society would best run. In particular, and of importance to Parsons, was the idea of roles and that in a capitalist, liberal democracy, everyone acquired them, even children. These roles, along with the obligations and functions of them, allowed society to run smoothly while dealing with potential abnormalities along the way. Of those roles, medical personnel including doctors, nurses, allied health professionals and others, had important positions in society for Parsons (1951/2013) as they administered medical care in the most impartial manner possible keeping society fit and 'functioning'. Parsons (1951/2013) in particular argued that the medical industry had to operate under the banner of universalism – that being, everyone has the right to medical care, and should be treated equally regardless of their personal circumstances.

For society to operate, Parsons (1951/2013) argued that there needed to be not just an obligation and responsibility placed on the medical professionals, but also on those who were sick themselves. This is where he introduced something termed the '**sick role**' This entailed a set of responsibilities and expectations that the sick person, as well as society, would adopt in relation to illness. The sick person's roles and obligations for him were three-fold;

1. The person should desire to not be ill in the first instance, however, should also not be held responsible for their condition after falling sick. For instance, if someone catches influenza and is unable to work, society should not hold that person responsible and they ought to be exempt from their other everyday roles such as work.
2. The person should recognise that being ill is not desirable, and as such have an obligation to ensure that they are doing all they can to get better.
3. The person should adhere to advice and recommendations from health professionals to deal with their illness so that they can get better as soon as possible.

It is clear that Parsons (1951/2013) placed a lot of importance on the relationship and interaction between doctor and patient here. The interactions between them are grounded in a universal approach to helping others (in the case of the doctor) and a desire to get better as soon as possible to resume normal life (in the case of the patient). However, sociologists and others have critiqued this approach for various reasons. Some of these criticisms can be listed below;

1. There are others who are also involved in the 'sick role' that are not considered by Parsons (1951/2013). For instance, parents in relation to their children play a vital role in the decision to take their kids to seek health advice. Other people, such as your family or friends, may also play a role in telling you to seek medical attention.
2. Parsons (1951/2013) placed a lot of emphasis here on 'getting better', but of course, many people will never get better and as such, should they consistently play the sick role? For instance, long-term illnesses or chronic conditions will require consistent attention throughout their lives. Parsons' (1951/2013) sick role does not account adequately for them.
3. Relatedly, Parsons (1951/2013) does not account for the role of societal stigma in relation to illness that others such as Goffman (1959/2009) might have. This includes stigmatisation of conditions such as mental illness throughout history, and diseases such as those sexually transmitted. As a consequence, Parsons (1951/2013) ignores the power of interaction between society and individuals, and the deviantisation of people with certain illnesses.
4. In certain times and conditions, doctors and nurses have to engage in triage decisions as to who is privileged for medical care, and who needs to be placed to the side. This was very evident during the early months of COVID-19 where in countries such as Italy, medical personnel had to make difficult choices as to who could be admitted to hospital due to the lack of resources. As Orfali (2020) shows, in Italy there were strict guidelines on age in relation to hospital admission, where the elderly were not prioritised for urgent care. In other countries such as France, priorities were given explicitly to healthcare providers first, ensuring that they looked after staff to keep hospitals running (Orfali, 2020). Parsons (1951/2013) does not account for the contexts in his universalist approach.
5. Finally, Parsons (1951/2013) places too much emphasis on the passivity of the patient as someone who simply adopts the advice of the medical care, and places enormous trust in the provider. As we will see below, others such as Giddens (1991) demonstrate that in today's modern society, expertise is not simply left unchallenged like this.

Despite these failings of Parsons (1951/2013), the sick role exposed a number of important issues for sociologists to unpack. This included the structure of society, and how illness interrupts the everyday roles that we adopt within them. Furthermore, the sick role highlights the importance of the relationship between the medical industry and society generally, highlighting to us how reliant we have become on the medical model for our ongoing health and well-being. We have left behind traditional models of medical care now for the biomedical model, which as we saw above can be critiqued for its power over society. Nevertheless, Parson's (1951/2013) approach to medicine is problematic for various reasons, the most important being the relationship between medical personnel and individuals today.

# Challenging Expertise – Giddens' Reflexivity

As **modernity** has progressed, so too have the number of occupations, specialists, professions and expertise, in every area of our social and individual lives. Health in particular is replete with professions that specialise in all sorts of medical issues. For British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991), our modern life has become complicated by this explosion of experts. We are bombarded with information constantly, especially via the internet. However, what is clear, as you might be aware of yourself, is that these experts or specialists do not always agree with one another, and at times publicly criticise the knowledge, techniques or actions of others. This puts those in society in a difficult position where we, perhaps unlike the case in premodern or early modern societies, have to make a choice of who to trust and who to follow.

To understand this further we need to take a step back and follow what Giddens (1991) contests is the change from modernity into what he calls 'reflexive modernity'. In short, Giddens (1991, p. 38) theorises that life has become a constant process of examining and reforming "social practices", "in the light of incoming information about those very practices." This is in large part due to the dramatic changes we have experienced in the latter half of the 20th Century including but not limited to significant changes in technology, the speed through which we receive information, the opening up of knowledge via the internet and the vast increased movement of people across the globe. Consider the changes for instance that have happened as a result of the uptake of Web 2.0 technology. While three decades ago we relied solely on television and the newspapers for our news, we now are fed information live and up-to-date 24/7 via social media and other applications. For Giddens (1991), this influx of information uproots traditional practices and creates new pathways for us to live our lives (see chapter on culture and identity).

While our great-grandparents perhaps had little choice in their **identity** formation and their knowledge consumption, today we have limitless information at our fingertips which inevitably for Giddens (1991) causes us to have an expansion of choice of how we live our lives. The process through which we consume, consider, rationalise and eventually choose a different path is described by Giddens as '**reflexivity**'. To simplify the idea, the argument is that we no longer simply take as a given information that comes to us. Rather, we balance that information against others, including our own knowledge, and then consider it carefully before making a decision. Consider for instance what led to your decision in career. While in premodern and even early modern times, you were likely to either (a) follow your parent's occupation, or (b) choose from a limited set of choices due to class or status, today you have an abundance of choice, and as such a significant amount of work needs to be conducted in analysing all information, acquiring even support from experts in the field.

**Figure**. Healing hands by Christin Hume is licensed by Unsplash

Put this idea of reflexivity to work in health, and you can see what Giddens (1991) might say about the choices we have in front of us in health and well-being. Giddens (1991) in particular argues that expert systems, such as those found in biomedical healthcare, are complicated systems of knowledge and statuses that organise our individual healthcare today. However, these systems are being challenged consistently by other expertise/knowledge from both within and from the outside. Expert systems lay claim to truths, but these are consistently contested amongst each other as to what that 'truth' is. Therefore, on one hand, consumers of healthcare have choices now as to which specialists within the biomedical healthcare model they follow. For instance, consider the division between chiropractic science and physiotherapy. Both are advertised as sciences following the scientific method, but equally, both have disagreements about what therapies are best for spinal problems. As Giddens (1991) would argue, they both lay claim to the truth, but oppose one another. On the other hand, however, there has been a dramatic rise of alternative approaches to healthcare that lay outside the biomedical industry. Complementary and alternative medicines (CAMs) and practices for instance have led to a diverse range of new expertise and specialists who argue complement or provide proper alternatives to biomedical science. In Australia, the popularity of complementary medicines is reflected in the estimated $5.6 billion dollars that Australians spend each year collectively on various items and services. From Giddens' (1991) perspective, this reflects the growing reflexivity that we have adopted in our own health care.

The major problem for Giddens (1991) is that expert systems such as medical science have fallen victim to a lack of trust. In the past, for him, we were more likely to accept the authoritative model of health care, one where the doctor knows best, and we follow advice stringently. However, with the expansion and availability of knowledge, coupled with the breakdown of traditional social norms, we have become far less trusting of our experts. For Giddens (1991) and others such as Ulrich Beck (1992), a large portion of this distrust comes from the unintended consequences, or side-effects, that expertise has created in our lives. We as individuals are always seeking to negotiate who to believe and place our trust in when it comes to health care and well-being. Giddens (1991) therefore argued that trust is something that institutions and individuals seek to develop more than simply proving the science today. He contends that at a personal level, institutions work hard through persuasive 'facework' (a term he borrows from Goffman, 1963/2002) to instil a sense of authority, expertise and trust into potential consumers. We could see this 'facework' potentially in the way that health care is marketed to us. Consider an advertisement for a new drug, or specialist in health care. What sorts of 'facework' do you see invested in these? How does the medical industry attempt to instil trust into us?

🧠 **Learn More**

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the trust of expert systems and the government was put to the test. In both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand,

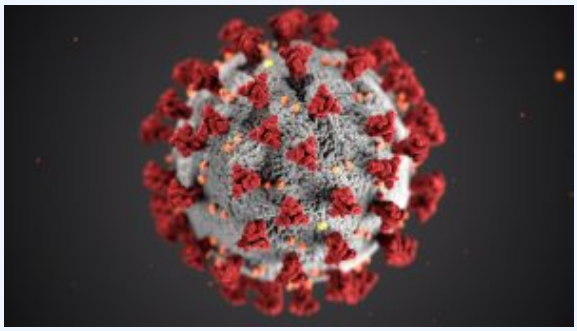

**Figure**. The ultrastructural morphology exhibited by coronaviruses by the CDC is licensed by Unsplash

rallies to protest against compulsory vaccination measures, lockdowns of the public, and other measures put in place to limit the spread of the virus, demonstrated the deep distrust that some of the public have towards government and public health care specialists. However, Goldfinch, Taplin and Gauld (2021) discovered in their survey research with 500 people in each country that public trust in both government and public health had reached a new high following the pandemic. In particular, trust had dramatically increased in government in both countries with approximately 80% of people in their sample agreeing that government was trustworthy. Furthermore, they also found that trust and confidence in public health care had risen significantly, with over 85% agreeing that specialists were working for the best interests of their countries. Yet despite this study, a recent poll conducted by the Australian National University discovered that only 63% of Australians had confidence in and trusted the hospital and health care systems, and 56% had confidence in state/territory governments! What do you think? Are we becoming more distrustful of our healthcare systems? If so, why do you think that might be the case? What institutions do you think we have the most trust in?

## Class and Health Care

Unlike Illich and Foucault, Marxists tend to view the health-care system not simply as a powerful institution that infiltrates social lives, Rather Marxists contest the structured inequalities that exist, creating ill-health in the first place. Marx and Engels themselves wrote extensively about ill health and the structured inequality of capitalism (for more on their critique of capitalism see chapter on class and status). In particular, Engels (Engels & Kiernan, 1845/1987) in his treatise on *The Condition of the Working Class in England* went to some extent to describe the conditions of housing for the proletarian. He argued that the poor state and design of homes, along with the planning of neighbourhoods for the working class, created breeding grounds for disease. The root cause of ill health is therefore not the lack of medical care, per se, but rather the organisation, governance and structure of a capitalist society. Unlike contemporaries of their

day, Marx and Engels contested the idea that ill health was individualistic or even biologically grounded in a form of social Darwinism. Rather, the poor health outcomes of the most vulnerable and poor in society, were the direct result of the ill effects of capitalism, that saw the proletariat become the property of the bourgeoisie. Engels (Engels & Kiernan, 1845/1987) in particular argued that the poor health outcomes of the working class were the responsibility of the middle-class bourgeoise and the government which he saw as only protecting the rights of those who were owners of property.

Over time, Marxist or critical theoretical critiques of health care followed suit with several arguing (especially in the 1980s) that individualistic efforts to explain poor health, only serve to obscure or gloss over the structural nature of poverty and the ill-health that follows (for instance see Navarro, 1980). However, other scholars have examined the transition from public health to privatised medicine where institutions, organisations and even hospitals have turned into profit-making enterprises. This is especially clear in the United States which has a significantly different model of health care than Australia or Aotearoa New Zealand. Nevertheless, healthcare systems such as Australia's have been criticised for the transition to different modes of public policy regarding health. Fran Collyer and her colleagues (2015) for instance criticise the transition from a fully funded public healthcare model, to one that has started to privilege corporate healthcare, and private insurance in particular. This is most evident in hospital care and surgery where they argue that,

> the increasing government support of the private healthcare sector also removes resources from the public system. In a small market such as Australia, where almost all surgeons operate in both the public and private sectors, increases in the level of private sector work (particularly where it is for private patients and elective surgery) diminishes the profession's capacity to attend to those in the public sector [...] and it is the public sector which cares for a much larger proportion of patients with relatively low socioeconomic status and more complex medical needs. (Collyer et al., 2015, p.281)

As a consequence of this movement towards private health care, the public system is overwhelmed and the ability for an uninsured person to obtain surgery for problems deemed not urgent is difficult. Consequently, wait times grow, resulting in an incentivisation towards private health care and insurance – something that the Australian government continues to provide a financial rebate to individuals who purchase private health insurance.

Marxists and those like them, emphasise therefore two major themes. Firstly, the nature of capitalism means that structurally, those who in the poorer classes tend to have poorer health outcomes. This bears out still to this day in Australia for instance. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) captures this data in their annual health reports showing that **socioeconomic** factors have a direct correlation with health outcomes today. It is important to note that socioeconomic groups, as defined in the report, are not simply a measure of class. Rather, they are statistical measures developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) that groups the population into five – based on income, education, unemployment and occupation. The groupings are reflective of the disadvantage (based on those variables) of areas, not simply class groupings. Thus, it compares the most disadvantaged areas with the least disadvantaged areas.

What the AIHW reports show is that socioeconomic disadvantage repeatedly demonstrates a disparity in

health outcomes on a range of measures across the 5 socioeconomic groups. This includes mortality rates where those in the lower socioeconomic groups were more likely to die from avoidable deaths than those in the higher groups. Comparing the lowest group to the highest, the AIHW found that the lowest were,

- 2.6 times more likely to die from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease than those in the highest socioeconomic category
- 2 times more likely to die from lung cancer than those in the highest socioeconomic category
- 1.6 times more likely to die from coronary heart disease than those in the highest socioeconomic category
- 1.3 times more likely to die from cerebrovascular disease than those in the highest socioeconomic category (AIHW, 2022, p. 3).

However, the socioeconomic group disparity goes beyond disease and death into other measures of health. This includes, for instance, smoking, where the lowest group is far more likely to smoke daily (3.6 times more) than the highest group. Furthermore, on issues like obesity, it tracks again that socioeconomic status matters with the prevalence of obesity declining from the lowest to the highest groups. This inequality even continued with COVID-19, with the pandemic disproportionately affecting the lowest socioeconomic group. As the AIHW (2022, p. 3) reports, "Of the 2,639 COVID-19 deaths that occurred by 30 April 2022, there were more than 3 times as many among people living in the lowest socioeconomic areas compared with people living in the highest socioeconomic areas".

The second issue for Marxists, and those like them, as indicated earlier is access to good health care systems, education and social/cultural capital. In 1988, Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell argued for a "just health program" that would allow humans across all classes the chance to access good healthcare and called for the government to create pathways for equality of outcomes. In particular, she argued that the inequalities of health could not simply be overcome through the privatisation of health systems. Rather, health knowledge, skills and resources needed to be made available to all, along with access to quality health care including preventative care through education programs and so on.

One empirical example of this is private health insurance. Having access, as noted earlier, to quality private health insurance is a significant health benefit to those in countries like Australia. As Collyer and her colleagues showed in their 2015 study, the division between private and public health systems is connected to the availability of doctors and other medical personnel, along with expenditure by the government on health care costs. In Australia, private health insurance is linked to different socioeconomic and other measures. In a study conducted by the ABS, it was found that in 2014/15 those with private health insurance were more likely to come from employed, couple households with a qualification beyond high school (such as diploma or bachelor's degree). Conversely, those without private health were likely to be migrants from Oceania, North Africa or the Middle East, and those from the lowest levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. Most people in follow-up questions simply argued that it was far too expensive to afford private health, and felt it an unnecessary burden on their budgets.

Marxist approaches to health, like this and that of Engels, allow us to look beyond the individual and into the core roots of social inequality. While we may have disagreements about the critique that Marx and Engels have on capitalism, we cannot deny the statistical reality that connects poverty to ill health. The question is how we overcome these things.

### 🧠 Learn More

One area of disparity in the classes in regard to health is that of dentistry. In a study conducted by Mejia et al. (2018) across Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, the problems of income were evident in relation to good oral health. The study (2018, p.8) in particular found that, "in terms of dental disease, this (income) reflects the ability to access oral health care, favouring populations with high income". In addition to this, the researchers found that those with lower incomes self-reported through surveys a "lower self-rating" in terms of their oral health (Meija et al., 2018, p.8). Socially advantaged groups, according to the authors, were far more likely to consider their oral hygiene better off compared to those in lower advantaged groups. Interestingly, Aotearoa New Zealand held the widest inequality in the self-reported data on tooth decay across a variety of variables including education and income. The reasons for this are varied, but the authors surmise this might be due to the lack of public dental care available in New Zealand for adults, compared to the other three nations.

**Figure**. Dentist with patient by Caroline LM is licensed by Unsplash

Several questions can be raised from this study regarding oral health. These include questions as to whether oral health care ought to be fully covered across the public health care systems. Is oral health care something that the nation-state should be ensuring for its population? Furthermore, what other areas of health care might display health inequalities like this? Should the state provide fully funded public health care for those issues as well?

## In Summary

The sociology of health and illness is a significant field with several key areas of study and consideration.

- Biological models embedded in the medical industry are heavily critiqued by several theorists in the sociology of health.
- Medicalisation in particular, by key theorists like Ivan Illich, criticises the dominance of the medical model on society, and the side-effects it produces.
- Relations between doctor and patient are key also to several theorists – such as Parsons who constructed a role for those who were sick in society.
- Expertise is, however, challenged daily, with trust between society and medical professionals a constant issue for modernity.
- Class, or more specifically socioeconomic status, is a significant contributor to ill health in developed and underdeveloped nations across the world.

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# DIGITAL SOCIOLOGY: THE INTERNET, SOCIAL MEDIA, ETHICS AND LIFE

Nick Osbaldiston

The key goals of this chapter are to:

- understand broadly what digital sociology is
- explain Big Data
- understand some of the concerns associated with big data
- understand what social media is and how it has changed our social interaction
- comprehend and explain some of the ethical debates around technology and digital worlds
- examine key concepts regarding robotics and ethics.

## Overview

The digital world is a central feature of our everyday life. Our social interactions are increasingly online in the form of social media, begging questions on how much of our sociality has changed. Furthermore, technology has fundamentally changed important areas of our society such as how political power is exercised, how economies work, how our workplaces operate, and even how our families live. Yet, these changes have brought consequences that this chapter will explore in detail. For instance, the uptake of social media brings with it issues of privacy and questions around what happens to your personal data. Increasing use of technology to track our online movements is as much an ethical as a sociological issue. In addition to this, the increasing use of robotics and investment into them for the future raises some larger sociological questions.

## Digital Sociology: New Frontiers in Sociology

One of the things that sociologists strove for in early modern periods was to understand how structural changes, including technology, impacted and potentially changed society. For someone like Emile

Durkheim, changes to the organisation of work, drastically challenged the **social solidarity** that people had with one another in modern life. For Karl Marx, technological changes in the workplace meant that workers in factories were increasingly **alienated** from the end product of their labour, in other words, work had become meaningless. For Weber, technological change brought with it increasing **rationalisation** of modern life – things were becoming predictable, calculated, and measurable.

It stands to reason then that as sociologists today, our concerns with the technological advances would follow suit. As digital technologies find their way increasingly into our everyday lives, we have to ask big questions about what this does to our social relations, social structures, identities, and how we organise life generally. Digital technologies are a major part of everything we do now, from work and study, through to entertainment, socialising, and even intimacy.

For renowned Australian sociologist Deborah Lupton (2013; 2015), these changes to our modern world need to be understood and explored sociologically. Digital sociology for her,

> provides a means by which the impact, development and use of digital technologies and their incorporation into social worlds and concepts of selfhood may be investigated, analysed and understood. (Lupton, 2013, p. 5)

Watch Deborah Lupton in the following interview [3:52] define further the everyday life of digital objects that we encounter – which are the things that digital sociologists study.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=158#oembed-1*

Sociologists in this area of research have been investigating the impact of digital worlds on social lives since the 1990s (Lupton, 2015, p. 5). As Lupton (2015, p. 5) identifies in her introduction to **digital sociology**, areas such as "cybersociology" and the "sociology of the internet" have been well studied for some time. However, in more recent years and largely due to the expansion of the internet along with a significant uptake of smart devices such as smartphones, the need to understand these issues is even more pressing. We only need to look at the upswing of users on Facebook to realise that something like social media has dramatically impacted our everyday lives. With almost 3 billion users in 2022, Facebook is easily the most used social media. Importantly as we will see, Meta, Facebook's named parent company which also owns Instagram, WhatsApp and Oculus, reported an annual revenue in 2021 of $117 billion USD, an increase of over 30 billion on the previous year. For comparison, British Petroleum's annual revenue for 2021 was roughly $165 billion USD. More recently, billionaire businessman Elon Musk bought the Twitter platform for a reported $44 billion USD. Clearly, social media is big business now as well!

At a broad level, digital sociology engages with how these new industries, means of communication, modes of production, and consumption, impact on our social, cultural, political and economic lives. Sociologists

in this area engage in critique of these areas, by asking questions on how much this has changed our society and the structures that surround it. Furthermore, many social scientists examine the question of morals and ethics in relation to digital issues. For instance, in recent times there has been a significant upswing in the development of artificial intelligence within our smart devices and in the growing Internet of Things (IoT). Social science and humanities scholars along with those who study technology, ask difficult questions on the ethics and moral limitations of these technologies, especially in relation to questions of legal/moral responsibility (see final section of this chapter). Other sociologists such as Possamai-Insedy and Nixon (2017) contend that sociologists ought to be involved in critiquing the digital/technological industries that market big data and how this creates issues for individual/collective privacies (Lupton, 2015). Within this space, there is a section of social sciences that are examining the way that data is used for population surveillance and how this is increasing in contemporary times. Some sociologists however examine everyday changes to our social worlds by examining the nature of social media and how it changes or adapts everyday communication (Hogan, 2010; Murthy, 2012). In the rest of this chapter, we will cover these issues.

### 🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit

What is the world's social media uptake like today?

- How many users are there in the world of social media today?
- What are the reported increases or decreases in the number of users on social media?
- Do some more digging on the internet – how many accounts do we have on average in Australia and New Zealand?
- Why do you think social media is so popular today? How would you understand this sociologically?

**Figure:** Social media in our everyday lives by Nathan Dumlao is licensed by Unsplash

## Social Media: Changing Social Interaction?

Most of us reading this text are probably only a hand gesture or a keyboard click away from logging into a social media space. When we engage with social media, we can ask questions about how classical and modern sociological theory might make sense of it. Is social media part of a complex system of identity wherein we perform aspects of ourselves now online? Or is it something more sinister as we will explore later.

Dhiraj Murthy (2012), a sociologist who specialises in digital media, utilises the work of Erving Goffman (1959) and his dramaturgical approaches to unpack social interactions online. Specifically, Murthy (2012) argues that the ritualisation of speech patterns that we experience in everyday life, which Goffman unpacked in his work, correlates neatly to the way we engage with online interaction. The three principles he suggests relate are ritualisation, participation frameworks and embedding.

Ritualisation refers to the unconscious ways that we gesture or share meaning across conversations that do not require much explanation. Goffman (1959) describes this further as the different verbal and non-verbal ways we communicate to others in our conversations. For instance, I may walk in one day to class, holding my arms across my chest and say out loud, 'BRRR!'. You, as a member of that conversation, would understand that this is not some sort of random verbal noise, but rather I am indicating through this small act that I am cold. We can think of many forms of this sort of micro-ritualised practices that are Australian in context. For instance, nodding heads as you walk past a stranger to indicate hello, smacking oneself in the forehead when you do something wrong, touching something wooden and saying 'touch wood' (a form of superstition), and even saying 'g'day' in the slang we use verbally.

Murthy (2012) takes this into the online environment arguing that we create these forms of ritualisations and copy them in social media spaces. Using Twitter as an example, he writes the following:

> Though the gestural conventions may be mediated through graphical avatars, emoticons, or even unintended typed characters, these can be considered 'gestures' and they are laden with meaning. For example, on Twitter, one can decipher a sigh or pause through subtle and not-so-subtle textual cues, e.g. '...' for an explicit pause. (Murthy, 2012, p. 1067)

We can see this sort of behaviour in other ways too. For instance, in a private conversation with a friend about something annoying, you might breathe out in a sigh to indicate displeasure. However, in a textual conversation, this is not possible (unless it was a video conversation), and so we might write 'ughhh' or use an emoticon to signify the sigh. As Murthy (2012) points out, we utilise a whole heap of 'non-verbal' ritualisations in the online world including the use of gifs, memes, emoticons, certain acronyms (eg. lol, smh, omg) and hashtags to convey things that are beyond the written word. The point that Murthy (2012) is trying to make here is that we are emulating the sorts of rituals that we all participate in online, in the offline world. However, we might ask whether we have started to construct our own forms of online ritualisations that are becoming norms in our digital worlds. For instance, are there unwritten norms now established around how long one should take before answering someone's online message? What about how we respond?

Goffman (1959) also focuses on the conversational participation frameworks. In your real-life conversations, he argues that you have both focused and unfocused interactions. Focused interactions are conversations that take place within a group or couple that are centred on the people in the conversation alone. Unfocused interactions however relate to how we act in a larger setting where you are gathered with others. For instance, in a bar watching sports on the television, people might be shouting and debating decisions by players and officials with total strangers. Murthy (2012) argues that we take this idea into social media with us. Firstly, we try to have focused and unfocused interactions with people on social media via different methods. Clearly we do this through private messaging in different interactions. However, like the bar example, we might be watching a sports team on the television but at the same time try to have unfocused interactions with others via use of hashtags. For instance, often in games televised now, there will be a hashtag provided to join in the discussion online with others as the game progresses (and afterwards). This unfocussed encounter allows us to converse with total strangers online – albeit sometimes not in nice ways! One of the problems of social media however is how little control you have over who sees your posts – and sometimes the algorithms of social media (see below) will guide people to your post who you did not intend to involve. For scholars like Murthy (2012), this can create potential problems in that you might attract people who you never intended to see your posts. However, is that different to real life conversation? Or has social media changed significantly how we 'socially' engage with the world?

The final area for Goffman (1959) is the role of 'embedding' in conversation. For him, embedding suggests that there are contexts and times where speech is not necessarily our own private talk. For instance, if you are a speaker or representative of a political party and you speak on behalf of a group of people. Our speech (and actions) in real life are also embedded in a time and space that in the past, might not be remembered

years later out of context. In the area of social media however, Murthy (2012) argues that the embeddedness of those things we post through social media may not be removed easily. In virtual spaces, we meet not in physical space but time. Thus, as he argues (Murthy, 2012, p. 1068), social media posts can be copied, held in reserve, and then brought forward at later dates. Furthermore, they can be taken to represent the words of the person themselves, rather than the context of the institution/organisation that the person is representing. We have seen many incidents where people's social media posts from years earlier have been reposted by others to challenge their political, ideological or social position. Often this is done, for someone like Goffman (1959), in order to spoil their public identity and delegitimise them in political/social discussions and debates. Or simply to embarrass people. There is always of course, a darker side to social media!

Video: Do social media rituals work in real life?

Watch this humorous experiment from creator Jena Kingsley and ask a few questions;

- Is Murthy (2012) correct? Is social media and real life crossed over?
- Secondly, do you think social media is doing for our society?
- What do you think of Sherry Turkle's argument that social media is making face to face conversations difficult?

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=158#oembed-2*

## Social Media Performance or Online Curation?

Several scholars utilise Erving Goffman's (1959) *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* to understand social media as a type of social performance (see for instance Agger, 2015; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Hogan, 2010). Common among them, as Goffman (1959) states in his dramaturgical approach to social interaction, is the notion that we present ourselves on a front stage which is where our social media profiles and posts appear, and keep hidden away from there the backstage, the things we do not want people to see. Goffman's (1959) argument is that the front stage is a performance where we try and convince the audience of a role or identity that we have. The audience responds negatively or positively to this, and we in turn respond to them by negotiating our projected self on the front stage. In an online world, this is

quite easy to adapt when we consider how we place on our social media profiles certain profile pictures, our backgrounds, likes/dislikes and other personal identifiers. Political parties even do this now, performing their identities and politics in a highly performative way, trying to keep hidden from view all the things they do not want people to know about their parties on their platforms.

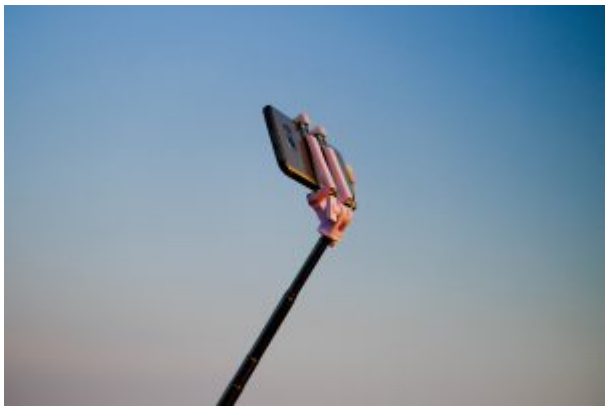

**Figure:** Selfie by Steve Gale is licensed by Unsplash

However, others like Bernie Hogan (2010, p. 381) contend that there is no longer an easy distinction between the backstage of life in social media, and the front stage. In some cases, individuals tend to open up what might well be something we would have liked to keep in the backstage typically, for everyone to note. In other cases, we might be lured into oversharing in the internet with random strangers that we have little in common with (Agger, 2015). Of course, broader and controversial topics like racism, sexism, sexting, online pornography and other facets of social media could well bring the backstage of people's lives to the fore, due to the lack of face-to-face interaction (Hogan, 2010).

Nevertheless, Hogan (2010, p. 381) argues that all content that we post and use on social media to present ourselves cannot simply be consider performance. First, performances in everyday life are usually contextual. For instance, I might wear a suit and tie to work, but I will remove that later in my dinner date with friends. Conversely, when we present in social media, it tends to be a "recorded act" which changes the nature of performance onwards (Hogan, 2010, pp. 381-382).

Instead, Hogan (2010, p. 382) would have us consider that social media spaces, like Facebook and Instagram especially, are now "exhibition sites" where we curate online. He describes this in the following.

> An exhibition site can now be defined as a site (typically online) where people submit reproducible artifacts (read: data). These artifacts are held in storehouses (databases). Curators (algorithms designed by site maintainers) selectively bring artifacts out of storage for audiences. The audience in these spaces consists of those who have and those who make use of access to the artifacts. This includes those who respond, those who lurk, and those who acknowledge or are likely to acknowledge. (Hogan, 2010, p. 382)

Curators of a museum or art gallery take artefacts or artwork and place exhibitions in different positions around the building to according to how they want the objects to be viewed. Alongside this is usually a blurb or story about the artefact/artwork, where it came from and what is important about it. Could we say our social media profiles are similar?

If we follow the metaphor, your online profiles and the way you interact and engage with them, is your ongoing collection of digital artefacts that exhibit your life. We order them according to what we want people to view first, or in different areas. We arrange them in different chronological orders potentially to represent how our life has progressed. We also use past digital artefacts, like a historian might use archives,

to display past events, moments, emotions and so on. You might want to ask if you think your social media page represents a type of museum or gallery of your life? What artefacts do you use to tell a story about who you are?

Hogan (2010) however contends that in digital spaces, there are now mediators who automatically curate objects for you. He writes "curators mediate our experiences of social information" (Hogan, 2010, p. 381; cf. Agger, 2015). These moderators are the algorithms or design of the social media application you use, which organises the presentation of your site in certain ways. This includes filtering your profiles to display certain artefacts, ordering them in such a way that only select friends you engage with often will see your posts, and of course, sell on data about you to third parties who then curate online advertisements back to you (see below). Consequently, argues Hogan (2010), we are not single curators of our online worlds. We are now co-curators with the platform itself and the programmers behind it (such as Facebook). Once our artefacts are online, they are subjected to different curations that occur with and without our knowledge. The question then becomes how much control you have over that data artefact once up online.

## Big Data: Surveillance, Consumption and Production of Online Lives

As Lupton (2015) explains in her introduction to digital sociology, our lives are increasingly being lived online (see also Christine Hine's work [2015]). As technological advances were made to the world wide web (also known at one stage as the information superhighway), and the internet moved to Web 2.0, a significant shift occurred in how we used the online world. Web 2.0 technology created opportunity for individuals on the internet to not only consume information (one-way direction), but now produce information/data/artefacts themselves (two-way direction). Thus, we are now not only consuming data, but also producing it (Beer & Burrows, 2007; Hogan, 2010; Lupton, 2015).

Consider the newspaper for instance. In the paper version that you might receive on your door step in the morning, you can engage with the text in a one-way fashion only. Thus, the publisher controls what you read. In the online format though, news is two-way in that we can take a story, comment on it, republish it on our social media accounts with our own opinions, critique it, and have online discussions about the issue with others. We have added to the story itself, creating our own digital artifacts. Thus, we are no longer simply consumers of information, but also producers

**Figure:** Data reporting dashboard on a laptop screen by Stephen Dawson is licensed by Unsplash

as well – hence the term "prosumer" (Lupton, 2015, p. 22). Yet, along with this comes some difficult ethical concerns with the use of our data.

One of the common terms you might hear in relation to the internet is that of **big data**. This refers simply to both the increasing amount, and the variety of and the speed of which data is accumulated and stored by corporations across the internet. The data is so diverse and significantly large, it is described as big data. Most of this data is statistical, and is gathered each time we utilise the internet, social media, or other online platforms. The explainer video below describes what big data is and how it is gathered.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=158#oembed-3*

Andrej Zwitter (2014) suggests that there are three different players in the role of big data. The first are the *collectors*. These are corporations, such as Google or Meta platforms, that store data that we supply through our various interactions online, such as online searches, likes and dislikes on different posts, demographic information (such as age, gender, location, etc), locations of check-ins on smartphones, and other **metadata**. The second group are the *utilisers*. These are companies who pay collectors for access to this data, in order to make money from it by understanding more about product users, their needs, their likes, and so on. These are usually marketing companies that work for or within corporations to maximise their profits and understand what consumers want. The final group of people are the *generators* which are simply those who engage with internet spaces and contribute (albeit in most cases unknowingly) to big data. These are people like you and me, everyday consumers of the internet, who also produce data. And this is not simply what we do in the online world directly. For instance, the use of different devices, such as smart watches, that connect to databases and the internet, are also collecting our information. This can also include loyalty cards (see the case study below from Deborah Lupton). If you think about this carefully, you are now looking at one of the largest focus groups that has ever existed in the world!

**Figure:** Person using analytics by Myriam Jessier is licenced by Unsplash

Consider this example. Let's say that one of us is a 25 year old male, who lives in Australia, Melbourne, Brunswick specifically, they are in a relationship with a 26 year old female, and are fully employed at a university campus with a degree in economics. This male, like many in and around his neighbourhood, also likes basketball and has a love for a specific style of shoe from one company. One day, he searches for that basketball shoe (*generator*), and looks over the different colour options, clicking on different items, different styles, and finally orders a pair over the internet paying with his credit card. Now imagine that you are a big data *collector*, and you have 5000 people in the same area all looking for basketball shoes, different styles, different colours and so on. Some have the same demographics as this man above, but some do not. Suddenly, you have a large and immediate understanding of what everyone likes, and does not like. You sell this data to the shoe company's marketing team (*utilisers*), who then analyse the data to design future shoes that align with the interests of their target demographic (basketball players). This is the nature of big data.

Critics like Zwitter (2014) argue that this is morally contentious as it assumes that people are aware of, and consent to, their data being taken like this (Beer, 2018; Lupton, 2015). However, Zwitter (2014, p. 4) like many others worries that there is an ethical dilemma in that "free will and individualism" is still assumed to exist in online spaces. However, ask yourself, when did you sign up for your data to be taken in this manner?

For Zwitter (2014), while this approach of obtaining your consent is legal, it is nevertheless unethical as people are not really aware of what they are signing up for. It also potentially creates situations where one's privacy could be breached, as we have seen in several circumstances in recent times where businesses that store personal data have been hacked and held to ransom by online anonymous groups. (see a list of data hacks in recent years)

However, the broader issue for Zwitter (2014) and others is that of data surveillance and the predictive power of analytics and statistics. As he argues,

> this information gathered from statistical data and increasingly from Big Data can be used in a targeted way to get people to consume or to behave in a certain way, e.g. through targeted marketing. Furthermore, if different aspects about

🛠 Sociological Tool Kit

Exercise: Examine the terms and conditions page of social media

Open up a social media application or site (such as Facebook or Twitter or Instagram) and look for the terms and conditions. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How easy is it to find information on what data this provider takes from you?
- What do they say they will use this data for?
- Did you read these terms and conditions before signing up? If no, why? Why do people not look at these do you think?
- Do you think it is ethical for these corporations to use your data like this?

> the preferences and conditions of a specific group are known, these can be used to employ incentives to encourage or discourage a certain behavior. (Zwitter, 2014, p. 4)

As more information is taken, and cross-analysed, corporations can predict with greater accuracy how to market specific products to specific groups of people. For instance, Lupton (2015) shares a fascinating but troubling example of this from Australia's grocery chain Woolworths:

> Woolworths supermarket chain also owns an insurance company and petrol stations and has a 50 per cent share in a data analytics company. Using the combined databases drawn from their customer loyalty programme and insurance company and employing the skills provided by their data analytics company, Woolworths were able to demonstrate that they could target consumers for insurance packages based on their supermarket purchasing habits. They found that customers of their supermarkets who purchased higher quantities of milk and red meat were better car insurance risks than those who purchased high quantities of pasta and rice, filled their cars with petrol at night and drank spirits. Based on the information in these datasets the two groups of customers were then targeted for offering different insurance packages involving different premium costs. (p. 97)

For some sociologists, this approach to modern life is creating a type of digital **panopticon** where business is now the surveillance mechanism of everyday life. Campbell and Carlson (2002, p. 587) for instance predicted over 20 years ago that the internet would develop into "Big Brother" capitalism, focused on "economic imperatives" that will begin to start "driving advertising and marketing firms to expand the technologies and techniques of surveillance". Unlike other analyses of power however, "surveillance" inside the marketplace requires the willingness of the participant, which for them raises the question of "how corporate actors compel individuals in the marketplace to engage in self-surveillance (and self-disclosure) when there is no immediate threat of coercion" (Campbell & Carlson, 2002, p. 591)? In other words, how do companies like Woolworths in the case above, or Facebook, or Google, convince us to give away personal information as we do?

🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit

Discussion point: Why do we engage with surveillance willingly?

Why is it do you think that people are willing to give out information about themselves online? How might we understand this sociologically? What do you think of the following quote by Campbell and Carlson (2002, pp. 591-592):

> Though the inequitable power relationship between consumers and suppliers constitutes the context of online surveillance, the mechanisms by which marketers frame participatory surveillance as a reasonable transaction cost are sufficiently subtle as not to be evident to consumers. In other words, individuals are not necessarily aware of the degree of inequalities in their relationship with suppliers because marketers and advertisers have effectively concealed the consumerist Panopticon.

For Zwitter (2014, p. 4) and others, this type of behaviour is concerning for two reasons. Firstly, we rarely know what we are signing up to when we accept terms and conditions that allow this data to be taken and sold. Secondly, this approach violates group privacy in that our demographic (as shown in the Woolworth's example) is breached and companies can use the information to tap into potential behaviour and sway activity in one way, or the other. Predictive statistics like this are not simply used for marketing purposes though. It is increasingly the case that the **state** is utilising big data to predict behaviour in relation to crime, health, and other matters (Lupton, 2015).

Sociologists, and other critics, are also increasingly concerned with the predictive power of statistics, especially with the development of algorithms that run in the background collecting information about us. Specifically, algorithms that are coded in such a way as to target particular areas, collect and codify digital data about internet users, and prioritise certain data over others. Important here, as Lupton (2015, p. 102) shows, these algorithms (written by a human) "play a part in the configuring of new data". She writes,

> algorithms play an influential role in ranking search terms in search engines, ensuring that some voices are given precedence over others. From this perspective, the results that come from search engine queries are viewed not solely as 'information' but as social data that are indicative of power relations. (Lupton, 2015, p. 102)

She then uses the case of Google's Page Rank algorithm which influences what websites show up in what order when searching for a particular thing online. This can have a significant impact then on what information is shown, and what is hidden or not noted by the user.

One of the major issues of the algorithm and the predictive power of it is that it can start to reflect racial, gender or other biases. For instance, a systematic literature review conducted in 2019 by Favaretto et al., on 61 different papers that engaged with discrimination through big data found that algorithms that are programmed to mine data for information on demographics for marketing purposes, can lead to underrepresentation of certain vulnerable groups "which might result in unfair or unequal treatment", or overrepresentation which might result in increased attention and scrutiny (Favaretto et al., 2019, p. 13). Watch this short clip [4:40] from a lecture given by Sandra Wachter on privacy and big data problems.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=158#oembed-4*

Algorithms also play a role in information delivery and predicting our own behaviour and needs. Lupton (2015) for instance describes the ways in which algorithms on social media will accumulate knowledge about our preferences, tastes, political and social views, and start to 'suggest' certain posts to us. For instance, you might be a strong advocate for action on climate change. Once the algorithms of social platforms such as YouTube accumulate this information about you from your searches, it will begin to automatically suggest videos related to your position. Australian sociologists Possamai-Inesedy and Nixon (2017, p. 871) argue that this sorting of information and knowledge is damaging to democracy as it can exacerbate existing political/social polarisation. They write,

> digital vigilantism indicates that big data's social impact is not simply a radical shift for users but also an amplification of existing tendencies [...] (there is) an increase in polarisation over social issues, as groups on either side of a debate cease communicating with each other. (Possamai-Inesedy & Nixon, 2017, p. 871)

In other words, if you are inclined to a particular political position on an issue, and the algorithm behind a certain social media platform understands this about you, and continues to feed you information and connection with like-minded people, there is little chance for communication between groups. Polarisation therefore continues as we "are led by algorithm" into "echo-chambers or filter bubbles" where we "find only the news we expect and the political perspectives we hold dear" (Possamai-Inesedy & Nixon, 2017, p. 827). This then, they argue, is "likely to limit cultural experiences and social connections" and "close down interactions except for those that fit existing patterns" (Possamai-Inesedy & Nixon, 2017, p. 827). In short, the more time we spend online, the more time we are going to spend with those we agree with. What does this mean for democracies?

**Look Closer**

Cambridge Analytica scandal – the potential damage of big data in democracies

Click through on the following videos that explain and

Despite these potentially damaging worries about big data, there are benefits as well. As Lupton (2015, pp. 98-99) shows, there are ongoing uses of big data that can track improvements in farming through to understanding and tracking progress on poverty reduction efforts globally. Furthermore, "Google now offers several tools that draw on data from Google searches" that provide insights into potential new health outbreaks such as "dengue fever" (Lupton, 2015, p. 99). Through the Internet of Things (see below) we can also start to use big data to predict natural

disasters, climate change impacts and other matters of scientific importance.

## Politics, Inequalities, and the Digital World

With our lives found more fully online within apps like social media, the opportunity to express identities, and also opinions, has grown significantly. Petray (2011, p. 924) for instance suggests that with the advent of Web 2.0 technology, we now potentially have a "soapbox from which anyone may shout to the world". However, in her work, she also warns that this could well result in society suffering from "opinion overload" where we grow apathetic to the different voices online (Petray, 2011, p. 925). In addition to this, there is potential (as we explored above) for digital political polarisation on topics, that reduces the capacity for proper conversation and discussion on especially sensitive issues.

analyse the recent controversies involving big data and the hack conducted by the company 'Cambridge Analytica'. How does this demonstrate some of the concerns of big data as outlined above? How might we understand this in relation to political sociology?

- "The Great Hack" – documentary preview
- How Cambridge Analytica stole data
- Professor sees the data that was taken from him for first time

Despite this, and the issues of the 'hack' of democracy shown through the Cambridge Analytica case, there has been a growing set of literature around the promise of social/digital life in assisting civic life. Manuel Castells (2015) for instance in his book *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the internet age*, suggests that the new world of political activism via the internet is posing challenges to corporate and political power. To understand Castells' position on this, we need to understand his theory of network society.

In this work, Castells (2009) contends that the organisation of our power and capitalism generally is now no longer located in the way that Karl Marx and others recognised in their day. Rather, power is found in the ownership and flow of information along the networks found in the digital age. Unlike Marx's analysis which focusses on the old notions of class (bourgeois vs proletariat) which places emphasis on ownership of private property, Castells (2009) contends that networked society and the new global economy, relies on inclusion and exclusion. He argues that within capitalism now, there are those who have access to networks of power (via information) and those who do not. This is especially true in relation to the stock market, which is mostly now digitised, with access to information on prices and potential growth areas accessible to only a small class of people (namely stockbrokers, equity managers, and stockholders themselves). Most of the global population is not privy to this information, however, crashes in this can have dire consequences

for the entirety of the world's population as the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2008 demonstrated. However, the easiest way to understand this is in relation to the design of new technology.

If we can imagine that a corporation, such as Apple or Google, decides that they will design a new smartphone and they employ various designers and engineers to develop this in their offices in California. The information on the design is held by that corporation and becomes their property. However, to actually produce this product, they need someone to build the devices. The designers, the corporation, send their information to another corporation that is employed as a sub-contractor to build the new smartphones. This company, most likely located in China, has limited power informationally and can be cut out of the deal if they are too expensive or their standard of construction is poor. In this relationship, the designing corporation (such as Apple) holds significant power for Castells (2009).

Thus 'inclusion' and 'exclusion' in the network society is an important power dynamic that deserves consideration. However, you can take this further by examining the contracted company that also hires employees to build these devices (mostly for us), and pays them accordingly. In terms of Marx's analysis, these employees, who are mostly younger, working, middle-class folk who require work, are the proletariat, with nothing to own but the labour they sell. They have no control at all over their labour, and no stake in the information sharing. They are also what Castells (2009) describes as expendable or disposable as they are a small node in a complicated network. Again, you can take this one step further but analysing where the raw materials for making the smartphone come from. In the case of devices such as these, some minerals are critical such as cobalt which is used in the development of batteries. Cobalt is mined in some of the most underdeveloped parts of the world, including the Democratic Republic of Congo. There have been serious and significant investigative reports that show that in these mines there has been evidence of abuse, slavery, child labour and death. This is the human cost of technological development. Again, for Castells (2015), these people are expendable, in the new networked society of capitalism.

🧠 **Learn more**

Blood Cobalt: Investigation by ABC News

Watch the following report from ABC News on the conditions and issues associated with the Congo's Cobalt mining operations.

How might conflict theorists like Marx view this situation? Do you think people are aware of what is happening in these places? If we were more aware, do you think we might change our behaviour?

You can start to see how power in the information/digital network works across all sorts of areas from politics, economics, academia, and the media. Those with the power of access to information, and control over information, hold power that others will not. However, Castells (2015) argues that social movements

in the current digital age create opportunities to disrupt these information networks. Important for Castells (2015) is the manner in which social movements are now organised. While in the past, these were mostly organised in person and required participation of time, including the physical presence of the protestor, social movements are now far broader, incorporating different platforms and sites that can disrupt information flows.

Social movements for Castells (2015), importantly, are now often structured in a flat form, not in a bureaucratic hierarchy where opinions of the movement are formulated from the top down (eg. a president and board declaring values and ideals). Rather, social media has allowed for leaderless movements that are bound to a general ideal, and seek to interrupt the flow of information or the networked society. A classic case for Castells (2015) is the Occupy Wall Street movement that organised under a banner of taking information on the banking sector and government regulation, and producing counter-narratives designed to draw people into protest against corporate/government cooperation. For instance, the slogan "We are the 99%", which referred to the general disparity of income relying on the statistic that only 1% of the population of the world owned over half the wealth, sought to draw attention to corporate interference with politics by exposing new information to civil society. Social media was utilised as a place to interfere with the 'status quo' of power dynamics within that network to feed an emotive response to corruption in Wall Street.

A prominent Australian example of this is also found in the #destroythejoint action taken by feminist protestors following comments made by a prominent radio commentator Alan Jones (Lupton, 2015). After making misogynistic comments on the then Prime Minister Julia Gilliard as someone who was 'destroying the joint', feminists began to use the hashtag of the same phrase. From Castell's (2015) point of view, the goal of this was to interrupt a power dynamic of the media to control the narrative in the public. Consequently, and after pressure from lobby groups as well as commercial interests, Jones rescinded his comment and made a public apology to the Prime Minister (Lupton, 2015, p. 149).

Other movements have started online with the same goal, to organise and control the narrative associated with the issue that those in power control. For instance, the Black Lives Matter movement, the #makeamazon pay protest, the September 2020 climate strikes, and International Women's Day #IWD events. Furthermore, others have shown how social media has played a pivotal role in organising protest movements in the Arab Spring uprising, and other important political moments (Brown et al., 2017; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013).

One of the downsides of organising social and political movements in the online space is that those with significant power can also incorporate harder surveillance on would-be activists. Uldam (2018) for instance investigated the role of social media in enabling activists to reach wider audiences with their criticisms of a large multi-national corporation. However, "social media also makes activists more vulnerable" where powerful groups (such as companies) can use their influence and legal ability to contain the message activists want to send out. In short, using the power of big data and other techniques, companies are able to control the narrative and ensure that activist messaging is withdrawn (cf. Castells, 2015; Yilmaz, 2017).

This is similar to the case with Indigenous activists in Australia in the online environment who, as Petray (2011, p. 929) argues, are exposed to the surveillance of online platforms like Facebook, which then in turn makes the activist's profile a target for "research for advertisers". In other words, activism online in social media actively aids the power of some of the most powerful nodes in the digital network, such as Facebook. It is clearly also a problem for those in other countries where surveillance is significant. Watch the following video [5:55] on the Chinese Communist Party in China and their 'Great Firewall' that blocks much information and also monitors social media use for discussions on things that the party does not want discussed.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=158#oembed-5*

## Robots and the Internet of Things

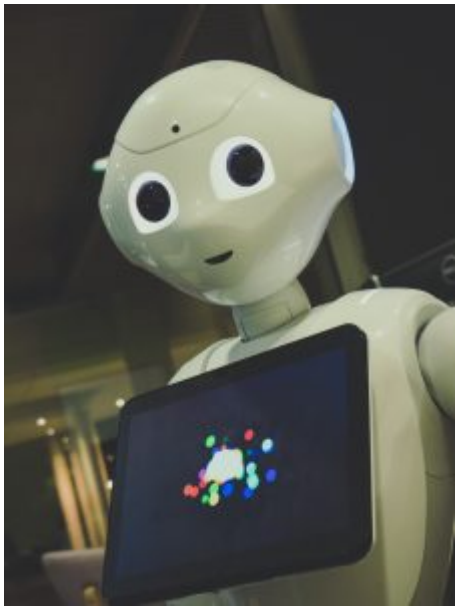

**Figure:** My best friend Pepper by Owen Beard is licensed by Unsplash

With the advancement of technology, and the widespread uptake of the Internet, there has been a rise in a new form of internet that is called the ' Internet of Things' (IoT). At a broad level, the IoT describes a network of different devices, objects, software, and technologies that are designed to take information/data and share this with other objects. Some devices for instance may have a sensor that tracks certain data that when shared with another device through the internet, triggers an action in that technology. We engage with many of these already with our wearable devices, smartphones, and in-home smart technologies. For instance, you may own a smart-home device (eg. an Amazon Echo), which may control your lighting in your home when you return home after being triggered by your smartphone. Or you might wear a device to monitor your exercise, which when connected via Bluetooth to your smartphone, can track your run, and provide data on average heart rate and distance covered (Lupton, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2020).

The promise of the IoT is wide-reaching. Everything from smart homes that reduce power consumption by automatically reducing or switching of supply to unnecessary electricity use, to smart environmental systems that monitor the potential threat of natural disaster and trigger warnings or other mechanisms to save lives, through to smart cities that could lower the cost of operation by monitoring and automatically reducing waste, such as water (Farhan et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2015, p. 41). The promises are significant including in the labour market, which may well result in a new industrial revolution. Farhan et al. (2018,

p. 2) for instance argue that "IoT and digital technology will help ensure maximum efficiency, reduced manufacturing cost with increased quality". This could also assist in agriculture where "IoT can provide solutions and methods for precision crop monitoring and disease diagnosis" that could help solve world food shortages into the future (Farhan et al., 2018, p. 2). However, there are growing challenges to the Internet of Things that hinder its development. These include security concerns, such as the hacking of networks, resourcing issues, the ability to store large amounts of data and the development of artificial intelligence to analyse data, privacy issues for civil society, and a growing issue – that of e-waste (Singh et al., 2014).

E-waste itself is now a significant issue that faces the world's population. For instance, Andeobu et al. (2021, p. 1) highlight that in 2019, "50 million tons (Mt) of e-waste was generated globally" and add "of this total e-waste, 24.9 million tons were generated in the Asia Pacific region alone". Recently the World Economic Forum released a report arguing for a proper recycling of e-waste that would lead to economic growth in some cases. However, it is clear that e-waste continues to be a drastic issue that is ever-growing, and the introduction of more devices/things into the system could exacerbate that further.

Investing in the Internet of Things has become a significant industry now with an estimated recorded value of 182 billion US dollars in 2020, with a predicted rise to over 620 billion by 2030. The smart home market is also significant, worth around 86 billion USD in 2020 with a significant growth expected to over 300 billion by 2030. However, there are concerns about the growth of the IoT, especially in the realm of the development of artificial intelligence (AI), which is programmed into smart devices, automated machinery and of course, robotics.

Sociologists for instance have been critical of both the further development of automation in our everyday lives and the potential implications for robots taking labour market roles. Frey and Osbourne (2015) for instance, predict that in the next few decades, a significant decline will occur in jobs that are already vulnerable to machine automation. However, as sociologist Judy Wajcman (2017) counters, the methodology that was used to make this prediction is now widely criticised. It does however represent a growing worry about the use of AI and robotics in taking jobs away from the working class (especially), and also in areas like law, medicine, and even academia. de Vries et al. (2020), as an example, examine the changing nature of jobs from 2005 to 2015 and calculate the impact of robotics on industry across 37 countries. They find that "increased use of robots is associated with positive changes in the employment share of non-routine analytic jobs and negative changes in the share of routine manual jobs" (de Vries et al., 2020, p. 11). In other words, employment that requires analytical work (such as problem-solving), was not as impacted by the adoption of robotics during this time period, as opposed to manual labour (such as factory work) which has been affected. Importantly they conclude, industrial robots did not replace jobs, but they did impact task demand and thus had disruptive effects on employment (de Vries et al., 2020, p. 11).

Why? This is fundamentally the goal of the IoT if we remember. Efficiency in operation, such as on a manufacturing floor, means less people are required, and fewer tasks are needed to be completed by

human hands. Nevertheless, the counterargument from people like Wacjman (2017, pp. 124-125) suggests that although these jobs may well be automated and run by robots, "other novel forms will be created in unexpected ways as capital seeks new ways to accumulate". In other words, throughout history, we have seen these sorts of disruptions in the industrial revolution and the wave of automation that happened within manufacturing. Over time, we have created new types of jobs (such as servicing robots) that will fill the gaps left behind. Watch this video below [11:00] on "Flippy" who runs the grill at White Castle – will robots take our fast food jobs in the future?

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=158#oembed-6*

Wajcman (2017, pp. 121-125) argues that when our focus is trained on these sorts of issues, such as robotics taking over our employment, we neglect the already existing power relations that exist. For her, the corporations that have capacity to develop AI and other important design capacities are "small" in number but have significant power therein (Wajcman, 2017, p. 121). She contends that these corporations create inequality through their structures already as they employ large numbers of casualised, "insecure", "low-paid" workers that "powers the wheels of the likes of Google, Amazon and Twitter" (Wajcman, 2017, p. 124). In addition to this, these companies subcontract significant labour to short-term workers in the 'gig economy' who are paid small fees for coding work and information processing. When we consider Castells' (2009) argument around those who hold the least power in the network society, Wacjman's (2017) contention is quite compelling. When we obsess over the idea of robots taking over, we neglect some existing inequalities within the tech industry that are rarely addressed.

Nevertheless, there are other concerns when it comes to AI, the IoT and robotics that need to be considered. The ethics of devices and morals programmed into them is one of those areas. A growing list of worries has emerged with the introduction of AI into our everyday lives and into especially military/policing use (Asaro, 2000; 2006; 2013). For Peter Asaro (2006), the question of ethics and morality in the use of AI in IoT and robotics is a deeply important question.

This all relates to some of the classical dilemmas thrown up by Isaac Asimov's collection of short stories entitled *I, Robot*. Within these works, Asimov constructed the "Three Laws of Robotics" in 1942, which are as follows:

> **First Law** – A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm
>
> **Second Law** – A robot must obey orders given to it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law
>
> **Third Law** – A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. (Asimov, 1950/2008).

**Figure:** Isaac Asimov adapted by Kalki is in the Public Domain

Boden et al. (2017), following a workshop with a range of scholars from across different disciplines, argue that the three laws were in need of formalisation but extension and consideration for current times. They constructed new laws for robotics for the general public as follows:

> **Rule 1.** Robots are multi-use tools. Robots should not be designed solely or primarily to kill or harm humans, except in the interests of national security.
>
> **Rule 2.** Robots should be designed and operated to comply with existing laws, including privacy.
>
> **Rule 3.** Robots are products: as with other products, they should be designed to be safe and secure.
>
> **Rule 4.** Robots are manufactured artefacts: the illusion of emotions and intent should not be used to exploit vulnerable users.
>
> **Rule 5.** It should be possible to find out who is responsible for any robot. (Boden et al., 2017, pp. 123-129)

These concerns for robotics/AI which are embedded into an IoT are centred primarily on the question of ethics. For Asaro (2006, p. 10), the real issue is where devices, machines and robots are tasked with areas of life that are fundamentally first, in conflict with the rule of killing other humans, or secondly, in places where ethical reasoning is required. He writes the following:

> First, we might think about how humans might act ethically through, or with, robots. In this case, it is humans who are the ethical agents. Further, we might think practically about how to design robots to act ethically, or theoretically about whether robots could be truly ethical agents. Here robots are the ethical subjects in question. Finally, there are several ways to construe the ethical relationships between humans and robots: Is it ethical to create artificial moral agents? Is it unethical not to provide sophisticated robots with ethical reasoning capabilities? Is it ethical to create robotic soldiers, or police officers, or nurses? How should robots treat people, and how should people treat robots? Should robots have rights? (Asaro, 2006, p. 10)

**Figure:** Drone takes flight by Kal Visuals is licensed by Unsplash

Let's take his first concern and tease out the question. The idea that the military could create robotics that could not only survey situations but also act to kill a human, is in clear violation of some of the laws of robotics set out by Asimov (1950/2008) and Boden et al., (2017) above. Yet, drone warfare is a significant issue in our contemporary age. Although drones are not yet fully autonomous machines, they are widely used in combat situations for surveillance and at times strikes. The United States for instance has utilised drone strikes in the past against terrorist targets. Government officials often cite that the use of drones in this way alleviates the human cost, as operators are not placed in life-threatening situations (Espinoza, 2018). Nevertheless, evidence continues to accumulate on the potential toll on innocent lives, and mistakes made by drone operators in killing innocent civilians (Espinoza, 2018). This itself worries scholars like Asaro (2006) when technological advances start to consider the development of fully autonomous military drones.

Asaro's (2006) second point above is worthwhile considering further. What happens when AI or a robot must judge and use ethical reasoning to decide on what action to take? James and Whelan (2022, p. 42) argue that with the excitement of the development of artificial intelligence that is pivotal to things like the Internet of Things, we must be cautious not to continue to underestimate this concern. The development of AI with ethical frameworks embedded within robots and other devices has become a race amongst corporations with clear economic agendas. However,

> at both global and local levels, ethics discourses pre-empt questions regarding the rationale of AI development, positioning investment and implementation as inevitable, and, provided ethical frameworks are adopted, laudable [...] Bracketing questions as to whose ethics are installed and by what means, and indeed whether ethical AI is meaningful given the logics within which it is developed. (James & Whelan, 2022, p. 42)

Asaro (2006, p. 11) makes a similar claim arguing that the answer to his conundrum is the construction of AI with moral reasoning skills. However, there are two concerns here. One being "the practical issues involved" in what "kinds of decisions the robot will be expected to make" and secondly "whose ethical system is being used, for what purpose, and in whose interests?" (Asaro, 2006, p. 11).

When it comes to these matters, several scholars bring forward the conundrum of the 'trolley problem' to highlight how even everyday tasks (not associated with warfare) can produce situations that require significant decisions that rely on ethics. Asaro (2006, p. 13) contends that in these circumstances, "different perspectives on a situation would endorse making different decisions". In other words, we all hold different views, philosophies, and ethics, as individuals living in wider society. If we were to program AI to act in certain ways in the case of an ethical decision, whose ethics is privileged?

🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit

Exercise: An adaptation on the trolley car problem

In this exercise you have to suspend reality for a moment, remembering that in moments like the one below (however very unlikely) you will likely act on instinct. This is an exercise fundamentally in ethical reasoning, not a real-life choice.

Consider for a moment that you are travelling down a highway, going the speed limit (100km/h) and two small children run onto the highway chasing a ball. To the left of you are a group of cyclists out for their morning ride, and to the right of you dividing the highway are a bunch of solid trees. In that instant, time freezes and someone approaches you with the following choices.

- First – you can do nothing which will result in the children being hit by you, likely seriously injuring or killing them
- Second – you can swerve to the left into the group of cyclists, likely seriously injuring or killing them
- Third – you can swerve to the right into the trees, likely seriously injuring or killing yourself

If you had these choices (remembering we're suspending reality – including the potential of airbags, etc), what would you choose?

This is perhaps not an entirely difficult question for you, depending on what your ethics were. However, what if we replaced the two small children with two small puppies, or an elderly man? Would that change your view?

A study conducted by scientists and ethicists published by the journal *Nature* reveals that we have different responses to these questions. If you have access through your library, you can review the findings in the *Nature* article.

The issue is that we all have different values, ethics and backgrounds. As such, when we build AI controlled robots that could be confronted with a situation where action would save one person's or animal's life but potentially damage another's, whose values and ethics get to be programmed?

For Asaro (2006) if we are faced with having to program ethical decision-making into AI into the future, this might be a way to ask whether it ought to be built at all. Any decision that is made however will need

to be legally bound (as stated in the principles above), and responsibility for that programming needs to be held by a human/corporation somewhere.

The ethical limitations framework is a good one to think through and consider given how rapidly the IoT, AI and robotics are growing. A number of issues appear daily that should cause us to reflect and review where we want technology to be in centuries from now. However, there are two conflicting viewpoints to consider here. One is the ethics of progressivism, which is the idea that technological advances in the past have led to significant gains for future generations. For instance, antibiotics, electricity, the washing machine, the automobile, have all improved our lives in the current day. The second ethics is that of the precautionary principle, which highlights the unintended consequences that fall and have lasting impacts on future generations due to technological advances. For instance, with electricity generation and auto and aero travel capacity came the unintended consequences of climate change, and pollution. Nuclear power created a significant source of energy, but also resulted in situations like Chernobyl.

The question for AI, robotics and the IoT is whether the potential gains for future generations will have serious potential consequences, that we cannot predict at this stage. Whether that is worth the risk or not, is a matter of discussion.

## In Summary

This chapter has covered the following information:

- Social media is now ubiquitous covering much of our social lives. Sociologists and other social scientists attempt to understand how this changes our social relations.
- Sociologists argue that social media can at times resemble our social interactions offline. We conduct ourselves similarly, especially in conversation.
- Social media, and the internet in general, generates a significant amount of data that is called 'big data' which is gathered by tech companies, and sold to marketers.
- We are now no longer simply consumers of information, but also producers.
- Several social theorists and ethicists argue that the collection of big data via apps like Facebook is morally complex and does not provide the consumer with consent.
- Democracies are also threatened by the collection of big data, as more information is known about voters than ever before allowing for targeted campaigning.
- Big data, and the Internet of Things, has moved rapidly, creating a need for ethical discussions around automation and the future of robotics.

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# POLITICAL SOCIOLOGY: THE STATE, IDEOLOGY, AND POWER

Nick Osbaldiston

The key goals of this chapter are to:

- understand what the nation-state is
- explain the different styles of governing that exist in the world
- discuss the various ideologies that exist within societies
- examine theories of power from sociology
- consider these theories with examples.

## Overview

Central to sociological analysis is the role of government in governing our everyday lives and interests. Key to this are several concepts such as power, the nation-state, ideology, and authority. In Australia, as well as many nation-states in the Western world, the foundation for many of these discussions resides in the operation of democracy and the relationship between the political and civil sections of society. Sociologists since modernity try to understand how this dynamic operates with focus on the nature of power. Power is a pivotal mechanism in modern society. It operates within government and non-government institutions, inside our communities, among our families, and even within university settings. Power according to some ideologies is equally dispersed across our societies. Whereas for others, power is concentrated in those with economic, or political status locking out everyday people from key decision-making.

## The Modern Nation-State

In the contemporary world, societies are organised into geographical territories that are governed by an entity known as the **nation-state**. Usually, the state consists of a group of formal institutions that are arranged to govern the everyday matters of societies within their control. This entity holds sovereign power over its geographical territory and is responsible for the people within these boundaries. Institutions consist

of large-scale bureaucracies such as legal, economic, political, health, educational and welfare. Fundamental to the state is also those mechanisms of power, order, and control such as the military and the police who maintain peace and security from other nation-states and also within our communities.

German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) famously argued that the nation-state is in fact the only institution that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (Weber & Runciman, 1978). Weber and Runciman (1978) argue that the nation-state can enact violence upon its own population to maintain peace and security because of the legitimacy of its authority of a society. Social institutions that grow entities such as armed militia groups, vigilantes, religions, and other groups that seek to impose order on sections of society through violence or threats of violence, are held as illegitimate by the state, and the people that support it.

States are organised differently across the world. For the most part, however, the state is made up of a range of institutions including the following:

- **Legislature** – refers to the assembly of people (usually politicians) who have invested power and authority to enact legal instruments (laws) and policies that govern a geographical territory. Examples include Australia's Federal Parliament and Queensland's State Parliament.
- **Public service** – refers to bureaucracies charged with the development, management and provision of services and resources to the public funded through the state's resources such as taxation. These services are usually governed by legislation developed by the legislature. Examples include the Department of Education in Australia and Services Australia.
- **Social security or welfare institutions** – usually a federal program that the state funds through taxation which provides monetary and other benefits for those who are unemployed, retired, disabled, parents or those who have suffered loss through disaster for example. The resourcing of these services is often the subject of political and ideological debate. An example of this is Centrelink in Australia which manages welfare payments to the public.
- **Health systems** – refers to the public health institutions that are put in place to deal with physical and mental health care of civil society. Unlike private health care, public health institutions are fully funded through the public via taxation. Policies that govern these systems come from the legislature. In Australia, the state governments, such as New South Wales, are charged with operating health systems.
- **Police and military** – refers to the organisations whose task it is to preserve law and order within a geographical territory or jurisdiction, while also maintaining security from other nation-states and organisations. As Weber (1919/1970) argues, these are the only legitimate institutions that can enact said force in a state.
- **Judiciary and other bodies** – refers to the bodies that are responsible for the operationalisation of the legal systems in a state. This includes courts, judges, and other officials charged with interpreting and applying the laws of the land. In **federal systems** like Australia, courts are divided between different levels with the federal government responsible for some courts (eg. The Family Court) and the state responsible for others (eg. District or Magistrates Courts).

The development of these institutions and the state broadly is also largely dependent on the legitimacy that the people give those who are in power. When people become disaffected with the way they are governed, this can lead to social action such as protests, demonstrations, and even revolutions. The legitimacy of a state in the eyes of the people is a focus of Max Weber's historical sociology.

**Figure**: Max Weber, 1894 is in the Public Domain

## Max Weber and Legitimacy and Authority

Intrinsic to the modern state's power for Weber is the capacity for those in power to be able to hold legitimate authority over others. Using the German concept of *herrschaft* which can be loosely translated to mean authority, domination, or control, Weber argues that the legitimacy that the citizenry affords to those in power, is evidence of an acceptance of a certain type of power. If the citizens of a state did not acknowledge the authority of their rulers/governors, it could result in large-scale change through elections or revolutions.

Weber makes use of a mode of historical method which he describes as the '**ideal type**'. The ideal type should not be confused as a definition of how things ought to be done. Rather, it is a type of concept that is useful for historical analysis and comparison (Weber, 2012). Think of them as "conceptual tweezers" that we can use to understand and speak about "historical reality somewhere between different tendencies" (Collins & Randall, 1986, p. 34). They help us make sense of changes in the world from one time period to another.

For Weber, the legitimacy of authority that the citizens give to those in power can be compared historically. There are three ideal types of authority for him, traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal.

## Traditional Authority

For traditional societies, authority to rule is usually legitimated based on sacred or divine rights. The social order that exists here relies on people believing the "dominant group person or group" to have been 'pre-ordained to rule over' everyone within a geographical terrain (Blau, 1963, p. 308). For instance, in a traditional society in premodern times, lands, people and cultures were governed by kings, queens, emperors, religious leaders or other forms of traditional reign. The capacity for this group of people to maintain their rule lay in hierarchical norms that dominate ideas, values, customs, principles, and cultures of societies. However, traditional authority extends into other areas of our social lives, including within the family where parents have assumed authority over their children which has now extended into law. Furthermore, religions bound to traditions and custom tend to place leaders in authority over congregations on the basis of a divine right (not to be confused with charismatic authority – see below).

For most of the premodern period, Weber argued that the state was based on this traditional authority, especially in the European countries where monarchies had power over the populace and were in charge of everything from war, internal law and order, punishment, commerce, trade, and the welfare of the people. Of course, the Europeans were not the only population governed in this manner. Across the world, civilisations have been and are governed by those with traditional authority over a territory.

## Rational-Legal Authority

The second and most relevant form of authority to our contemporary society Weber calls **rational-legal** authority (also known as legal authority). In this form, the relations between society and authority take on a number of important distinctions from traditional societies. Importantly, this form of authority takes legislation or law as a foundation for the organisation of life. People in our society are provided with power not afforded through custom, like royalty. Rather, positions of authority are determined by first a strong belief in the validity of legal rules, norms, and procedures, and second an acceptance of those people who hold positions above us as having a superiority over us formally.

Intrinsic to Weber's understanding of this ideal type of authority is the growth and acceptance of the **bureaucracy** (Blau, 1963; Weber & Runciman, 1978). The nation-state is no longer simply a geographical territory ruled by a small group of individuals. Rather, the state is a conglomeration of politicians and departments that oversee different areas of social/economic/political life, law and order, health systems, welfare organisations, and so on. The important distinction between traditional and rational-legal authorities for Weber is that development of organisations that have impersonal layers of authority built within them. Each of these organisations has defined values, rules, legislation, procedures and ultimately, rather impersonal relations with the citizens of the state. They also have certain powers which can at times engage punitive measures such as fines and penalties. These formal bureaucracies are found in all our social lives, governing aspects of how we live from everything including taxation through to fishing.

The nation-state is therefore not just one entity or a small group of elites maintaining a kingdom any more. For Weber (1973), the modern nation-state rests upon the validity that citizens give to those who hold offices across these bureaucracies. People are generally not elected into these bureaucratic positions, but are "appointed to positions on the basis of technical expertness" and "assigned specialised responsibilities" (Blau, 1963, p. 309). Of course, not only did bureaucracies come to dominant government, we can see them organised in all aspects of modern life. Sporting clubs, community groups, universities, and even social movements, are rational, formal and have hierarchical positions with different rules, laws and norms assigned. For Weber and Runciman (1978), the bureaucracy has become the dominant modal of organisational life due to its rational structure, and the appearance of optimal efficiency.

🧠 **Learn More:** Max Weber and Sociology (Video)

Watch this short video [1:36] to examine Weber's arguments around bureaucracy and what his arguments around this organisation of authority were.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=5#oembed-1*

## Charismatic Authority

Weber and Runciman (1978) spent significant time discussing rational-legal authority through bureaucratic power. However, he was also fascinated by a third form of power that appears throughout both premodern and modern societies, charismatic authority. Charisma is not simply holding a charming personality. Rather, charismatic authority is essentially irrational (not unlike traditional authority) where an individual convinces an audience of an extraordinary message that often challenges the status quo. Throughout history, Weber saw that there were unique cases where individuals created a following via a message of new values, rules and modes of living. He argued that these individuals generally must 'prove' themselves to their audience through miracles and heroic deeds. Important here is the audience who become followers. Instead of ceding to traditional or rational-legal authority, they become subservient to their new charismatic leader, and in some cases, become devoted to them.

Several examples of this form of authority exist in premodern and modern times. For instance, in biblical history and thought, several figures rise to take on the mantle of leadership despite not having any

traditional right to the position. A classic case for Weber is Jesus Christ, who was not born into any position of note. However, through miracles and a message that criticised the dominant Jewish hierarchy at the time, he attracted a significant following, leading to one of the most significant religions in the world.

**Figure:** The famous MAGA hat from Trump's Presidential campaign by Natilyn Hicks (Natilyn Photography) is licensed by Unsplash. Did Trump display charisma?

Charismatic authority does not always lead to good outcomes for Weber though. Years after his death, Weber's idea of charisma was realised in his home nation-state of Germany with the rise of Adolf Hitler to power in 1933. Hitler's rise to power, and that of the Nazi party, came at a time of unrest, especially in the wake of the Treaty of Versailles where the Weimar Republic agreed to pay war reparations to allies. His message blaming former leaders for their incompetence, along with his call for a new republic along with his anti-Semitic beliefs grew in popularity and led to one of the most devastating modern wars in recent times and a large-scale genocide of Jewish and other peoples.

Charisma was important to Weber's understanding of the future of an increasingly bureaucratised and rationalised society. As Barbara Adam (2009, p. 11) suggests, Weber's thinking around charisma suggests that as we are increasingly "controlled through rational calculation" and bureaucratic authority, we will yearn for "charismatic leaders, spiritual fulfilment and 'sublime values'". Leaders in political and social life will rise often with a new message that shakes the status quo, provides pathways forward to a new authentic way of being, and provide new rules and even laws for living.

# Power and Control – Elitism

Unlike Weber, other sociologists and theorists have examined the structures of the state in a more critical fashion. One such individual was Robert Michels (1876-1936), an Italian sociologist and student of Webers'. Michels argued that within democracies, there is a tendency for power to eventually be concentrated within an elite few. This he described as the **iron law of oligarchy**. Following along from Weber's analysis of bureaucracies, Michels argued that within any setting, only a small amount of people will eventually make decisions. While this serves a purpose, for Michels, eventually those in the decision-making roles become isolated from others, take on more power, and lock out others. He writes:

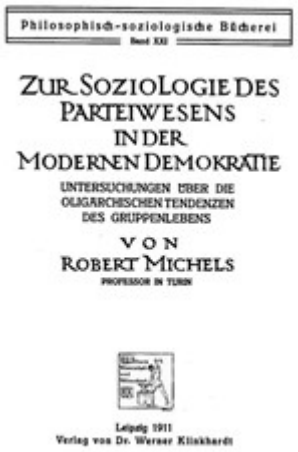


**Figure:** Robert Michels' book Political Parties (1911) by P.S. Burton (contributor) is in the Public Domain

> It is organisation that gives birth to the domination of the elected over the electors, of the mandataries over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organisation, says oligarchy. (Michels, 1962, p. 365)

The problem for Michels is that the nature of modern organisations as bureaucracies (as Weber analysed them), requires 'leaders' or officers whose job it is to make decisions. He argues that in every organisation, especially democratic parties, leaders arise who become "professional leaders" who are difficult to remove due to the chain of command and service they provide the party (Michels, 1962, p. 364). Unless someone comes along who is charismatic and able to open up new possibilities, 'professional leaders' will continue to hold positions of power repeatedly eventually locking others out. A small group of people "exercises control" over the organisation or party (Michels, 1962, p. 278). For him, this can lead to problems as while the individuals may start with the best intentions, they can easily be led to selfish desires including the maintenance of their power or gaining it through larger processes such as an election. This is especially a problem for political parties who begin to neglect the wider constituency, focusing instead on political survival.

Like Michels, others have argued that power can be concentrated in the few. American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) in his book *The Power Elite* (1956) argues that the organisation of the state specifically in the US, means that power is concentrated in three specific groups – the military, the major corporate entities, and the political class. These three areas for him have come to dominate American social life leaving other areas dwindling in importance. For instance, the rising importance of the economic conditions meant that the unions were afforded less power, and subsequently of less importance to society. The military also makes increasingly more important decisions leading to an increased position of value in American life.

Mills argues there is a core group of individuals within these organisations who can freely move across different high-ranking positions making decisions with major consequences. These individuals all hold similar social backgrounds. They tend to be from the upper classes, have degrees from prestigious

universities, hold similar financial positions, and have subsequently similar values and ideas. As such, and due to their shared social and political values, major decisions are made that have a significant impact on citizens. Power is concentrated within this group, leaving others with little to no power. Hence, it is **elitist** because the values that these usually upper-class men hold, are singular, leaving out a diversity of thought and consideration of others.

> People with advantages are loath to believe that they just happen to be people with advantages. They come readily to define themselves as inherently worthy of what they possess; they come to believe themselves 'naturally' elite, and, in fact, to imagine their possessions and their elitist privileges as natural extensions of their own elite selves. (Mills, 1956, p. 14)

Subsequently, elites who dominate decision-making in the military, political and economic circles tend to ignore what society may think, believing that they themselves are aware of what is best given their status. Furthermore, the citizenry even when they can use their power in elections, become disenfranchised and are more likely to vote through emotion or culture. This works only to support the elites as they are rarely challenged and continue to hold positions of authority.

Similar arguments are made by Australian sociologist Michael Pusey (1991) in his work *Economic Rationalism in Canberra*. Pusey (1991) argues that within the Australian public service, significant decision-makers who changed the values of organisations towards more economic rational approaches (an approach which suggests that markets provide better outcomes than governments and encourages deregulation), were elite private school educated and had economics degrees. He argues that over time, "economists were appointed to positions from which they completely dominated the whole policy apparatus" (Pusey, 2018, p. 13). Those who had command over economic principles, and who overwhelmingly valued economic deregulation, became leaders of public services leading to an inevitable homogenization of values and ideas. Furthermore, these important decision-makers were independent completely from elections as in Australia, citizens do not have a say on who is appointed to leadership roles within public services. This creates a new form of elite class that goes unnoticed in Australian political life (see also Connell, 1977).

## Sharing Power – Pluralism

Unlike elitists who see power as concentrated among the few, **pluralists** tend to view power as shared among different groups in society. These compete for influence over political and government decision-makers equally, and all groups have the capacity to win their case and exercise political power. The fundamental principle of pluralism is that of democracy – all people have power, and will compete in the public for attention. No group has more power than another in this respect. However, like elitists, pluralists accept that once a group wins, they have exercised that power to the detriment of other competing groups. These groups emerge from different sections of society including religion, trade unions, ethnicities, special interest groups, generations, suburbs, or even sporting associations. Even though some groups will win over others, this does not prevent a group from continuing to advocate for their causes again.

This is the argument of political scientist Robert Dahl (1915-2014) in his work *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* published in 1961. In a rebuttal to C. Wright Mills' power elite theory, Dahl explores the power and decision-making networks within the city of New Haven, Connecticut and argues that different groups participate in decisions by being in competition with one another. While these groups will have access to different resources, social and political capital, and status within the community, this does not necessarily lead to having political influence. Some groups will have influence, without having money. The politicians within a community can and will, at times, bow to pressure from those in the community who have established status. In other words, unlike Mills' assessment, groups can have influence on the political decision-makers despite lacking the resources that the elites hold. Importantly, and unlike Mills, Dahl (1961) argues those decision-makers within political organisations or bureaucracies, require the support of groups in the community. They cannot simply exercise power according to their own ideas.

Dahl (1971) applied his ideas on pluralism to democracies by suggesting that genuine democracy is near impossible to achieve. The ideal of all of society being able to have their say is too difficult. Democracy can achieve some ideal, through **polyarchy** – the rule by many. Dahl (1971) argues that representative democracy, where citizens elect individuals to represent their communities in government, provides the best answer to the democracy problem. Through this, elected individuals would be beholden to special interest groups and held accountable by the broader citizenry. Power is therefore invested into the representative for decision-making.

There are clearly issues with this approach. Some groups will have greater access to those representatives while others will not. Dahl (1989) recognises this by later arguing that citizens require access to avenues to express their concerns within the public and need rights such as freedom of speech to ensure they can do so. Allowing citizens the ability to form groups and compete for attention is crucial to the dispersal of power among society. Neo-pluralists such as Charles Lindblom (1982) suggest further that some groups will have more power according to the context of the issue that they are competing in. For instance, medical associations will have more power in cases where their expertise is important. For contemporary pluralists, this is not a problem and represents the structure of society where some groups should have more power than others. Furthermore, Lindblom (1982) argues in a capitalist system, governments do have to cooperate with business to ensure a successful society and economic growth. This does mean providing business with more power at times than other groups – something criticised by elite theorists.

However, in the contemporary age, we can see that there is potentially an overload of information for the public exacerbated by social media and other forms of communication. As Petray (2011, p. 925) suggests in her research into social movements, the widespread proliferation of groups all competing in the online space, especially for attention and resources, may cause "opinion overload" leading to an apathy. Furthermore, Possamai-Inesedy and Nixon (2017) argue that one of the deep concerns of social media is that it causes greater polarisation, meaning that individuals are increasingly only exposed to groups that align with their ideological position. This potentially undermines the sort of pluralistic democracy that Dahl and others sought.

# Social Relations, the Self, and the Power Within

## Social Identity Theory

Sociologists and their cousin discipline social psychology are quick to remind us that much of the power of modern-day life occurs in our experiences and interactions. One such theory, **social identity theory**, posits that we all belong to different groups of individuals which "hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same category" (Stets & Burke, 2000, p. 225). At times, these groups are not simply something we choose, but something which is ascribed to us by others through our external characteristics, or implied characteristics because of our race, religion, gender, and so on. As Stets and Burke (2000, p. 225) acknowledge, we are born into a structured society, where different groups will emerge according to the different social structures that exist.

Social identity theory posits that there are two forms of identity in modern life. The first is self-categorisation which can be defined as a process through which we identify with different groups and therefore take on board their norms, values, ideas, traits, and practices. Stets and Burke (2000) argue that we tend to accentuate our similarities with others, and seek to align ourselves with the group. These norms within the group then teach us how to act, and importantly how not to. As Emile Durkheim (1995) also suggests, groups have important identifiers such as objects or totems, that define the group and which become **sacred** and require protection at all times from the **profane** everyday world.

Importantly, once you identify with the group, the second process called social-comparison is undertaken. Here, members of groups compare themselves with other groups and accentuate differences through evaluation. In other words, we take our group's values, ideas, and other characteristics, and compare them to other groups. This is at times done unconsciously in our everyday life. For instance, we might identify strongly with a particular football team accentuating our similarities with other fans of the same club. Through this process, we might identify other fans of other teams by comparing our team with theirs. This can lead to a situation where we identify those others, especially if they are strong rivals, as outsiders, and therefore, disassociate with them. Through this also we develop labels and **stigmas**.

In terms of power, this process of identifying ourselves with groups in this manner means that we are controlling our own selves to align with expectations and norms from the inside. These expectations then feed into our everyday life and cut across many social identities including gender, race, sexuality, religion, community, and friendship circles. A great fictional representation of this is the 2004 movie Mean Girls which highlights how groups form in high school in America, and how expectations within and outside these groups create comradery in some sections, and hostility in others. We can see that this form of power is not controlled by some larger entity, such as the state, but is embedded in our very lives.

Sociology on screen: *Mean Girls* (2004)

If you have ever watched Mean Girls or have a chance to, you will notice sociology in action. The movie shows social identity theory in effect with different groups with different labels, all with their own sub-culture within them, all distinguished from other groups. In some cases, certain groups are degraded, and have stigmas applied to them by the main characters. This means that even being near these 'outsider' groups is considered to be inappropriate. Some questions you might like to consider during this chapter are,

- Can we see this attitude still in the contemporary school?
- Why do you think we create 'groups' in our everyday life?
- What do you think of labelling today? Is it still in effect? Or have we gone beyond?

## Stigma

One sociologist who extended upon this was Erving Goffman (1922-1982) who developed a theory of **stigma** to identify how people's identities can be shaped by negative stereotypes. A social interactionist, Goffman argues that our everyday life is shaped by our relations with other people. We control the impressions we want to give to others about who we are through what he calls our "performance" (Goffman, 1959, p. 15). Utilising the metaphor of the theatre, Goffman argues that we construct our identities that we want others to know about us through our props, our frontstage behaviour, what we keep hidden in the backstage, and our character performance (actions, how we speak, how we present). Going back to our football example, for instance, we might seek to present ourselves as a supporter of the team through our clothing which quickly identifies us as part of that group. Importantly for Goffman though is not just the presentation, but the audience. The key to a successful performance is how well an audience responds or believes in what you are presenting.

Goffman (1959) however argues that sometimes, people will identify others in ways that the individual did not intend. This can include identifying someone negatively because of their external characteristics including race, gender, sexuality, bodily appearance, clothing, class, and status. People may make assumptions about an individual through stereotyping and then completely discredit the person. This is what he calls stigma. For Goffman (1968) there are three different types of stigma which are;

1. Physically identifiable abnormalities (such as disability)
2. Individual behavioural issues (for instance drug addictions)
3. Group identification or social identity (for instance race, gender, religion)

Through this, Goffman (1968) argues that stigmas are identified because of visible markers (such as religious attire or disability), public knowledge of the individual already, the relevancy of the context (so for instance someone speaking loudly in a movie) and the obtrusiveness of the stigma into everyday life.

The power of stigma relies heavily on the casting of the individual as outside normal, an outsider, less than human. Once a stigma is successfully applied and accepted by members of a group, the stigmatized individual is then as Goffman (1968) argues, disqualified from full social acceptance. This form of power over the individual can be quite debilitating causing distress. Goffman (1968) suggests that once applied, individuals can spend time and resources trying to remove their stigma. For instance, corrective practices such as surgery to correct perceived abnormalities might be undertaken (Roach-Anleu, 2006). Furthermore, as we have seen in the past, people might be removed from society and taken to mental institutions to remove the cause of their behaviour that is stigmatised.

## Self-Control and Emotions

Much of the discussion so far has been about how the state, powerful actors and other people exercise power, or how we exercise power ourselves such as in democracies. However, sociologists are also very interested in how we control ourselves and exercise power in various contexts. For instance, imagine one day you are in the shopping centre waiting in line at the checkout and a customer starts to get angry with the clerk at the counter. You notice that the clerk is doing their best to handle their emotions and tries hard to calm down the customer. You think to yourself, 'Wow they're really good at controlling themselves because I would be upset right now'.

In the above example, we can see evidence of an area that sociologists are continuing to show interest in, that of emotions. While in the past, emotions were considered an area exclusively for biologists and psychologists, sociologists have been able to show how emotions can be structured – in other words, we adopt different emotions and sometimes control our emotions based on situations.

One of the first sociologists to engage with emotions was Norbert Elias (1897-1990). Influenced heavily by Max Weber, Elias (1991, p. 116) argued that emotions are entirely sociological and not simply biological. He considered our reactions as adults as not simply "an entirely unlearned, genetically fixated reaction pattern". Rather, during our formative years, and throughout life, we learn not just how to act and what to value. We also learn how to express our emotions, and importantly when to express them. Different structures, such as gender, class, status, occupation, and ethnicity, will determine how you learn to exercise your emotions, and when to control them or not. Importantly, certain cultural expectations about our emotions are intrinsic to how we control them.

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1979) takes this further by arguing that there are rules to how we are to feel during different contexts. She breaks this into two different areas, "evocation" where we are required to feel something and "suppression" where we need to control our emotions that might arise due to different contexts (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561). In the case above in the supermarket, we can see that the clerk is

required to suppress their internal emotions – something that Hochschild (1983) also calls **emotional labour**. However, in other situations in our everyday lives we can see rules and expectations about when we are required to exercise self-control over our emotions. We can also see places, contexts and times where we are expected to feel certain emotions. For instance, at a wedding, there is an expectation that we feel hope, happiness and love for the couple. When we subvert these expectations, others may well exercise power and control over us.

Thinking sociologically...

Remember back to when you were a child and you learned about emotions. This could be at school, at home or among your friends and the wider community. Ask yourself the following questions and start to unpack these sociologically:

- What were some of the rules for feelings? Were these structured in any way do you think if you were to compare yourself to other groups such as genders, cultures, or ethnicities?
- If you, or someone else, contravened the rules for emotions, what happened to them?
- Have the rules for emotions changed since you were young?

Much of sociological research demonstrates how emotional work is largely gendered (Hochschild, 1983). Men are importantly governed by certain rules that mean they have to exercise more self-control in different situations. Women conversely also have many rules and there is an expectation that women are more caring and able to express compassion. This general rule Hochschild (1983) argues shows why more women end up in careers that require self-control but an ability to use emotions in work. She calls this emotional labour which is work that "requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). For instance, a nurse is required to be an expert not just in their job, but also in the way they show their care and attention. Flight attendants are the same – managing their physical tasks while also expressing emotions to make customers feel relaxed and comfortable. For Hochschild (1983), the general belief that women are more expressive, in touch with their feelings, and naturally more caring, means that women tend to gravitate towards these careers more than men. Once in these roles, women are required to control and evoke certain emotions.

## Self-Regulation and Discipline

Much of what we have discussed above is about learning self-control due to societal expectations. The power, therefore, is exercised by culture, or those interacting around us. However, for others, those

expectations come from outside of culture in our government, disciplines and institutions. In particular, French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (1926-1984) identifies in his work the relationship between us, and the ways in which society is organised that causes us to self-control our behaviour. Foucault (1977) especially is known for his work entitled *Discipline and Punish* in which he sets out how state surveillance has changed through time, to the point that we self-govern. This form of power is worked through us internally.

Central to Foucault's (1977) thesis are three major points;

1. Changes to criminal justice from explicit punishment such as public executions, to prisons and so on, are based on a movement towards more rational forms of punishment which includes segregating offenders from the population.
2. Governments have learned that it is more effective to exercise control over the consciousness than to discipline bodies.
3. Power is now exercised throughout society by several disciplines over us who teach us the correct way to live – for instance psychiatrists and psychologists. These experts are vitally important to people and we turn to them for advice on how to conduct ourselves.

Foucault's theories can be difficult to understand so in what follows we will break this into two main areas, **discipline**, and **governmentality**.

Let's start with discipline. Imagine for a moment that you are driving very late at night in an out-of-town area and you come across an intersection with traffic lights. You slow down and stop because the light is red. There is no one around anywhere and the lights are taking a long time to change. The question you might like to ask yourself here is, why did you stop and what stops you from going through the red light?

Foucault (1979) answers this question by describing the society we live in as governed by **disciplinary power**. He uses the proposed architectural structure of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) called the panopticon as a metaphor to explain this. Bentham's design was a prison shaped like a circle divided into cells around a central guard tower located in the middle of the circle. The tower had the capacity to look out but prisoners from the outside could not see in. Bentham's idea was to invoke a feeling in the prisoners that they could be watched at any time and not know this (as they could not see into the guard tower. His belief was that the prisoners would start to self-regulate on the assumption that they were being surveilled.

This metaphor works for Foucault in general for society as we are disciplined not in jails per se, but in other areas such as schools, government agencies, policing, and even universities. Foucault (1979) argues that power is held in these institutions that have the ability to monitor, record, report and withhold or provide resources according to an individual's behaviour.

This approach to power appears to privilege then, the state as an actor that uses different institutions to discipline the population into subservience. In other words, we stop at the traffic light because we are afraid of getting into trouble with the police. However, Foucault (1984) also envisioned power as something that

was productive. This does not mean he saw power as something positive, but rather, sometimes we do things not because we feel like we are being surveilled, but rather we feel compelled to act in certain ways. This form of power he describes as **governmentality**.

A basic definition of governmentality is the "dramatic expansion in the scope of government due to the emergence of the human sciences, which provide new mechanisms of calculation, especially statistics, that enable particular kinds of knowledge about populations and, in turn, become the basis for regulation, intervention and administration" (Roach-Anleu, 2006, p. 90). As modernity progressed for Foucault (1984) and the state grew in size and rationality, so too did the growth of human sciences like psychology, sociology and demography. More knowledge was accumulated on the population, and as such, ability to understand how to regulate, and entice individuals to become disciplined in their everyday lives. In short, Foucault and Hurley's (1990) argument is that government now has access to understanding people more than ever, and as such can entice individuals to act, or not act according to the needs of society (from their point of view).

For Foucault and Hurley (1990) this information is used every day to regulate society. We see this in the form of signs, information, knowledge, directions, and advice, that we as individuals take on board. For instance, we receive constant advice on how to remain healthy and to monitor our actions accordingly. When you pick up a food product now, you will find all sorts of health advice listed on the packet. Foucault and Hurley (1990) would not argue that this is a good or bad thing for your body, but rather it demonstrates the nature of society and government. Unlike our predecessors in the past, we are far more motivated to self-regulate, and as such governmentality presents a very different way of exercising power.

## Different Ideologies, Different States

In most nation-states today, there are competing political parties whose task it is to obtain power of the legislature so that they can enact their style of governance. In most cases, these different parties hold distinct political ideologies which encompass a range of values, ideals, beliefs, and interests that the group (or an individual) holds. These ideologies are often in competition on a range of issues including the role of government in societal and individual lives. Ideologies also determine attitudes towards the economy, business, diplomacy, and security not only within the state, but with other states and global entities. There exists a range of different political ideologies throughout history. However, for ease of analysis, we will select five here to discuss further. Like Weber's ideal type, these are concepts that allow us to compare, but are not without fault. Sometimes, political parties will exhibit ideologies across different areas. Such is the nature of democracy! The five ideologies we will examine here however are liberalism, communism, socialism, conservatism, and neoliberalism.

### Liberalism – Rights, Liberty, and Freedom

One of the earliest political ideologies that continues to exist today is that of **liberalism**. Developed by

philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and John Locke (1632-1704), this approach to government prioritises the rights, freedoms, and liberties of individuals and advocates for minimalising government interference as much as possible. Initially, Hobbes and Locke designed this philosophical tradition with the desire to liberate individuals in society from the monarchy, providing opportunities for individual success through freedom and rights.

**Figure:**"Being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his (sic) life, health, liberty and possessions," John Locke, Second Treatise of Government (1690). Portrait of John Locke 1697 by Godfrey Kneller is in the Public Domain

This tradition led to several key moments in history including the French Revolution and the independence of America. In both instances, the push for freedom and democracy was founded in pursuit of liberty for individuals from what was seen as oppressive regimes (e.g. monarchies). The emphasis on freedom led to key documents such as the American Constitution, which privileges aspects of individual life over government such as freedom of speech, religion, thought, and assembly. In addition, liberalism identifies a number of 'rights' that are legislated and protected by the state. These rights importantly include the right to private property.

Importantly, for traditional liberalism, the state should have minimal interference in the everyday lives of individuals (Heywood, 2003). This means that states, for liberals, should be small and allow people to live freely unless they infringe on the rights of others. For this reason, liberal democracies develop laws that protect people from the actions of others ensuring their ability to continue living freely.

The emphasis here on freedom leads to significant and divergent thinking around outcomes for others. Liberals tend to argue that everyone in society should have an equality of opportunity but accept that there is a tendency in a capitalist society to have inequality in outcomes. In other words, all people should have the ability and freedom to learn skills and talents that will lead to success. Furthermore, liberal philosophers such as John Stuart Mill (1806-73) felt that freedom would advance society as people could

innovate, discover and contribute new knowledge, skills, and technologies. Subsequently, government should support freedom to think, act and be independent, to ensure that society is developing and progressing.

As noted, the emphasis of liberalist thought on freedom, leads to legislation and policy designed to increase opportunities for people to develop, such as providing equal access to schooling and universities. However, the focus on individuals means that liberalism accepts that different outcomes will occur. Some people will succeed through hard work and intelligence, others will fail. This motivates people to push harder to succeed so that they can live better. While people are free to live how they want, they are responsible for the outcomes of their choices and the state should not be required to intervene if they fail. As such liberals tend to argue for smaller welfare states, with more funding allocated to providing equal resources for areas such as education to ensure everyone has a chance to succeed.

Several states in the world are founded on the principles of liberalism. Examples include the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Norway, Iceland, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, India, Australia, and New Zealand. Each have different approaches to the structures of governments and the ideological position according to the political party that is in power, but each also have certain rights and protections that centre on the individual especially the right to private property.

## Communism – Class Struggle, Common Property, and Harmony

At the core of critical thought on contemporary politics, economics and social life is the work of Karl Marx (1818-1883) and his colleague Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). Marx's contributions in the volume *Das Kapital* offered a deep critique of the economic system of capitalism and the liberal philosophical position that upheld it. Broadly, Marx's criticism revolved around three key points.

Firstly, history is defined by an ongoing struggle for survival which he calls **historical materialism**. This persisted throughout each age including the feudal or premodern period. However, with the industrial revolution and development of capitalism, Marx argued that society is organised around a quest for profit and wealth. The bourgeoisie (owners of the means of production) used their power in the market to dictate terms of employment to the proletariat (the workers) and use them for surplus (profit) which Marx saw as deeply unequal. The workers were providing the labour but were not being adequately paid for their contributions to the profits of the bourgeoisie.

Secondly, and importantly, Marx argued that the state was designed to support private property (a hallmark feature of liberalism) which could realistically only be owned by the bourgeoisie. The state's laws and order policies were orientated to protecting private property and upheld the rights of the bourgeoisie while ignoring workers' rights. As such, the state is a critical structure in supporting deep class inequality.

Thirdly, and crucial to world politics especially post World War 2, Marx's ideas coalesced with Engels into the development of the document *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 which called for a broad movement against the bourgeoise, and capitalism generally. Importantly, the document sought for removal

of 'freedom' as articulated by a liberal state, especially around the issue of private property, wealth, and profit.

> And the abolition of this state of things is called by the bourgeois, abolition of individuality and freedom! And rightly so. The abolition of bourgeois individuality, bourgeois independence, and bourgeois freedom is undoubtedly aimed at. (Marx & Engels, 1848, p. 23)

Overcoming the bourgeois could only be achieved through revolution hence the oft-cited phrase from them 'workers of the world unite'. The end goal for Marx and Engels was a classless society where individuals would share common property, people would be 'truly' free, and inequalities that persist in liberal capitalist societies disappear. To get to this stage, however, capitalism would need to be replaced with socialism which would eventually lead to a fully communist society. In this position, people would be able to contribute to the genuine progress of society as the need for material survival through labour would be gone. Individuals would live in harmony with one another as class would be done away with.

The movement of this ideology grew and eventuated in the development of several states that identified as communist. Russia for instance, experienced a pattern of protests leading to a movement in 1905 and the eventual 1917 February Revolution which led to the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic. Eventually, led by Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) who was significantly influenced by the writings of Marx, the communists took control of the government, and Russia became the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Following his death in 1924 however, the USSR's leadership transitioned to Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) whose state was opposed to Western capitalism and liberalism. Stalin quickly exiled and murdered several opponents, and transitioned the USSR into a dictatorship.

Inevitably, the USSR collapsed because of pressure from within and outside in 1991. However, the ideas of Karl Marx had made their mark on the world for numbers of years and persist today. Importantly, the divide between liberalist philosophy and communism resulted in one of the most tense periods of modern history, the **Cold War**. These opposing ideologies progressed the development of nuclear weapons and the eventual policies of mutually assured destruction. Nevertheless, communism did eventually collapse, and the Soviet Union dissolved into what is now known as the Russian Federation.

Several countries followed the USSR's example developing their own approach to communist ideology, the largest being the Chinese Communist Party which established control of China in 1949 and continues to identify as communist today. Other states still identifying with communism include Cuba, North Korea, Vietnam, and Laos. However, among most liberal democracies you will still find communist parties, including in Australia. Furthermore, some of the ideas of communism are found throughout other ideologies including socialism or social democracy.

🧠 **Learn More**: The Chinese Communist Party and the Cultural Revolution – documentary [49:44]

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=5#oembed-2*

## Socialism/Social Democracy – Social Cohesion, Equality, and Justice

One of the fundamental criticisms of Marx is that he predicted that inevitably capitalism would fail. Capitalism for Marx is too volatile destroying all that is meaningful to humanity and eventually 'man (sic) is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind' (cited in Harrington, 2004, p. 48). However, capitalism has not ended. In some ways it has flourished creating wealth and lifting especially developed nations out of poverty. However, that progress out of poverty has not been uniform across the world.

🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit

Exercise: The World Population Review Poverty Index

Click through to the World Population Review poverty index to review poverty across the world. As you hover over the map and gain information on poverty data from each country, ask yourself the following questions:

- Where are the countries with the highest levels of poverty located?
- What about the countries with the lowest levels of poverty?
- Why do you think that poverty is this way inclined?
- What do you think someone who comes from a Marxist tradition might say about this?

Over time therefore, socialism or **social democracy** has increased in response to this by altering forms of

Marxist thought to align with the contemporary capitalist environment. Rather than seek to overthrow capitalism, modern socialists/social democrats seek to lift the standard of living for all, reduce the inequalities that come from an unequal distribution of wealth, eliminate poverty and homelessness, and express the importance of the collective over the individual. Unlike communist states such as the USSR and China, contemporary socialists/social democrats believe that these goals are best achieved in a democratic setting and operate mostly in states who have free and open elections.

The importance of equality is paramount to socialists and social democrats. The principle of equality of outcomes (rather than simply equality of opportunity) which seeks to ensure that all members of a society have access to opportunities for education, health care, housing and other services, is vital to this form of government. Furthermore, like Marx, socialists/social democrats are wary of the claim from liberalism that individuals should be free to flourish without intervention. They argue that this tends to favour the wealthier classes, producing heavy income inequality and leaving certain groups in society behind.

One of the organisers of the group known as the Fabians and sociologist Beatrice Webb (1858-1943) argued that capitalism depresses the community or public spirit as it focusses on greed (Webb & Webb, 1970). As such, socialists/social democrats emphasise a collective responsibility that society has towards all peoples and subsequently support a large welfare system to support all.

**Figure:** Photo of sociologist Beatrice Webb founder of the Fabians Society by LSE Library is in the Public Domain

In principle then, socialists/social democrats support a strong government (opposed to liberalism) as in order to supply services across different sectors of society, a state needs large organisations and bureaucracies to manage resources. Advocates argue that the ability to progress as a society is stifled without this strong support. A capacity to produce and advance new knowledge, ideas, skills and technologies is limited in a liberal system as it assists only those who are wealthy. Consequently, only a small number of people can actively assist in society's progress.

One of the limitations and criticisms of socialism and social democracies was launched by eminent sociologist Anthony Giddens (1998) in his book *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*. In his work, Giddens (1998) argues that socialist/social democracy had limited innovation and creativity due to over-regulation by the state on business and industry. As such, he calls for a reduction in government size, encouraging individuals to develop their business and innovate technologies and skills. In a globalised economy dominated by two trends in government, liberalism (or neoliberalism) and social democracy, Giddens (1998) argues for a smarter and ethical third approach that serves to create empowered citizens, emphasis on environmental protection, policies on equality of inclusion, a commitment to **pluralism**, and an emphasis on building resources through government to enhance economic competitiveness at a national level. This new form of social democracy sought not equality of outcomes, but rather equality

of opportunity recognising that the global economy has made it difficult to have large government intervention. However, Giddens (1998) stresses the importance of social justice as an ethos for governing, with emphasis on the well-being of all people in society.

Giddens' (1998) approach was significant in the United Kingdom where his social democratic renewal project influenced Tony Blair's 'New Labour' movement which proclaimed itself as a centre-left party, leading to an election win in 1997. Earlier in the United States of America, the renewed project of social democracy enabled Bill Clinton to win the presidential race in 1993 with an approach that he deemed as 'centrist'. Nevertheless, Giddens' (1998) approach is also heavily criticised as favouring small government, which traditional socialists argue still only assists the wealthy. Furthermore, nations where socialism/social democracy flourishes, such as Denmark or Sweden, innovation and progress has not been stifled by strong government. These countries are among some of the richest countries in the world despite being heavily influenced by socialist/social democratic policies.

In Australia, the approach to socialism/social democracy was founded in the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in their early formation in 1890 and continues to be their guiding principle today. The ALP represents what is commonly known as the left-wing of politics in Australia.

## Conservatism – Tradition, Strong Government, Skepticism

Throughout the late eighteenth century, dramatic changes were happening all across Europe initiated arguably by the French Revolution (1789-1799). This movement which created impetus for rapid economic and social transformations caused some groups in society to grow uneasy and push back with a form of government called **conservatism**. In general terms, conservatism supports traditional ideals, values, and authorities such as the monarchy or the church. However, divisions began to appear in conservative ideology early on with some in Europe outright dismissing social change, whereas in the United States and United Kingdom, conservatives accepted that change was indeed 'natural' (Heywood, 2003, p. 138).

Conservatives are sceptical of the ideologies set out above as they see individuals as inherently greedy and selfish. As such, human nature under liberalism will lead to inequality in society and a lack of strong community-mindedness. Conversely, socialism is utopian and unachievable as it relies too heavily on the rational ideals of enlightenment. People, they argue, need authority that promotes shared understanding of morality and obligation to each other. People also require guidance and direction from elites, as they are the talented and knowledgeable in society. As such, conservatives advocate for large government especially in law and order, with laws designed to protect individuals.

Conservatives are deeply concerned with the increasing tendency to elevate the individual's rights and freedoms above society (as is the case with liberalism). Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859) argued that with the decline of traditional social structures (such as religion, family, community), individuals would use their democratic power to focus on their own individual needs. This would then leave minorities and others

with no voice as the majority will only seek policies that improve their own lives. As such, conservatives tend to have a paternalistic approach to the state whereby people require governing to protect each other and promote a strong community structure founded on traditional institutions such as the family.

Typically, conservatives are sceptical of rapid social change as this is usually untested and the implications for society unknown. Social theorist Michael Oakeshott (1962, p. 169) illustrates this in the following;

> To be conservative, then, is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss.

**Figure:** British Philosopher Michael Oakeshott by LSE Library is in the Public Domain

This is not to suggest that conservatives do not believe in social change. As noted earlier, this is important to a society and inevitable. However, dramatic large changes to structures like the family, community, and traditions, inevitably cause disruption which could break down the strong bonds that we feel attached to within society. Changes ought to be small, ensure that society remains strongly committed to a mutual obligation towards one another, and have no detrimental impact on different groups or individuals. Hence, conservatives often oppose significant change such as same-sex marriage, gender-identity legislation, and abortion.

As noted, the paternalistic approach from conservatives means that they oppose liberalist thought on allowing individual freedom, but also critique socialist thought on regulation of the economy. Rather, conservatives tend to advocate for strong laws to govern and promote moral obligation of individuals to society, while also ensuring individuals have the ability to grow and succeed in the economy. As such, conservatives at times will promote policies that ensure everyone is given access to opportunity and support a stronger welfare state than liberalism does. However, in recent times, a new form of conservatism has arisen that aligns traditional ideas around authority with liberal ideas around economy. This is described as neoliberalism.

🧠 **Learn More**: 'Rediscovering Conservatism' with author Yoram Hazony

In the following interview with the Hoover Institution [1:11:35], learn about academic Yoram Hazony's attempt to rediscover conservatism's roots with his book *Rediscovering Conservatism*.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=5#oembed-3*

## Neoliberalism – Individualism, Responsibility, and Free Markets

A term that you will hear often within sociology texts in contemporary times is that of neoliberalism. As a general definition, **neoliberalism** refers to a political ideology that combines the free market and governance ideals of liberalism, with the parts of the values of conservativism. It can be summarised as an ideology that supports free market economics while maintaining support for traditional values such as the family.

Neoliberalist ideas can be traced back to the governments of US President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990). Both leaders saw a need to increase the economic conditions of their respective countries and did so through a series of reforms that dramatically changed structures in society. This included deregulation of trade to increase competitiveness, the selling of publicly owned resources to private entities such as electricity, airlines, banking and mining, the reduction of welfare systems and expenditure, and a general move to smaller government, or in other words a reduction in the public service. Like liberalism, neoliberalism believes that the economy needs to be free from government intervention to flourish. Important contributors to this idea, such as Austrian-British economist Fredrick Hayek (1899-1992), argued that socialism acted to suppress innovation, individualism and human ingenuity. For him, only the free market, one without intervention from the government, would lead to the improvement of society and genuine wealth creation for all. By limiting regulation and increasing competition, markets are also freed from potential monopolisation (one company dominating industries), lowering costs for consumers, and increasing choices.

Neoliberals seek to increase the wealth of their society by increasing opportunities for companies to do business elsewhere, including overseas. By removing tariffs, regulations and laws regarding taxation in regards to trade, the argument is that businesses will have greater access to other people, and thus increase their profits. These profits will then benefit local economies as more people will be employed, wages will increase, and eventually this will trickle down to the poor lifting them out of poverty.

Unlike liberalism, however, neoliberalism is stronger in certain areas of social governance and like conservativism tends to hold to traditional values. This is especially true in the case of law and order, as neoliberals argue that individuals need to be responsible for their own welfare and not reliant on the state.

As such, neoliberalism places significant emphasis on public services in making individuals responsible. The argument here is mostly a moral one and can be summed up in the question – why should the community be responsible for the welfare of others? Subsequently, different laws and agencies have arisen in the neoliberal system to ensure people are responsible for their own lives.

A good example of this is the rise of child support systems in Western countries around the world. While in the past welfare systems would support single parents in their situations of raising children, neoliberal governments have argued that parents ought to be responsible for the economic support of their own children. As such, laws have been enacted that limit how much financial welfare a sole parent can obtain from the state, while also ensuring that the parent not living with the children provide money to support – hence the name child support. Public services like the Child Support Agency here in Australia hold significant power in this domain with the ability to force parents to pay their child support through a range of measures. The ethos of the agency is to make individuals responsible. This ethos is found across several welfare, health, and community services now.

Neoliberalism also opposes the union movement arguing that it restricts individual freedom to be rewarded for their innovation, skills, and abilities. People should be able to negotiate their own employment conditions with their employer, and not be beholden to a broader collective bargaining agreement usually organised between employers and trade unions. Wages or salaries therefore can be agreed upon individually – whereas in an enterprise bargaining agreement, levels are set collectively regardless of individual differences within certain levels.

Critics of this approach to governance emphasise the inability of deregulation to add wealth to the whole of society. Specifically, extremely rich people can increase their profits without this wealth trickling down into the rest of society. Furthermore, critics argue that cutting back public expenditure leads to detrimental impacts on society removing safeguards for those with few resources. This includes long-term unemployment, poverty, ill health and increased income inequality within a society. Critics argue that all people should have access to services that will potentially improve their lives and increase their chances of overcoming structural issues like poverty.

## In Summary

This chapter introduces a range of issues related to questions of political sociology that include power, social control, identity and ideologies.

- The nation-state is one of the most important structures to study given it has significant power in our current age.

- The nation-state is made up primarily of politicians, bureaucracies in public services, policing, judicial systems, social security and health care.
- Ideologies (see below) play a significant role in shaping how these components of the nation-state operate for the public.
- Power is well discussed in sociology. Max Weber considered authority, however, to be more important than power with its different styles of authority (traditional, charismatic, rational-legal).
- How the state's power in a democracy is experienced by the public is also contested. Pluralists believe that all groups share power in democracy whereas elitists argue that only a small portion have real power.
- Australian sociologist Michael Pusey argues that power is actually held in Australia by a small pocket of public servants who are unelected but wield significant influence.
- Different ideologies exist that govern politics – conservatism, social democracy, socialism, liberalism and neoliberalism. Each has different perspectives on how to govern society, and there are significant examples across the world for all.

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# SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Theresa Petray

The key goals of this chapter are to explain that:

- social movements are one form of non-routine collective action focused on correcting injustices
- there are many types of social movements and many activities they may engage in
- key approaches to understanding social movements include resource mobilisation theory, framing, and new social movement theory
- while social movements are an important contemporary way of bringing about social change, they are not the only way that change happens.

## Overview

In May 2020, most countries around the world were in the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, and restrictions on movement to stop its spread. But this time period also saw the largest racial justice protests in the United States since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, in response to the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in May 2020 (we also discuss this movement in the chapter on race, ethnicity and indigeneity). The Black Lives Matter movement was reactivated despite pandemic restrictions, and large protests were held around the world (Silverstein, 2021). In the months that followed, Washington, DC, became a locus of the movement in the US, with a formal gathering place named Black Lives Matter Plaza (Gottbrath, 2020).

**Figure:** Black Lives Matter Plaza, in Washington, DC, was established in 2020. Black Lives Matter Plaza sign by Bdward3 is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Black Lives Matter protests were held at the same time as a trial of arming police officers, which caused considerable concern amongst Maori, Pasifika, and Black people in the country. Protests in Aotearoa New Zealand explicitly focused on the risks of arming police, and a few days after the first Black Lives Matter protests, the government announced it would not go ahead with arming police (Silverstein, 2021).

In Australia, Black Lives Matter led to protests against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody but also brought attention to racism more broadly—including the increased risks that First Nations people had of COVID-19 complications (Bond et al., 2020).

What causes large groups of people to come together in the ways that we saw in response to this murder—even in the face of very real public health concerns at the time? How does something like this spread beyond the city where the initial event happened, and even around the world? What role does group activity like protest have in changing society? This chapter will help you understand these protests, and others, through a focus on collective behaviour, social movements, and social change.

## Collective Behaviour

**Figure:** Flash mob pillow fight in Vancouver, Canada in April 2009.
Vancouver pillow fight flash mob by Sean Hagen is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

People sitting in a café in a touristy corner of Sydney might expect the usual sights and sounds of a busy city. They might be more surprised when, as they sip their espressos, hundreds of people start streaming into the picturesque square clutching pillows, and when someone gives a signal, they start pummelling each other in a massive free–for–all pillow fight. Spectators might lean forward, coffee forgotten, as feathers fly and more and more people join in. All around the square, others hang out of their windows or stop on the street, transfixed, to watch. After several minutes, the spectacle is over. With cheers and the occasional high-five, the crowd disperses, leaving only destroyed pillows and clouds of fluff in its wake.

This is a flash mob, a group of people who gather for an unexpected activity that lasts a short time before returning to their regular routines. Flash mobs emerged as a deliberate action with a name in 2003, relying on emails and text messages to gather a crowd (Corry, 2021). Today, the more common version is a TikTok meme—a handful of people performing a choreographed dance in a train station, shopping centre, or on a city street.

Technology plays a big role in these events. They are often captured on video and shared on the internet;

frequently they go viral and become well known. What leads people to want to flock somewhere for a massive pillow fight? Or for a choreographed dance? Or to freeze in place? In large part, it is as simple as the reason humans have bonded together around fires for storytelling, danced together, or joined a community holiday celebration. Humans seek connections and shared experiences.

Flash mobs are examples of **non-routine collective action**, non-institutionalised activity in which groups of people voluntarily engage. There are four primary forms of collective behaviour: the crowd, the mass, the public, and social movements.

It takes a fairly large number of people in close proximity to form a **crowd** (Lofland, 1993). Examples include a group of people attending a Harry Styles concert, attending Mardi Gras festivities, or joining a worship service. Turner and Killian (1993) identified four types of crowds.

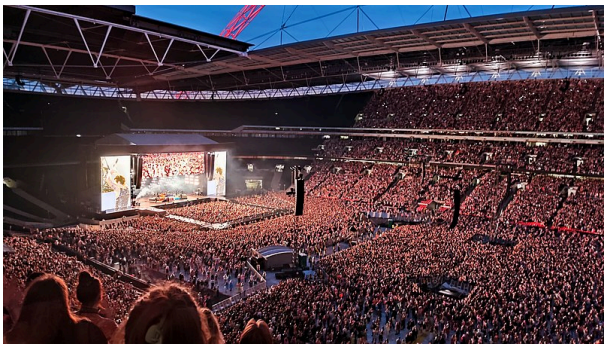

**Figure:** Crowd gathered for Harry Styles' concert at Wembley Stadium for Love on Tour, June 2022. Audience for Harry Styles – Wembley Stadium, Love on Tour 2022 by Myrtoulina is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

1. Casual crowds consist of people who are in the same place at the same time, but who are not really interacting, such as people standing in line at the post office.
2. Conventional crowds are those who come together for a scheduled event, like a religious service or rock concert.
3. Expressive crowds are people who join together to express emotion, often at funerals, weddings, or the like.
4. The final type, acting crowds, focus on a specific goal or action, such as a protest movement or riot.

In addition to the different types of crowds, collective groups can also be identified in two other ways (Lofland, 1993). A **mass** is a relatively large and dispersed number of people with a common interest, whose members are largely unknown to one another and who are incapable of acting together in a concerted way to achieve objectives. In this sense, the audience of the television show *Game of Thrones* or of any mass medium (TV, radio, film, books) is a mass. A **public**, on the other hand, is an unorganised, relatively diffused group of people who share ideas on an issue, such as social conservatives. While these two types of crowds are similar, they are not the same. To distinguish between them, remember that members of a mass share interests whereas members of a public share ideas.

Some collective behaviour is considered routine, like voting and lobbying, which may contribute to social change even though they are within formal institutional structures. However, there are times when 'usual conventions cease to guide social action and people transcend, bypass, or subvert established institutional patterns and structures' (Turner & Killian 1957/1987, p. 3). It is in these moments where non-routine collective action emerges.

# Theories of Collective Behaviour

Early collective behaviour theories (Blumer, 1969; Le Bon, 1895/1960) focused on the irrationality of crowds. Le Bon saw the tendency for crowds to break into riots as a product of the properties of crowds themselves: anonymity, contagion, and suggestibility. On their own, no one would be capable of acting in this manner, but as anonymous members of a crowd they were easily swept up in dynamics that carried them away. Eventually, those theorists who viewed crowds as uncontrolled groups of irrational people were supplanted by theorists who viewed the behaviour of some crowds as the rational behaviour of logical beings.

## Emergent Norm Theory

Sociologists Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian (1993) built on earlier sociological ideas and developed what is known as emergent norm theory. They believe that the norms experienced by people in a crowd may be disparate and fluctuating. They emphasise the importance of these norms in shaping crowd behaviour, especially those norms that shift quickly in response to changing external factors. Emergent norm theory asserts that, in this circumstance, people perceive and respond to the crowd situation with their particular (individual) set of norms, which may change as the crowd experience evolves. This focus on the individual component of interaction reflects a symbolic interactionist perspective.

For Turner and Killian, the process begins when individuals suddenly find themselves in a new situation, or when an existing situation suddenly becomes strange or unfamiliar. Once individuals find themselves in a situation ungoverned by previously established norms, they interact in small groups to develop new guidelines on how to behave. According to the emergent-norm perspective, crowds are not viewed as irrational, impulsive, uncontrolled groups. While this theory offers insight into why norms develop, it leaves undefined the nature of norms, how they come to be accepted by the crowd, and how they spread through the crowd.

## Value-Added Theory

Neil Smelser's (1962) meticulous categorisation of crowd behaviour, called value-added theory, is a perspective within the functionalist tradition based on the idea that several conditions must be in place for collective behaviour to occur. Each condition adds to the likelihood that collective behaviour will occur.

The first condition is structural conduciveness, which describes when people are aware of the problem and have the opportunity to gather, ideally in an open area. Structural strain, the second condition, refers to people's expectations about the situation at hand being unmet, causing tension and strain. The next condition is the growth and spread of a generalised belief, wherein a problem is clearly identified and attributed to a person or group. Fourth, precipitating factors spur collective behaviour; this is the emergence of a dramatic event. The fifth condition is mobilisation for action, when leaders emerge to direct

a crowd to action. The final condition relates to action by the agents of social control. Called social control, it is considered the only way to end the collective behaviour episode (Smelser, 1962).

While value-added theory addresses the complexity of collective behaviour, it also assumes that such behaviour is inherently negative or disruptive. In contrast, collective behaviour can be non-disruptive, such as when people flood to a place where a leader or public figure has died to express condolences or leave tokens of remembrance. People also forge momentary alliances with strangers in response to natural disasters.

## Assembling Perspective

Interactionist sociologist Clark McPhail (1991) developed the assembling perspective, another system for understanding collective behaviour that credited individuals in crowds as rational beings. Unlike previous theories, this theory refocuses attention from collective behaviour to collective action. Remember that collective behaviour is a non-institutionalised gathering, whereas collective action is based on a shared interest. McPhail's theory focused primarily on the processes associated with crowd behaviour, plus the life cycle of gatherings. He identified several instances of convergent or collective behaviour, summarised below.

**Table. Clark McPhail (1991) identified various circumstances of convergent and collective behaviour**

| Type of crowd | Description | Example |
|---|---|---|
| Convergence clusters | Family and friends who travel together | Carpooling parents take several children to the movies |
| Convergent orientation | Group all facing the same direction | A semi-circle around a stage |
| Collective vocalisation | Sounds or noises made collectively | Screams on a roller coaster |
| Collective verbalisation | Collective and simultaneous participation in a speech or song | Singing along at a Taylor Swift concert |
| Collective gesticulation | Body parts forming symbols | Dancing the haka at a football game |
| Collective manipulation | Objects collectively moved around | Holding signs at a protest rally |
| Collective locomotion | The direction and rate of movement to the event | Children running to an ice cream truck |

As useful as this is for understanding the components of how crowds come together, many sociologists criticise its lack of attention on the large cultural context of the described behaviours, instead focusing

on individual actions. Moreover, how do we understand collective behaviour that is expressly seeking to participate in social change processes? For that, we turn to the sociological study of **social movements**.

# Sociology of Social Movements

Social movements are purposeful, organised groups striving to work toward a common goal. These groups might be attempting to create change, to resist change, or to provide a political voice to those otherwise disenfranchised. Social movements are based on the perception of injustices — we say perception, here, not to downplay the seriousness of the things a social movement is responding to! But rather, an injustice must be perceived as a problem, and people need to believe that change is possible, in order for a social movement to emerge.

You may have learned about social movements in history classes—the Civil Rights movement, for example. But we tend to take for granted the fundamental changes they caused. And contemporary movements create social change on a global scale. Movements happen in our towns, in our nation, and around the world, especially since modern technology has allowed us a near-constant stream of information about the quest for social change around the world.

🧠 **Learn More**

The article *Social Movements—and Their Leaders—That Changed our World* lists several key individuals—social movement leaders—who have changed the world in recent history. The article, while not exclusively focused on the United States of America, does pay more attention to leaders from the US than anywhere else. What social movement leaders from Aotearoa New Zealand or Australia would you add to the list? What social movements are missing from the list?

Consider the relationship between individual leaders and the collective effort of social movements. As a society we often pay attention to the individuals, but how successful would they be if they did not have a movement of many other supporters working with them?

**Figure**: A collage of protests from the Middle East and North Africa. Clockwise from top left: 2011 Egyptian revolution, Tunisian revolution, 2011 Yemeni uprising, 2011 Syrian uprising. A collage for MENA protests by HonorTheKing is licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

One set of social movements that have been strongly linked to modern communications technologies is known as the Arab Spring. In January 2011, Egypt erupted in protests against the stifling rule of long-time President Hosni Mubarak. The protests were sparked in part by a revolution in Tunisia that began in December 2010, and, in turn, they inspired demonstrations throughout the Middle East in Libya, Syria, and beyond. This wave of protest movements travelled across national borders and seemed to spread like wildfire. There have been countless causes and factors in play in these protests and revolutions, but many have noted the internet-savvy youth of these countries. Some believe that the adoption of social technology—from Facebook pages to mobile phone cameras—that helped to organise and document the movement contributed directly to the wave of protests called Arab Spring. The combination of deep unrest and disruptive technologies meant these social movements were ready to rise up and seek change.

Since the start of the Arab Spring, only Tunisia has successfully transitioned to a democratic government with constitutionally-protected basic rights. Other countries have fallen into civil wars, or remain ruled by authoritarian regimes. However, Khondker (2019) argues that this doesn't mean that the revolutions of the Arab Spring failed, necessarily. There have been significant social improvements in the region, and it is likely that these protests will have long-term impacts on how people understand their agency and ability to resist government power.

## Types of Social Movements and Activism

Earlier studies of social movements differentiated between two main types of movements. First, integrationist, or liberal, movements are those seeking change to existing systems. In contrast, anti-systemic, or radical, movements seek to replace that system with a new one. Anti-systemic movements are further broken down as either social movements or national movements (Wallerstein, 2002). In the 1970s, social movements were thought of as those focused on class struggle, like trade unions and socialist parties. National movements were those seeking to create nation-states, through secession, decolonisation, or federation.

More recently, the authors of this book, sociologists Theresa Petray and Nick Prendergrast (2018), identified an additional category of social movements. In addition to integrationist and anti-systemic movements, they added non-hegemonic movements to the discussion. While the first two are focused on

states—reforming them, or overhauling them—the latter seeks to create localised change without engaging at all with existing structures. In other words, non-hegemonic activism focuses on "small-scale experiments in a different kind of society" (Petray & Pendergrast, 2018, p. 668).

Some research is interested in the life cycle of social movements—how they emerge, grow, and in some cases, die out. Blumer (1969) and Tilly (1978) outline a four-stage process. In the preliminary stage, people become aware of an issue and leaders *emerge*. This is followed by the *coalescence* stage when people join together and organise in order to publicise the issue and raise awareness. In the *bureaucratisation* stage, the movement no longer requires grassroots volunteerism: it is an established organisation, typically peopled with a paid staff. At this point, a movement may experience success or failure, it may be co-opted by power structures, it may face repression, or it might become mainstream. Generally what follows is the decline stage.

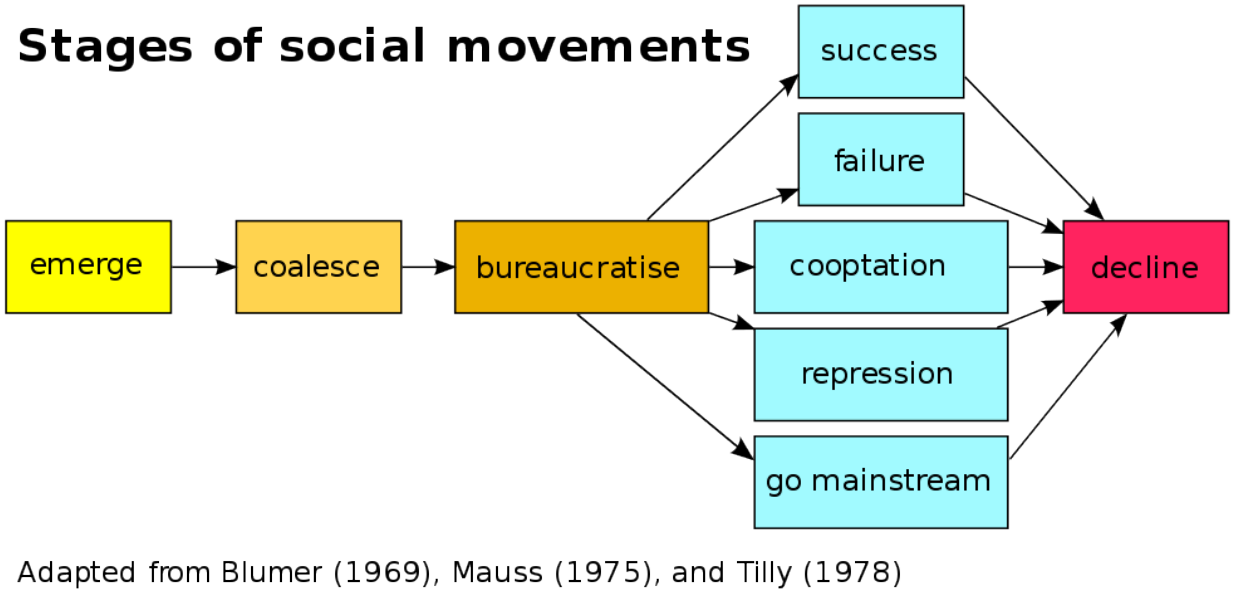


**Figure:** Stages of a social movement by Wykis is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

🔍 **Look Closer:** Social Movements and Social Media

Chances are you have been asked to tweet, share, like, or donate online for a cause. Or maybe you follow political candidates and activists on Instagram and share their posts to your stories. Perhaps you have "liked" a local non-profit on Facebook, prompted by one of your neighbours or friends liking it too. Nowadays social movements are woven throughout our social media activities.

Social media has the potential to dramatically transform how people get involved. Look at

the first stage in the life cycle of social movements, the preliminary stage: people become aware of an issue and leaders emerge. Social media speeds up this step. Suddenly, a shrewd TikTok-er can alert thousands of followers about an emerging cause or an issue on their mind. Issue awareness can spread at the speed of a click, with thousands of people across the globe becoming informed at the same time. In a similar vein, those who are savvy and engaged with social media emerge as leaders. Suddenly, you do not need to be a powerful public speaker. You do not even need to leave your house. You can build an audience through social media without ever meeting the people you are inspiring.

At the next stage, the coalescence stage, social media also is transformative. Coalescence is the point when people join together to publicise the issue and get organised. U.S. President Obama's 2008 campaign became a case study in organising through social media. Using Twitter and other online tools, the campaign engaged volunteers who had typically not bothered with politics and empowered those who were more active to generate still more activity. It is no coincidence that Obama's earlier work experience included grassroots community organising. What is the difference between this type of campaign and the work that political activists did in neighbourhoods in earlier decades? The ability to organise without regard to geographical boundaries becomes possible using social media. In 2009, when student protests erupted in Tehran, social media was considered so important to the organising effort that the U.S. State Department actually asked Twitter to suspend scheduled maintenance so that a vital tool would not be disabled during the demonstrations.

What is the real impact of this technology on the world? Did Twitter bring down Mubarak in Egypt? Author Malcolm Gladwell (2010) does not think so. In the article "Small Change", in The New Yorker magazine, Gladwell tackles what he considers the myth that social media gets people more engaged. He points out that most of the tweets relating to the Iran protests were in English and sent from Western accounts (instead of people on the ground). Rather than increasing engagement, he contends that social media only increases participation; after all, the cost of participation is so much lower than the cost of engagement. Instead of risking being arrested, shot with rubber bullets, or sprayed with fire hoses, social media activists can click "like" or retweet a message from the comfort and safety of their desk (Gladwell, 2010).

**Do you agree with Gladwell, or do you see the potential for social media to contribute more directly to social change?**

The term that is generally used to describe what social movements *do* is activism. The term 'activism' has lots of baggage and meaning in our societies. Many people think of activism and *protest* as synonyms, but in fact, protest is just one kind of activism. Protest—marches or rallies where groups of people gather to

demonstrate their commitment to a cause or issue—can be a bit more confrontational, a lot more visible, and sometimes more challenging to norms than other forms of activism, and for these reasons it attracts more media attention.

Other forms of activism are just as important for social movements, though. These include things like

- advocacy, where movement participants work with specific people or communities experiencing disadvantage in order to improve their circumstances,
- lobbying, where movement participants seek to influence formal politics through letter writing, or meeting with politicians or bureaucrats,
- education and outreach, where movement participants work to increase awareness of their cause amongst the general public, using various methods,
- celebrations and commemorations, where movements acknowledge wins, and recognise their history as a social movement, and
- prefiguration, where movement participants establish the alternatives they seek more broadly. This form of activism is especially relevant to the non-hegemonic movements that we have discussed above.

Sociology on Screen

Protest is usually the kind of activism that most people are aware of, partially because of how the media and popular culture portray social movements. We can see protest at the centre of works like *Les Miserables*, which culminated in the Paris Uprising of 1832, with protesters responding to poverty, disease, and inequality. The stage and screen depictions of *Les Miserables* feature protesters establishing barricades and fighting against the army. Other movies like *Pride* (released in 2014), *The Hate U Give* (released in 2018), and *Selma* (released in 2014) tell the stories of more recent social movements. When activism is present on TV shows and in movies, what kinds of activism are we most likely to see? What is missing from a more sensationalised version of a social movement?

## Theoretical Perspectives on Social Movements

Social movements have, throughout history, influenced societal shifts. Sociology looks at these moments through the lenses of three major perspectives.

The functionalist perspective looks at the big picture, focusing on the way that all aspects of society are integral to the continued health and viability of the whole. A functionalist might focus on why social movements develop, why they continue to exist, and what social purposes they serve. On one hand, social movements emerge when there is a dysfunction in the relationship between systems. The labour union movement developed in the 19th century when the economy no longer functioned to distribute wealth and resources in a manner that provided adequate sustenance for workers and their families. On the other hand, when studying social movements themselves, functionalists observe that movements must change their goals as initial aims are met or they risk dissolution.

The critical perspective focuses on the creation and reproduction of inequality. Someone applying the critical perspective would likely be interested in how social movements are generated through systematic inequality, and how social change is constant, speedy, and unavoidable. In fact, the conflict that this perspective sees as inherent in social relations drives social change. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded in the United States in 1908. Partly created in response to the horrific lynchings occurring in the southern United States, the organisation fought to secure the constitutional rights guaranteed in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, which established an end to slavery, equal protection under the law, and universal male suffrage (NAACP, 2011). While those goals have been achieved, the organisation remains active today, continuing to fight against inequalities in civil rights and to remedy discriminatory practices.

The symbolic interactionist perspective studies the day-to-day interaction of social movements, the meanings individuals attach to involvement in such movements, and the individual experience of social change. An interactionist studying social movements might address social movement norms and tactics as well as individual motivations. For example, social movements might be generated through a feeling of deprivation or discontent, but people might actually join social movements for a variety of reasons that have nothing to do with the cause. They might want to feel important, or they know someone in the movement they want to support, or they just want to be a part of something. Have you ever been motivated to show up for a rally or sign a petition because your friends invited you? Would you have been as likely to get involved otherwise?

🔍 **Look Closer:** School Strikes for Climate

**Figure:** School strike for climate, Wellington, New Zealand, in March 2019 by David Tong is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

In 2018, Swedish 15-year-old Greta Thunberg held a three-week sit-in on the steps of the Swedish Parliament instead of attending school. Following the Swedish election at the end of the three-week protest, Thunberg continued to hold a weekly sit-in on Fridays. This action inspired other Swedish young people to join her, and in November 2018, sparked the global School Strike For Climate. In Australia, school strikes were held in November 2018, March 2019, and periodically since then (Alexander et al., 2022).

How would each theoretical perspective seek to understand this social movement?

A functionalist perspective might focus on the societal dysfunction that leads to young people feeling so concerned about the risks of climate change to protest by going on strike from school. This perspective might consider the disruption in social norms, which typically see young people trusting in the authority of adults, including politicians—but in the case of the School Strike for Climate, this trust appears to be eroding.

A critical perspective would likely include an analysis of the lack of power that young people hold in society, particularly relative to politicians and corporations responsible for mainstream responses to climate change. This conflict between young people worrying about the future of the planet and powerholders with economic and political interests might be viewed as a key method for changing existing power dynamics, according to this critical perspective.

Understanding the School Strikes through a symbolic interactionist lens might focus instead

on the images, symbols, and slogans on the protest signs at the School Strike events. For example, the sign in the image below refers to a celebrity, Gigi Hadid, and one in the background refers to Twilight character Edward Cullen. In the image at the top of this box, one sign is designed to look like the periodic table of elements. Symbolic interactionists might consider the meanings attached to, and communicated by, such protest signs.

**Figure:** Hotter than Gigi Hadid – Fridays for Future pre-COP26 Milano, Lombardy, Italy by Mænsard vokser is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

More specifically, here we will showcase three specific theories used to understand social movements.

## Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT)

Social movements will always be a part of society as long as there are aggrieved populations whose needs and interests are not being satisfied. However, according to Resource Mobilisation Theory, grievances do not become social movements unless social movement actors are able to create viable organisations, mobilise resources, and attract large-scale followings. As people will always weigh their options and make rational choices about which movements to follow, social movements necessarily form under finite, competitive conditions: competition for attention, financing, commitment, organisational skills, etc. Not only will social movements compete for our attention with many other concerns—from the basic (our jobs or our need to feed ourselves) to the broad (video games, sports, or television), but they also compete with each other. To be successful, social movements must develop the organisational capacity to mobilise resources (money, people, and skills) and compete with other organisations to reach their goals.

McCarthy and Zald (1977) conceptualise resource mobilisation theory as a way to explain a movement's success in terms of its ability to acquire resources and mobilise individuals to achieve goals and take advantage of political opportunities. For example, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), a social movement organisation, is in competition with Greenpeace and the Animal Liberation Front, two other social movement organisations. Taken together, along with all other social movement organisations working on animal rights issues, these similar organisations constitute a social movement industry. Multiple social movement industries in a society, though they may have widely different constituencies and goals, constitute a society's social movement sector. Every social movement organisation (a single social movement group) within the social movement sector is competing for your attention, your time, and your resources.

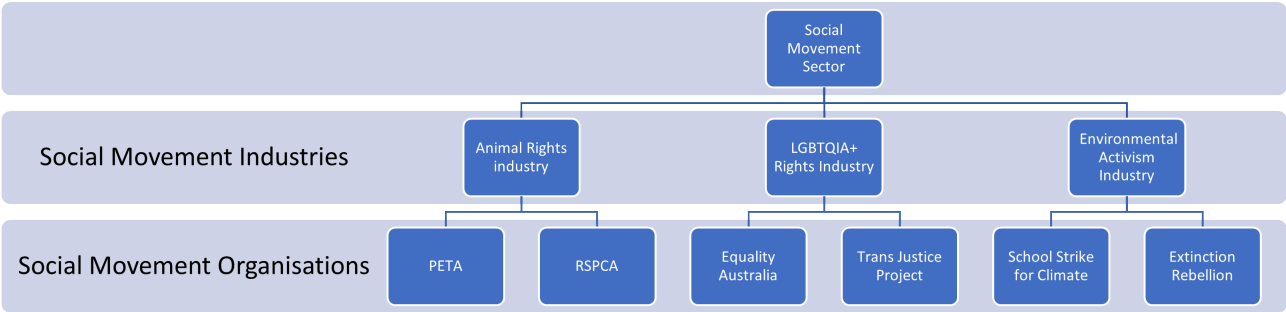


**Figure:** Social movement organisational hierarchy is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0

## 🛠️ Sociological Tool Kit: Collective Identity and WUNC

An important concept that social movement researchers use, especially (but not exclusively) in an RMT perspective, is collective identity. Collective identity is the shared sense of self that movements seek to instil in members. Sharing a movement identity can attract members to movements, and it keeps them involved by ensuring participants feel like they *belong* to the broader group.

Collective identity can be built on two types of identity. Embedded identities are those which are perceived outwardly by society, like race or gender, which are difficult for an individual to change. Detached identities are those which can be tried on, shed, or clung to depending on circumstances. For example, you can't typically guess someone's politics when they are in a grocery store unless they have chosen to wear clothing or accessories with an explicit political message.

Both kinds of identities are resources that social movements can seek to mobilise, and to make more salient (active and relevant, as opposed to a latent identity or one that isn't central to one's experience of the world).

A social movement with a strongly developed collective identity will have high rates of unity and belonging, encouraging ongoing participation in movement activities. That participation can then go on to create new (detached) identities—like "activist" or "environmentalist".

**Collective identity is a concept that is not just important to understand social movements, but lots of other groups in society. In your life, what groups do you belong to? What makes you feel like you belong?**

Collective identity is closely tied to what sociologist Charles Tilly called WUNC—a movement's worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. According to Tilly, these four things indicate whether or not a movement is important to society, and can influence the response of powerholders to that movement's demands. The video below [6:33] contains a brief explanation of WUNC, and how it connects to collective identity—including the tension that some movements face between maintaining breadth.

*One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://oercollective.caul.edu.au/exploringsociology/?p=162#oembed-1*

**Think of a social movement that has been in the news recently. What elements of that movement's activities contribute to their display of WUNC?**

## Frame Analysis

The sudden emergence of social movements that have not had time to mobilise resources, or the failure of well-funded groups to achieve effective collective action, calls into question the emphasis on resource mobilisation as an adequate explanation for the formation of social movements. Over the past several decades, sociologists have developed the concept of frames to explain how individuals identify and understand social events and which norms they should follow in any given situation (Benford & Snow, 2000; Goffman, 1974; Snow et al., 1986). A frame is a way in which experience is organised conceptually. Imagine entering a restaurant. Your "frame" immediately provides you with a behaviour template. It probably does not occur to you to wear pyjamas to a fine dining establishment, throw food at other patrons, or spit your drink onto the table. However, eating food at a sleepover pizza party provides you with an entirely different frame. It might be perfectly acceptable to eat in your pyjamas, and maybe even throw popcorn at others or guzzle drinks from cans. Similarly, social movements must actively engage

in realigning collective social frames so that the movements' interests, ideas, values, and goals become congruent with those of potential members. The movements' goals must make sense to people to draw new recruits into their organisations.

According to this theoretical perspective, successful social movements use three kinds of frames (Snow & Benford, 1988) to further their goals. The first type, diagnostic framing, states the social movement problem in a clear, easily understood way. When applying diagnostic frames, there are no shades of grey: instead, there is the belief that what "they" do is wrong and this is how "we" will fix it. This "us and them" mentality may build a stronger collective identity within a movement. Prognostic framing, the second type, offers a solution and states how it will be implemented. When looking at the issue of pollution as framed by the environmental movement, for example, prognostic frames would include direct legal sanctions and the enforcement of strict government regulations or the imposition of carbon taxes or cap-and-trade mechanisms to make environmental damage more costly. As you can see, there may be many competing prognostic frames even within social movements adhering to similar diagnostic frames. Finally, motivational framing is the call to action: what should you do once you agree with the diagnostic frame and believe in the prognostic frame? These frames are action-oriented. In the Aboriginal justice movement, a call to action might encourage you to join a blockade to protest coal mining on Aboriginal land or contact your local MP to express your viewpoint that Aboriginal land rights be honoured.

With so many similar diagnostic frames, some groups find it best to join together to maximise their impact. When social movements link their goals to the goals of other social movements and merge into a single group, a frame alignment process (Snow et al., 1986) occurs—an ongoing and intentional means of recruiting a diversity of participants to the movement. For example, Carroll and Ratner (1996) argue that using a social justice frame makes it possible for a diverse group of social movements—union movements, environmental movements, First Nations justice movements, LGBTQIA+ rights movements, anti-poverty movements, etc.—to form effective coalitions even if their specific goals do not typically align.

## New Social Movement Theory

New social movement theory emerged in the 1970s to explain the proliferation of postindustrial, quality-of-life movements that are difficult to analyse using traditional social movement theories (Melucci, 1989). Rather than being based on the grievances of particular groups striving to influence political outcomes or redistribute material resources, new social movements like the peace and disarmament, environmental, and feminist movements focus on goals of autonomy, identity, self-realisation, and quality-of-life issues. The appeal of the new social movements tends to cut across traditional class, party politics, and socioeconomic affiliations to politicise aspects of everyday life traditionally seen as outside politics. Moreover, the movements themselves are more flexible, diverse, shifting, and informal in participation and membership than the older social movements, often preferring to adopt non-hierarchical modes of organisation and unconventional means of political engagement (such as direct action).

Melucci (1994) argues that the commonality that designates these diverse social movements as "new" is

the way in which they respond to systematic encroachments on the lifeworld, the shared inter-subjective meanings and common understandings that form the backdrop of our daily existence and communication. The dimensions of existence that were formally considered private (e.g., the body, sexuality, interpersonal affective relations), subjective (e.g., desire, motivation, and cognitive or emotional processes), or common (e.g., nature, urban spaces, language, information, and communicational resources) are increasingly subject to social control, manipulation, commodification, and administration. However, as Melucci (1994) argues,

> these are precisely the areas where individuals and groups lay claim to their autonomy, where they conduct their search for identity ... and construct the meaning of what they are and what they do. (pp. 101-102)

# Social Change

Collective behaviour and social movements are just two of the forces driving social change, which is the change in society created through social movements as well as external factors like environmental shifts or technological innovations.

## Technology

Some would say that improving technology has made our lives easier. Imagine what your day would be like without the internet, the automobile, or electricity. Advances in medical technology allow otherwise infertile women to bear children, indirectly leading to an increase in population. Advances in agricultural technology have allowed us to genetically alter and patent food products, changing our environment in innumerable ways. From the way we educate children in the classroom to the way we grow the food we eat, technology has impacted all aspects of modern life.

Of course, there are drawbacks. The increasing gap between the technological haves and have-nots—sometimes called the digital divide—occurs both locally and globally. Further, there are added security risks: the loss of privacy, the risk of total system failure (like the Y2K panic at the turn of the millennium), and the added vulnerability created by technological dependence. Think about the technology that goes into keeping nuclear power plants running safely and securely. What happens if an earthquake or other disaster, as in the case of Japan's Fukushima plant, causes the technology to malfunction?

## Social Institutions

Each change in a single social institution leads to changes in all social institutions. For example, the industrialisation of society meant that there was no longer a need for large families to produce enough manual labour to run a farm. Further, new job opportunities were close to urban centres where living space was at a premium. The result is that the average family size shrunk significantly.

## Population

Population composition is changing at every level of society. Births increase in one nation and decrease in another. Some families delay childbirth while others start bringing children into their fold early. Population changes can be due to external forces, like an epidemic, or shifts in other social institutions, as described above.

In Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, we have an ageing population (StatsNZ, 2022, Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2021), which will in turn change the way many of our social institutions are organised. For example, there is an increased demand for elder care and assisted-living facilities, and growing awareness of elder abuse. There is concern about labour shortages and pension costs as baby boomers retire.

Globally, often the countries with the highest fertility rates are least able to absorb and attend to the needs of a growing population. Family planning is a large step in ensuring that families are not burdened with more children than they can care for. On a macro level, the increased population, particularly in the poorest parts of the globe, also leads to increased stress on the planet's resources.

## Environment

Humans are part of the environment, and we affect each other. As a result of climate change, we are seeing an increase in the number of people affected by natural disasters, and human interaction with the environment increases the impact of those disasters. Part of this is simply the numbers: the more people there are on the planet, the more likely it is that people will be impacted by a natural disaster. But it goes beyond that. As a population, we have brought water tables to dangerously low levels, built up fragile shorelines to increase development, and irrigated massive crop fields with water brought in from far away. These events have birthed social movements and are bringing about social change as the public becomes educated about these issues.

🔍 **Look Closer:** Dystopian Fictions?

**Figure:** A protest sign refers to characters from speculative fiction novels who fought against repressive regimes. Katniss protest sign by Marc Nozell is licensed under CC BY 2.0

People have long been interested in science fiction and space travel, and many of us are eager to see the invention of jet packs and flying cars. But part of this futuristic fiction trend is much darker and less optimistic. In 1932, when Aldous Huxley's book, *Brave New World,* was published, there was a cultural trend toward seeing the future as golden and full of opportunity. In his novel, set in 2540, there is a frightening future. Since then, there has been an ongoing stream of dystopian novels, or books set in the future after some kind of apocalypse has occurred and when a totalitarian and restrictive government has taken over. Some of these books have a grim ending, but others contain the promise of hope.

What is it about contemporary times that makes looking forward so fearsome? Take the example of author Suzanne Collins's hugely popular *Hunger Games* trilogy. The futuristic setting isn't given a date, and the locale is Panem, a transformed version of North America with 12 districts ruled by a cruel and dictatorial capitol. The capitol punishes the districts for their long-ago attempt at rebellion by forcing an annual Hunger Games, where two children from each district are thrown into an arena full of hazards, where they must fight to the death. Connotations of gladiator games and video games come together in this world, where the government can kill people for their amusement, and the technological wonders never cease. From meals that appear at the touch of a button to mutated government-built creatures that track and kill, the future world of Hunger Games is a mix of modernisation fantasy and nightmare.

When thinking about modernisation theory and how it is viewed today by both functionalists and conflict theorists, it is interesting to look at this world of fiction that is so popular.

**When you think of the future, do you view it as a wonderful place, full of opportunity? Or as a horrifying dictatorship sublimating the individual to the good of the state? Do you view modernisation as something to look forward to or something to avoid? And what factors have influenced your view?**

# Modernisation

Modernisation describes the processes that increase the amount of specialisation and differentiation of structure in societies resulting in the move from an undeveloped society to a developed, technologically driven society (Irwin, 1975). By this definition, the level of modernity within a society is judged by the sophistication of its technology, particularly as it relates to infrastructure, industry, and the like. However, it is important to note the inherent ethnocentric bias of such assessment. Why do we assume that those living in semi-peripheral and peripheral nations would find it so wonderful to become more like the core nations? Is modernisation always positive?

One contradiction of all kinds of technology is that they often promise time-saving benefits, but somehow fail to deliver. How many times have you ground your teeth in frustration at an internet site that refused to load or your phone connecting to Bluetooth when you don't want it to? Despite time-saving devices such as dishwashers, washing machines and robot vacuum cleaners, the average time spent on housework is the same today as it was 50 years ago. Further, the internet has brought us information, but at a cost. The morass of information means that there is as much poor information available as trustworthy sources. And the dubious benefits of 24/7 email and immediate information have simply increased the amount of time employees are expected to be responsive and available. While once businesses had to travel at the speed of the postal system, today the immediacy of information transfer means there are no such breaks.

**Learn More**

A key campaign of labour union activism in recent years has been "the right to disconnect". This is in response to increasing expectations that workers be always available by phone, email, or some other chat service. The government in France introduced legislation giving paid workers the right to disconnect when not at the office. Some industries in Australia and New Zealand have followed suit, but many have yet to do so. Will this become a broader social movement in the future?

## In Summary

- Collective behaviour encompasses everything from crowds to social movements. Social movements are a particular form of non-routine collective action that attempts to create

or resist political and social change. Social movements have had profound impacts on society as we know it.

- Social movements can seek to reform existing systems, replace them with something new, or sometimes create alternatives on a small, local scale. The things that social movements do are typically referred to as activism, and while many people commonly think of activism as meaning the same thing as protest, there are many other ways that a social movement can do activism.
- Sociologists use a variety of approaches to understand social movements, how they come about, and what their impacts might be. Resource mobilisation theory treats social movement participants as rational decision-makers; frame analysis explains how social movements articulate their issue to make it salient to new members; and New Social Movement theory considers the shift to postindustrial movements that are about more than simple redistribution of resources.
- Aside from social movements, other influences of social change include technology, the environment, population, and institutions.

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# VERSIONING HISTORY

This page provides a record of changes made to this book. Each set of edits is acknowledged with a 0.1 increase in the version number. The exported/downloadable files for this book reflect the most recent version.

| Version | Date | Change | Details |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1.0 | 28 April 2023 | Front matter and four chapters published in accordance with OER Collective grant timeline requirements. | Chapter: Race, Ethnicity and Indigeneity<br><br>Chapter: Gender, Sexuality and Families<br><br>Chapter: Digital Sociology: The Internet, Social Media, Ethics and Life<br><br>Chapter: Political Sociology: The State, Ideology, and Power |
| 2.0 | 8 February 2024 | Additional chapters and back matter added. | Chapter: Class and Status in Classical and Contemporary Society<br><br>Chapter: Identity, Self and Culture in Classical and Contemporary Society<br><br>Chapter: Understanding Social Research Methods and Perspectives in Sociology<br><br>Chapter: Education<br><br>Chapter: Health, Illness and Medicine in Society<br><br>Chapter: Social Movements and Social Change |

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