Introduction to the Social Sciences

INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Preface

This book includes many links to external sources and further reading materials. Links can change and so if you, the reader, come across a broken link or know of a better source or reading, please email one of the authors to rectify the issue.

In the spirit of solidarity and the co-production of knowledge, thank you.

Title page

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which this project originated. We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country. We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.

These lands always have been, and always will be, Aboriginal lands.

A Guidance Through Time by Casey Coolwell and Kyra Mancktelow © The University of Queensland.

About the artwork

Quandamooka artists Casey Coolwell and Kyra Mancktelow have produced an artwork that recognises the three major campuses, while also championing the creation of a strong sense of belonging and truth-telling about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, and ongoing connections with Country, knowledges, culture and kin. Although created as a single artwork, the piece can be read in three sections, starting with the blue/greys of the Herston campus, the purple of St Lucia and the orange/golds of Gatton.

The graphic elements overlaying the coloured background symbolise the five UQ values:

- The Brisbane River and its patterns represent our Pursuit of excellence. Within the River are tools used by Aboriginal people to teach, gather, hunt, and protect.

- Creativity and independent thinking is depicted through the spirit guardian, Jarjum (Child in Yugambeh language), and the kangaroo
- The jacaranda tree, bora ring, animal prints, footprints and stars collectively represent honesty and accountability, mutual respect and diversity and supporting our people.

Learn more about [The University of Queensland's Reconciliation Action Plan](#).

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Introduction

As we move further into the twenty-first century, we are continuing to see rapid and significant societal and global shifts that have dramatic and deep effects on our lives, and which have ripple effects through our societies and across nations. The thrusts of globalisation, (neo)colonialism, neoliberalism, unfettered capitalism, hyper-incarceration, digitisation and more, as well as recent significant global events like the Covid-19 pandemic, have continued to rock the foundations of our being. They point, yet again, to the continued need for humans to ask ourselves serious questions about our lives and the societies we live in: 'what makes a good society?', 'what is important for achieving social justice?', 'how can we tackle global inequalities and poverty?', 'how can we end racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and more?', 'how can we reorganise ourselves in ways that prioritise wellness and happiness?', 'how can our political systems be fairer and more inclusive?'. **These are all questions for social scientists.**

The social sciences, as we elaborate on throughout this book, are a broad church. They cover many different disciplines and sub-disciplines that focus on different aspects of society (e.g., politics and governance, the economy, the family, education, and more) from lots of different perspectives and lenses (e.g., using different theories, as we talk about in later chapters). What they have in common, however, is that their core focus is upon *people, societies, power, and social change*. In sum, social scientists are interested in how people live, interact with one another, organise themselves in different ways, exert and respond to power, and/or how they effect social change. The social sciences are interested in the 'big' or 'macro' bits of society (e.g., social institutions, like the family, the economy, and more) as well as the 'smaller' or 'micro' bits (e.g., self-identity, interpersonal relations, and more). Social scientists are also adept at considering both 'agency' and 'structure'; as we discuss later, they use their 'sociological imaginations' (a term coined by sociologist, C.W. Mills) to consider how social issues fit within broader social, historical, spatial, cultural, and geopolitical contexts, as well as how these contexts shape and influence such issues. It is these concepts, and more, that we set out to introduce and encourage our readers to reflect on throughout this book.

The focus of this book

In this book, we attempt to set out a broad introduction to the social sciences. We address what they are, and how they can help us to think in different ways about the world. In later chapters, we also provide some short introductions to key areas of study within the social sciences, including the environment, development, health, and work. We conclude the book by considering what it means to be a (good) social scientist; that is, the kind of dispositional qualities that effective social scientists have, and how this translates into social science practice.

It is our intention in this book to provide an introductory overview only; we do not pretend that this book covers all topics or perspectives that fall within the remit of social science disciplines. In this regard, it is most suited to entry-level university social science students. Nevertheless, in writing the book, we have primarily sought to:

- further democratise social science knowledge (e.g., by publishing this manuscript as open access, and also ensuring that many of the resources referred to within are open access — rather than locked behind paywalls),
- contribute to making the social sciences more inclusive (e.g., by weaving through non-Western social scientific perspectives and approaches, to destabilise the oft-Western-centric accounts that tend to litter texts of this nature), and
- encourage budding social scientists to get excited and passionate about what the social sciences have to offer!

We write this book from three different perspectives: as a criminologist who primarily researches social policy and who teaches into the introductory social sciences (Staines), as a political anthropologist who teaches introductory social anthropology (Hoffstaedter), and as an undergraduate social science student (Binnie). These different perspectives have enabled us to build different types of expertise into this book, which we have sought to reflect in varying learning and reflection exercises, case studies, and more. It has also enabled us to — primarily through the valuable perspective of Binnie — bring what we hope is a relatively fresh lens to social science theory, topics, and concepts. As Binnie reflects:

> Beginning to study concepts within the social sciences opens up the possibility to reconsider the world as it appears to us. Already thoroughly embedded within our particular social formations, this learning is never undertaken in a vacuum. By engaging with the social sciences, we all seek to understand the broad questions of 'how does it all work?', and 'why do we do what we do?', which we hope will provide some greater meaning to everyday life. The social sciences are for everyone – but especially for those of us who hope for a more free, more equal society for all. It is this act of 'dreaming a new world into existence' that captures the necessary essence of the social sciences.

Never before have the social sciences been more important than today. We are excited to have you engage with us on this journey through the social sciences, and hope that in reading this book, we can also impart some of the passion we feel for social scientific research and practice onto you as our readers.

1.

What are the social sciences?

Learning Objectives for this Chapter

After reading this Chapter, you should be able to:

- understand what the social sciences are, including some fundamental concepts and values,
- understand and apply the concept of 'phronesis' to thinking about the purpose and value of the social sciences.

History and philosophy of the social sciences

Some of the earliest written and spoken accounts of human action, values, and the structure of society can be found in Ancient Greek, Islamic, Chinese and indigenous cultures. For example, Ibn Khaldoun, a 14th-century North African philosopher, is considered a pioneer in the field of social sciences. He wrote the book *Muqaddimah*, which is regarded as the first comprehensive work in the social sciences. It charts an attempt to create a universal history based on studying and explaining the economic, social, and political factors that shape society and discussed the cyclical rise and fall of civilisations. Moreover, indigenous peoples across the world have contributed in various and significant ways to the development of scientific knowledge and practices (e.g., see this recent article by Indigenous scholar, Jesse Popp – How Indigenous knowledge advances modern science and technology). Indeed, contemporary social science has much to learn from indigenous knowledges and methodologies (e.g., Quinn 2022), as well as much reconciling to do in terms of its treatment of indigenous peoples the world over (see Coburn, Moreton-Robinson, Sefa Dei, and Stewart-Harawira, 2013).

Nevertheless, the dominant Western European narrative of the achievements of the enlightenment still tends to overlook and discredit much of this knowledge. Additionally, male thinkers have tended to dominate within the Western social sciences, while women have historically been excluded from academic institutions and their perspectives largely omitted from social science history and texts. Therefore, much of the history of the social sciences represent a predominantly white, masculine viewpoint. That is not to say that the concepts and theories developed by these male social scientists should be outright discredited. Nevertheless, in engaging with them we must understand this context; *they are not the only voices, nor necessarily the most important.* Indeed, it is crucial therefore that the history of the social sciences is continually re-examined through a critical lens, to identify gaps within social scientific knowledge bases and allow space for critical revisions that broaden existing concepts and theories beyond an exclusively

masculine, Western-centric perspective. We seek to adopt such an approach throughout this book. However, to critique and question Western social scientific perspectives, we must first understand them.

Social sciences in the Western world

The study of the social sciences, as developed in the Western world, can be said to emerge from the Age of Enlightenment in the late 17th Century. Beginning with [René Descartes](#) (1596-1650), both the natural and social sciences developed from the concept of the rational, thinking individual. These early Enlightenment thinkers argued that human beings use reason to understand the world, rather than only referring to religion. Other thinkers around this time such as [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#) (1712-1778), [M. de Voltaire](#) (1694-1778) and [Denis Diderot](#) (1713-1784), began to develop different methodologies to scientifically explain processes in the body, the structure of society, and the limits of human knowledge. It was during this period that the social sciences grew out of moral philosophy, which asks 'how people ought to live', and political philosophy, which asks 'what form societies ought to take'. Rather than only focusing on *descriptive* scientific questions about 'how things are', the social sciences also sought answers to *normative* questions about 'how things could be'. This is one of the central differences between the natural sciences and the social sciences. This era of Enlightenment marked an important turning point in history that gave way to further developments in both the natural and social sciences.

[Immanuel Kant](#) (1724-1804) is often regarded as one of the most influential philosophers for the development of the social sciences. In his work, Kant develops an epistemology that accounts for the objective validity of knowledge, due to the capacities of the human mind. In other words, how can we as individual people come to know facts about the world that are true for all of us. Social scientists, such as [Émile Durkheim](#) (1858-1917) and [Max Weber](#) (1864-1920) critically developed the work of Kant to explain social relations between individuals.

Émile Durkheim prioritised the validity of social facts over the values themselves, continuing the tradition of '**positivism**' (an ontological position that we discuss later in this Chapter). Durkheim argued that there is a distinction between social facts and individual facts. Rather than viewing the structure of the human mind as the basis for knowledge like Kant, Durkheim argued that it is society itself that forms the basis for the social experience of individuals. Social facts should therefore, "be treated as natural objects and can be classified, compared and explained according to the logic of any natural science" (Rose, 1981: 19). Durkheim developed his methodology using analogies to the natural sciences. For example, he borrowed concepts from biology to understand society as a living organism.

TRIGGER WARNING
The following section contains content which may be triggering for certain people. It focuses on the sociology of suicide, including discussion of self-harm and different forms of suicide as it exists within society.

Durkheim and Suicide

Emile Durkheim's 1879 text 'Suicide: a Study in Sociology' is a foundational work for the study of social facts. Durkheim explores the phenomenon of suicide across different time periods, nationalities, religions, genders, and economic groups. Durkheim argues that the problem of suicide can not be explained through purely biological,

psychological or environmental means. Suicide must, he concludes, "necessarily depend upon social causes and be in itself a collective phenomenon" (Durkheim 1897: 97). It was and continues to be a work of great impact that demonstrates that, what most would consider an individual act is actually enmeshed in social factors.

In his text, Durkheim identifies some of the different forms suicide can take within society, four of which we discuss below.

Egoistic Suicide

Egoistic suicide is caused by what Durkheim terms "excessive individuation" (Durkheim 1897: 175). A lack of integration within a particular community or society at large leads human beings to feel isolated and disconnected from others. Durkheim argues that "suicide increases with knowledge"(Durkheim 1897: 123). This is not to say that a particular human being kills themselves because of their knowledge; rather it is because of the decline of organised religion that human beings desire knowledge outside of religion. It is thus, for Durkheim the weakening organisation of religion that detaches people from their (religious) community, increasing social isolation. According to Durkheim, the capacity of religion to prevent suicide does not result from a stricter prohibition of self-harm. Religion has the power to prevent someone from committing suicide because it is a community, or a 'society' in Durkheim's words. The collective values of religion increases social integration and is just one example of the importance of community in decreasing rates of suicide. Isolation of individuals, for Durkheim, is a fundamental cause of suicide: "The bond attaching man [sic] to life relaxes because that attaching him [sic] to society is itself slack" (Durkheim 1897: 173).

Altruistic Suicide

Durkheim notes another kind of suicide that stems from "insufficient individuation" (Durkheim 1897: 173). This occurs in social situations where an individual identifies so strongly with their beliefs of a group that they are willing to sacrifice themselves for what they perceive to be the greater good. Examples of altruistic suicide include suicidal sacrifice in certain cultures to honour their particular God, soldiers who go to war and die in honour of their country, or the ancient tradition of Hara-kiri in Japan. As such, Durkheim notes that some people have even refused to consider altruistic suicide a form of self-destruction, because it resembles "some categories of action which we are used to honouring with our respect and even admiration"(Durkheim 1897: 199).

Anomic Suicide

The third kind of suicide Durkheim identifies is termed anomic suicide. This type is the result of the activity of human beings "lacking regulation", and "the consequent sufferings" that are felt from this situation (Durkheim 1897: 219). Durkheim notes the similarities between egoistic and anomic suicide, however he notes an important distinction: "In egoistic suicide it is deficient in truly collective activity, thus depriving the latter of object and meaning. In anomic suicide, society's influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a check-rein" (Durkheim 1897: 219).

Fatalistic Suicide

There is a fourth type of suicide for Durkheim, one that has more historical meaning than current relevance. Fatalistic suicide is opposed to anomic, and is the result of "excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline" (Durkheim 1897: 239). These regulations occur during moments of crises, including economic and social upheaval, that destabilise the individual's sense of meaning. It is the impact of external factors onto the individual, where meaning is thrown to the wind for the individual, that characterises fatalistic suicide.

Durkheim's sociological study of suicide was a groundbreaking work for social sciences. His methodology,

multivariate analysis, provided a way to understand numerous interrelated factors and how they relate to a particular social fact. His findings, particularly the higher suicide rates of Protestants, compared to Jewish and Catholic people, was correlated to the higher rates to individualised consciousness and the lower social control. This study, despite criticisms of the generalisations drawn from the results, has had a remarkable impact on sociology and remains a seminal text for those interested in the social sciences.

Max Weber was also influenced by the work of Kant. Unlike Durkheim, Weber "transformed the paradigm of validity and values into a sociology by giving values priority over validity" (Rose, 1981: 19). Culture is thus understood as a value that structures our understanding of the world. According to Weber, values cannot be spoken about in terms of their truth content. The separation between values and validity means that values can only be discussed in terms of faith rather than scientific reason. For Weber, only when a culture's underpinning values are defined can facts about the social world be understood.

The philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) also greatly shaped the development of the social sciences. As argued by Herbert Marcuse (1941: 251-257), Hegel instigated the shift from abstract philosophy to theories of society. According to Hegel, human beings are not restricted to the pre-existing social order and can understand and change the social world. Our natural ability to reason allows human beings to create theories about our world that are universal and true.

Karl Marx (1818-1883), often regarded as the founder of conflict theory, was deeply influenced by the philosophy of Hegel. For example, Hegel emphasises that *labour* and *alienation* are essential characteristics of human experience, and Marx applies this idea more concretely to a material analysis of society, dividing human history along the lines of the forces of production. In other words, Marx understood that labour was divided in capitalist society according to two classes that developed society through a perpetual state of conflict: the working class, or '**proletariat**', and the class of ownership, or '**bourgeoisie**' (we talk more about Marx's conflict theory in Chapter 3).

Overall, the social sciences have a long and complex history, influenced by many different philosophical perspectives. As alluded to earlier, however, any account of the historical beginnings of the social sciences must be understood to be embedded within dominant systems of power, including for example colonisation, patriarchy, and capitalism. Indeed, any history of the social sciences is already situated within a narrative, or 'discourse'. Maintaining a critical lens will allow for a deeper understanding of the genesis of the social sciences, as well as the important ability to question social scientific approaches, understandings, findings, and methods. It is this disposition that we seek to cultivate throughout this book. After all, as Marx famously wrote, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it."

> ### Defining Key Terms
>
> **Descriptive**: A descriptive claim or question seeks to explain how things work, what causes them to work that way, and how things relate to one another.
>
> **Normative**: A normative claim or question seeks to explain how things _ought_ to work, why they _should_ work a certain way, and what _should_ change for things to work differently.
>
> **Labour**: For Marx, labour is the natural capacity of human beings to work and create things. Under capitalism, labour primarily produces profits for the ruling class. *(Please note, we return to the notion of labour in later chapters, and explore other understandings and definitions of this term.)*
>
> **Alienation**: Workers, separated from the products of their labour and replaceable in the production process, become
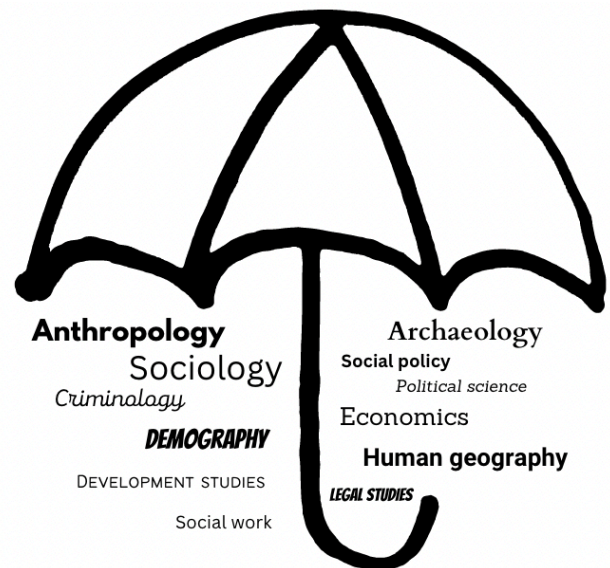
separated or 'alienated' from their creative human essence. *(Please also see Chapter 3 for a further explanation of the concept of alienation under Marxism.)*

What are the social sciences?

The social sciences are a 'broad church', including lots of different disciplinary and sub-disciplinary areas. These include, for example, sociology, anthropology, criminology, archaeology, social policy, human geography, and many more. At their core, they apply the 'scientific method' to the analysis of people, societies, power, and social change.

Before we move on, let's touch briefly on what we mean by the **scientific method**. At its core, the scientific method is essentially a series of steps that scientists take in order to build and test scientific knowledge. These steps include:

The social sciences are made up of lots of different disciplines and sub-disciplines, which focus on different aspects of society

1. **Observation:** *Scientists observe the world around them, in order to better understand it.*
2. **Question:** *Scientists ask 'research questions' about how the world works.*
3. **Hypothesis:** *Scientists come up with ideas or theories about how they think the world works, which they then seek to test through their research.*
4. **Experiment:** *In experimental research, scientists use a specific experimental design (which includes a control and experimental group) to test hypotheses. This is not always possible or desirable in the social sciences, so social scientists tend to rely on a broader array of methods to collect data that can help them test their hypotheses about the social world.*
5. **Analysis:** *Scientists use various different approaches to analyse the data they collect; the approach to analysis depends on the kind of data collected, and what questions are being asked of the data.*
6. **Conclusions:** *Scientists develop conclusions, based on the results of their analyses. They consider how these either reinforce or further develop existing knowledge and understandings, as well as what there is left to find out (the latter of which informs future research endeavours).*

Over time, social scientists have developed their own **ontological** and **epistemological** leanings, which in many ways represent a departure from the typical **positivist** approaches of the natural sciences. While the natural sciences tend to assume there are objective 'truths' waiting to be discovered through, for instance, sensory experience (seeing, looking), social scientists tend to understand truth as being socially constructed. Thus, social scientists tend to adopt **interpretivist** and **constructivist** approaches to understanding the world, seeing knowledge as being co-constructed, rooted in context, and an important source/expression of power.

Flyvbjerg (2001) referred to the 'science wars', by which he meant the ongoing battle between the natural and social sciences. Often in public and political discourse, the natural sciences are seen as being more 'scientific' and a source of 'stronger' or 'more objective' knowledge than the social sciences. However, the reality is that both have equally important *but different* things to offer. As Flyvbjerg (2001: 3) argued:

> ...the social sciences are strongest where the natural sciences are weakest: just as the social sciences have not contributed much to explanatory and predictive theory, neither have the natural sciences contributed to the reflexive analysis and discussion of values and interests...

As Flyvbjerg (2001) sees it, social scientists should not try to replicate the natural sciences but should instead embrace their ability to take a different ontological and epistemological outlook, which enables deep, reflexive, and contextualised analysis about people and societies as a point of departure for *values-based action*. He called this 'phronetic social science' (which we elaborate on later in the Chapter).

Defining key terms

'Ontology': Ontology is the study of reality and being. When we refer to 'ontology', we are not just talking about people's views of the world, but also their lived experience and actual being in the world, as well as their beliefs and claims about the nature of their existence. Some key questions are 'what and who exists in the world?' and 'what are the relationships between them'?

'Epistemology': Epistemology concerns the origin and nature of knowledge, including how knowledge claims are built and made. Some key questions are 'what is knowledge?' and 'how is knowledge acquired'?

Positivism: Positivism is an ontology that assumes there is an objective 'truth' waiting to be discovered. Positivism involves, therefore, the search for a universal/generalisable 'truth'.

Constructivism: Constructivism is an ontology that assumes that there are multiple 'truths' that are subjective and socially constructed. Truths are not, therefore, universal but are instead rooted in social, historical, and geographical context. These 'truths' are also bound up with power. For instance, those who hold power get to say what is 'true' and what isn't.

In addition to the above, Argentine-Canadian philosopher Mario Bunge's (2003: 285ff) glossary of key terms includes a range of ontological concepts used in the social sciences that are useful to think with:

"Definitions of Twelve Ontological Concepts

1. Ontology: The philosophical study of being and becoming.
2. Realism (ontological): The thesis that the world outside the student exists on its own.

3. Phenomenalism (ontological): The philosophical view that there are only phenomena (appearances to someone).
4. Constructivism (ontological): The view that the world is a human (individual or social) construction.
5. Dialectics: The ontological doctrine, due to Hegel and adopted by Marx and his followers, according to which every item is at once the unity and struggle of opposites.
6. Materialism: The family of naturalist ontologies according to which all existents are material.
7. Naturalism: The family of ontologies that assert that all existents are natural-hence none are supernatural.
8. Idealism. The family of ontologies according to which ideas pre-exist and dominate everything else.
9. Subjectivism. The family of philosophies according to which everything is in a subject's mind (subjective idealism).
10. Holism: The family of doctrines according to which all things come in unanalyzable wholes.
11. Individualism: The view that the universe is an aggregate of separate individuals: that wholes and emergence are illusory.
12. Systemism (ontological): The view that everything is either a system or a component of some system."

Source: Bunge, M. (2003). *Emergence and Convergence: Qualitative Novelty and the Unity of Knowledge*. University of Toronto Press. Pp. 285ff

Reflection exercise

Take a few moments to think about what you have read above. Then, write a short (~100 word) reflection explaining:

- primary ways in which the natural and social sciences differ, and
- some things that the social sciences offer that the natural sciences cannot.

Why study the social sciences?

In their 2019 publication, Carré asked, 'what are the social sciences for'? In response, they propose a framework for thinking about the different approaches and contributions of social science research, which encompasses three continuums: 1) return on investment versus intrinsic value; 2) citizen (societal) relevance versus academic relevance; and 3) applied research versus basic research (see the Figure below, adapted from Carré [2019: 23]).

While Carré (2019) argues that social scientists move along these continuums, he also suggests that there is good justification for finding middle grounds between the extremes. For instance, while applied research will tend to focus on and find solutions for specific social issues (e.g. youth crime), 'basic' research tends to adopt a more high-level theoretical approach to shaping how we understand the world, which can lead to longer-term substantive change (such as changing the way we think about and understand youth crime). As Carré (2019: 22) explains: "either research is conducted to directly solve pressing social issues, or it takes a full step back from the social word, in order to reflect about it without directly meddling [and] being involved in its events and discussions." However, both are incredibly useful for moving knowledge forward and making crucial contributions. Similarly, they can have important symbiotic relationships; applied research might be informed and guided by the knowledge created through basic research, and conversely, applied research studies might be meta-analysed (a type of combined analysis) to inform broader theoretical development that is often the purview of basic research.
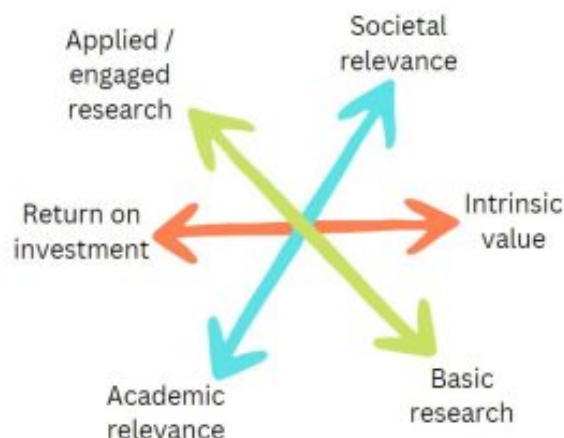
Adaptation of Carré's (2019: 23) framework for understanding the contributions of the social sciences

Reflection exercise

A central question raised by Carré (2019) is, what should social science 'give back' to the society that supports it? Take a piece of paper and write down some responses to this, based on your own views and beliefs.

According to Flyvbjerg (2001), and as also covered by Schram (2012), the concept of 'phronetic social science' can help bring social scientists back to the central value of the social sciences, rather than seeing them try to emulate the natural sciences and their search for universal and generalisable theories and truths. Instead, **phronetic social science** recognises that 'truth' is dependent on context, is in constant flux, and is bound up with power. This is not to say that we live in a 'post-truth' world where anything goes, but merely that we need to interrogate how knowledge and truth are created and how societies and social structures can play a role in this. Famous sociologist, Michel Foucault (1926-1984) referred to this as a 'politics of truth': something we'll continue to discuss in greater detail over coming chapters.

'Phronetic' social science

Phronetic social science draws on the concept of *phronesis,* a term coined by Aristotle (384-322 BC) to refer to practical wisdom that arises from experience. Thus, phronetic social science "is designed not to substitute for, but instead to supplement, practice wisdom and to do so in ways that can improve society" (Schram 2012: 16). In terms of improving society, phronetic social science is then also concerned with *praxis,* or the practical application of knowledge to the betterment of society. Finally, phronetic social science is not attached to particular methods (e.g. quantitative

versus qualitative), instead being "open to relying on a diversity of data collection methods in order to best inform attempts to promote change related to the issues being studied" (Schram 2012: 20).

Schram (2012: 18-19) presents four justifications for phronetic social science as follows:

1. "Given the dynamic nature of human interaction in the social world, social inquiry is best practiced when it does not seek general laws of action that can be used to predict courses of action, but instead offer a critical assessment of values, norms and structures of power and dominance. Social inquiry is better when it is linked to questions of the good life, that is, to questions of what we ought to do.

2. While the social world is dynamic, social research is best seen as dialogical. Social inquiry is not a species of theoretical reason but of practical reason. Practical reason stays within a horizon of involvements in social life. For Flyvbjerg, this entails a context-dependent view of social inquiry that rests on the capacity for judgement. Understanding can never be grasped analytically; it is a holistic character. Understanding also has intrinsic subjective elements requiring researchers to forgo a disinterested position of detachment and enter into dialogue with those they study.

3. As the study of dynamic social life, dialogical social inquiry is best practiced when we give up traditional notions of objectivity and truth and put aside the fact-value distinction. Instead, we should emphasise a contextual notion of truth that is pluralistic and culture-bound, further necessitating involvement with those we study.

4. Dialogical social inquiry into a dynamic and changing social world provides a basis for emphasising that interpretation is itself a practice of power, one that if conducted publicly and in ways that engage the public can also challenge power and inform efforts to promote social change."

This concept of phronetic social science is a helpful means of understanding how the social sciences differ to the natural sciences, and can add value in different ways. However, it doesn't tell us *how to do* social science, or how to *be* social scientists. What tools, for instance, might we use to undertake the sort of dialogical social inquiry that Schram refers to above? And how might we start 'thinking' like social scientists? We turn to these questions in the chapter that follows.

Defining key terms

'Phronesis': Described by Aristotle as 'practical wisdom', and juxtaposed with *techné* ('know how' of practice) and *epistemé* (abstract and universal knowledge).

'Dialogical': Exploring the meaning of things and creating knowledge through dialogue/conversation.

'Quantitative': A term used to describe research methods that typically involve measurement and counting of phenomena, regularly involving numerical data.

'Qualitative': A term used to describe research methods that typically involve understanding and interpretation of lived experiences (how people think, feel, act), regularly involving textual data.

Think about the concept of phronetic social science. Write a short paragraph (~30-40 words) to explain it in your own words. Then read back over the content in this chapter content to check your understanding.

Resources to support further learning

Relevant readings:

- Gorton, W. 'The Philosophy of Social Science.'
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2001. 'The science wars: a way out.' In. Flyvbjerg, B. *Making social science matter,* chapter 1. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Carré, D. 2019. 'Social sciences, what for? On the manifold directions for social research.' In. Valsiner, J. (Ed.) *Social philosophy of science for the social sciences,* pp. 13-29. Springer: Cham.
- Schram, S. 2012. 'Phronetic social science: an idea whose time has come.' In Flyvbjerg, B., Landman, T. and Schram, S. (Eds.) *Real social science: applied phronesis.* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Bunge, M. (2003). *Emergence and Convergence: Qualitative Novelty and the Unity of Knowledge.* University of Toronto Press.

Other resources:

- Video: Soomo, 'An animated introduction to social science' (YouTube, 4:35).
- Video: 'Introduction to the social sciences' (YouTube, 8:34).
- Podcast: Theory and Philosophy Podcast, 'Bent Flyvbjerg – Making Social Science Matter' (YouTube, 44:06). (Note, discussion of *phronesis* starts at 7:51)
- Video: 'Importance of social science with Professor Cary Cooper' (YouTube, 4:13).

2.

Thinking like a social scientist

After reading this Chapter, you should be able to:

- understand and apply the concepts of structure and agency to help you think sociologically about the world around you,
- understand and apply the concept of the sociological imagination to critically analyse different 'real world' examples.

The sociological imagination: agency and structure, macro and micro

C.Wright Mills (1916-1962) coined the term 'sociological imagination' by which he meant the ability to connect the individual with the social, the one with the many and seek to understand broader trends, structures and ideas. Understanding this connection is helpful to think about structure and agency and our place within it. Agency is about our free will and potential to self-actualise our lives, whereas structure is about the material and immaterial conditions within which we live, for example, the systems of governance, religion, social class, social norms and rules and regulations etc. It may be helpful to think of structure and agency on a continuum, a sliding scale between the two extremes of ultimate agency and totalising structure. Neither extreme pole exists in the real world, but our society or life may shift along this kind of continuum from time to time, due to circumstance or other factors. Even though we may sometimes think of structures as limiting our agency and curtailing us, we are also

Using our 'sociological imaginations' means placing private 'troubles' into their broader context, and understanding them as symptomatic of larger forces and structures

the creators and maintainers of the structures around us. This interplay between agency and

structure is nicely captured by the famous quote by anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978): "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

The concept of the sociological imagination is also a tool to help us, as social scientists, think through agency and structure. Mills (2000 [1959]: 3) stated, "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both." Indeed, Mills (2000 [1959]) drew an important distinction between private 'troubles' and public 'issues', explaining:

> *Troubles* occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his or her immediate relations with others; they have to do with one's self and with those limited areas of social life of which one is directly and personally aware. Accordingly, the statement and the resolution of troubles properly lie within the individual as a biographical entity and within the scope of one's immediate milieu – the social setting that is directly open to her personal experience and to some extent her wilful activity. A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by her to be threatened.
>
> *Issues* have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of her inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieu into the institutions of an historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieux overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened. Often there is a debate about what that value really is and about what it is that really threatens it. This debate is often without focus if only because it is the very nature of an issue, unlike even widespread trouble, that it cannot very well be defined in terms of the immediate and everyday environments of ordinary people. An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements, and often it involves what Marxists call 'contradictions' or 'antagonisms.'

At its core, then, the sociological imagination helps us to think through two dualisms: agency/ structure, and macro/micro. That is:

- **agency** – the ability of an individual to make free and independent choices about how they live, what they do, how they are etc, according to their own values and wishes,
- **structure** – the social structures that influence, constrain, and guide the ability of individuals to make free and independent choices about how they live, what they do, how they are etc.,
- **micro** – focusing on the smaller scale, like the individual or small groups of people, and
- **macro** – focusing on a larger scale, like the structure of society and social institutions situated within.

We will keep returning to the concepts of agency/structure, macro/micro throughout the book. First and foremost, however, our task here is to encourage you – as budding social scientists – to use your sociological imaginations (alongside other tools we will cover in later sections) to see the world around you through new eyes. Equipped with the sociological imagination, we social scientists can then reflect upon our own position within the world. This process of *reflexivity*, "involves considering one's own place in the social world, not as an isolated and asocial individual but as a consequence of one's experience as a member of social groups." (Willis, 2004: 22). The sociological imagination is then not just a theoretical lens through which to perceive the world, but also an intensely practical viewpoint that allows us to see the world beyond our immediate surroundings.

The notion of reflexivity links bank to our discussion of phronetic social science in Chapter One. At its core, phronetic social science is described by Flyvbjerg (2001: 3) as focusing on the "reflexive

analysis and discussion of values and interests" in ways that the natural sciences cannot. Thus, the social sciences encourage us to not *deny* subjectivities in research, but to instead *embrace and grapple with them* as meaningful and important aspects of our vocation. In doing so, we can more deeply acknowledge the impacts that the subjective values we live by have on our views about the world, including the different approaches we might take to understanding and responding to different social issues. In thinking, reflexively, through how our own values may shape and influence our views of the world, it is also helpful to consider the role of cultural and moral relativism.

Cultural and moral relativism refer to the understanding that values are dependent on and relative to the society from which they emerge. That is, your own values might be very different to someone who lives in a different country, who lived at a different time, or who lives in the same country and has had a different upbringing and different life experiences. A cultural relativist would argue that this makes neither set of values 'right' or 'wrong'; they are just different. The reality of cultural and moral relativism requires that we, as social scientists, are reflexive about the ways in which we see the world as well as the values that we bring to our research and work ('our cultural baggage so to speak'). In essence, reflexivity involves 'bending back' on oneself to acknowledge and understand how our own values influence how we see the world around us, as well as our place within it.

Reflection exercise

Pause for a moment and think about your own values and beliefs. Where do you think these come from, primarily? Have they changed over time? If so, what has caused them to change? What role/s do they play in shaping your day-to-day behaviours and choices?

Reflection exercise

Use your sociological imagination to think through some social issues that interest you. This may include, for example:

- climate change
- gender equity
- intergenerational poverty
- public health
- homelessness
- discrimination
- sustainable development
- food justice
- crime and justice, or many more!

Choose one or two of these (or other) social issues that you're most passionate about and then follow the below steps:

1. Take a piece of paper and draw two columns: label one 'Agency' and the second one 'Structure'.
2. Make a list under each column heading of the kinds of things we might like to consider when using our

> sociological imaginations to think through your chosen social issue/s.
> 3. Reflect: did this approach lead you to think of anything you might not otherwise have considered in relation to your chosen social issue?

Reflection exercise

To extend your learning with regard to agency and structure, please read through the policy case study written by Staines (2021), available via the Australian New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), entitled '[From the ground up: developing the Cape York Girl Academy School to re-engage young women and mums from remote Australia.' (PDF, 380KB)](#).'

After reading the case study, consider the below prompts for further thinking and discussion. *Students might also like to share and discuss their responses with their peers, if undertaking this activity in a classroom setting.*

1. **First,** think about the challenge of lower school attendance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (from herein, 'Indigenous') peoples in Australia and consider the below discussion prompts.

   ◦ How might this challenge be explained through the lens of agency?
   ◦ How might this challenge be explained through the lens of structure?
   ◦ How might these different lenses lead to different policy responses?

1. **Second,** think about the policy approach taken in the case study — i.e. the establishment of an Indigenous school — and consider the below discussion prompts.

   ◦ How does this policy response address structural issues regarding lower school attendance for Indigenous students?
   ◦ What structural matters are left unaddressed by this policy response?
   ◦ How might these other matters also be addressed?

1. **Third,** turn your thinking towards the tensions between ground-up and top-down policymaking, including those identified in the case study. Then consider the below discussion prompts.

   ◦ Representing only 3% of the total Australian population means that Indigenous peoples in Australia tend to be poorly represented in state and federal politics, and often excluded from policymaking (including through a long history of generally poor consultation — e.g. see the optional reading below).
   ◦ Consider the implications of this for policymaking in Australia, including whether/how Indigenous Australians might be better empowered to lead and have meaningful input into policies that directly affect their lives.

Further optional reading to support this activity: Davis, M. 2016. Listening but not hearing: when process trumps substance. *Griffith Review, 51:* 73-87.

Structure and agency, through a Bourdieusian lens

The concepts of **agency** and **structure,** introduced above, are tools used by social scientists to understand how individuals act within society. As a recap, agency is the ability of individuals to interact spontaneously within society and make choices according to their own free will. Structure is the influencing factors of the social conditions that shape and constrain agency. Our choices as
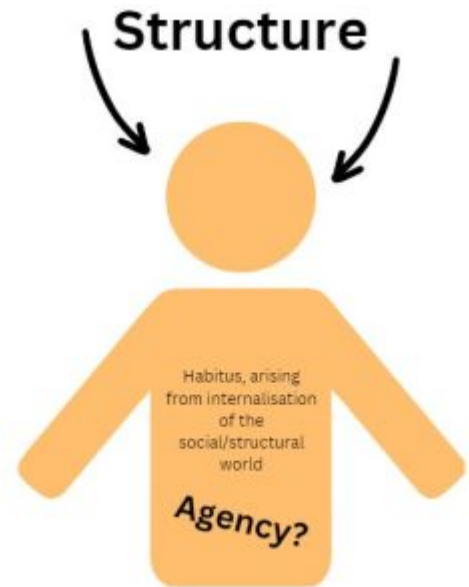
individuals within a society are always influenced by numerous structures. Some are imposed upon us externally, such as social class and systems of government. Others are internalised as values, for example as social and religious norms. Often, there are a mix of both external and internal elements to the structures that shape our choices. Moreover, whilst agency is inevitably shaped by structure, it is important to note that the reverse is also true. Structure is far from a natural occurrence. We, as individuals, have the ability to create and maintain the structures around us. Social scientists aim to clarify this intricate relationship between agency and structure.

One perspective on structure and agency is developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002). For Bourdieu, "all activity and knowledge... are always informed by a relationship between the agent's history and how this history has been incorporated" (Schirato and Roberts, 2018: p. 133). This position influences Bourdieu's theory of 'habitus':

> "The habitus, as the system of dispositions... is an objective basis for regular modes of behaviours, and thus for the regularity of modes or practice, and if practice can be predicted... this is because the effect of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances" (Bourdieu 1990: 77) [Bourdieu, 1990: In other words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology]

To illustrate the role of the habitus in our daily lives, consider how different people, influenced by different social factors, make their tea. A person of English heritage, according to history and social customs, might prefer to have their black tea with a dash of milk. In a similar fashion, a person of Japanese heritage may prefer to have green tea, or alternatively black tea with lemon and no milk. If a person of English heritage was to prefer black tea with lemon, this could be seen to go against customs and appear alien to "normal" English culture. Examples abound of preference within tea culture, however all highlight the effect of habitus upon our choices. The habitus can be understood to contain all the cultural preferences, or dispositions, that people bring with them when making choices. Almost always unconscious, these influencing factors allow individuals to believe they are acting according to their own agency, when in reality our decisions are always influenced by our habitus. Such a simple example is nevertheless helpful to demonstrate how the habitus can shape our decisions, no matter how small, without our awareness of it.

Bourdieu tends to view agency as being very heavily influenced by structure. His concept of 'habitus' explains how individual choices and actions arise from the internalisation of the social/structural world.

Although the habitus is a relatively stable set of beliefs and values created by structure, there are certain "circumstances and contexts [that] are not necessarily receptive to or in tune with it" (Schirato and Roberts, 2018: 144). For Bourdieu, the problem for social scientists is to then understand how individuals can act spontaneously in ways that are not always entirely shaped by structure itself. In other words, how does agency continue to exist *despite* the powerful influence of structure?
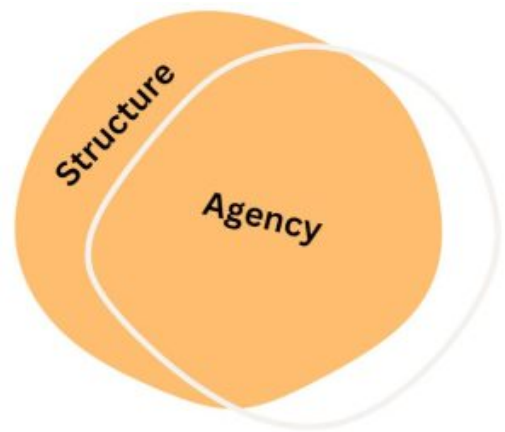
Giddens and Structuration

English sociologist Anthony Giddens (1938-present) saw the relation between agency and structure not as two opposing binaries but as a duality. Giddens' structuration theory develops the argument that,

> "people produce their social systems employing rules and resources (structures) during interaction (agency), knowingly or unknowingly reproducing these structures via routines and rituals that are often taken-for-granted or unquestioned" (Hardcastle, Usher, and Holmes 2005: 223).

Giddens proposes that agency and structure be viewed as two sides of the same coin, with each requiring the other for social practice to occur. Social institutions, as structure, are preserved by the action of individuals through some form collective agreement. This consensus takes the form of action, where for example the legitimacy

According to Giddens, agency and structure are mutually dependent and reinforcing. Structure influences agency, but the reverse is also true.

of the political system is maintained by individuals collectively agreeing to attend the polling booth to vote. Without this complicit action, structure would be forced to operate differently. To continue the example above, such a government may form a military dictatorship to ensure people vote, which consequently undermines the legitimacy of structure. Giddens argues that this action of individuals in *maintaining* structure also means that individuals have the ability to *change* structure. It is through the active agency of individuals that the power of structure can be reorganised.

Individuals, groups, culture, society

The notion of the **individual** has developed through the history of philosophy. The individual is defined as a single human being, influenced by social structure, whilst retaining some degree of agency. In (neo)liberal capitalist societies, the individual is often understood to be a rational and self-interested being who maximises economic opportunity ('homo economicus'). However this definition is problematic and fails to appreciate the principles of reciprocity that underlie many communitarian societies (e.g., see the example of hydrosocial territories in the Kayambi community of La Chimba, Equador, discussed by [Manosalvas, Hoogesteger, and Boelens, 2021](#)), as well as many examples of generosity and selflessness *within* capitalism. One example can be seen in the act of gift giving. A theory of the gift was developed by French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), where he discussed how gift giving brings with it a certain sense of obligation that escapes the typical "individualistic" view of modern societies. Rather than a collection of isolated individuals acting out of self interest, Mauss argued that the act of gift giving develops a sense of reciprocity between individuals and groups. This reciprocity ultimately strengthens relationships between different people — a process unable to be accounted for by simply viewing individuals as self-serving and utilitarian.

Often in (neo)liberal capitalist societies, humans are considered to be rational thinkers motivated to maximise individual profit over all else. This typology is often referred to as 'homo economicus', and has been the subject of widspread critique.

Social scientists are also interested in understanding how individuals interact within social groups. Rather than simply a collection of relatively random individuals, such as in a grocery store checkout, a social group is united by some set of common interests, values or other form of membership. Belonging to a group requires adherence to certain expectations of conduct, some explicit and others implicit. A group may be small, such as a particular street gang, with certain norms and behaviours that are required to be accepted as a member. A group may also be large, such that **'society'** broadly may be said to constitute a social group of sorts, engaged in consistent social interaction and often governed by the same legal authority. Society both shapes and is shaped by certain forces, including cultural values, institutions, and hierarchies. These forces organise individuals and smaller groups in such a way that they adhere to the expectations of a specific society. Nested within society are groups, subcultures, and individuals, who can be broadly categorised as either conforming to social expectations, or as engaging in behaviour that deviates from these norms. This distinction is a practical one, typically enforced by power structures such as government, police, and the legal system.

In the social sciences, **culture** refers to the (implicit and explicit) shared beliefs, values, customs, rules, behaviours, and artefacts that characterise a group or society. It encompasses all aspects of social behaviour and norms and provides a framework for understanding the behaviour of individuals within that society. Culture can be defined as the "non-biological aspects of society, all those things which are learnt or symbolic, including convention, custom and language" (Willis, 2004: 73). It is culture that distinguishes the social organisation of humans from that of other animals.

Othering: Processes of making self and other

As you will have seen in this Chapter, an integral part of social science research is understanding relationships, especially between the self and 'Other'. We are individuals but also part of society; relationships are how we fit *into* a given society. In the social sciences we use a range of methods to study the self (e.g., especially in psychology) and others (e.g., especially in anthropology). In fact, understanding more about ourselves by studying others also has a long tradition: the search for common traits or cultural and social differences has been at the forefront of sociology and anthropology, for example. In these (and other) disciplines, the Other and their characteristics of otherness are often studied not only to better understand relationships between 'us' and 'Other', but also to pose problems. This is because the process of labelling someone as 'Other' inherently places them at the margins, setting them apart from mainstream society on the basis of particular traits, and decentring their own identity. Moreover, othering often takes place on the basis of particular traits, such as a person's religious, social, cultural, sexual, or ethnic identities, and thus can have significant negative effects — giving way to ostracisation and discrimination. This process feeds into an 'us' versus 'them' mentality that creates 'in' and 'out' groups as a result.

> ### Reflection exercise
>
> Think of a group of people that are othered in your society, hometown or workplace. What happens? How are they marginalised and on what basis? How can these processes be addressed and ameliorated? Think about using some of the concepts and theories you have learnt about in this chapter to analyse the processes of othering and how the current situation could be changed.

Sex, gender, and sexuality

Example aspects of social identity that can give way to 'othering' are sex, gender, and sexuality: concepts that play a significant role in shaping our identities and experiences. While **sex** refers to a biological classification based on anatomy, hormones, and chromosomes, **gender** refers to the social and cultural norms, expectations, and behaviors that are associated with being labeled a particular sex. Gender is not solely based on biological sex and can vary across cultures and time periods.

Male and female are the most common binary sexes, but there are also individuals who have intersex conditions and may have bodies that do not fit within typical binary definitions of male or female. The term 'nonbinary' is regularly used as a sort of 'catch all' to include diverse individuals who do not identify as either male or female.

> ### Understanding non-binary: excerpts from a correspondence
>
> To learn more about what it means to identify as non-binary, you might like to watch the following TedX Talk, ['Understanding non-binary: excerpts from a correspondence' (YouTube, 15:43)](#).

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=24#oembed-1

Typically, 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are gendered traits that are used to describe certain qualities and behaviours that are expected to be associated with being male or female. Masculinity is often associated with toughness, assertiveness, and competitiveness, while femininity is often associated with softness, emotional expressiveness, and nurturing. In reality, however, traits that are considered either 'masculine' or 'feminine' exist on a spectrum; individuals can exhibit both masculine and feminine traits, regardless of their biological sex or gender identity. Indeed, critical scholars have also drawn attention to the ways in which these gendered traits are bound up in expressions of power and domination. That is, the categories themselves are oppressive social constructs rather than objective reflections of reality. Feminist scholar and famous existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir, provides an example of how the notion of femininity can be used to oppress and deny rights and freedoms to those who identify as women.

The myth of femininity

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was chiefly influential in second-wave feminism. In her book 'The Second Sex' (1949), she argued that femininity was a myth that served to oppress women and deny their rights to free and equal participation in society.

You might recall the below video from earlier in the semester. To learn more, re-watch it and think about the kinds of implications this thinking has had on the social institution of the family, and on conceptions of gender today.

Feminine beauty – a social construct? (YouTube, 2:01)

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=24#oembed-2

In addition to sex and gender, **sexuality** refers to an individual's sexual orientation and desires. For instance, sexual orientation can include — amongst other orientations — heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and pansexuality. Often used, for instance, the LGBTQI+ acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and intersex, with the plus sign representing a variety of other identities, including asexual, aromantic, and more. Sexuality is, indeed, a complex and multi-faceted aspect of our identities that can be shaped by a variety of influences, including biological, social, cultural, and psychological factors.

Our sex, gender, and sexuality are important aspects of our social identities that can have significant influences on our lives. Indeed, they can be sources of opportunity as well as oppression, depending on the social and cultural milieu within which a person exists. Moreover, an

intersectional perspective on these concepts recognises that individuals can face multiple forms of oppression and privilege based on their sex, gender, masculinity, femininity, sexuality, but also other aspects of their identity. For example, a transgender woman of colour may face discrimination and prejudice based on both her gender identity and her race. Additionally, individuals may also experience privilege based on one aspect of their identity while facing oppression based on another aspect. For instance, a white, gay man may face discrimination based on his sexual orientation, but also benefit from privilege based on his race. Intersectionality also highlights the importance of recognizing the unique experiences and perspectives of individuals who belong to multiple marginalized communities. For example, a black, lesbian woman may face discrimination and prejudice based on her race, sexuality, and gender identity, and may also experience unique forms of discrimination and violence that are specific to her intersecting identities.

Read more on sex, gender, and sexuality

To read more about sex, gender, and sexuality, particularly from a sociological perspective, the following freely available resource may be useful:

Little, W. and McGivern, R. 2022. '[Gender, sex, and sexuality](#).' In. *Introduction to Sociology – 1st Canadian Edition.*

Globalisation, borders, capitalism

The social sciences are also interested in explaining how different cultures and societies interact with each other on a **global** as well as **local** scale. From the ancient empires that rose and fell, to colonisation during the expansion of the British and Spanish empires, to the new forms imperialism led by American expansionism, human history has long been a global history. This history, far from a unified tale of the equality of human beings sharing a single world, is divided: along lines of class, race, religion, nationality, and gender. It is the job of social scientists to address these conflicts and inconsistencies, so as to imagine a better world united by a shared humanity.

Borders mark the formal boundaries between different nation-states. Borders between groups of people are nothing new, but the formalised demarcation between political units or nation-states as marked in maps and determined to be legally binding is a relatively new development. Early borders were physical, such as rivers, mountains and the sea. People were often divided into lowland and highland peoples, or land and sea peoples, who traded and were in contact, even though they were physically distanced. James Scott has argued that in Southeast Asia peoples rejected formalised states and such political manifestations by distancing themselves from lowland centres of commerce and state building by moving into the highlands and maintaining more egalitarian and anarchic societies. With the rise of the nation-state in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries, borders became more politically significant. Nation-states sought to define their territories and assert their sovereignty over their borders. To do this, they employed techniques such as boundary markers, boundary surveys, and maps. These techniques were used to physically demarcate the border and provide a clear visual representation of the territory controlled by a given state. Thus, bordering techniques include the physical building of border fences, walls and other barriers as well as the technological in the form of passports and other identification documents that tie us via citizenship to a particular nation-state.

Borders and bordering techniques have a long history tied to war, imperialism, and economic exploitation. Legal boundaries are often disputed by different ethnic, religious or otherwise distinctive groups. Conflicts over borders as the result of colonisation are often the result of

arbitrary border lines drawn on a map, then sanctified as law by colonising entities. Due to the haphazard divisions of geographic areas without consideration for the people who lived there, such as across Africa in the late 1800s, and across Australia from the late 1700s, the peoples that occupy a particular area often became forcibly unified under a nation-state, despite significant cultural differences. In other cases ethnic groups were split up by such arbitrary borders across multiple nation-states (see the reflection exercise, below).

Reflection exercises on borders

Read the following blog post from the library of Congress and analyse the maps on the website that chart the changing US-Mexico border:

- Osborne, C. 2015. 'The changing Mexico-US border'. *Library of Congress Blog*, December 18.

Then read the following article in The Conversation:

- Leza, C. 2019. 'For Native Americans, US-Mexico Border is an "imaginary line".' *The Conversation*, March 19.

After reading these articles:

1. Think about the effects and affect of shifting borders and what borders mean to people who are living on either side of them. Write a short list of peoples who have been affected by the US-Mexico border and how they have been affected. What commonalities or differences exist between different groups and on what basis?
2. Think about where you live, what issues arise at the border and how are they dealt with? Who deals with these issues? Reflect on the power dynamics at play – who has power and who is subject to bordering and/or othering (see above) practices.

The nation-state is also closely linked to the emergence of capitalism and both developed in step. The nation-state provided the market security, infrastructure and more cohesive regulations across a larger geographic area. To sustain economic growth, nation-states entered into competition with other states, that also have the potential for conflict. However the general fruitful collaboration between the political (nation-state) and economic (capitalism) system has generated the world we inhabit today. This has made **capitalism** the dominant ideology across the globe. Fundamentally an economic system, capitalism has nevertheless evolved over its relatively short history into a political and social system. This system shapes the lives of individuals, as well as defined the borders of nations and interactions between them. Ellen Meiksins Wood (1999: p.2) defines capitalism as "a system in which goods and services, down to the most basic necessities of life, are produced for profitable exchange, where even human labour-power is a commodity for sale in the market, and where all economic actors are dependent on the market". Whilst workers require the market for sale of their labour, capitalists also require it for the purchase of labour and the sale of goods and services.

As an ideology, capitalism is treated as a natural, necessary system resulting from Enlightenment notions of human nature as rational, self-interested, and competitive. However, using a social science lens allows us to see capitalism as a relatively new idea that has developed out of conflict, exploitation, and imperialism. Capitalism today is inseparable from globalisation, defined by international trade systems, markets, and the supremacy of multi-national corporations.

Globalisation refers to the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence of the world's economies, societies, and cultures due to advancements in communication, transportation, and technology. Whilst it was a celebrated concept and reality in the 1990s and early 2000s, when euphoria of this interconnectedness and global connection was meant to diminish conflict in a new liberal world order of peace and prosperity, such analysis was short lived. Critics soon showed that globalisation rests on exploitation and unequal global power relations. For example, Eric Wolf's work, "Europe and the People Without History" shows how globalisation has been driven by the interests of dominant states and capital, leading to cultural and economic imperialism. He argues that globalisation is not a neutral process, but one that reinforces the power dynamics between the Global North and South. His work also demonstrates that globalisation is not a new phenomenon but the latest word to describe a long process of economic exchange and integration across the world. Indeed, Sidney Mintz, in his work "Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History", critiques the way colonial sugar producing islands in the Caribbean were thrust into unequal trading relations with the colonial homeland consuming the sugar. He shows how these unequal power dynamics lead to the exploitation of resources and people in the Global South. Mintz also documents the ways in which the global trade of sugar has shaped cultural and economic systems, creating a dependence on sweet foods in the Global North. Both studies offer important perspectives on the cultural and economic impacts of globalisation, emphasising the need to critically examine the process and its effects on people and societies.

In the 1970s and 1980s Immanuel Wallerstein developed world systems theory as a theoretical framework to explain the dynamics of the global capitalist economy and its effects. The theory was developed as an alternative to traditional views of economic development that emphasised the role of individual nation-states. According to world systems theory, the global economy can be divided into three main categories: core, semi-periphery, and periphery. Core countries are highly industrialised and economically dominant, possessing a disproportionate amount of wealth and power in the world system. Peripheral countries, on the other hand, are less industrialised and economically dependent, often serving as suppliers of raw materials for the core. Semi-peripheral countries occupy a middle ground between the two, sometimes acting as intermediaries between the core and periphery. The relationships between these three groups are characterised by unequal power dynamics and exploitation. Core countries are seen as benefiting from the exploitation of peripheral countries, which are subjected to low wages, poor working conditions, and limited access to (often their own) resources. Over time, this leads to unequal development, poverty, and underdevelopment in peripheral countries, perpetuating their position as suppliers of cheap labor and raw materials.

Resources to support further learning

Readings:

- Mills, C.W. 2000 [1959]. 'The promise'. In. Mills, C. *The sociological imagination* (2nd edition), chapter 1. Oxford University Press: Oxford.
- Staines, Z. 2021. *From the ground up: developing the Cape York Girl Academy school to re-engage young women and mums from remote Australia*. Australia and New Zealand School of Government, John. L. Alford Case Study Library: Canberra.
- National University. n.d. 'What is the sociological imagination?' Blog post.

Other resources:

- Dhingra, P. 2019. 'Why should you use your (sociological) imagination' (YouTube, 15:53).
- Phoenix, A. and Holloway, W. (2011). The Agency-Structure Dualism – Critical Social Psychology (YouTube, 2:34). [A transcript of the video (PDF, 24KB)]

Social science theories, methods, and values

Learning Objectives for this Chapter

After reading this Chapter, you should be able to:

- understand, apply, and evaluate core social science values, concepts, and theories, which can help inform and guide our understanding of how the world works, how power is defined and exercised, and how we can critically understand and engage with these concepts when examining the world around us.

Social science theory: theories to explain the world around us

As we have discussed in previous chapters, social science research is concerned with discovering things about the social world: for instance, how people act in different situations, why people act the way they do, how their actions relate to broader social structures, and how societies function at both the micro and macro levels. However, without theory, the 'social facts' that we discover cannot be woven together into broader understandings about the world around us.

Theory is the 'glue' that holds social facts together. Theory helps us to conceptualise and explain *why* things are the way they are, rather than only focusing on *how* things are. In this sense, different theoretical perspectives, such as those discussed in this Chapter, act as different lenses through which we can see and interpret the world around us.

Theory *testing* and *generation* is also an important part of social scientific research. As shown in the image below, different theories are rooted in different philosophical foundations. That is, various theories arise in accordance with different ways of seeing and living in the world, as well as different understandings about how knowledge is understood and constructed. As we learned earlier in the book, these concern both ontological and epistemological considerations, but also axiological considerations; that is, questions about the nature of *value,* and what things in the world hold value (including in relation to one another). While theory is rooted in these philosophical foundations, however, it also gives way to different ways of *doing* research, both in terms of the methodology and methods employed. Overall, using different theoretical perspectives to consider social questions is a bit like putting on different pairs of glasses to see the world afresh.
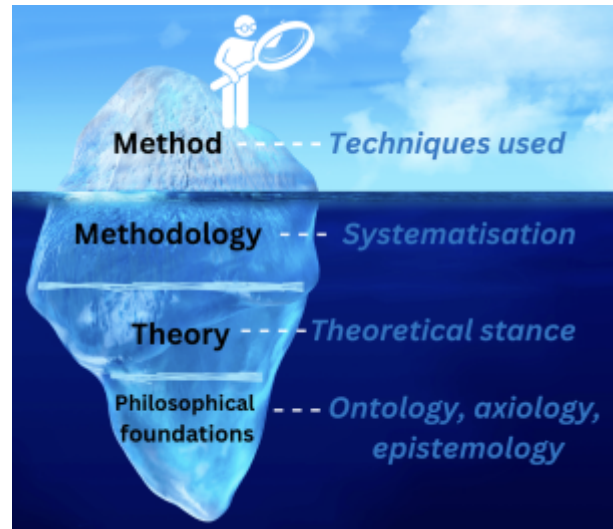

The theories we choose arise from different philosophical foundations, and suggest different choices of methodology and methods for social scientific research

Below we consider some foundational social science theories. While these are certainly not the *only* theoretical perspectives that exist, they are often considered to be amongst the most influential. They also provide helpful building blocks for understanding other theoretical perspectives, as well as how theory can be applied to guide and build social scientific knowledge.

Structural functionalism

Structural functionalism is a theory about social institutions, 'social norms' (i.e., the often unspoken rules that govern social behaviours), and social stability. We talk more about social institutions in the next Chapter of this book, but essentially they are the 'big building blocks' of society that act as both repositories and creators/instigators of social norms. These include things like school/education, the state (often called a meta-institution), the family, the economy, and more. In this regard, structural functionalism is considered a macro theory; that is, it considers macro (large) structures in society, and concerns how they work in an interdependent way to produce what structural functionalists believe to be 'harmonious' and stable societies. Structural functionalists are particularly concerned with social institutions' *manifest* and *latent* functions, as well as their *functions* and *dysfunctions* (Merton [1910-2003]).

Manifest functions of social institutions include
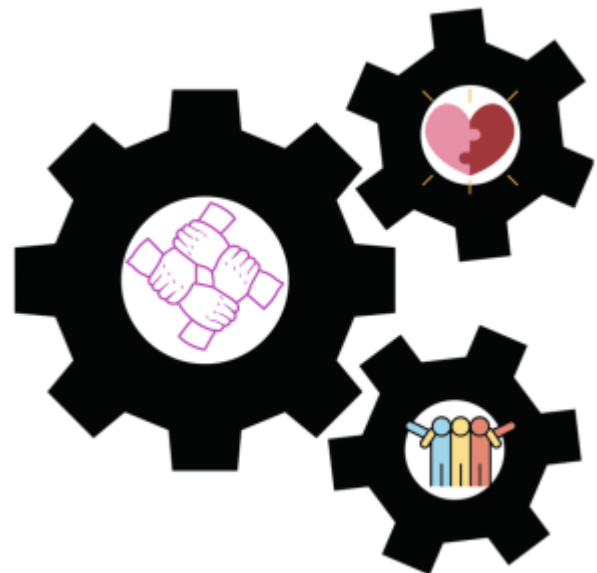
Structural functionalism holds that social institutions and social norms work in harmony with each other to maintain stability and keep society functioning harmoniously.

things that are overt and obvious. By contrast, latent functions of social institutions are those that are more hidden or secondary. For instance, a manifest function of the social institution of school is to teach students new knowledge and skills, which can assist them to move into chosen careers. Alternatively, we might also argue that school has other latent functions, such as socialisation and conformity to social norms, and building relationships with peers.

In addition to manifest and latent functions, structural functionalists are also concerned with the *functions* and *dysfunctions* of social institutions. They believe, for instance, that dysfunctions play just as much of an important role as functions, because they enable social institutions to identify and punish them, thereby making an example of dysfunctional elements (e.g., punishing those committing crime). This serves to reinforce social norms around how society should function.

Reflection exercise

Take a piece of paper and, in your own words, write down a brief definition of structural functionalism. Then re-read the above sub-section. How does your understanding fit with the information above?

Structural functionalism: want to learn more?

If you'd like to reinforce your understanding of structural functionalism, the below video provides a good summary that might be helpful.

Functionalism (YouTube, 5:40):

> 📽 One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=27#oembed-1

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of our experiences and how our consciousness makes sense of the phenomena (be they objects, people or ideas) around us. As a methodology or approach in the social sciences it has garnered renewed interest in the last few decades to better understand the world around us by studying how we experience the world in a subjective and often individual manner. It is, thus, considered a 'micro' theory.

This philosophical approach was developed by [Edmund Husserl](#) (1859–1938), and his students and critics in France and Germany (key figures were philosophers [Martin Heidegger](#) (1889-1976), [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) (1905-1980) and [Maurice Merleau-Ponty](#) (1908-1961)) and later made it to the US via influential sociologists, such as [Alfred Schütz](#) (1899–1959).

Phenomenologists reject objectivity and instead focus on the subjective and intersubjective, the relations between people, and between people and objects. So, rather than trying to come to some objective truth, they are more interested in relationships and connections between the individual and the world around them. Indeed, there is a strong centering of and focus on the individual and their experiences of the world that phenomenologists believe can tell us about society at large. The individual is also key, as there is a focus on the sensory and the body both as instruments of enquiring as well as enquiry. Thus, we are always already part of the world around us and have to make sense of being here, but also want to go beyond ourselves by understanding others and how they relate to the world. The body features as a key site for such enquiries as it is the physical connection we have with people and objects around us. Further, there is a focus on everyday, mundane experiences as they have much to tell us about how society operates. This background environment in which we as people operate is called a **lifeworld,** the shared horizon of experience we share and inhabit. It is marked by linguistic, cultural, and social codes and norms.

Phenomenology concerns how we understand, see, think, and experience the world around us.

One key method inherent to Husserl's early approaches is 'bracketing' , the process of standing back or aside from phenomena to understand it better. Such processes of 'reflexivity' and understanding our taken for granted attitudes and beliefs about certain phenomena are crucial to enable the social sciences to better understand the world around us. Debates in philosophy continue around whether such a bracketing is ever fully possible, especially considering that we as humans remain trapped in our minds and bodies. Nonetheless, phenomenology has had a profound impact in most social sciences to redirect the focus towards the intersubjective nature of life and the lifeworld, within which we experience the world around us.

Reflection exercise

Take a piece of paper and, in your own words, write down a brief definition of phenomenology. Then re-read the above sub-section. How does your understanding fit with the information above?

Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is related to phenomenology as it is also a theory focused on the self. In this regard, it's also a micro theory – it has particular focus on individuals and how they interact with one another. Symbolic interactionists say that symbolism is fundamental to how we see ourselves and how we see and interact with others. George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) is often regarded as the founder of this theory and his focus was on the relationship between the self and others in society. He considered our individual minds to function through interactions with others and through the shared meanings and symbols we create for the people and objects around us. Mead's best known book *Mind, Self, Society,* was posthumously put

Symbolic interactionism holds that symbols have shared meanings and influence our interactions with one another

together by his students and demonstrates how our individual minds allow us to use language and symbols to make sense of the world around us and how we construct a self based on how others perceive us.

[Charles Cooley's](#) (1864-1929) concept of the "**looking glass self**" points out, for instance, that other peoples' perceptions of us can also influence and change our perceptions of ourselves. Other sociologists, such as Erving Goffman (1922-1982), have built on this understanding, suggesting that 'all of life is a stage' and that each of us play different parts, like actors in a play. Goffman argued that we adapt our personality, behaviours, actions, and beliefs to suit the different contexts we find ourselves in. This understanding is often referred to as a 'dramaturgical model' of social interaction; it understands our social interactions to be performative – they are the outcomes of our 'play acting' different roles.

Charles Cooley came up with the concept of the 'looking glass self', which suggests that how others see us affects the way we see ourselves.

In explaining this theory, Goffman also referred to what he called 'impression management'. As part of this, for instance, Goffman drew a crucial distinction between what he referred to as our '**front stage selves**' and our '**backstage selves**'. For Goffman, our 'front stage selves' are those that we are willing to share with the 'audience' (e.g., the person or group with whom we are interacting). Alternatively, our 'backstage selves' are those that we keep for ourselves; this is the way we act when we are alone and have no audience.

Goffman also pointed to the important role that **stigma** can play in how we see ourselves and thus, how we act and behave in relation to others. Stigma occurs when "the reaction of others spoils normal identity". Goffman argued that those who feel stigmatised by others (e.g., through public discourses and 'frames' of social issues that vilify certain groups of people) also experience changes in the way they see themselves – that is, their own sense of self-identity is 'spoiled'. This can lead to other negative effects, such as social withdrawal and poorer health and wellbeing.

Reflection exercise

Take a piece of paper and, in your own words, write down a brief definition of symbolic interactionism. Then re-read the above sub-section. How does your understanding fit with the information above?

Reflection exercise

This exercise is to be conducted in small groups. First, get into a small group with other students. Then, do the following:

1. Think about your daily life, activities, and interactions with others.
2. Take a few moments to identify at least three examples of social symbols that you and other group members frequently use to interpret the world around you.
3. Talk about how each of the group members interprets/responds to these symbols. Are there similarities? Are there differences?

Symbolic interactionism: want to learn more?

If you'd like to reinforce your understanding of symbolic interactionism, the below videos provide good summaries that might be helpful.

Symbolic Interactionism (YouTube, 3:33) provides an easy-to-understand summary of symbolic interactionism:
What does it mean to be me? Erving Goffman and the Performed Self (YouTube, 1:58) provides a helpful summary of Erving Goffman's conception of the 'performed self' – including his notions of a 'front stage' and 'backstage' self:

Conflict theories

Conflict theories focus particularly on conflict within and across societies and, thus, are particularly interested in power: where it does and doesn't exist, who does and doesn't hold it, and what they do or don't do with it, for example. These theories hold that societies will always be characterised by states of conflict and competition over goods, resources, and more. These conflicts can arise along various lines, though

this group of theories emanate from the work of Karl Marx (1818-1883), who saw the capitalist economy as a primary site of conflict.

In Marx's view, social ills emanated particularly from what he described as an upper- and lower-class structure, which had been perpetuated across multiple societies (e.g., in ancient societies in terms of slave owners/slaves, or in pre-Enlightenment times between the feudal peasantry/aristocracy). He saw capitalism as replicating this upper/lower class structure through the creation of a **bourgeoisie** (upper class, who own the means of production) and *proletariat* (lower class, who supply labour to the capitalist market). Marx also talked about a *lumpenproletariat,* an underclass without class consciousness and/or organised political power. Classical Marxism takes a macro lens: it is particularly concerned with how power is

Conflict theories view societies as being in perpetual conflict. For Marx, a primary site of conflict was capitalism.

invested in the social institution of the capitalist economy. In this sense, classical Marxism represents a structural theory of power.

Marx argued that the only way for society to be fairer and more equal was if the proletariat was to rise up and revolt against the bourgeoisie; to "smash the chains of capitalism"! Thus, he strongly advocated for revolution as a means of creating a fairer, utopic society. He stated, "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to change it" (Marx 1968: 662). Nevertheless, a series of revolutions in the early 20th century that drew on Marxist thinking resulted in power vacuums that made way for violent, totalitarian regimes, as political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) argued in *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*. On this basis, subsequent

conflict theorists (and critical theorists) have tended towards advocating for more incremental reforms, as opposed to revolution.

Reflection exercise

Take a few moments to watch the below two videos, which explain conflict theory in greater detail.
Key concepts: Conflict theory – definition and critiques (YouTube, 2:49):
Political theory – Karl Marx (YouTube, 9:27):

After watching these videos, take a piece of paper and, in your own words, write down a definition of conflict theories. After doing so, re-read the above sub-section. How does your understanding fit with the information in the above sub-section, and in the videos? Was anything missing? Is anything still unclear?

Critical theories

Marx saw the capitalist economy as a primary site of oppression, between the working class and the property owning class. Marx advocated for revolution, where the proletariat were urged to rise up and break the chains of capitalism by overthrowing the bourgeoisie. Marx saw this as being necessary for ensuring the freedom of the working classes. Critical theory develops from the work of Karl Marx, supplementing his theory of capitalism with other sociological and philosophical concepts.

Gramsci and cultural hegemony

In addition to Marx, critical theory utilised the work of Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci, specifically his concept of 'Cultural Hegemony'. When we refer to 'hegemonic' social norms, we're referring to social norms that are regarded as 'common sense' and thus, which overshadow and suppress alternative norms. Hegemonic norms typically reflect the values of the ruling classes (in Marxist terms, the bourgeoisie). To learn more, you might like to watch the video below:

Hegemony: WTF? An introduction to Gramsci and cultural hegemony (YouTube, 6:25)

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=27#oembed-3

Developing from this, critical theory also considers how power and oppression can operate in more subtle ways across the whole of society. Critical theory does not seek to actively bring about revolution, as the possibility for a revolution in the years post-World War Two was unlikely. Whilst critical theorists are by no means opposed to revolution, their focus lies more in identifying how capitalist society and its institutions limits advancement of human civilisation. In this respect, conflict theorists see more opportunities for praxis than classical Marxists.

Critical theory observes how the Enlightenment ideals of freedom, reason, and liberalism have developed throughout the first half of the 1900s. Ultimately, critical theorists see that reason has not

necessarily *progressed* in a positive way throughout history. In fact, reason has developed to become increasingly technical, interested in classifying, regulating, and standardising all aspects of human society and culture. German philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) thought that Nazi Germany and the holocaust is a devastating example of the potential evils of rationality if developed without a critical perspective.

Another, less extreme, example of this tendency toward standardisation is in the production of art and culture. Big budget films, typically in the superhero or science fiction genre, all appear to be virtually identical: extravagant special effects, epic soundtracks, and relatively simple plots. However, this is not to say that such films are of a poor quality. Rather the similarity and popularity of these films indicates a homogenisation of culture. If culture is merely the reproduction of the same, how can society progress beyond its current point?

This critique of the development of reason throughout the 20th century does not mean that we must abandon reason entirely. To do so would be to discount the vast wealth of knowledge that humanity has come to grasp, as well as prevent further knowledge production. Instead, critical theorists argue that reason should be critiqued to uncover what has been left out of its development thus far, as well as open up the possibility for a more free, progressive form of society.

At its core, then, critical theory can be thought about as being an additional theoretical lens through which we can look at and understand the social world around us. In tune with Flyvbjerg's (2001) conception of *phronetic* social science, critical theorists are also concerned with disrupting the systems they observe as a means of achieving social change. Critical theory urges us to recognise, understand and address how capitalist society reproduces itself and limits the free organisation of human beings.

Reflection exercise

Take a few moments to watch [Critical theory definition and critiques (YouTube, 3:26)](#), which explains critical theory in greater detail.

Take a piece of paper and, in your own words, write down a brief definition of critical theories. Then re-read the above sub-section. How does your understanding fit with the information above and the video?

Reflection exercise

Critical theory can be applied in myriad different ways to better understand the world around us. In [Critical theory and the production of mass culture (YouTube, 2:12)](#), critical theory is adopted as a lens to understand and critique the production of mass culture. Watch the video and then consider the questions below.

1. Can you think of examples where you could argue that the primary objective of producing art is to preserve the economic structure of the capitalist system?
2. Do you agree with the proposition that mass-consumed entertainment, like popular television shows, are *only* produced as a source of light entertainment and escapism from work, and thus serve to placate and pacify the worker? Why or why not? (What *other* purposes might such entertainment serve, if any?)
3. Do you agree with Adorno's proposition that the products of the 'culture industry' are not only the artworks, but also the consumers themselves? Why or why not?

Critical race theory

Critical race theory applies a critical theory lens to the notion of race, seeking to understand how the concept of race itself can act as a site of power and oppression. Arising from the work of American legal scholars during the 1980s (including key thinkers like Derrick Bell [1930-2011] and Kimberlé Crenshaw [1959-]), it originally sought to understand and challenge "the ways in which race and racial power [were]... cosnstructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole." (Crenshaw et al. 1995: xiii) In particular, it questioned whether the civil rights afforded to African Americans in the aftermath of the civil rights movement had made a substantive impact on their experiences of social justice. Critical race theorists argued that more needed to be done; that civil rights had not had the desired impacts because (amongst other reasons) they:

- were imagined, shaped and brought into being by (predominantly) white, male middle- or upper-class lawyers, and thus, were only imagined within the bounds of white ontology,
- did not move *beyond* race – race still mattered, and
- implicitly perpetuated white privilege (e.g. they were constrained to only imagine redress and justice *within* the existing oppressive, white hegmonic system).

Crenshaw (1995: xiii) writes that, although critical race scholars' work is heterogenous, they are nevertheless united by the following common interests:

1. "The first is to understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America, and, in particular, to examine the relationship between that social structure and professed ideas such as 'the rule of law' and 'equal protection'."
2. "The second is a desire not merely to understand the vexed bond between law and racial power but to *change* it."

In Australia, scholars have also taken up aspects of a critical race lens to understand how privilege is bound up with race. As Moreton-Robinson (2015: xiii) puts it, in Australia:

> Race matters in the lives of all peoples; for some people it confers unearned privileges, and for others it is the mark of inferiority. Daily newspapers, radio, television, and social media usually portray Indigenous peoples as a deficit model of humanity. We are overrepresented as always lacking, dysfunctional, alcoholic, violent, needy, and lazy... For Indigenous people, white possession is not unmarked, unnamed or invisible; it is hypervisible...

Crenshaw has been crucial in also stressing the key importance of understanding how race can also intersect with other aspects of social identity, such as gender, to produce a 'double' or 'triple' oppression. In Australia, Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson's 2000 book, *Talkin' up to the white woman,* was also crucial in understanding how Australian feminism could also be oppressive of Indigenous Australian women by not seeing and hearing them or the specific issues they face/d. She called for the need for "white feminists to relinquish some power, dominance and privilege in Australian feminism to give Indigenous women's interest some priority" (Moreton-Robinson 2000: xxv). This emphasised that an intersectional lens was needed to acknowledge the different but cumulative impacts of both racial oppression and sexism. At the centre of this argument is the reality that "all white feminists [in Australia] benefit from colonisation; they are overwhelmingly represented and disproportionately predominant, have the key roles, and constitute the norm, the ordinary and the standard of womanhood in Australia" (Moreton-Robinson 2000: xxv).

Uproar over critical race theory

During 2020, racial sensitivity training in the USA prompted widespread discussion about critical race theory. Former US President, Donald Trump, posits in the video below that the theory, and the kinds of racial sensitivity training it promotes, are fundamentally racist – against white people. Others argued that this represented a deep misunderstanding of the theory, but also an ignorance of the extent and power of white privilege.

For an example of former President Trump's views, watch [Trump: Racial sensitivity training on white privilege is 'racist' (YouTube, 3:16)](#):

Postmodern critique of critical race theory

Postmodernists have levelled critique at critical race theory on the basis that understanding/explaining power as being rooted in racial difference has the consequence of reinforcing and perpetuating the validity of 'race'. Postmodernism, however, rejects the distinct, conceptual bounds of 'race' and racialised identities. Instead, it sees race itself as a social construction, which should be questioned and disrupted, thereby leading to new insights that aren't constrained by socially constructed definitions of race.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, for example, seeks to "probe the very definitions of race itself. He bypasses the empirical question of whether racism exists to ask the theoretical question of what race and racism are" (in Chong-Soon Lee 1995: 441)

Reflection exercise

Take a piece of paper and, in your own words, write down a brief definition of critical race theory. Then re-read the above sub-section. How does your understanding fit with the information above?

Putting theory into action: rethinking crime through a critical lens

Critical criminologists apply a critical theory lens to the study of crime and criminality. In this regard, critical criminology is concerned with understanding how the criminal justice system can act as a site of power and oppression; a perspective that tends to sit in contrast with western (non-critical) criminology, which sees the criminal justice system as a natural social institution that has the primarily purpose of protecting society against deviants (criminals) and making an example of those who fail to comply with hegemonic social norms. (This non-critical view draws parallels, for example, with the perceived 'functions' of the criminal justice system under a structural functionalist perspective, and its role in making examples of 'dysfunctional' elements of society.)

Critical criminologists in Australia have considered the role of the criminal justice system as a key site of oppression under, for example, Australian settler colonialism. For instance, Indigenous Australians are, per capita, the most incarcerated peoples in the entire world ([Anthony & Baldry 2017](#)) and these incarceration rates are rising, not reducing (ABS 2018). In using a critical lens to understand the difference between incarceration rates for Indigenous and non-

Indigenous Australians, however, we can seek better insight into how the criminal justice system operates as a site of oppression, perpetuating white settler colonial norms and values, which seek to punish alternative ontologies and epistemologies. Lynch (cited in Cunneen and Tauri 2016: 26) argued,

> In short, criminology is one of the disciplines that established the conditions necessary for maintenance of the status quo of power. It can only do so by oppressing those who would undermine the status quo. In this sense, criminology must be viewed as a *science of oppression.*

In part, this oppression operates through the construction of knowledge and truth within (positivist) criminology (which relates to Foucault's conception of power-knowledge, as we touched on last week). In turn, this also involves what Cunneen and Tauri (2016: 26) describe as "the ideologically driven dismissal of Indigenous knowledge about the social world as 'subjective', 'unscientific', and/or at best 'folk epistemology'... which in turn paves the way for excluding *other ways of knowing* from the Western, criminological lexicon".

In their book, *Decolonising criminology,* Blagg and Anthony (2019: 22-23) set out a taxonomy for what they see as a decolonised criminology (noting, though, that Blagg and Anthony themselves are non-Indigenous researchers, though they have worked closely with Indigenous peoples and communities for decades). In their taxonomy (which we have included an adapted version of below), they include the following probing comparisons between a positivist (largely uncritical) criminology and a decolonised (critical) criminology:

	Positivist criminology	Decolonised criminology (postcolonial, post-disciplinary)
Underlying assumptions	The state's criminal laws and its role in Indigenous peoples' lives is considered to be neutral. Criminological knowledge is considered to be objective and free of bias.	Criminal laws are understood as a harmful technology of control and subordination, used by the colonial settler state against Indigenous peoples. Criminological knowledge is considered to be subjective, reflecting status quo power relations. Thus, there is an acknowledged need for a "plurality of critical and Indigenous epistemologies".
Typical research questions	What leads Indigenous peoples to commit offences? How can the state respond to and reduce rates of Indigenous offending? How can the state manage the 'risk' that Indigenous peoples pose to social order?	What leads the state to offend against and harm Indigenous peoples? What is needed for the state, and other key institutions, to stop harming Indigenous peoples? How might the state, as well as other actors, repair the harms done to Indigenous peoples? How can Indigenous peoples' self-determination be supported?
Typical research focus	Indigenous peoples' deficits (e.g., offending) and the state's ability to counter and address these deficits via the criminal justice system.	The state's deficits (e.g., violence and offending against Indigenous peoples) and Indigenous peoples' resilience and strength in the face of such offending, as well as their ability to self-determine holistic strategies to support and enhance their own emotional, cultural, and social wellbeing.
'Experts'	Researchers (including criminologists) in institutions like universities	Indigenous peoples who have first-hand experience of the effects of the state's criminal justice system, and who are experts at nurturing their own wellbeing and self-determination.
Typical research outputs	Academic journal articles, books, and chapters; official reports.	Information that is suited to the needs and priorities of Indigenous communities; informative outputs that support Indigenous activism, advocacy, and self-determination.
Outcomes and impacts	Enhancing institutional knowledge and contributing to policy reforms that further strengthen the state's responses to crime (particularly via the criminal justice system).	Enhancing the capacity of Indigenous knowledge production and contributing to reforms that attend to the needs and priorities of Indigenous peoples. This includes by supporting Indigenous self-determination, and efforts at decarceration.

A table comparing positivist and decolonial approaches to criminology.

Source: Authors' adaptation from [Blagg & Anthony (2019: 22-23)](#)

The probes and questions that Blagg & Anthony pose in the above taxonomy are critical in their focus and intent; they seek to critique the criminal justice system as a site of colonial power, but they also seek to change it — through research that produces knowledge about these truths. This is, in essence, a reframing (to use Bacchi's term) of the nature of criminological research towards a richer, and more historically and culturally contextualised understanding of the Australian criminal justice system. As a result, this produces different knowledge about crime and justice in Australia: knowledge that shifts blame away from the individual (the 'bad' Indigenous citizen, to use Moreton-Robinson's [2009] language) to the structures, history and continuation of colonial oppression.
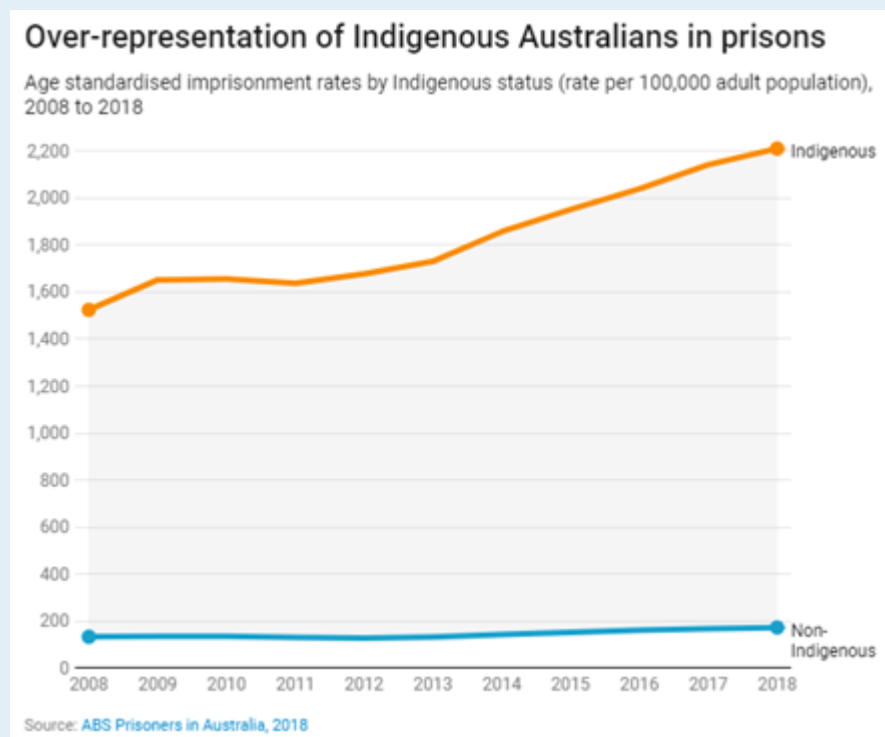
Radical criminology is rooted in the Marxist conflict tradition and sees the capitalist economy as being central to the definitions of crime (arrived at by the bourgeoisie) that constrict, control and suppress the working classes (proletariat).

In contrast (or in addition to), **critical criminology** is interested in more than just class relations and also sees different opportunities for praxis – tending to favour a more incremental approach to social change as opposed to widespread revolution (Bernard 1981)

Drawing on a critical criminology and decolonising perspective, consider the below graph, which shows the over-representation of Indigenous Australians in prisons, indicating an upward trend from 2008-2018. Then consider, from a critical criminology standpoint, what kinds of 'truths' might you draw on to help explain this trend?

Over-representation of Indigenous Australians in prisons

Age standardised imprisonment rates by Indigenous status (rate per 100,000 adult population), 2008 to 2018

Source: ABS Prisoners in Australia, 2018

Over-representation of Indigenous Australians in prisons. Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018, shared under a CC BY 4.0 licence.

(To guide your thinking, you may like to revisit the above taxonomy by Blagg and Anthony.)

Reflection exercise

Watch the below short clip of Senator Patrick Dodson talking in March 2021 about the issue of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody. Consider LNP Senator, Amanda Stoker's response to Senator Pat Dodson, in particular her comment that she "understand[s] the outrage is real… because the lives of every person, though our justice system are important, no matter the colour of their skin."

In #Estimates, @SenatorDodson fires up over a lack of action on deaths in custody. @stoker_aj's response: "I understand the outrage is real…because the lives of every person, through our justice system are important, no matter the colour of their skin." #Auspol @SBSNews @NITV pic.twitter.com/jgsb8y9YcD
— Naveen Razik (@naveenjrazik) March 26, 2021

What do you think about Senator Stoker's response to Senator Dodson? How might you analyse her response, through a critical race theory lens?

Reflection exercise

Choose one of the following social issues:

- The gender pay gap
- Poverty
- The workplace 'stress' epidemic
- Homelessness
- Childhood obesity

Consider how your chosen social issue might be explained by drawing on the different theoretical perspectives outlined earlier in this Chapter. Record your thoughts in a short, written explanation.

Reflection exercise: a critical reading of meritocracy

Kim and Choi (2017: 112) define meritocracy as "a social system in which advancement in society is based on an individual's capabilities and merits rather than on the basis of family, wealth, or social background." According to Kim and Choi (2017: 116), meritocracy has two key features: "impartial competition" and "equality of opportunity".

The notion of meritocracy has arisen over the past few centuries primarily in response to feudalism and absolute monarchy, where power and privilege are handed down on the basis of familial lines ('nepotism') or friendships ('cronyism'). This kind of system could (and often did) place people into positions of power, regardless of whether they were the most appropriate or 'best' person for the job. In essence, then, the notion of meritocracy is intended to tie social advancement to merit; that is, the focus is supposed to be on 'what you know' rather than 'who you know', which seems a noble cause, right? Many have argued, however, that a blinkered belief in meritocracy leaves a lot of things out of the 'frame'.

The belief in meritocracy, and its focus on 'what you know' rather than 'who you know', can have both positive and negative impacts. Take a piece of paper and write a short list of each.

If critical theory operates according to the broad Marxist understanding of history as class struggle, post-structuralism is a theory that attempts to abandon the idea of grand historical narratives altogether. Fundamentally, post-structuralism differs from other social theories in its rejection of *metanarratives*, its critique of binaries, and its refusal to understand all human action as being shaped solely by universal social structures. Whilst there is much disagreement between post-structuralist thinkers, these three broad trends help us to understand this social theory.

Post-structuralism

Post-structural accounts of conflict and power can take a macro and micro lens. They see power as transcending social structures, like social institutions (e.g., the state, the economy) and instead being *all around us at all times*. **Michel Foucault** (1926-1984), for example, argued that power is everywhere and acts upon us to shape our identities, bodies, behaviours, and being. In terms of a liberal democratic society, therefore, where coercive ('sovereign') power is only exerted by the state under certain specific circumstances, Foucault argued that the state otherwise uses its power to create 'responsibilised' citizens who absorb hegemonic (i.e. authoritative/dominant) social norms and use these to *govern themselves*. This relates to what Fairclough (1995: 257) referred to as power by consent:

> We live in an age in which power is predominantly exercised through the generation of consent rather than through coercion... through the inculcation of self-disciplining practices rather than through the breaking of skulls (though there is still unfortunately no shortage of the latter).

Foucault was also particularly interested in the link between power and knowledge. He argued that those who hold the power tend to construct knowledge and 'truth' in certain ways, which can reinforce their power by, for example, perpetuating certain social norms. This is elaborated on by Watts and Hodgson (2019) in reading 5.2, where they describe Foucault's conception of power/knowledge as follows:

> Truth is not neutral or objective, and is not simply a thing that can be verified scientifically because its 'truth value' is dependent on the operation and circulation of power (think, for example, the oft-quoted phrase that 'truth is whatever the powerful say it is'). In the context of the human and social sciences, power creates knowledge and is also a force for the *translation* of knowledge of and about human beings into practice... For example, the moment we speak into existence the concept of something as commonplace as 'human being' or 'human rights' or 'social justice' we are using some form of power (truth) to render such things thinkable and knowable as *things in the world* (Watts and Hodgson 2019: 85-86).

Reflection exercise

Take a piece of paper and, in your own words, write down a brief definition of Foucault's post-structural concept of power. Then, re-read the above account. Does your definition align with the information above?

Beck and Risk Society

The notion of risk society is outlined by Ulrich Beck in his 1992 book 'Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity'. Where society was once organised around wealth distribution based on scarcity, Beck argues that society is becoming

increasingly based on the distribution of *risks*. Risks are defined as "a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself" (Beck 1992: 21). Beck argues that the process of modernisation is no longer focused exclusively on the creation of new technologies, but rather the focus lies in the management of risks of potential technologies. As such, modernisation is becoming increasingly *reflexive*, involved not only in the production of technologies to meet needs, but rather investigating the often unknown side-effects of technologies. For example, a nuclear energy plant might be built in order to meet society's increasing energy demand. However, this solution to a specific problem then must deal with the new issue of disposing of this radioactive waste that modernisation itself has produced. This is just one example of the ecological risks inherent with the development of new technologies, which often have unintended side-effects, that must themselves be uncovered and solved.
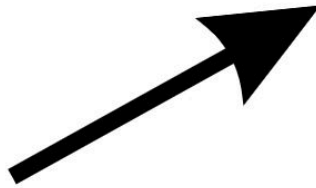
Postmodernism

Before we can get to postmodernism, we need to define modernism to see what postmodernism wants to supersede. Modernism describes the social upheaval and major changes of 20th century life. It is marked by processes of industrialisation, rationalisation and bureaucratisation – in short a world in which the sciences seemed to provide ever more answers and ultimate truths about the world and us. Modernism or modernity was also about hope for a new society, unfettered technological and material progress and, with advances in scientific fields, led to longer lives and new and exciting materials to make new things to make life easier (think household machines). It was also punctured by some key social movements that brought the world to the brink of destruction in the epic fight over what ultimate truth should prevail. The key political ideologies of fascism, socialism and liberalism clashed in the second World War over their different visions for a new world order. In the post war climate of a new stand-off between socialism/communism and liberalism or the Soviet bloc and 'the West' many writers, academics and artists became disillusioned with the modernist project. Slowly critiques of these universalising truths and meta-narratives came to think of this time as a time of postmodernism. Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998) defined postmodernism as the 'incredulity towards meta-narratives', by which he meant that increasingly people were no longer persuaded by grand or master narratives about themselves, a particular nation, people or even humanity. The singular, stable, coherent modern subject was thrown into a void and thus becomes fragmented, fluid and plural in the postmodern. No one truth exists anymore and the certainty of facts becomes disputed and muddied once more. Thus, postmodernity is about scepticism, deconstruction and questioning rather than offering answers and solutions. This has made it a controversial theory or topic as it offers little in the way of hope for a better world, indeed it is often seen as dystopic. Inherent in many postmodern critiques of current society is a critique of (late) capitalism and consumer or mass culture that pervade every aspect of our lives, whilst others focus on technology and its pervasive intrusion into our daily lives.
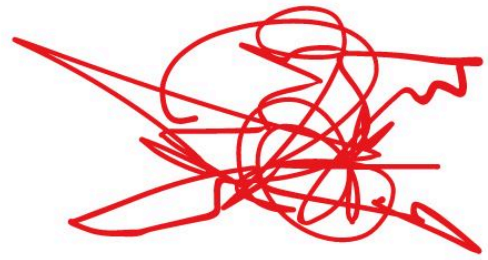
Premodern   Modern   Postmodern

"God made it this way, in the past, for the present, and for the future."

"The only way is up: we are the authors of our own march towards progress."

"The... djfkl;sjadfa sfe;sjfeawjfiejij;towJwE; j e;rj eoj tj!~!!! asjfklasdj;fl"

Source: Authors' adaptation of a humorous representation of the progression from premodern to postmodern by Owlcation.

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Resources for further learning
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Readings:

- Moreton-Robinson, A. 2015. 'Introduction: white possession and Indigenous sovereignty matters.' In. Moreton-Robinson, A. *The White Possessive: property, power and Indigenous sovereignty,* pp. xi-xxiv.
- Powers, C. 2009. Sociology as a coherent discipline: unifying themes. In. Powers, C. *Making sense of social theory,* Chapter 16.
- Watts, L. and Hodgson, D. 2019. 'Power and knowledge'. In. Watts, L. and Hodgson, D. Social justice theory and practice for social work, Chapter 5.
- Cunneen, C. and Tauri, J. 2016. 'Towards a critical Indigenous criminology.' In. Cunneen, C. and Tauri, J. Indigenous criminology, pp. 23-43.
- Kim, C.H. and Choi, Y.B. 2017. How meritocracy is defined today – contemporary aspects of meritocracy. *Economics and Sociology,* 10(1): 112-121.
- Flyvbjerg, B. 2001. 'Values in social and political inquiry.' In. Flyvbjerg, B. *Making social science matter,* Chapter 5.

Other resources:

- Watego, C. 2021. 'Who are the real criminals? Making the case for abolishing criminology.' (YouTube, 1:35:01),
- Anderson, E. 2017. 'How good social science can and ought to be value-laden' (YouTube, 17:00).
- Zigon, J. and Throop, J. 2021. 'Phenomenology' *Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology.*

4.

Social institutions

What are social institutions?

Social institutions are important to social scientists because they form a critical part of the fabric of our societies and have considerable influence on our lives. For instance, they are repositories of social norms, but also dictate and perpetuate social norms. They are also much more than social norms alone; instead, they are typically complex social structures within which social norms, rituals, conventions, rules, ontologies, and epistemologies are interwoven into a tight knit. In their book, *The Institutional Order,* Turner (1997: 6) defines social institutions as "a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organising relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment".

If, for instance, we were to apply our sociological imaginations to thinking about social issues, social institutions would be an important 'layer' of our nested realities to consider (see the image above). While, for example, one might consider an individual's social position within their own family and extended family or kinship structure, we might also think about how their own experience of family and kinship is nested within the broader social institution of 'the family' in their society, as well as in other societies (see the image below). The social institution of 'the family' structure in non-Indigenous Australia, for example, is still typically based on a nuclear structure with two (typically heterosexual) parents, who play certain roles in terms of

Social institutions are an important 'layer' of society

rearing children. Within this conceptualisation, we can see how an individual has a certain level of agency, but also how that agency is affected by the structure of their own family/kinship unit/s, as well as by the broader social institution of the family unit. There are, of course, many alternative family structures that do not necessarily 'fit' in this model set by the social institution of the family, which leads us to consider the important power of social institutions in upholding certain (political and ever-changing) social norms, while delegitimising others.

Integrating social institutions into our sociological imaginations

Social institutions play important and central roles, in terms of how our societies are organised and operate. In particular:

1. social institutions stem from a need in society;
2. based on that need, a fixed set of social relationships to fulfil it;
3. those relationships then organise into more formal structure/s or mechanism/s; and
4. those organised relationships gain significance in society, ensuring they are maintained and endure over time.

Indeed, social institutions are typically long lasting, though their shape and structure often change

incrementally over time, and they sometimes also experience significant changes in response to particularly revolutionary moments (e.g. second-wave feminism of the 1960s-80s had considerable and relatively quick-paced impacts on the social institution of the family). Key social institutions include (but are not limited to):

- The state
- Work
- The family
- Education
- The economy
- Media
- Religion
- Health care
- Criminal justice system

These social institutions are also interrelated in different ways: something we touched on in Chapter 2 when we discussed structural functionalism (recall social institutions working as a 'well-oiled societal machinery). In this Chapter, we focus on the social institutions of the family, the state, religion, education, and work (past, present and future). In particular, we examine how these institutions have changed over time, the roles they play, and how they influence our lives. We also discuss how social institutions are intimately interrelated; just as they influence us, they are also influenced by one another.

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Reflection exercise

Earlier in the book, we introduced the concept of social institutions in relation to structural functionalism. Drawing on these earlier materials, consider:

1) How do social institutions feature in a structural functionalist view of the world, and what role ('function/s') do they play?

2) How might a conflict or critical theorist see social institutions differently?

</div>

The family

The family unit has changed dramatically over time but remains a critically important social institution. Changes to the family unit have often occurred along gender lines; because (after the industrial revolution) men have typically earned higher wages in the formal economy, they are the ones who have most often undertaken waged labour while women have generally tended to work in the domestic realm (the informal economy). The changing nature of work has, thus, had a significant impact on women's role in the family, as shown in the figure below.

Pre-industrial revolution	Industrial revolution	Post-industrial revolution	Early 20th Century
Separation between work and home was not as clear…	Men, women & children worked; men earned more…	Women & children exited workforce; men earned higher wages and thus, continued… women resigned to domestic duties.	Men went to war; women entered workforce…

Enter the 'second shift'	Post-World Wars
While women are now in the workforce at much higher rates, they still undertake the bulk of unpaid domestic and caring duties – what Hochschild termed the 'second shift'. To handle this, women are overrepresented in part-time and casual work; they still earn less than their male colleagues.	Women return to domestic duties… Second-wave feminism calls for women to re-enter the workforce; women re-enter at higher rates…

The changing nature of work has, thus, had a significant impact on women's role in the family

Second-wave feminism saw the re-entry of large numbers of women into the workforce and significant changes to the family unit as a result. The paid childcare sector stepped into fill the gap and, as contraception became more readily available, women gained greater control over planning their families, or choosing *not* to have children at all (though social norms differ across geography and culture). However, even though women now participate in the formal economy at much higher rates, the playing field is far from even.

Arlie Hochschild shed light on what one of her research participants called the 'second shift'. Women would go off to work in the formal economy, do their 'day shift', and then come home and do a second shift that consisted of unpaid work: cooking dinner, preparing children for bed, doing the washing, cleaning and other domestic duties. Women also tend to absorb these duties by taking on less work in the formal economy — e.g., through part-time and casual positions. As a result, women – and particularly women of colour and First Nations women – are far more likely across the globe to earn less and experience poverty. We discuss this further in Chapter 9 when we talk about 'Work', reproductive labour, and the 'free riding' nature of capitalism (to quote Nancy Fraser).

Reflection exercise

Watch the below video, where Airlie Hochschild describes the concept of the 'second shift' and a 'stalled revolution'.

[Arlie Hochschild on the Second Shift and a stalled revolution (YouTube, 5:57)](#):

One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=28#oembed-1

After watching the video, consider the following:

1) Is the feminist revolution 'stalled'?

2) What implications does our typically narrow framing of 'work' as that which occurs in the formal economy have for women in particular?

3) What flow-on effects might this narrow framing of work have across a woman's life?

The nation state

The state might be considered a 'meta-institution', insofar as it is a social institution that — to an extent — has an overarching role in organising other social institutions. For example, governments typically have primary purview over the organisation and administration of education, the economy, the criminal justice system, and more. According to international law, nation states have sovereignty over their territories. They govern citizens of their territory in accordance with an invisible 'social contract'. A social contract is theorised as a sort of agreement between the state and its citizens that sees citizens agreeing to abide by the laws and rulings of the state in return for being able to live peaceably within the nation state's bounds and receive other benefits from the state, such as citizenship rights (e.g. access to welfare, health care and more). For social contract theorists, this provides an underpinning analogy for the way in which states operate today, which plays into a structural functionalist perspective of the role of the state as enabling the harmonious functioning of a society. However, drawing on conflict or critical theory perspectives, we can also consider how the state can also operate as a key site of power and oppression, including in Australia.

As a **settler colony**, Australia as we know it today was erected on the stolen lands of Indigenous peoples who lived here for 65,000+ years prior. It was stolen on the basis that it was erroneously understood to be *terra nullius* — 'no man's land'; that

> **"Always was, always will be Aboriginal land."**

is, uncivilised and uncultivated. While the doctrine of *terra nullius* was overturned in *Mabo v Queensland* (No. 2) (1992), it has cast a long shadow. There is, today, still no formal recognition of the unceded sovereignty of Indigenous Australians, nor any reckoning for the theft of Indigenous lands, including the violent genocide that has accompanied and enabled colonisation.

Moreton-Robinson (2009: 63) points out that "The white patriarchs who theorised about the social contract were primarily concerned with it being a means of agreement between white men to live together, make laws and govern, incorporating white women into the polity as their subordinates through a marriage contract." In thinking through how the social contract operates in Australia, however, Moreton-Robinson (2009) points out that there is, and has never been, agreement by Indigenous Australians to be governed by the settler state (e.g., no treaty). In this context, instead of the state protecting Indigenous Australians, "citizenship rights [which were only afforded very recently] are a means by which subjugation operates as a weapon of race war that can be used strategically to circumscribe and enable the biopower of patriarchal white sovereignty… [thus] rights can be enabling and constraining" (Moreton-Robinson 2009: 64-65).

Reflection exercise

Think about the quote above by Professor Moreton-Robinson (2009). What does she mean when she says citizenship rights can be a means of subjugating Indigenous Australians? Can you think of an example?

Political sovereignty has been perceived differently by different scholars; for instance, as being "able to coexist with and/or be enfolded into the (fabricated) sovereignty of the Australian settler state, or as being intrinsic, embodied and therefore not in need of substantiation *by* or *through* colonial governance structures" (Staines and Smith 2021: 17). The first view is one adopted by Indigenous law Professor and Cobble Cobble woman, Megan Davis (2017), while the latter view is one adopted by Professor and Quandamooka woman, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2007). Nevertheless, there have

been strong and ongoing proposals by Indigenous Australians for a stronger voice in governance and policymaking, including through the [Yirrkala bark petitions in 1963](#) and, most recently, via the [Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017](#). The **Uluru Statement**, and its call for a recognition of the unceded sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, as well as a call for three structural reforms (a 'voice' in the Australian constitution, treaty, and truth-telling via a Makkarata Commission), was rejected by the Turnbull LNP Government in 2017. Despite committing to further negotiation around the Uluru Statement proposals as a key election platform, the Morrison Government has also done little to progress these proposals and has also outwardly said it disagrees with the notion of a constitutionally-enshrined First Nations voice. You can read a short analysis of this rejection by [Staines and Gordon (2019): A road to reconciliation – The case for a voice to parliament](#).

More recently, in the lead up to the May 2022 federal election, First Nations leaders once again called for urgent action on the Uluru Statement From the Heart (you can read about this in The Guardian – ['The time is now right': parties urged to make Indigenous voice an election issue and set referendum date](#)). In this election, the Australian Labor Party was elected to government on a platform that it would take the Uluru Statement proposals to referendum; so far, it is tracking in this direction and a referendum on the 'Voice' component of the proposals is expected in 2023.

The Uluru Statement from the Heart

Watch Professor Megan Davis read aloud the words of the [Uluru Statement from the Heart (YouTube, 3:44)](#):

> 🖻 One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=28#oembed-2

Reflection exercise

The Uluru Statement from the Heart (which [you can read](#)), refers to the need to recognise that the sovereignty of Indigenous Australians has "never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown". It also speaks to the social disadvantage that is disproportionately experienced by Indigenous Australians today, stating "These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness."

Think about this last statement. How might you link this back to some of the key concepts we have touched on in the book so far?

When we take a critical perspective to thinking about the state as a key social institution, we can also delve more deeply into how it can operate as a source of stability for some, while simultaneously operating as a site of instability and oppression for others. We will continue to take a critical perspective over the coming weeks, as we think more deeply about other social institutions as well, like work, the family, and education.

Religion

Religion plays an important role in life around the world. It is an umbrella term to describe a range of systems of belief and practice. There are many definitions of religion with most focusing on the supernatural. Broadly, religion is a system of beliefs in supernatural forces with symbols and rituals or performances that provide meaning to life. Early social science definitions of religion, such as by anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) who saw belief in spirits and supernatural beings as central, claimed that religion offered 'primitive answers' to what happens when we die and gave explanations for all the unknowns.

Tylor's contemporary, Durkheim (1858–1917) also focussed on the importance of the sacred and in his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, i.e., things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them." (Durkheim (1912)1954: 47). He described a division between the sacred and the profane. The sacred is what society decides to be special, extraordinary and significant and deserving of awe and respect. The profane refers to the mundane, everyday and therefore relatively insignificant. Thus, Durkheim focuses on the sacred, which he saw as the core of religion. He also saw religion as foundational to the way human societies function and therefore saw **religion as the most fundamental social institution.** Durkheim's view of the history of humankind was based on the belief that religion was at the heart of how humans found collective identities and meaning. Thus, Durkheim argued that people today as well as in the past have determined what is sacred and how to act in the presence of such sacredness. This made religions the manifestations of communal values of a given society and we are therefore in a way worshipping ourselves.

> **Reflective exercise**
>
> Before reading on, think about religion as a social institution.
>
> What are the main functions of the dominant religion(s) where you are? Think about what roles the dominant religion(s) plays in everyday life and the structure of society.
>
> Write down some answers and see how it fits with the social scientific approaches below.

In terms of the functions of religion as a social institution, there are several to name:

1. Religion as social institution can create social solidarity as its members adhere to a shared set of social norms and worldview. In everyday religious life and on special occasions, such as life stage events of a birth, getting married or death, rituals act to bind community together.

2. The socialisation or initiation into a religious community and larger social institution with rules and norms leads to social cohesion and provides for a meaningful place for people in society.

3. This leads to the function of social control religions can perform in many societies. These norms and rules extend to moral codes that direct believers to act in certain ways to avoid judgement by supernatural or earthly adjudicators. Both divine punishments and unfavourable rebirths or pathways to eternal hell can act to control behaviour and even thoughts. Clergy and other eartheenly intermediaries may also act to police behaviour and thoughts of people.

4. Religions can provide answers to the most fundamental questions of life and death, such as why are we here? or why do people suffer? The religious answers can be reassuring and provide meaning to people's existence on Earth.

In Marx's 1843 work *Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* he makes the famous assertion that religion is the 'opium of the people'. The book was written at the height of English industrialisation, where people moved to the city, entered wage work in factories marked by what he calls *alienation*. For Marx, then, organised religion provides a way to dull the pain of these processes of unsettling people, communities and our creative connections to the product of our labour.

In this longer quote it becomes clear that Marx follows structural functionalism here and argues that religion serves a similar purpose or function as opium does to a person: they make one feel better for a while, or reduce the suffering, shroud the realities, and can offer illusions.

"The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man.
Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.
Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

There are several critiques of the social functions of religions, not least from Karl Marx who noted that religions tends to legitimize inequality and the status quo. Marx was writing at a time of turmoil in Europe, when it was believed that enlightenment values of reason, science and logic would overcome the pseudo-science and belief in cults, the clergy and religion as a whole. The nation-state was taking over as the key political ordering principle and science was answering many questions that had perplexed humanity, such as where we are from, how we can cure diseases or overcome poverty. Education was becoming more widespread and allowing people to read firsthand the evidence, news and primary texts of religion and science, allowing people to make up their own mind without the interference of clergy or other middlemen.

At this time eminent philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) lamented the demise of God and the concomitant religious superstructure that held together the Western Judeo-Christian worldview. To his mind the function of religion in maintaining order, especially moral order, was deteriorating and this would have a lasting impact on Western societies. In the section on work below you will see how Max Weber (1864–1920) described the consequences of Protestant beliefs leading to certain types of action in the world in his "Protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism". Max Weber compared religions and argued that his comparative cross-cultural analysis provided evidence of religion as an explanation to suffering. He showed how the process of rationalisation, the increasing importance of rationality and reason over traditions, led to a disenchantment of the world and therefore secularisation. This means that religion was increasingly uncoupled from other domains of life, such as the economy and governance.

Marx, Durkheim and Weber are the key social theorists to have addressed and investigated the move from pre-modern to modern societies, focussed on the (Christian) European experience. This process of modernisation changed the role religion as a social institution played in these societies and has had a lasting impact on people's faith, identity and adherence to the dominant mass religious organisations.

Education

Education as we know it today was borne of the industrial revolution; it is intimately linked to and still reflects the conceptualisations of 'work' that arose from the 1700s and 1800s. Indeed, Education was and still is a process of socialisation whereby children become exposed to the social, cultural and political conventions of larger society and are taught how to perform skills and tasks that may be later required of them in the workplace. While education serves a variety of important social functions, it is also a site within which power imbalances are reflected and reinforced.

Initially, boys were typically sent to school while girls stayed home; the gender pay gap meant (and in lots of cases, *still means*) boys and men were the ones who would later be able to bring in a larger income. Early feminist writers, such as Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) argued that girls and women should also have equal rights to education and work. However, it wasn't until the late 1800s that schools were made compulsory for both boys and girls; even then, girls were directed towards subjects that taught domestic duties (e.g., home economics) and guided into what were considered 'feminine' professions (e.g., administration, nursing, teaching), the latter of which continue to be paid less, overall, than other professions.

Access to and engagement with education remains a site for the perpetuation of power imbalances. For instance, Australian curricula overwhelmingly reflect dominant social norms that exclude minorities. An obvious example is the exclusion of First Nations histories, cultures and ontologies. This sends strong signals about what types of knowledge are valued and devalued, and it also indicates who has a place (and who doesn't) in educational institutions. This is changing, but very slowly. Beyond the types of knowledges covered, a main motivation to access education today is the qualification credential (degree, diploma or certificate) that one attains at the end. This has created a tendency to value education mainly based on the eventual credential one attains and not the learning that happens in between.

> **Reflection exercise**
>
> Before reading on, consider the following:
>
> 1) Taking a structural functionalist perspective, what kinds of functions does education serve in society?
>
> 2) How might a conflict theorist see education differently?

Education as a social equaliser?

We often hear that education is a social equaliser. However, many also challenge this myth. Consider the following excerpt from Down, Smyth and Robinson's (2018: 89) study of Australian university students:

> *Stephanie and Janet shared similar ambitions. They wanted to go to university, pursue their passions and get ahead. Yet, their experience was markedly different in terms of the kinds of resources available to them. Stephanie was able to draw on a range of family assets, knowledge and dispositions... Her parents are more well educated, financially secure and socially connected than Janet's. This allowed Stephanie to read the script more effectively than Janet and, at the same time, not have to worry too much about money (Down, Smyth and Robinson 2018, 89).*

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) would argue that Stephanie has access to cultural and social capital that Janet doesn't, which influences her ability to achieve at university. Thus, class has important implications for educational engagement and outcomes, as do other aspects of social identity (e.g., gender, race, sexuality and more). This is particularly because educational institutions tend to reflect and reinforce dominant social norms; they also tend to judge students' abilities and behaviours against these benchmarks, which can serve to perpetuate rather than alleviate inequality.

Work/The economy

We typically think about 'work' through a very narrow frame — that is, work in the formal economy. However, this narrow framing tends to exclude lots of different forms of work, including:

- work in the grey (informal) and black (illegal) economies
- work in the informal economy (e.g. care work, volunteer work)
- work inside versus outside the home.

Work hasn't always been conceptualised in the way it is today; understanding this helps us critique current conceptualisations of work and the impact these narrow frames have on our lives.

What we consider to be 'work' has changed over time. In pre-industrial societies, families tended to work on the land (e.g., subsistence farming) and/or in craft-like trades. Work was typically undertaken at home (e.g., tending the land), or very close to home; the distinction between work and home was not as strong as it is today (though COVID-19 has continued to challenge this!). Domestic responsibilities, including caring for children, were more evenly shared amongst families and communities. People also tended to be more self-sufficient

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and independent (e.g., growing their food locally and perhaps also participating in local bartering).

These workers often owned and had a stake in the product of their labour. For instance, if a family managed to grow 2kg of tomatoes, but only needed 1kg to sustain themselves, they could sell the extra tomatoes and directly reap the benefit of their labour — that is, they would be paid directly for the tomatoes they produced. Nevertheless, as technological advances led to the industrial revolution, more people began to work in mills and factories, which started to pop up as mass-manufacture of goods became more commonplace. Families also moved *en masse* away from the land and into cities to take up work in these new industries.

People started working for wages — a key moment in the birth of capitalism, where the extra benefit that might be accumulated through an individual's hard work was redirected *away from workers and to employers*. This severed the relationship between workers (or as Karl Marx called the working classes, the proletariat) and the product of their labour; something Marx called '**alienation**'. Returning to the example of tomatoes used earlier, while pre-industrial workers would directly reap the rewards of producing an extra kilo of tomatoes, workers during the industrial revolution were instead paid the same wage regardless of how many tomatoes they produced. Any extra capital from surplus tomatoes instead went to the employer (in Marxist terms, the bourgeoisie, or owners of the means of production). Karl Marx was particularly critical of this key change and saw this shift in the way we work as being symptomatic of class conflict and the associated exploitation of workers.

The shift to waged work meant that, as Marx argued, workers no longer owned the product of their labour

Conditions were terrible in early industrial workplaces; horrific workplace accidents and deaths were commonplace. However, because families began to move into (emerging) industrial cities at extremely high rates ('urbanisation'), employers had a surplus workforce to choose from. This meant that employees had very little power. If they demanded better working conditions or higher wages, they could be fired and easily replaced. Workers began to realise that they had greater power in numbers and, so, began to see value in unionising as a means of pooling their collective bargaining power. It was more difficult to sack and replace an entire workforce than it was when dealing with just one or two people.

Workers' unions made some great gains, such as demanding higher wages and time off (e.g., we owe the concept of the weekend to unions). However, union membership has decreased dramatically in previous decades for a variety of reasons. For instance, the percentage of all employees who were also members of a union ('union density') in Australia dropped from 51% to 14% of the workforce between 1976 and 2016 (Gilfillan and McGann 2018). As we discuss further in Chapter 8, many have argued that this is related to the erosion of workers' rights and concomitant rise in 'precarious work'. Work in the formal economy has also changed in other important ways, including with regard to what has been called the 'feminisation' of the workforce. This has had significant implications for the social institution of the family, as we discussed earlier in this Chapter, and also elaborate on further in Chapter 8.

Thinking about the interdependency of social institutions

The materials in this Chapter have introduced some key social institutions: work, family, religion, and education. While we have addressed these individually, they are deeply interrelated. Changes in one social institution (for example, work) can lead to changes in other social institutions (for example, family and education) over time. Similarly, changes in broader social norms (e.g., understandings of 'femininity' and 'womanhood') are typically echoed in changes to key social institutions. In this way, as we outlined at the start of this week's materials, social institutions can reinforce social norms, but also be repositories of changing social norms. A theoretical example of the interdependency of social institutions is the work of Althusser, who describes two forms of institutions that maintain the dominance of ideology.

Althusser, institutions, ideology

French philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990) argues that two kinds of institutions serve to maintain the dominance of capitalist ideology: **Repressive State Apparatuses** and **Ideological State Apparatuses.**

Following from a classical Marxist perspective, Repressive State Apparatuses are the formal institutions of a state: government administration, armed forces, police, the legal system, and the prison system. These institutions serve to maintain the system of capitalism through force. RSAs define "the State as a force of repressive execution and intervention 'in the interests of the ruling classes' in the class struggle conducted by the bourgeoisie and its allies against the proletariat" (Althusser 1971: 137). For example, the police enforce the laws of a particular society, often through public displays of power. In doing so, they can be said to uphold the beliefs and values of the ruling class (the bourgeoisie) who write the laws.

Althusser identifies Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) as another form of institutions that work to maintain the ruling capitalist ideology. If RSAs operate through repressive violence, ISAs are understood to function by producing and reproducing this ruling ideology. ISAs serve to maintain the dominance of the ruling bourgeoisie class by institutionalising their ideology within the private sphere. Examples of ISAs include religious establishments, education institutions, the family, media, communications, trade unions, cultural organisations, and political parties (Althusser 1971: 143).

Althusser argues that the power of a ruling class does not solely consist of their monopoly on overt repression but also implicit coercion. Together, these two kinds of institutions work to situate the individual within ideology. Althusser (1971: 162) defines ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence". The individual, influenced by different structures, absorbs the values, behaviours, and ideals of the ruling class. By 'voluntarily' submitting to the social system, the individual acts against the values of the working class, maintaining the status quo.

Where the individual is concerned, "the existence of the ideas of his belief is material in that his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject." (Althusser 1971: 166-169) It is in this way that Althusser's notion of ISAs facilitates the reproduction and maintenance of the dominant ideology, not in a purely ideological fashion, but in a material through the practices of the individuals themselves, resulting in their interpellation. It is through our daily participation in ISAs, such as the family or the university, "that we come to 'live' our relation to our conditions of existence under the symbolic and conceptual forms provided by ideology, as it 'materialised' in these practices." (Benton 1984: 105) This process of interpellation ultimately promotes the continuation and reproduction of the dominant ideology, through the ISAs, by reproducing our false belief that capitalism is a natural social structure.

Reflection exercise

Reflecting on the content of this Chapter, take a pen and paper and write down your answers to the following:

1. What type of work would you like to pursue in the future?
2. What kinds of factors have influenced your thinking? (Do social institutions like family play a role? What about the ways that different forms of work are viewed in society? Or perhaps cultural capital?)
3. How does your educational pathway prepare you for this work? Where might it fall short?

Resources for further learning

Readings:

- Durkheim, E. (1912/1954). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. (J. Swain, Trans.) New York: The Free Press.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. 2009. Imagining the good Indigenous citizen: race war and the pathology of patriarchal white sovereignty. *Cultural Studies Review,* 15(2): 61-79.
- Taflaga, M. 2019. 'A short political history of Australia.' In. Chen, P. et al. (Eds.) *Australian politics and policy, senior edition,* Chapter 2. Sydney University Press: Sydney.
- Hochschild, A. 2003. A speed-up in the family, In. The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home. Penguin.
- Pedulla, D. and Thebaud, S. 2015. Can we finish the revolution? Gender, work-family ideals and institutional constraint. *American Sociological Review,* 80(1): 116-139.
- Bowden, B. 2017. Three charts on: the changing face of Australian union members. *The Conversation,* July 5
  - Campbell, I. 2010. 'The rise in precarious employment and union responses in Australia.' In. Thornley, C., Jefferys, S. and Appay, B. (Eds.) *Globalization and Precarious Forms of Production and Employment: Challenges for Workers and Unions.* Edward Elgar: Cheltenham.
- Turner, J. 1997. *The Institutional Order.* New York: Longman.
- Althusser, L. 1970. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.

Other resources:

- Miller, S. 2007. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry: social institutions.
- 'What is Ideology? Louis Althusser' (YouTube, 10:30).

5.

Understanding and addressing social 'problems'

Learning Objectives for this Chapter
After reading this Chapter, you should be able to: • understand and apply the concept of 'framing', including by using Bacchi's WPR approach to analyze and evaluate the framing of various contemporary social issues, • apply the concept of framing as a basis for critically analysing media headlines.

What is a social problem, what is public policy?

When seeking to understand and address social problems, several broader questions emerge for us as social scientists. Firstly, what are social problems? Any answer to this question is always underpinned by different theories of the social world, what it means to us, and how it could be organised differently.

Evan Willis (2004:8-9) presents a distinction between sociological problems and social problems. Sociological problems are of an intellectual nature, something that needs to be understood or explained. Such problems tend to be more general, questioning the broad structuring of society and how certain social formations operate. Social problems, on the other hand, are more specific, focusing on a particular aspect of society that can be said to be problematic and in need of a solution. Often these two kind of problems overlap when explaining a social issue. One example is the issue of affordable housing. The sociological problem would be to consider how the housing market and capitalist economy broadly manufactures a shortage by artificially inflating house prices, withholding vacant properties, and engaging in market speculation. The social problem would lead us to consider what could be done to provide more affordable housing, through policy changes and concrete solutions that address the problem at this point in time. Both are necessary tools for social scientists to both understand the root of social issues, and to practically improve the real conditions of society.

Ultimately, social scientists observe the specific features of society and its organisation. These elements include structures, institutions, and role of human agency. Identifying problematic elements then allows us to ponder the question: how should the world look? From this, certain areas of society may need to be reconceptualised. One example could be the class structure, where the working class produces profit for the class that own property and the means of production.

A solution could be to reorganise labour so that those that work receive what they have earned. Whilst such a solution may seem unlikely, the job of social scientists is to see past the barriers that prevent change by striving for a better world for all. This kind of 'blue sky thinking' is what allows society's to progress, by imagining an ideal world without social problems and then endeavouring to get as close as possible.

Reflection exercise

After reading the above section, take a piece of paper and write down what you believe are the five most important social problems in your society. Then ask yourself:

1. How might we approach these issues as sociological problems? What kinds of questions might we ask, and how might we find the answers?
2. How might we approach these issues as social problems? What kinds of questions might we ask, and how might we seek to address them?

'What's the problem represented to be' – 'WPR' approach to policy analysis

What do we mean by 'policy'?

A 'policy' is just a person or organisation/institution's stance on a particular issue. We mostly talk about policy in relation to government — that is, the government's formal position or stance on a range of issues constitutes its policy. A government might express and/or implement their policy position through a range of instruments, such as a white paper (i.e., a formal document expressing a policy position), legislation (e.g., creating

Bacchi (2009) introduced a 'What's the problem represented to be', or 'WPR' approach to policy analysis in order to analyse how policy problems are constructed and represented by different actors in the policy-making process. Bacchi (2009: 1) states, "rather than *reacting* to 'problems', governments are active in the creation (or production) of policy 'problems'." So, Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach essentially boils down to asking six questions of a policy 'problem' (or other social 'problem'):

1. *What's the 'problem' (e.g. of 'problem gamblers', 'drug use/abuse', domestic violence, global warming, health inequalities, terrorism, etc.) represented to be in a specific problem?*
2. *What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?*
3. *How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?*
4. *What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?*
5. *What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?*
6. *How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted or replaced?*

In her blog entry, Carson (2018) also unpacks each of these questions in a helpful table on [The politics of the problem: How to use Carol Bacchi's work](). While Bacchi focuses particularly on government policy, we can also apply the WPR approach to unpack framings of social issues that are apparent elsewhere — like in the media.

The media obviously reacts to social issues — it 'holds a mirror up to

society'. However, the media can also be active in the *creation* of social issues insofar as it can:

- perpetuate the kinds of 'frames' that governments (or others) employ,
- leave important information out of its reporting (e.g., active bias, or perhaps time constraints in getting a story to press), and
- can also have a stake in sensationalising stories (e.g., 'if it bleeds it leads' — stories that draw attention or are sensational in nature tend to get more reads and 'clicks' — there is a financial imperative here).

Good social scientists cast a critical eye over how issues are 'problematised' and what is left out of the 'frame'. Cairney (2015) gives a helpful overview of the concept of 'framing'. You can read through his post 'Policy Concepts in 1000 Words: Framing', as well as listen to his podcast (embedded in the blog page).

As Cairney (2015) explains, "Framing is a metaphor to describe the ways in which we understand and use language selectively to portray policy problems..." Cairney (2015) uses the image of hands to the right to indicate how different 'frames' can cause us to focus on some parts of the world, while other parts fall outside of our 'frame'. It can also be helpful to think of a picture frame. While some parts of a 'problem' fall inside the picture frame (and are captured / focused on), other parts do not for various reasons.

law to enforce a policy position), money (e.g., creating a new tax to support a policy position) or more. Political parties that do not hold office will also have policies, though will often have fewer resources at their fingertips for implementation.

We will return to the concept of policy in more depth later in the semester.

Important: Bacchi (2009) uses her WPR approach to unpack government policy in particular, but we can also use it to unpack the framing of a number of different social issues — not just those that constitute government policy.

Considering 'the frame'

For instance, **consider how youth crime is 'framed' in the example headlines to the right.**

Use the six questions in the WPR approach to think about:

i) What is included in the frame?

ii) What is excluded from the frame?

iii) How might the 'problem' of youth crime be framed differently?

Framing 'youth crime'

Reflection exercise

Watch the below video, which provides a brief overview of [Bacchi's view of public policy (YouTube, 2:02)](#):

> 📊 One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
> https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=29#oembed-1

As you watch the above video, think about whether its explanation of the WPR approach aligns with your own understanding. Were there any bits of the reading or approach you found particularly difficult or confusing?

Reflection exercise

Access and read/listen to the blog and podcast by Cairney, below:

- Cairney, P. 2015. [Blog and podcast: policy concepts in 1000 words – 'framing'](#).

After reading/listening to the above, complete the following activities:

1. After completing the reading/podcast, write a short paragraph (e.g., 100 words) outlining your understanding of the concept of framing.
2. After thinking about the above framing of youth crime, including what is included/excluded from the frame, and how the 'problem' of youth crime might be framed differently, *share and discuss your answers with your peers*.

Reflection exercise

Think about Foucault's conception of power and knowledge, which was discussed in Chapter 3. How might this relate to Carol Bacchi's 'WPR' approach? In particular, how can 'frames' construct 'truth', and how can/does this relate to power?

We can use the WPR approach – particularly questions 1 and 4 – to help us unpack the 'framing'

of a range of social issues, including those framings that are reflected in media headlines. Read through the below practice headlines and complete the exercises attached to them to support your understanding of framing.

Reflection exercise

Have a look at your local newspaper coverage of asylum seekers and refugees and check online for news stories about people seeking asylum.

Now, consider the headline "Smiling asylum" on the media report pictured from an Australian newspaper.

Smiling Asylum. 14,000 boat people ready to launch mission to Australia – @SharriMarkson @petermichaelNQ @dailytelegraph #frontpagestoday #Australia #TheDailyTelegraph pic.twitter.com/3A5UHZ3R3R
— ◇◇◇◇◇ ◇◇◇◇◇ ◇◇◇◇◇ 🖥 (@ukpapers) August 27, 2018

Then consider the questions below.

1. How does the headline frame the issue of asylum seeking?
2. What is missing from this framing of the issue?
3. Rewrite this headline to reflect a 'fairer' and 'fuller' framing of the social issue at hand.
4. Write a few short paragraphs to justify your revised headline.

Resources to support further learning

Readings:

- Bacchi, C. 2009. 'Introducing a 'what's the problem represented to be?' approach to policy analysis. In. Bacchi, C. *Analysing policy: what's the problem represented to be?* Chapter 1.
- Cairney, P. 2015. Blog and podcast: policy concepts in 1000 words – 'framing'.
- Carson, L. 2018. The politics of the problem – how to use Carol Bacchi's work. Power to Persuade Blog.

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6.

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Environment

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Learning Objectives for this Chapter
After reading this Chapter, you should be able to: • develop an introductory understanding of the sorts of topics that social scientists working in the area of environmental sociology typically explore, and • develop skills to critically analyse approaches to understanding and managing our environment, drawing on different theoretical perspectives.

How do social scientists think about the environment?

Environmental sociology examines the interactions and interrelationships between society and the natural environment. According to Harper (in Hannigan 2014), the movement grew out of the 'Limits of growth' model, which was proposed by Meadows et al. (1972). The model drew attention to the fact that: "… the world's finite… resources — timber, coal, oil — were being depleted at an alarmingly rapid clip and were in danger of running out. [The authors of the model] pointed to runaway population growth, uncontrolled industrial production and material consumption as the chief culprits" (Hannigan 2014: 3).

Fifty years on, the situation has worsened dramatically; the ways in which we live continue to have considerable and wide-ranging negative impacts on our environment. Climate change and global warming are now central features in most environmental debates and, while climate (and other) scientists play an important role in helping us to understand the extent of damage to the planet (e.g., atmospheric changes), social scientists also have a great deal to contribute. A sociological perspective is critically important, for example, in exploring how humans have contributed to and can also respond to the threats posed by environmental degradation and climate change. By making simple changes to the ways in which we live and organise our societies, it is possible to halt and even reverse the impacts of environmental degradation and climate change.

Reflection exercise
Think about how life might be different if we were to live in ways that recognised how deeply interconnected we are

to the environment around us. For instance, how might this affect our work, families, cities, systems of government, economy and/or more?

As we've discussed in previous chapters, using our sociological imaginations is central to thinking critically about social 'problems' – including by thinking through both agency and structure, and how these interact. Going back to our earlier diagram (see right), it helps us to think about how relationships between the concentric circles of our nested lives play a role in both framing our understanding and responses to social problems.

Thinking sociologically about our 'nested' realities

Drawing on our sociological imaginations is also critically important in environmental sociology. It helps us to think through the myriad ways in which we, as individuals, might change our behaviours, but also how social institutions and broader social structures can also influence and/or lead change. While individuals can play an important role, it is unlikely that we will see substantial improvements until we see significant shifts at the level of social structure — for instance, in key social institutions, like the economy.

Sustainable development goals

The notion of sustainable development arose in the 1980s and seeks to balance development across the 'triple bottom line' of social ('people'), economic ('profit') and environmental ('planet') domains (Elkington 1997). For development to be sustainable, it must consider all three areas at once.

In 2000, countries across the world came together to develop a set of eight goals that sought to achieve sustainability in global development, as well as tackle global poverty. These were called the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and were later replaced with a more complex set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. The SDGs seek to (for example) end poverty, improve wellbeing (e.g. by achieving zero hunger, improving health care, and addressing other social determinants of health), promote peace and encourage sustainable living. However, in many industrialised societies, including Australia, concerns about the economy still tend to override concerns about people and the environment. This demonstrates (again) that solutions to social

The 'triple bottom line'

challenges require us to tackle deeply divisive questions about the kinds of societies we want to live in — questions that are tightly bound up with politics and power.

Reflection exercise

Watch the video below, which provides a quick explanation of how the SDGs came about.

Transitioning from the MDGs to the SDGs [3:02]

After watching the video, consider: while sustainable development is supposed to balance development across the social, economy and environmental domains, we frequently see businesses make decisions that prioritise profit over people and the planet. Before moving on, can you think of some examples where this is the case?

Reflection exercise: critiquing the SDGs

The SDGs are far from universally celebrated, and many have heavily critiqued the SDG approach. For a brief overview of some of these core critiques, read this short blog from the London School of Economics:

Hickel, Jason. 2015. 'Five reasons to think twice about the UN's Sustainable Development Goals'. *LSE Blog*, September 23.

After reading the blog, do the following:

1. Take a piece of paper and write down, in your own words, short summaries of the so-called 'five reasons to think twice about the SDGs'.
2. After writing your short summaries, reflect on these five arguments/critiques. Which critique do you think is strongest or most important? Why do you think so?
3. Are there additional critiques of the SDGs that you think are missing from the short analysis provided in this blog?

Climate change

Carbon trading is one means by which global carbon emissions can be reduced. Carbon trading essentially places a price on carbon emissions and thus, provides a financial incentive for companies to reduce their emissions over time. However, in her case study concerning Green Resources, Professor Kristen Lyons demonstrates how this kind of approach can also produce other unintended negative outcomes. This, again, draws out the crucial importance of using our sociological imaginations to think through how different responses to climate change can have varying impacts across our nested realities. Professor Lyons draws attention, for example, to the inequities in how we think about and respond to climate change — in particular, that those living in poverty are typically not responsible for climatic pollution, and yet tend to bear the burden of such impacts.

What is carbon trading?

To learn more about how carbon trading works, you might like to watch How Carbon Trading Works (YouTube, 2:43):

> 🖳 One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
> https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=30#oembed-2

Reflection exercise: 'whose responsibility is it to cool the planet?'

Watch Responsibility to cool a warming planet does not lie with the poor (YouTube, 16:46) below, which shows a TedTalk presented by Professor Kristen Lyons.

> 🖳 One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
> https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=30#oembed-3

After watching the video, consider the following:

1. How do the social sciences assist you to think more broadly about the causes and consequences of environmental issues?
2. What are some of the drivers of the global carbon offset industry, and how effective do you think it is in addressing the global challenge of climate change?

Climate change amidst COVID-19

Research released in 2020 indicated that, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, "Global carbon emissions are likely to see their steepest fall… since the second world war" (Vaughan 2020). The below graph clearly illustrates this considerable drop.

The coronavirus pandemic has already driven a 17 per cent drop in global CO2 emissions this year
Fossil C02 emissions, million tonnes per day (2020 figure is for 7 April)
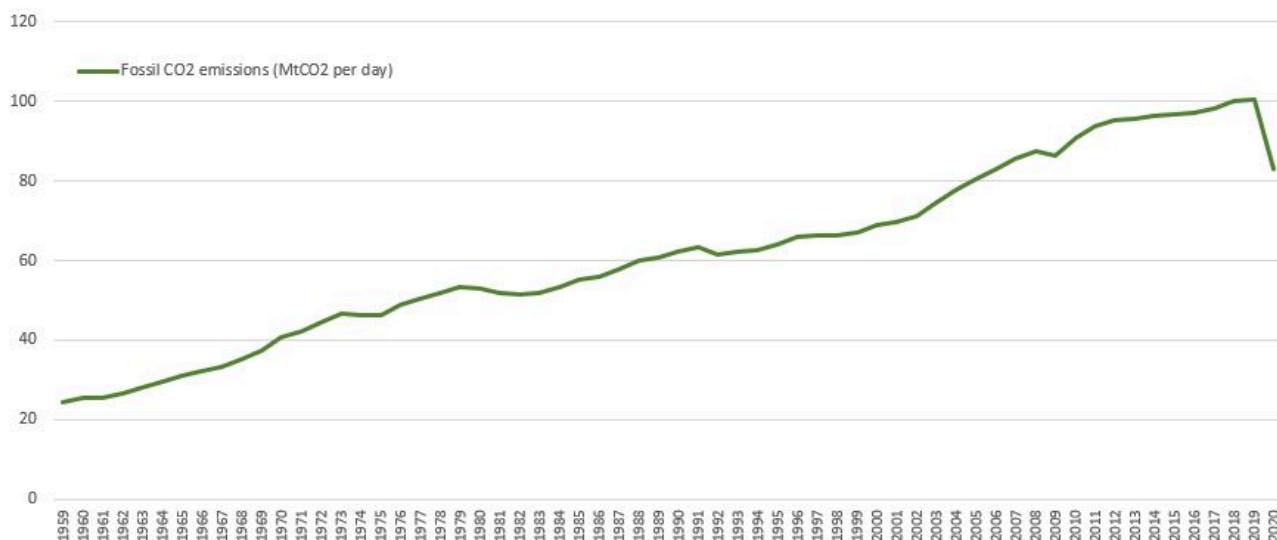
Climate change and COVID-19 (Authors' adaptation from Vaughan 2020)

It was expected, however, that these emissions would surge again during 2021, triggering calls for structural change to maintain co2 reductions (e.g. see Harvey 2020). This prediction was realised, with reporting indicating that carbon emissions had recovered again (Forster 2020). Forster (2020) reported that "Looking further ahead to 2030, simple climate models have estimated that global temperatures will only be around 0.01C lower as a result of COVID-19 than if countries followed the emissions pledges they already had in place at the height of the pandemic." The global carbon monitor indicates that carbon emissions have, indeed, tended to track back upwards between 2020 and 2022.

Reflection exercise

Have a think about the above and then consider the following:

1. What kinds of changes that occurred during the pandemic do you think would have contributed *most* to these drops in emissions?
2. How might this help us to think about the way forward for reducing emissions in the post-COVID era?

Environmental extractivism, colonialism, and poverty

In considering the impacts of climate change, it is also crucial that we – as social scientists, using our sociological imaginations – understand how this contemporary social issue is also inflected by differing historical and political contexts. In this sub-section, we do this by considering the role of extractive industry ('extractivism' to use Professor Naomi Klein's terminology) as part of colonial and neocolonial politics, and as being intimately bound up with contemporary experiences of poverty and exposure to climate change risks. Here, we draw on a case study of the island nation

of Nauru from a recent book, *Island Criminology* (Scott and Staines, 2023). This text considers these cases through a 'green criminology' and critical theory lens.

The term 'green criminology' was first coined in 1990 (Lynch, 1990 ; Mahabir, 1990) and sought to draw attention to crimes committed against the physical and cultural environment. More than this, though, green criminology tends to expand the notion of 'crime' to include a kind of 'harm-ology' – that is, to consider not only harms to humans that may or may not be socially constructed as crimes, but also harm to the environment, to other species, and more (Shearing, 2015). It is only relatively recently, however, that green criminology has turned its attention more wholeheartedly towards the effects of environmental destruction on Indigenous peoples, including under colonisation (Lynch, Stretesky, & Long, 2018). Lynch et al (2018), for example, explore how Indigenous peoples have been caught up in a globalised, capitalist, and corporatised treadmill of production, and been subject to the exploitative extraction of natural resources from their territories (also see Bunker, 2005). Drawing on Klein (2015) , Morris (2019 , p 1123) explains:

> Extractivism is the form of accumulation, associated with colonialism and imperialism, whereby territories, populations, and animal and plant life were rendered into commodities for the taking so as to enrich the world economic centres. It is also an ideological mindset of removing resources under the guise of 'development', ultimately benefiting wealthy countries at the expense of poorer ones. What is new about extractivism today is the expansion of corporations and non-government organizations into ever-growing resource frontiers globally.

Nauru and extractive (neo)colonialism

Nauru is situated in Micronesia, north-east of Australia, has a population of around 10,800 people and is about 21 km2 in size (World Bank, 2021). The island's isolation and remoteness meant that it was protected from colonisation for a longer period than many other Pacific islands, though the late 1800s saw interest in the fertiliser trade 'catapult ... [Nauru] onto the international trading scene' (Morris, 2019, p 1125). The island of Nauru, initially a German colony (from 1888, after Germany was gifted the island in the Anglo-German Declaration), became a League of Nations mandated territory in 1914, and was subsequently administered by Australia until it achieved independence in 1968 (Bray, 1930; Morris, 2019). Having been identified as a rich site of phosphorous in the late 1800s, it later became what Morris (2019, p 1125) refers to as an 'Australian-run British Phosphate Commission Control', with mining rights jointly held by Australia, New Zealand, and Britain (with the two former countries being settler colonies of the latter) (Bray, 1930). The Pacific Islands Company (later Pacific Phosphate Company [PPC]) began mining on the small island from 1906 (Pollock, 2014), and extractive mining soon became Nauru's main industry, with the Australian, New Zealand, and British governments buying out the PPC in 1920 to establish in its place the British Phosphate Commissioners (BPC).

Nauru's isolation and remoteness supported the monopolisation of its resources by these powers, and particularly Australia as administrator. As one Australian public servant, P. Deane, cited in Firth (1978, p 36), explained, it was 'impossible ... to estimate the enormous value of the island [of Nauru] to Australia ... It not only ensures to the farmer, free of all outside interference and control, his full requirements of phosphates – but does so at cost price.' Early representations of the role of mining in the small island nation were overwhelmingly positive, depicting residents as having been 'saved' and made rich through industrial development (Morris, 2019). For example: '[Pleasant Island, or Nauru] is ... self-supporting and the natives [*sic.*], grouped for administrative purposes into fourteen districts, each presided over by a chief, play the role of rich land-owners, receiving both rents for their lands and royalties on each ton of phosphate shipped' (Bray, 1930, p 1371).

As we turn to below, however, the reality was far different. A similar scene played out during

the 20th century on Ocean Island – now part of the nation state of Kiribati, and Nauru's closest neighbour being situated nearly 300 km to the east. Phosphate mining began on Ocean Island from 1900 and continued until 1980 (Teaiwa, 2015a), originally being enabled through what Firth (1978, pp 36–7) describes as a 'scandal', since 'Albert F Ellis of the Pacific Islands Company persuaded two [Indigenous Banaba] chiefs to put their marks on a document giving the company the right to take Ocean Island phosphate for 999 years for the trifling sum of £50 a year'. As mining expanded on Ocean Island, the British administration acquired further land and eventually, in 1945, forcibly exiled the local Banabans to Fiji's Rabi Island (Firth, 1978). Drawing on the examples of both Nauru and Ocean islands, Firth (1978, p 37) argues that at the time these mining industries were established, 'governments were merely the agents of private companies, providing legality for whatever the companies wished to do'. And in contrast to the often-positive portrayals of industrial expansion on the islands, the influx of people and trade has instead wrought numerous devastating effects, while providing few if any returns.

In Nauru, new influxes of people, including indentured labourers, to support local mining brought previously unknown diseases, including leprosy from 1911 onwards (Bray, 1930). As an example of islanding *within* islands (Mountz, 2015), lepers in Nauru were subject to several isolation practices, including being exiled to a Nauruan lazaret and for the most severe of cases, on a 'strip of the coastline, consisting of coral reef and foreshore [which] has been isolated, ... well supplied with water and food-bearing trees ... [and where] Discipline is maintained by two chiefs' (Bray, 1930, p 1373). Nauru claimed independence in 1968 and subsequently nationalised the island's phosphate mining operations, which resulted in the nation briefly claiming the second-highest Gross Domestic Product in the world during the 1970s (that is, after Saudi Arabia). Nevertheless, the phosphate reserves soon diminished and mining-related income dried up (Bambrick, 2018). Thus, in addition to the introduction of disease, phosphate extraction also failed to deliver promised wealth to Nauruans; instead, mining channelled extreme wealth *away* from Nauru and into the hands of administering states and corporations. Meanwhile, Nauruans received little to nothing in the way of income or compensation for the pillaging of their island's finite natural resources, and the country subsequently found itself in bankruptcy, while also needing to deal with significant environmental destruction. As Pollock (2014, p 109) puts it, Nauruans have been left:

> ... with little land to live on, no local resources, limited finances, and a high level of dependency on outside agencies. They must import all necessities, including food and water, using whatever returns their resource has provided throughout the XXth century. Today, they have become dependent on outside aid to replace their denuded island's wealth.

Bambrick (2018, p 273) explains that 'Most of the island is [now] missing, leaving just a coastal ring, and pollution from mining has also devastated surrounding fisheries from polluted run-off.' However, neither Nauru nor Ocean Island have received just compensation for the devastation caused by the histories of extractive mining that took place there. In Nauru's case, a compensation claim was made to the International Court of Justice in relation to damage caused by phosphate mining while the nation was under Australian administration (1914–68), but no legal finding was made and the matter was instead settled out of court in 1993, with Australia agreeing to pay Nauru a mere $107 million total in compensation – about half in a lump sum, and the remaining portion over a 20-year period ([Maclellan, 2013](#)). While the payment was intended to finance the island's environmental rehabilitation, this has not occurred (Gale, 2016). Moreover, the final remaining reserves of phosphate continue to be mined on the island, with ongoing involvement by Australian mining companies. The operations of one Australian mining company on Nauru also recently attracted the attention of the Australian Federal Police, who found it had used inducements to secure political support for its continued mining operations (Dinnen & Walton, 2016). Meanwhile,

Nauru's position as a severely depleted remote island, in need of external aid for survival, has been used to explain its subsequent take up of the Australian government's 'most recent industrial package', which has seen it shift to a new industry of refugee detention from 2001 onwards, beginning with the Australian government's 'Pacific Solution' policy (Morris, 2019, p 1126; also McClellan, 2013).

The primary industry on the island has subsequently shifted in a relatively short space of time, from mining to refugee processing – again on behalf of and benefiting Australia, and arguably representing a kind of neo-colonial extractivism (Morris, 2019). The 2001 Australia–Nauru agreement resulted in an immediate influx of funding into the small island to create a new 'industry', which – Morris (2019) argues – saw asylum seekers replacing phosphate as the commodity of interest. Morris' (2019, p 1122) description of the physical legacies of this shift is palpable:

> Nauru's phosphate cantilevers went unrepaired, testament to the residues of a past resource economy in phosphate extraction. Piles of fertilizer component lay in loading warehouses, unfeasible for export to earmarked Australian and Asian destinations due to long-overdue repairs to Nauru's loading bay. The country's landscapes lay pockmarked, mined in a panic of dwindling availability. But three refugee processing centres [now] crowned the country, gleaming from in between dilapidated phosphate extraction fields ...

The impacts of these dovetailing extractive industries are arguably amplified in Nauru because of the limited local resources available to those living on the small island; that is, the size and isolation of the island, coupled with the devastating impacts of colonialism, arguably worked together to seal its fate. Moreover, the isolation and small size of Nauru enables its border to be more carefully administered, while also creating a site of exception where lines of legality are blurred (Agamben, 2005). In some instances, the exceptionalism of this island space has protected Australian political and commercial interests, while at other times it has fostered and protected those engaged in corruption within Nauru itself, including Australian businesses and Nauruan nationals. In the case of refugee detention, Nauru's relative isolation is also helpful in keeping most of the horrors of Australian asylum seeker policy hidden from view, and – because they are detained offshore – these asylum seekers also have no official recourse to appeal decisions on their refugee status determinations under Australian law. This essentially enables Australia to openly contravene its obligations under multiple international conventions, which has resulted in widespread criticism on the international stage. For example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has repeatedly drawn attention to the poor conditions of Australia's offshore detention centres, including in Nauru, Christmas, and Manus islands, and called for an end to Australia's offshore processing policies (UNHCR, 2018), with other national and international advocacy groups doing the same (Amnesty International, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2021; Refugee Council of Australia, 2021).

Meanwhile, the Nauruan government has staunchly protected Australian political interests by frequently disallowing visas to journalists and researchers who are unsympathetic to the operation of its detention centres (Davidson, 2018). The few stories that *have* emerged, however, indicate that asylum seekers' human rights are frequently violated in Nauruan detention, with Amnesty International referring to Nauru in its 2016 report as an 'island of despair' and documenting multiple horrific stories of actual and attempted suicides, including by children. According to Walton and Dinnen (2020 , p 530), Nauru not only benefits from this arrangement by maintaining Australian funding to run the detention centre, but also in terms of gaining leverage in its relations with Australia. The authors argue that this has subsequently 'constrain[ed] ... critical responses [by Australian authorities] to the alleged involvement of local [Nauruan] political actors in organised crime' (Walton & Dinnen, 2020 , p 530). In multiple senses, therefore, Nauru's island isolation

establishes it as an exceptional site where the horrors of Australia's layered extractivism go relatively unnoticed, and whereby Australia can thus escape accountability for its actions.

Since 2015, refugees have no longer been officially 'detained' within the Nauru detention facility, but instead able to experience a level of freedom (within island containment) in an 'open centre'. Thus, Nauru has been described as an 'open air prison that people cannot leave [due to its isolation], even when they have been officially recognised as refugees' (Amnesty International, 2016, p 5). The detention of refugees under administrative (rather than judicial) arrangements means that they have no certainty about time frames for when their cases might be finalised, or when they might be able to leave the island. One Iranian refugee (in Amnesty International, 2016, p 22) who had been granted refugee status, and released to live 'freely' on Nauru, stated:

> Now, the walls have changed, but nothing else. The situation is worse than in the camp [at the Refugee Processing Centre]. Before we were at least waiting, hoping that once we have the refugee status things will change, but now we understand that it doesn't give us any freedom either. It is worse than a prison, because we have no idea how long we are in for and when we can get released.

The walls of the detention centre prison had been merely swapped out, in this refugee's view, for the boundaries of the isolated island itself, which was experienced as dangerous and threatening. In this way, refugees on Nauru appear to experience 'pains of freedom' (Shammas 2014) in the form of uncertainty and (limited) exposure to freedom, without actually being free. They are trapped in a state of island-bound limbo; essentially stateless and homeless (Amnesty International, 2016).

The case of Nauru raises significant questions about social and distributive justice. Indeed, the sum of the past few centuries of ever-intensified industrialisation, (neo)colonialism, and extractivism, especially the burning of extracted coal, has been to create the looming disaster of climate change. It has repeatedly been pointed out that this event is far more likely to negatively impact the world's poorest peoples and countries before anyone else. In particular, it is island states (and non-governing island entities) that are consistently at greatest threat from rising seawaters Mountz, 2015). These are sites 'where the impacts of climate change will be experienced early and dramatically' (Mountz, 2015, p 643); 'Sovereign archipelago atoll states – Tuvalu, Marshall Islands, Kiribati [for example] – face comprehensive drowning with even a modest rise in sea level' (Baldacchino, 2016, p 98). As a Pacific island located nearby these archipelago atoll states, Nauru will also be significantly affected as climate change predictions come to fruition. While Nauru (and other islands) bear the brunt of a warming planet, the negative social and economic impacts of resource extraction discussed above will be layered upon the negative effects of climate change, significantly lowering resilience and affecting long-term health, wellbeing, security, and survival (Bambrick, 2018; Holley et al, 2018).

Bambrick (2018) argues that, in relation to Pacific Island communities, (re)building resilience to climate change should entail a series of first- and second-order strategies that would see healthcare systems and other critical institutions strengthened, as well as promoting a shift away from extractivist capitalism and towards 'climate compatible' development that is community-led and promotes economic inclusion and security (also see Holley et al, 2018). For instance, she argues that sustainable tourism and carbon capture (for example, regeneration of forest regions to construct global carbon sinks) are potential alternatives that could be pursued (Bambrick, 2018). Nevertheless, although alternative industries like tourism and carbon offsets offer different avenues for island economies, they do not address the capitalist and consumptive structures and mindsets that continue to underlie the global climate change crisis in the Age of Anthropocene. In particular, carbon capture has been critiqued as a means of simply underwriting the continuation of extractive capitalism (as discussed earlier in this chapter), while making it more politically palatable – a form of 'greenwashing' (Klein, 2015). In contrast, a more fundamental change is arguably needed to avert the

climate disaster, which would see a dramatic shift in the way that Western capitalism engages with and commodifies both people and the environment.

In this regard, there is much to learn from Indigenous philosophies and practices. As Holley et al (2018, p 191, emphasis added) point out, during the Holocene (about 12,000 years after the last Ice Age), many Indigenous peoples across the globe lived with 'conceptions and rules that recognized our *interconnectedness* with the natural world', while 'many in the Global North barely glimpsed, or did not fully understand or acknowledge ... that Nature constituted our biophysical security'. An initial step towards a more ecologically 'just' future might entail, for example, re-engaging with Western notions of time and space, which are typically conceived of as linear and fixed: signalling a beginning and (inevitable) end. For some Indigenous cultures, however, time is non-linear and not even circular. As Apalech (Wik) man from northern Australia, Tyson Yunkaporta (2019, pp 44–6), explains in relation to what he refers to as 'First Law':

> It all comes out from that central point of impact, that big bang expanding and contracting, breathing out and in, no start and finish but a constant state where past, present and future are all one thing, one time, one place. Every breath ever taken is still in the air to breathe. I breathe the breaths of the Ancestors, and everybody else's too ... This is a sustainable system. Nothing is created or destroyed; it just moves and changes, and this is the First Law. Creation is in a constant state of motion, and we must move with it as the custodial species or we will damage the system and doom ourselves.

Arguably, a dramatic shift would arise if the planet were to be viewed through this lens by the colonising and corporate powers that have been primary architects of its destruction. Indeed, this kind of 'long' time represents a break from the short-termism that so often characterizes extractivist mindsets and endeavours. Surely also, human interaction with the lands and seas would change if all understood that, as a 'custodial species', we are nevertheless inseparable from (and thus, not in a position to dominate or commodify) the lands, seas, skies, and living organisms that reside within (Yunkaporta, 2019). In the broader research literature, these views are most often described as forms of environmental stewardship, which seek to protect, restore, and sustainably manage/ utilize lands, seas, and the resources they hold, either explicitly or implicitly building on Indigenous ontologies and knowledges (Ens et al, 2016; Bennett et al, 2018). As radical (and subsequently, critical) criminology has long argued, a different valuing of natural and human resources would also perhaps contribute to reducing poverty, increasing social cohesion, and reducing *crime*. More than this, though, Holley et al (2018, p 186) ask how legal, security, and criminological scholarship in the Age of the Anthropocene can grapple with the question: 'how [can] humanity secure itself from itself?' By breaking down the socially constructed boundaries between humans, other species, and the planet – that is, (re-)embracing Indigenous ontologies that see this inseparability as simply part of life – legal scholars, criminologists, and others might conceive of the environment and other species that live within as additional 'beings' that are also deserving of respect and protection, possibly through conferral of legal rights (Holley et al, 2018). This also potentially paves the way for a green criminology that focuses on the interwoven security of both people *and* planet (Cao & Wyatt, 2016). As shown above, the actions of colonial and corporate extractivism have had disastrous effects for both island environments and peoples. Conversely, the world's islands will be (and are) among the earliest and most significant beneficiaries of stewardship alternatives. In this respect, the places and spaces of islands in this emerging green criminology demand ongoing consideration.

Reflection exercise: Extractivism and justice for Nauru

After reading the above section about extractivism and (neo)colonialism in Nauru, consider the following:

- Think about the SDGs (described earlier), including the critiques of the SDGs described in the blog by Jason Hickel (referred to earlier in the chapter). How might an SDG approach respond to the situation in Nauru?
- Which, if any, of Hickel's critiques of the SDGs might be borne out through the case study of Nauru?
- What approach do you think should be taken to restoring justice to the island nation of Nauru, and why?

Resources to support further learning

Readings:

- Hannigan, J. 2014. Planet in peril. In. *Environmental Sociology.* Routledge: London and New York.
- Cumpston, Z. 2020. To address the ecological crisis, Aboriginal peoples must be restored as custodians of Country. *The Conversation.*
- Butzer, K. 2011. Collapse, environment, and society. PnAS, 109(10): 3632-3639.
- Candell, P. et al. 2020. 'Global emissions are down by an unprecedented 7% — but don't start celebrating just yet.' *The Conversation,* December 11.
- Forster, P. 2021. 'Covid-19 paused climate emissions – but they're rising again.' *BBC Future,* March 15.
- Maclellan N., 'What has Australia done to Nauru?', *Overland* (No. 212, spring 2013).
- Scott, J. and Staines, Z. 2023. *Island Criminology.* Bristol University Press.

Other resources:

- Tsinghua University, Laboratoire des sciences du climat & de l'environnement (LSCE), University of California, and Chinese Academy of Sciences. 2022. *Global carbon monitor, real-time carbon monitoring 'evolution' map.* Available at Carbon monitor.

7.

Health

Learning Objectives for this Chapter

After reading this Chapter, you should be able to:

- develop an introductory understanding of the sorts of topics that social scientists working in the area of health typically explore,
- begin to critically analyse approaches to health and wellbeing, drawing on different theoretical perspectives, and
- critically situate health and wellbeing in their social contexts by thinking about how social characteristics can contribute to the health and welfare of people and groups.

How do social scientists understand health and wellbeing?

The sociology of health is concerned with the social institution of medicine and, as White (2017: 44) describes, it "ranges over a wide territory: [interrogating, for example] how some conditions come to be called diseases; the experience of being sick or ill; the organisation of the medical profession; the ways in which health policies are produced; and the workings of hospitals." The sociology of health has changed its focus and emphasis over time.

In the 1950s sociology concerning medicine was most often focused on assisting the "dissemination of medical knowledge" and encouraging "patient compliance with medical directives" (White 2017: 37). There was very little questioning or critique of the institution of medicine or the way it was practiced; health institutions were generally considered to be benevolent and, as **Talcott Parsons** (1902-1979) (the so-called 'father' of structural functionalism) argued, the institution of medicine tended to be uncritically regarded as being crucially important in operating alongside other institutions to support a harmonious and self-sustaining society.

Reflection exercise

Before you move on, grab a pen and paper and write down a short (~30 word) critique of the structural functionalist perspective of medicine (which prevailed in the 1950s, as described above) as a purely benevolent social institution. Think about your critique; what have you included, and what might you have missed?

From the 1960s onwards, social scientists became more interested in how conflict and power might also be expressed through the field of medicine. For instance, consider the concept of medicalisation. The concept of 'medicalisation' refers to the process by which some aspects of the human condition come to be defined as representing 'illness' or 'sickness'. In turn, labelling someone as 'ill' enables a whole range of medical interventions to take place. From the 1960s onwards, sociologists began to become interested in how labels of illness might reflect social norms around behaviours, instead of illness per se.

In one of his earlier books called *Madness and Civilisation,* Foucault (1961) talked about how the idea of 'madness' (or mental illness) has changed over time, from being treated in some societies as a sign of wisdom or spiritual connectedness to being classified as dangerous, where individuals were confined (e.g. in asylums) and subjected to heavily invasive 'corrective' treatments, such as frontal lobotomies, the use of mind-altering drugs, and electro convulsion therapy (ECT) (White 2017: 39).

The very act of defining something as an illness can be thought of as the process of constructing a new 'truth', which influences how we think about ourselves and others. Consider the following:

- **Homosexuality** was only removed from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) in 1973 — until then, it was considered and treated as a mental illness, worthy of intervention and correction (Drescher 2015). (If you're interested in reading more, see [Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality](#).)
- For a large part of the 19th and 20th centuries, **women's 'hysteria'** was considered a legitimate medical condition, where women apparently suffered from a "wide array of symptoms including sexual desire and the nebulous 'tendency to cause trouble'." (Maines 2012) It invited a range of invasive treatments, such as confinement and (later) ECT (also see [Tasca et al. 2012](#)).
- In your reading, White (2017: 46) describes what was, during the 19th century, referred to as **'Drapteomania'**. The symptoms of this so-called disease involved African American slaves running away from plantations on which they were forced to work. As White (2017: 46) describes, "the white plantation owners called in the doctors. And the doctors, as skilled practitioners of a technical and scientific practice, diagnosed the condition as a disease and prescribed a remedy: the removal of both big toes, thereby making running a physical impossibility."

Both Goffman ([1961](#)) and Foucault ([1961](#)) questioned the role of medicine as "a value-loaded system of social control operating under the guise of science" (White 2017: 39). Foucault wrote from first-hand experience as someone who had suffered from mental illness and who had also worked in a mental health hospital during his younger years. In the views of these (and other) scholars, symptoms of illness (the definitions of which have changed considerably over time) mark someone as 'deviant' — that is as deviating from the 'norm' of a 'healthy' body and mind. Thus, medicine operates (alongside other social institutions) to recognise and punish deviance and to, in turn, encourage conformity with **hegemonic** social and cultural norms. This kind of thinking took sociologists further towards conflict and critical theory perspectives of health and medicine, which recognised that the social institution of medicine itself could both reflect and reinforce hegemonic social norms. However, the institution of medicine did so in ways that appealed to the evidence base of scientific 'truths' and was, therefore, particularly powerful.

In anthropology, too, the field of **medical anthropology** developed to answer questions at the intersection of culture, society, health and illness around the world as well as critique existing structures, institutions and norms that perpetuate(d) prevailing norms as discussed above. Medical anthropology explores how social, political, economic, and cultural factors influence people's experiences of health, illness, and healthcare. Medical anthropologists aim to understand the

complex relationships between biological, social, and cultural factors that determine health outcomes, well-being and broader societal views on health issues. Medical Anthropology as a seperate sub-field emerged in the mid-20th century and has since grown to encompass a wide range of topics, from the study of local healing practices to the examination of global public health issues, such as pandemics. At the heart of anthropological studies is the examination of the cultural meanings of health and illness and the ways in which people's experiences thereof are shaped by their cultural beliefs, values, and practices. To gain this understanding, medical anthropologists use **ethnography**. This is the key qualitative method in anthropology to study cultures, societies and people, often for extended periods of time, to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of the particular issue investigated. Medical anthropologists use participatory observation, interviews and comparative case studies to understand the social, cultural, and historical contexts of health and illness around the world.

Since the 1960s a key theme for medical anthropology has been the study of the unequal distribution of health and illness, and the ways in which social and political factors contribute to health disparities. Paul Farmer (1959-2022) has been instrumental in highlighting the structural issues at play that determine people's health. He was a social justice activist and global health pioneer, co-founding Partners in Health in 1987 to address a lack of medical facilities in Haiti. Farmer was a medical doctor and anthropologist, which meant he understood both the daily medical needs of patients and practitioners as well as the broader historical, economic, political, social and cultural barriers to better healthcare for marginalised people around the world. He and his organisation have pioneered ways of delivering low cost but good healthcare to remote and underserved regions, even helping to rebuild Rwanda's entire healthcare system. Within the academic field his most significant contributions have been to our understanding of the social determinants of health and the impact of structural violence on global health.

Reflection exercise

Watch [Health & medicine – crash course sociology (YouTube, 11:14):](#)

> One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
> https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=32#oembed-1

After watching the above video, consider the following questions:

1) What are some key areas of focus for a sociology of health and medicine?

2) How might other social institutions, such as family or work, or other characteristics, such as gender, shape how you understand and respond to symptoms of illness?

Social determinants of health

The movement towards more critical perspectives of health also led sociologists to recognise that health was influenced by not just individual, but also structural factors, such as social class and other social determinants. White (2017: 41) described this critique as follows:

> The medical model explained disease and illness as the outcome of the invasion of a germ or virus into the individual's body. The cure was the administration of drugs or the application of technologically based treatments.
>
> [However] That individuals became sick because of the invasion of a germ or virus, and could

be cured by the application of medically prescribed regimens, over-looked the fact that individuals also lived in social groups that may have had as much to do with their illness and diseases as germs or viruses. It is quite possible to be infected with a germ or virus and not be diseased. This finding is particularly well established in the case of tuberculosis, where occupation and living conditions play a large part in whether or not the disease develops.

Reflection exercise

Before you read on, think about some key social factors that might determine someone's health over their life course. Write a list of the things that come to mind.

After writing your list, watch [What Makes Us Healthy? Understanding the Social Determinants of Health (YouTube, 6:27)](https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=32#oembed-2) below. Once you've watched the video, revisit your list. Would you add anything else to either your own list, or to what is discussed/described in the video?

> One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=32#oembed-2

Structural determinants, like socioeconomic and political context, can influence (and be influenced by) individual characteristics, such as gender, race, and class. Thus, our position in society is a key factor in determining whether we will experience good or poor health over our lives. As White (2017: 44) explains, "For a sociologist, what people get sick of, how they are treated, and what they die of are a product not of their personality or, primarily, of their biology, but of their position in a set of power relationships that are formed out of access to those social goods which guarantee the quality of life."

Thus, those studying a sociology of health tend to focus on health through the lens of their **sociological imaginations.** This encourages them to think through the nested realities of individuals and how these can influence health and wellbeing over time. In particular — and building on the key themes we've discussed in previous weeks — this enables us to move beyond conceptions of medicine as the "value-free workings of a disinterested scientific practice" and instead explore it as "the product of social relationships" (White 2017: 48).

Bond and Singh (2020) talk about this in your reading with regard to the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples in Australia. The authors question the Closing the Gap 'refresh', which began in 2019, on the grounds that it would be unlikely to result in policies that address the structural and social determinants of poorer health for Indigenous peoples. While direct engagement by Indigenous peoples in the refresh process was considered positive, Bond and Singh (2020: 198) state:

> Whether such engagement will engender the radical reimagining required to transform persisting Indigenous health disparities remains to be seen. There is a danger that the engagement of Indigenous peaks [i.e. Indigenous peak representative organisations], many of which are reliant on federal funding, will be used to embellish a policy agenda that effectively maintains the status quo and, further, will be held responsible for any future policy failings in Indigenous health.

Think about this line of argument in relation to the systemic issues of racism and inequality that are raised in the below video and activity. Can a mere 'refresh' of Closing the Gap targets address these

kinds of deeply embedded and racialised structural inequalities that are a primary contributor to poorer health outcomes for Indigenous Australians? Bond and Singh (2020: 199) argue, for instance, that:

> Epidemiological discourses that describe the gap [in health outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians] are limited in their ability to close the gap because the mechanism by which the gap is made real — race — is barely understood by the epidemiologist.

Resources to support further learning

Readings:

- White, K. 2017. The development of the sociology of health. In. *An introduction to the sociology of health and illness* (3rd edition). London: Sage Publications, pp. 36-58.
- Bond, C. and Singh, D. 2020. More than a refresh required for closing the gap of Indigenous health inequality. *Medical Journal of Australia, 212(5):* 198-199
- Bond, C. and Singh, D. 2019. *Canada-Australia Indigenous health and wellness racism working group – discussion paper and literature review*. University of Queensland and Lowitja Institute: Brisbane.
- Munro, J. and Hoffstaedter, G. 'COVID-19 and "medical citizenship": How the pandemic is generating new forms of belonging and exclusion'.

Other resources:

- Crash Course Sociology – Health and Medicine (YouTube, 11:14),

8.

Development

Learning Objectives for this Chapter

After reading this Chapter, you should be able to:

- understand the sorts of topics that social scientists working in the area of international and community development explore,
- explore key concepts pertaining to international and community development, enabling you to think more deeply about the ways in which such work can be undertaken,
- understand and critically analyse approaches to international and community development, drawing on different theoretical perspectives.

How do social scientists think about (international) development?

Development has been central to the social sciences for a very long time, especially the way societies develop over time economically, politically, and socially. In the last few decades studies of development of people and the nation-states they live in have become their own field of 'development studies' that encompasses anthropology, sociology, political science, international relations, and many other social sciences. Economic approaches and studies have dominated the field and have focused on the growth of gross domestic product (GDP) and the expansion of market-oriented economies as key indicators of development. Political science has explored the role of states and international governmental and non-governmental organisations in shaping development outcomes, while anthropology and sociology have focused on the social and cultural dimensions of development, including issues of power, inequality, and identity.

Arturo Escobar (1952-)

Arturo Escobar is a Colombian anthropologist and critical development scholar who is best

The history of (international) development has predominantly been concerned with developing the so-called Third World, which in turn was produced by the West and its so-called First World status. For the global South to be reduced to a supposed underdeveloped 'Third World' status, which carries many negative connotations, requires a global North to benefit from the trading arrangements in place (see **world systems theory** in the introduction). In this view the global South is largely made up of former colonies that remain in a dependent relationship. In this vein, development has become a new word for

colonialism, especially in its form of international development aid (Hayter 1971).

In the post-World War II era, the concept of development became central to the agendas of most newly independent, decolonising states, many of which saw it as a path to modernity and progress. The price they had to pay to access funding, loans and aid was to sign up to a politico-economic system of one of the two superpowers, the Soviet Union or the United States of America. For all those who aligned with the US and the West more broadly became subject to economic interventions that sought to open domestic markets to international markets, create an international legal framework to make international trade easier and allow foreign ownership (and the extraction of resources and profit) of key industries and resources.

Development can be defined as the:

> ...sum of the social processes induced by voluntarist acts aimed at transforming a social milieu, instigated by institutions or actors who do not belong to the milieu in question , but who seek to mobilize the milieu, and who rely on the milieu in their attempt at grafting resources and/or techniques and/or knowledge (Olivier de Sardan 2015: 24-25).

What does this broad definition mean? Usually, that an outside party comes in and transforms or attempts to transform the material conditions, local practices and/or mindset of people. Often, this is aimed at changing the economic conditions of a given place such that they may better serve the people – depending on the intervention that can have beneficial effects to locals or those in faraway places. This is where things get complicated, because an easy definition would say that, of course, any intervention should be to benefit the people, e.g. lift people out of poverty and increase their well-being. However, many development interventions have had adverse effects on the people they were meant to serve. To elucidate this, let's look at some examples of development interventions.

known for his critiques of traditional development practices. In his influential book, "Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World," Escobar argues that development has been shaped by Western-centric perspectives and is inherently tied to a colonial legacy. He argues that development has been used as a tool of domination, leading to cultural and ecological destruction, and perpetuating global inequalities. Escobar also calls for a more participatory, culturally sensitive, and ecologically responsible approach to development that is grounded in local knowledge and perspectives.

In a paper I (Gerhard) wrote in 2011 with Prof Chris Roche on the performance of international development aid we documented how the state has to be performed in such a manner that it is identical to that of the aid donor in order to receive development aid (Hoffstaedter & Roche 2011). This means all states have to conform to what a modern Western nation state looks like so that aid donors, like the Australian government through AusAID or the United States through USAID, can communicate directly with their counterparts. The problem is that in some states there are no clear counterparts, or states are still forming, with break away regions, not under singular control. Any such deviation from the Weberian modern state model, where the nation state has a monopoly on violence and thus control, is seen as a deficiency or gap, that development actors seek to address and rectify. Such states are quickly called 'weak', 'fragile', or worse still 'failed' states. This diminishes the diversity of political actors or political governance models that exist around the world.

At the heart of much of the debates are how international inequality has been shaped and continues to shape the lived experiences of many people and to what degree we can achieve a just world order.

Here is a short video of Bill Easterley on some more issues with development aid and how that aid gets lost along the way sometimes...

[Why does foreign aid fail? (YouTube, 6:33)](https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=31#oembed-1):

Source: [Big Think](#).

David Mosse

David Mosse is a British social anthropologist and development practitioner who has made significant contributions to our understanding of the cultural dimensions of development. In his work, Mosse argues that development projects often fail to achieve their intended outcomes due to a lack of attention to the cultural dimensions of development. He has studied the ways in which development programs shape the social and cultural norms of communities, and has explored the importance of local cultural practices and beliefs in shaping development outcomes. One focus is on how development discourse creates powerful narratives that distort and often do not reflect the realities on the ground.

Development can be much more insidious when interventions are sold as nation-building efforts but end up displacing many people and making their lives worse. These can include dams that are built to shore up cheap reliable domestic energy for the economy but result in the displacement of people, animals and effects on the local ecosystem. For example, the [Yacyretá Dam on the Paraguay-Argentina border](#) was hailed as a major infrastructure project that received around 2 billion USD loans from the World Bank with costs blowing out to an estimated 11-15 billion USD with corruption cited as a major cause. The dam also displaced tens of thousands of people and the flood plain covered crucial ecosystems, which led to the extinction of several species of animals. The World Bank continues to [fund dams around the world](#) even though its negative effects are well known by now.

This is why it is important to differentiate between development discourse versus development practice. Over the last couple of decades the state-led development dominance has been challenged by grassroots and participatory development. These more inclusive forms take better account of the local people and their interests to create better development interventions. This where community development comes to the fore as a discipline as explained in the next section.

How do social scientists think about community development?

Community development can be practiced in different ways, but generally refers to the empowerment of (typically socially disadvantaged) communities to identify and meet their own needs. This may include needs for basic infrastructure, like water and electricity, or other human needs, such as for social contact, which can improve health and wellbeing. The basis of community development is that it is communities themselves who define what their needs are, as well as the basis and approach for acting on those needs. This rejects the notion of an outsider coming in to impose their own ideas and strategies about the ways and means of development, which as Stoecker (2013: 3) explains, "has been the typical pattern of outsider professionals in dealing with populations that exist at the margins of 'our' society." Stoecker (2013: 3) goes on to explain:

> We interpret people as impoverished and unhappy because they don't have big-screen TVs, or interpret them as more moral and happy because they are living in the woods even when they are dying young from diabetes and heart disease. So we go in to

'fix' them, from our standards and through our own eyes. We apply the golden rule — do unto others as you would have them do unto you — without considering that the 'others' may not be like us, and doing unto them the same as us could in fact be doing harm.

Community development approaches can either be generalised (i.e. focusing on multiple aspects of a community at once) or specialised (i.e. focusing on one aspect in particular, like housing or health) (Stoecker 2013: 4). Regardless, community development practitioners tend to view communities as complex systems with lots of interrelated and moving parts that influence and affect one another. Unlike a typical structural functionalist perspective, however, community development practitioners are also usually deeply concerned with power, including how forms of power and control can disenfranchise some groups, and how those groups might claim their power back. Indeed,

> ...community development is not simply about building things. Safe drinking water, schools, houses, and other physical things are of course important. But even more important is building the capacity of community members to organise themselves so that they can set and achieve their own community goals. (Stoecker 2013: 5)

Reflection exercise

Watch [What is community development? (YouTube, 1:11)](https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=31#oembed-2) about community development.

> One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
> https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=31#oembed-2

After watching the video, take a pen and paper and write down your own brief definition (~30 words) of community development. Check your understanding by watching the video a second time.

Reflexivity in community development

Strong community development practitioners draw on their sociological imaginations to understand their own social positions, and how this might impact their work. Remember back to the materials we covered in module 1. For instance, recall that we discussed Nagel's (1989) concept that there is 'no view from nowhere', which reminds us that we are all embedded in our own social realities and, thus, can never be truly objective outsiders. In this regard, we inevitably bring our own values and beliefs, informed in part by our social positions, to everything we do — including community development.

In this regard, it is critically important that we acknowledge and are **reflexive** about our social positions (our 'positionality') and how these influence our work.

Revision: What is reflexivity?

For some revision on the concept of reflexivity in research, you might like to watch [Reflexivity in Qualitative Research (YouTube, 2:00)](#):

We discussed the concept of reflexivity earlier in the book, in relation to using our sociological imaginations. This is also critically important when undertaking community development work.

Reflection exercise

After moving through the above materials, consider:

1. How might we draw on principles of community development to critique Australia's colonial history?
2. Think about current approaches to 'Indigenous Affairs' in Australia, like ['Close the Gap'](). How might a community development practitioner critique this strategy? (You might also like to read [this Guardian article]() about the 2020 Closing the Gap report.)

Spaces for change

'Spaces for change' are those spaces within which individuals and communities can contribute to, direct and/or deliver change. These can include 'closed', 'open' and 'claimed' spaces:

- **'Closed' spaces** are those in which experts, bureaucrats and others who are invited into the space define and think about social 'problems', and responses to those problems, with very little or no consultation or involvement from those experiencing such 'problems'.
- **'Open' spaces** are those in which authorities (e.g. government) invite others to participate in deliberative processes for identifying and responding to social problems (e.g. deliberative democracy forums).
- **'Claimed' or 'created' spaces** are those that are claimed or created by less powerful social actors — e.g. community members or others — and provide room for grassroots level engagement around defining and responding to social problems.

The *type* of space made available for policy input, as well as how different actors can shape policy *within* those spaces, is deeply influenced by power, as illustrated in [Gaventa's 'Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis' (PDF, 120KB)]() (2006: 25) power cube.

Reflection exercise

Think about examples of policy making you have either witnessed first-hand, or heard about/seen second-hand. Consider the following:

1. Can you think of an example of a policy that might have been advertised as being developed in an open

space, but where this did not take place in practice?

2. Why does this matter? What are the implications for this in a representative democracy?

Resources to support further learning

Readings:

- Hoffstaedter, G. & Roche, C. (2011) 'All the world's a stage': structure, agency and accountability in international aid, *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, 16:4, 529-543, DOI: [10.1080/13547860.2011.610886](10.1080/13547860.2011.610886)
- Kenny, S. 2016. Community development today: engaging challenges through cosmopolitanism? *Community Development Journal*, 51(1): 23-41.
- Stoecker, R. 2013. The community development context of research. In. *Research methods for community change: a project-based approach*. Sage: London.

Other resources:

- Escobar, A. (1995). *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hayter, T. (1971) *Aid as imperialism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Mosse, D. (2005). *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. London: Pluto Press.
- Olivier de Sardan, J.-P. 2005. *Anthropology and development: Understanding contemporary social change*. translated by Antoinette Tidjani Alou, London: Zed Books.

9.

Work

Learning Objectives for this Chapter

After reading this Chapter, you should be able to:

- understand and apply sociological arguments regarding diverse forms of work,
- understand, analyse, and critically evaluate how work is defined under capitalism, including what this includes/excludes, and implications for different social groups,
- understand, analyse, and critically evaluate how work is changing under neoliberalism and capitalism, as well as its impacts on different social groups.

Work, employment, and unemployment

In Chapter 4, we introduced 'work' as a key social institution. Under capitalism, work is reified as the most important and sometimes only means to achieving 'freedom'. Indeed, since the industrial revolution, economic security and participation have centred largely around one's ability to undertake formal, waged labour. This is of course, however, not the only 'work' that people undertake. Indeed, as we touched on in Chapter 4, 'work' can be understood broadly as encompassing work conducted within the formal economy (e.g., via a waged labour relationship with an employer), but also in the informal or 'grey' economy (e.g., unpaid care work, volunteer work, domestic work), *and* within the black (i.e. illegal) economy. Nevertheless, the kind of work that is conducted in these other spheres is generally less visible than that which occurs in the formal economy. We turn to this below, where we first consider the reproductive 'caring' work that holds society together (what Hannah Arendt refers to as 'labour' – see below). This work is largely unseen and devalued under capitalism. Then we consider the changing nature of work, including increasing precarity and automation.

Arendt's concepts of labour, work, and action

In her book, 'The Human Condition', Hannah Arendt (1958) conceptualises labour as one of the three fundamental activities that constitute human an 'active life' (*viva activa*), alongside work and action.

For Arendt, labour is the activity that addresses the basic biological needs of human beings, such as food, shelter,

and clothing. Labour is necessary for survival, repetitive, cyclical, and is also performed in isolation, as individuals must attend to their own bodily needs before they can participate in other activities.

Arendt distinguishes labour from work, which involves the creation of durable objects, such as tools or buildings, and action, which involves human interaction and the creation of relationships and communities. Unlike labour, work and action are characterised by their public and social dimensions.

Arendt argues that in modern society, the emphasis on labour has overshadowed the importance of work and action, leading to a devaluation of human life and a loss of meaning and purpose. She suggests that by rethinking our relationship to labour and emphasising the importance of work and action, we can create a more meaningful and fulfilling human existence.

Reproductive labour and the 'free riding' nature of capitalism

From the ~1960s-80s, second-wave feminists made demands for women to enter the labour market and be treated equally as employees, spurring mass feminisation of the workforce across most developed countries. Indeed, women have moved into paid employment at far higher rates than in the early 20th century, though this varies across different geographies (e.g., remote, urban), different countries, and also across different social groups (e.g., able bodied versus less able, non-Indigenous versus Indigenous, etc.). This is demonstrated in the below graph from the World Bank, which shows female labour force participation for women globally was 52.6% in 2019, though this differs across several large geographic regions (e.g., it was far lower in Latin America & Caribbean and South Asia, and higher across North America and Europe & Central Asia). Australian Bureau of Statistics data demonstrate that Australian women overall are now more likely than ever to be employed, though employment rates remain relatively lower than men, and particularly low for First Nations women and single mothers.

Female labor force participation over three decades
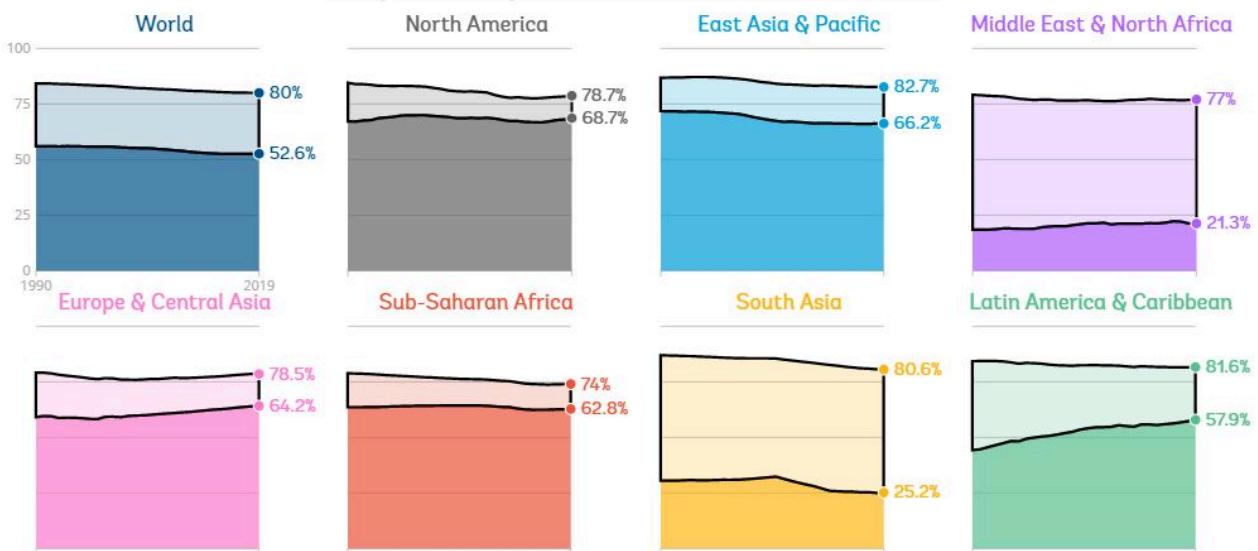
Source: Kugler, Maurice; Viollaz, Mariana; Duque, Daniel; Gaddis, Isis; Newhouse, David; Palacios-Lopez, Amparo; Weber, Michael. 2021. How Did the COVID-19 Crisis Affect Different Types of Workers in the Developing World?. World Bank, Washington, DC. © World Bank 2019. License: CC BY 3.0 IGO

Globally, however, women nevertheless continue to undertake disproportionately high rates of reproductive labour and care work, and this is often juggled as a 'second shift' alongside employment. According to the ILO (2018a: 37), women worldwide performed about 76.2% of the

total hours of unpaid care work in 2018, and "In no country in the world do men and women provide an equal share of unpaid care work". This excludes forms of reproductive labour that are not counted in official statistics, and thus possibly underestimates its overall volume. These statistics also miss racial differences in how reproductive labour is shared, and how this is also anchored in and inflected by histories of racial oppression (Duffy, 2007). In Australia, for instance, First Nations women do more care work (PDF, 346KB), and indeed more *diverse forms* of care work, than any other group.

For most women, juggling waged employment and reproductive labour presents significant difficulties and, in a recent international ILO (2017) survey, was repeatedly identified as the biggest challenge faced by women worldwide. Employment also often fails to be 'family-friendly' for parents and carers, meaning they are more likely to either reduce or exit employment as a strategy to manage their multiple roles. The ILO reported that globally in 2018, labour market participation was 26.5% higher for men (sitting at 75%) than women (sitting at 48.5%) (ILO, 2018b: 7), while in Australia in February 2022, 62.1% of Australian women were participating in the labour force versus 70.9% for men (Australian Government 2022c). For First Nations peoples in Australia, the situation is worse overall, with 56% of men and only 52% of women participating in the labour force at the 2021 Census (ABS 2021).

Caring labour, which is disproportionately undertaken by women, remains grossly undervalued and ignored under capitalism

Women are also more likely to be working part-time as a means of absorbing additional domestic work. In Australia in 2021, for instance, ~44% of all women in the labour force were in part-time work versus 23% for all men (ABS Census 2021), and in 2020–21 men were twice as likely to be in highly paid jobs than women (Australian Government 2021). This results in a persistent gender pay gap, which has only decreased marginally (by ~0.17% per year) since 1975, and which means that women earned 22.8% (or ~$22.8k AUD) per annum less than men in 2022. It also produces a situation whereby women are more likely than men to draw on social security as a source of income for labour that is not remunerated through employment.

As the latest (June 2022) data from the Australian Department of Social Services show, women account for 64% of all social security recipients on average, and this proportion is much higher for social security payment types related to caring and reproductive labour (e.g., Parenting Payments where women represent 94% of total combined recipients). Additionally, despite only representing ~3% of the population, First Nations peoples make up about 7% of all social security recipients. In neoliberal and highly conditional welfare states, like Australia, the UK, and the USA, which tend to have low payment rates, strong means testing, and intensive mutual obligation requirements, this can be a surefire pathway to poverty. Indeed, it is no accident that worldwide, women and particularly First Nations women and women of colour, are more likely to live in poverty.

As feminist scholars like Kathi Weeks, Nancy Fraser, Silvia Federici, and Carol Bacchi have long pointed to, the root cause of the problem here is that patriarchal capitalism does not make visible nor value/remunerate women's reproductive care labour. Indeed, it is *not* that women are inactive, unproductive, or unskilled, but instead that the forms of productivity they often undertake are *simply not seen*. These persistent inequalities have led many to argue, for example, that 'lean-in'

or 'neoliberal feminist' efforts to subsume women into capitalism do not address the patriarchal oppressions that are *built into* capitalism (Aschoff, 2015, 2020; hooks 1982, 2000).

Socialist feminist writer, [Nicole Aschoff](#), argues that a feminism worth fighting for "is one that struggles *against* ... capitali[sm]" (emphasis added), and as [bell hooks](#), [Moreton-Robinson](#) and others have also repeatedly pointed to, one that is also anti-racist. That is, as opposed to the 'lean in' emphases of liberal feminism that seek to subsume women *into* capitalism, an anti-capitalist and anti-racist feminism sees gender inequality and colonial oppression as part of the inherent architecture of capitalism itself. Because these oppressions are woven into the fabric of capitalism, particularly in how the capitalist wage-labour system dismisses reproductive labour, they cannot be overcome by simply aiming for employment or wage parity. Instead, we must pursue strategies (and indeed, perhaps entirely different institutional structures) that (re)centre and fundamentally value care.

Reflection exercise

Take some time to think further about the persistent gender pay gap. Then think about how this is differently explained and responded to from a *radical* feminist perspective, versus a *liberal* feminist perspective. Write a short paragraph explaining each.

As you write, reflect on your own understandings and views about the gender pay gap. Which of these two perspectives do you think best captures your own thinking? Why?

Reflection exercise

In one of her seminal works, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle,* Silvia Federici states:

> "To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital, that capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking. At the same time, it shows that we have cooked, smiled, fucked throughout the years not because it was easier for us than for anybody else, but because we did not have any other choice. Our faces have become distorted from so much smiling, our feelings have got lost from so much loving, our oversexualisation has left us completely desexualised." (pp.15-16)

After reading this quote, reflect on the following:

1. Can capitalism exist without domestic, reproductive labour?
2. Are women more 'suited' to housework and domestic labour or is it, as Federici argues, that they simply had no choice?
3. What avenues of recourse do you think Federici might suggest? (You may wish to search for more information on Federici online while thinking about this last question, including summaries of her other works.)

Work transitions and the precariat

In addition to changes in the gender patterning of paid and unpaid work, work across the globe is

also changing in other important ways. An example is the global trend towards more precarious and insecure forms of work. This includes in forms such as:

- part-time or casual work (including rolling casual contracts, with little opportunity for permanency),
- self-employment, and
- chronically low, sporadic and/or stagnant wages.

Precarious workers are also often unable to enjoy social protections, like guaranteed superannuation, award rates and/or leave entitlements (e.g. sick or maternity leave). Carney and Stanford (2018: 4) note, "Many Australians worry about the insecurity of work, the declining opportunities for permanent, stable employment, and in particular what it means for the next generation of Australian workers — many of whom may never find a permanent, regular job." Indeed, in Australia, the rise of precarious and insecure work is illustrated across several different datasets, as outlined in [Carney and Stanford (2018) (PDF, 1.15MB)](). The impacts of increasingly insecure and precarious work are now felt across most industries and by people from a range of backgrounds. When other factors come into play, such as racism, sexism, ableism and more, some workers can effectively be locked out of the labour market for long periods of time.

Standing (2011) argues that precarious workers, or as he refers to them the 'precariat', are forming as a new class — different to the Marxist proletariat and still not a united force — but with an emerging set of political demands concerning fairer distribution of wealth, greater social protection, and a politics of time. He and others identify several contributing factors to the emergence of the precariat, including:

- a surplus of workers unmatched by a surplus of jobs (so employees increasingly have to take whatever's offered, rather than what might be in their best interest),
- a decline in the general quality of work conditions and workers' rights, which has been accompanied by significant declines in labour union density,
- the excesses of government policies that are directed towards supporting unfettered capitalism (often via **'neoliberalism'**), and
- the rise of technology, which has resulted in new platforms for work (like the 'gig economy').

The latter point regarding the rise of technology is not new, but has instead been at the centre of key changes to the institution of work for centuries. For instance, the so-called Luddites (textile workers during the industrial revolution) used to fear that machines would take their jobs and render them obsolete. Thus, they used to band together to destroy the machinery in the hope of keeping their jobs. Historically, however, advances in technology have typically *displaced* workers by changing the nature of available jobs, rather than making workers obsolete. Some argue that current technological shifts are different and will have more severe impacts, while others argue that the impacts will be similar and that we have little reason to fear robots taking our jobs. For more information, you might like to watch the following video: [The big debate about the future of work, explained (YouTube, 9:02)]().

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What is 'neoliberalism'?
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The term neoliberalism (literally, 'new liberalism') tends to be used to refer to policies and processes that liberate the

economy and other social institutions from control or regulation of the state. Neoliberals argue that these social institutions should be shaped by the 'free' market (e.g. through privatisation of government services).

Others argue, however, that there is no such thing as a truly free market. For instance, the power of large corporations, which are supported by neoliberal government policies (e.g. through tax exemptions and other forms of corporate welfare) means the market is decidedly '*un*free'.

Watch [Three Minute Theory: What is Neoliberalism? (YouTube, 3:31)](#) below for a brief introduction to the concept of neoliberalism and think about how it may also shape working conditions.

> One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=33#oembed-1

Reflection exercise

Watch [Precarious work and Marx's reserve army of labour (YouTube, 4:39)](#) below, which talks about the rise of precarious work through the lens of Marx's concept of the 'reserve army of labour'.

> One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=33#oembed-2

After watching the above video, consider the following:

1. Think about Marx's concept of the 'reserve army of labour'. Reflect on the concepts presented in the video and then write down some key characteristics of the 'reserve army' that also apply to the so-called 'precariat'. What are some differences?
2. As the video talks about, capitalism revolves around the accumulation of capital as a primary objective. In your view, can capitalism be made 'more gentle'? Why or why not? If so, how might this happen?

What about those who cannot work, or for whom work does not provide economic security?

Income support and pension programs provide financial assistance to individuals who are unable to work due to physical or mental health barriers, disabilities, or other circumstances. They also provide support to those who are underemployed and for whom work does not, therefore, provide sufficient economic insecurity. These programs are supposed to ensure that those who are unable to work have access to a basic standard of living and are not left in poverty, though not all countries have these sorts of schemes, and the effects of neoliberal restructuring have also tended to undermine this objective in other parts of the world that do.

Social security systems, which oversee eligibility and payment of income support and pension programs, tend to include a range of different initiatives that form what is often referred to as a 'mixed economy of welfare'. Such initiatives may include:

- direct cash transfers to citizens (e.g. unemployment allowances or aged and disability

pensions),

- indirect transfers via government subsidies (e.g. subsidised or free education and health care – for instance, Medicare),
- welfare programs delivered by government, or through government funding (e.g. government funding to charities to provide services to those in need), and
- services for those who are elderly, experience disability, or more.

Although tax breaks and subsidies to large corporations are generally not conceived of or framed in the same way, these are also forms of social welfare. These forms of social welfare do not tend to be problematised in public and political discourses, while social security for unemployed people *is* heavily problematised. This is evident in discourses that define 'us' versus 'them': the 'lifters' (those who work in the formal economy) and the 'leaners' (those who don't work in the formal economy).

<div style="border:1px solid #ccc; padding:1em;">

Reflection exercise

Watch [The myth of 'us' and 'them' – why we all need the welfare state (YouTube, 16:15)](#) below:

> 🖳 One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=33#oembed-3

After watching the video, answer the following:

1) In your own words, what is the purpose of the welfare state?

2) Near the end of the talk, Peter Whiteford remarks that 'we're all them'. What does he mean by this? How might this shift our understandings of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' welfare beneficiaries? Do you think COVID-19 will or already has affected peoples' thinking about social welfare and the 'us' and 'them' divide?

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Unemployment allowances and 'workfare'

The social welfare payment to unemployed people in Australia was, until very recently, called Newstart. The payment rate of Newstart has been frozen (i.e. not increased) for 25 years, despite significant increases to general living expenses (like the cost of housing and food) over that time. This has caused many to argue that Newstart does not alleviate poverty, but instead keeps people living in state of *perpetual* poverty on what is typically about $40 of income per day.

> **Raising unemployment allowances**
>
> For decades, there have been Australia-wide campaigns to raise the levels of income support provided to those who find themselves unemployed. These

In response to COVID-19, the Australian Government announced that Newstart would be replaced by a new unemployment allowance, called the JobSeeker Payment. The JobSeeker Payment included a temporary supplement, which essentially doubled the previous rate of income that was available under Newstart. This was designed to cope with widespread and rapid unemployment caused by COVID-19.

However, the COVID-19 supplement was removed at the end of March 2021. Subsequently, the Government also agreed to make a very small increase to the base rate of JobSeeker by $50 per fortnight – equivalent to about $32 per day, still below the poverty line, and below the increases that have been publicly called for. Meanwhile, some policymakers in other parts of the world have seen COVID-19 as an opportunity to change the culture and structure of the economy; to

shift entrenched inequality (see <u>Hawaii's plan for a 'feminist economic recovery plan'</u>).

While unemployment allowances are very low in Australia, the kinds of activities and obligations that those receiving such allowances must undertake — like searching for work and attending regular appointments with job service providers — are amongst the strictest in the world. This is often referred to as a 'workfare' (instead of welfare) approach and involves strict **welfare conditionality**. That is, people have to do things (e.g. maintain certain behaviours, participate in work for the dole, etc.) to remain eligible for social security payments.

A commitment to 'activating' unemployed people to search for work focuses intensively on individual-level reasons for unemployment (e.g. not trying hard enough to find work, not having the right skills) and tends to ignore structural concerns. Intensive workfare programs, such as Australia's JobActive program (applied in urban areas) or the Community Development Programme (applied in remote areas), have also been shown to be harmful because if people don't comply with the program rules, they can have their social support income suspended and be left with no means of support at all (for example, see <u>Welfare suspensions increase by 40% under new compliance regime</u>, <u>Indigenous communities slapped with more fines under Government work-for-the-dole scheme, data shows</u>). There are, however, a range of reasons that people might not be able to comply with workfare obligations, such as language barriers, illness, mobility and more.

Wacquant (2010) understands workfare as part of a broader globalised movement towards state-led punishment of poorer populations, who must either enter the formal economy or else be subject to strict paternalism. This perpetuates the 'truth' that "economic participation is... the key marker of the responsible adult citizen", even though this is only "one course of action in an array of potential alternatives" (McDonald and Marston 2005: 379). In this 'truth', individuals are overwhelmingly blamed for their circumstances; if they find themselves unemployed, they are characterised as lazy or undeserving — something Wacquant (2010: 213) refers to as the "cultural trope of individual responsibility" or which Foucault called a process of 'individualisation'.

> payments were referred to as 'Newstart' payments until early 2020, when the name changed to JobSeeker Payment.
>
> Watch <u>The growing momentum to raise Newstart (YouTube, 2:38)</u>, which provides an overview of this long-running campaign.

Reflection exercise

The refusal to raise the level of baseline unemployment allowances in Australia has often been accompanied by key ministers' (including Prime Minister Morrison) insistence that the 'best form of welfare is a job'. Workfare arrangements, such as those that require people to undertake job-search and upskilling, are supposed to move people from welfare and into jobs. Think about and unpick this approach – what does it ignore? For example, you might consider:

- are jobs always a source of economic security?
- what kinds of factors hinder peoples' ability to gain secure employment in the formal economy (and thus, create a need to draw on welfare)?

Thinking about alternative approaches – (universal) basic income

Debates about the future of work have led many to argue that changes are needed to the ways in which we think about and administer social welfare. While we have seen recent dramatic changes to

social welfare provisions in response to COVID-19 (see right), many have otherwise argued for the efficacy of alternatives for years but without much movement. This has included ongoing advocacy around the concept of a universal basic income (or similar), especially in terms of thinking about ways in which we can:

- support members of society who suffer as a result of structural inequality, unemployment, and poverty,
- pursue policies that are focused on a fairer redistribution of wealth across society, over the longer term,
- recognise and value work that occurs beyond the formal economy (e.g. unpaid care work, which is – as we spoke about last week – still predominantly undertaken by women), and
- re-situate greater power and autonomy in the hands of workers.

The Basic Income Earth Network – an advocacy network of policymakers, scholars, citizens and more, originally established by Professor Guy Standing – defines a basic income as a "periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement" (BIEN 2021). BIEN goes on to describe the five key characteristics of a basic income as follows:

1. **"Periodic**—It is paid at regular intervals (for example every month), not as a one-off grant.
2. **Cash payment**—It is paid in an appropriate medium of exchange, allowing those who receive it to decide what they spend it on. It is not, therefore, paid either in kind (such as food or services) or in vouchers dedicated to a specific use.
3. **Individual**—It is paid on an individual basis—and not, for instance, to households.
4. **Universal**—It is paid to all, without means test.
5. **Unconditional**—It is paid without a requirement to work or to demonstrate willingness-to-work." (See [BIEN's website](#), for more information.)

Technically, the term 'universal basic income' (UBI) assumes the universality of the payment (point 4) above, while 'basic income' is often used to refer to a payment that meets characteristics 1, ,2, 3 and 5, but not characteristic 4 (universality).

A (universal) basic income decouples income from work, thereby further enhancing individual autonomy and enabling individuals to decide how to expend their labour and time. In this sense, it would not devalue and penalise those who

> "BI gives people the freedom to say no and get a better deal for their labour." (Klein et al. 2019: 3)

undertake productive labour (e.g., informal care work), as is currently the case under market capitalism. As Klein et al. (2019: 2-3) point out in your reading (9.1), this goes "beyond the usual understanding of the 'safety net' associated with post-World War II welfare states." Indeed, "For those in paid work, a BI gives an unconditional economic base that improves workers' bargaining power… [and it] means if people want to withdraw or suspend their labour from exploitative or oppressive conditions, they can do so without the fear of destitution" (Klein et al. 2019: 3).

Proposals and trials of basic income have tested diverse payment rates and arrangements. Per month rates range significantly, from $35 USD/$47 AUD (Brazilian Citizen's Basic Income), to $500 USD/$671 AUD (Stockton California trial), to $635 USD/$852 AUD (Finland), to $1,430 USD/$1,920 AUD (Germany), or $1,968 USD/$2,643 AUD (Spain) (Samuel 2020). As at 2022, a weekly income of at least $496.77 AUD ($1987.08 AUD per month) is necessary to take (single) Australians above the Henderson poverty line, but this could be met either wholly or partially by a basic income payment, which could provide either a core single payment or an unconditional extra

(and thus, safety net or economic floor) to supplement ongoing unemployment and other social security benefits (Staines et al. 2021). Proposals and discussions about different possible design and implementation strategies for a basic income in Australia are, however, ongoing. Indeed, there is not currently political support from either of the two major political parties for basic income, though the Greens have put a specific proposal forward (which they call a 'Liveable Income Guarantee', see No Poverty in a Wealthy Country (PDF, 107KB)).

While universal basic income is not a panacea, at the very least it provides us with an alternative vision; one that enables us to think more critically about our current approaches and whether there are things we can do differently in order to create the futures we want for ourselves and for those who come after us.

Reflection exercise

Watch Why we shouldn't have to work just to survive (YouTube, 13:13) below:

> One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
> https://uq.pressbooks.pub/introduction-social-sciences/?p=33#oembed-4

After watching the video, consider the following questions:

1) Jonny Ross-Tatum was an undergraduate history student when he gave this TEDx Talk! Why is it important for young adults and students to be active in thinking and talking about these sorts of future options?

2) What is your understanding of a universal basic income?

3) What role (if any) might a basic income play in perhaps protecting against the threats of automation and AI and/or recognising and encouraging important work *outside* of the formal economy?

4) What are some possible downfalls of a basic income? (You might also like to do some further googling to support your thinking in relation to this one!)

Resources for further learning

Readings:

- Federici, S. 2020 [1975]. 'Wages for housework'. In. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle.* PM Press, pp. 11-18.
- Klein, E., Mays, J., and Dunlop, T. 2019. 'Introduction – implementing a basic income in Australia.' In. Implementing a basic income in Australia, chapter 1, pp. 1-20.
- Graeber, D. 2013. 'On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs.'
- Voice, P. 2014. 'Labour, Work and Action', In. Hayden, P. (Ed.) *Hannah Arendt, key concepts.* Routledge, London. Chapter available (PDF, 773KB)
- Passerin d'Entreves, M. 2019. Hannah Arendt. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.*

Other resources:

- 'Interesting engineers' – Robots will take our jobs when we create new ones (YouTube, 6:29).

- ['Kelakanava' – Rationale of the basic income trial in Finland (YouTube, 2:21)](#).
- ['TedX Talks' – Discussing the merits of unconditional basic income – Enno Schmidt (YouTube, 11:47)](#).

10.

Conclusions: Being a (good) social scientist – embodying through practice

As you will have read and seen so far, the social sciences encompass a wide range of practices, theoretical positions, and debates. As social scientists we are always conscious of our positionality within the context of who and what we study – it is important to be reflective about power differentials, our cultural and social baggage, our preconceptions and beliefs. We try to bracket these as best we can, but they seep into everything we do, think, and work on. To be a (good) social scientist — and we have 'good' in parentheses here because that is a loaded term in terms of what it means to different people, at different points in time, and in different places — is not easy. Thus, in the conclusion we want to firstly reflect on some examples of 'bad' social science to direct our attention to what *not to do,* before we end on a hopeful note of what *to do* in order to embody some of the principles of good and ethical scholarship.

What *not* to do

The social sciences have a long history of unethical, complicit and dangerous research that has undermined the mission to better understand the world and make it a better place. As we have detailed throughout the book, the social sciences have been foundational to many of colonialism's efforts to subdue others, classify them, and maintain power over them. Early anthropologists were often part of the efforts of colonial regimes to better understand their enemies as well as friends. They helped create sometimes persistent stereotypes of peoples, such as whether they are lazy, industrious, 'good', or 'bad'. Ultimately, however, all branches of the social sciences have played a

part in various colonial and post-colonial endeavours to create and maintain certain power relations that have tended to favour a white, European narrative of global history.

One example from anthropology is that of Napoleon Chagnon (1938-2019), who conducted long-term field research among the Yanomamö, an Indigenous group in the Amazon rainforest. He wrote several books and papers about the violent nature of the Yanomami. He argued that because of the social valorisation of violence, successful warriors had more offspring, making their society as a whole more violent. However, he has been accused of engaging in unethical research practices, including the exploitation of his subjects for financial gain, manipulation of data, and perpetuating harmful stereotypes about the Yanomami people. For example, several fellow anthropologists accused him of escalating violence by trading steel weapons for information and blood samples of a medical study that was financing one of his research trips. Chagnon's pursuit of 'his' narrative about the Yanomami has been deeply damaging for them and anthropology.

Also working in the 1960s and 70s was sociologist Laud Humphreys (1930-1988), who published the 'The Tearoom Trade', a controversial book about anonymous sexual encounters between men in public restrooms, known as 'tearooms'. The study was widely criticised for its unethical methods, including the failure to obtain informed consent and the invasion of privacy of the participants. Humphreys not only observed the public restrooms covertly but also noted down number plates of visitors to track them down for follow up interviews, even disguising himself when subsequently attending their homes to obtain further information for his study. Not only was this incredibly harmful for participants, it was also very risky; this was a time when homosexuality remained illegal across many countries including North America, where the study took place.

In a more general sense, [Coburn, Moreton-Robinson, Sefa Dei and Stewart-Harawira](2013) talk about the social sciences as a colonising force, assisting colonial entities to name, categorise, and label indigenous peoples the world over as 'inferior' and thereby assist in colonial domination and theft. They state:

> For Indigenous peoples, the sciences, including the social sciences, have been an important, even critical part of colonizing processes. Thus, Indigenous peoples historically know the social sciences as a form of violence, part of the naming and claiming of Indigenous peoples (Tuhiwai Smith, 2004, especially 80-83) and their lands and histories for the colonizers… In short, in the same processes by which Indigenous lands were renamed and reclaimed by colonizers, Indigenous ancestors and men, women and children were named and claimed as objects of science. (Coburn et al. 2013: 10, 13)

In Australia, scientific texts and theorising of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, for example, often perpetuated myths of savagery and inferiority, which made way for the theft and pillaging of peoples and lands.

These examples show how studies can be undone by the unethical methods some social scientists use to get their data, tell their story, or even just make things up. Conducting research with people is a privilege that requires ethical safeguards and an ethical disposition beyond legal ethical codes. At the heart of this is — and should be — that social scientists should not be extractive in our praxis. We naturally value data in the form of participant observation or interviews, in short information for our studies. But how do we do this in a way that does not just extract information for us? How do we do our work in such a way that it supports us *alongside* the people we work with? How do we engage in knowledge *co-production*? How do we distribute power and act ethically in what are sometimes unequal relationships? Every research project is different so the three of us authors decided to give our views in more detail on these matters in the following section.

> ### A note on who we work with and why
>
> Many of the questions raised above pertain to situations when researchers are in a more powerful position than their interlocutors and when we work with people we want to support and actively work towards shared goals or ideals. This is not always the case. Social sciences still tend to 'study down', but as Laura Nader urged in the late 1960s: we need to 'study up'. Her appeal was to some extent in reply to some of the problematic studies we outlined above but also as a critique of then still prevalent stance of social sciences as value-neutral and objective. She argued that to study poverty we need to get out of the 'ghetto' (her words, also to mean to get out of our silos) and study the banks, Wall street, capitalism as the structural drivers of the poverty we can see on the ground. 'Studying up' remains an ambition as barriers of access to the rich and powerful preclude many studies engaging them more fully.
>
> In addition there are many social scientists who work with people they would not want to support and with whom they do not share goals or ideals. For example, anthropologists working with terrorists to find out their motivations, political scientists working with supporters of the far right, or criminologists working with child sex offenders.

What *we* do: author reflections on doing social science

Zoe Staines (researcher and lecturer in criminology and social policy)

I work mainly with peoples who tend to be disproportionately marginalised, including First Nations peoples, people living in poverty, single mothers, and more. I am animated by a deep sense of social justice, instilled by my upbringing and experiences, and attempt to practice within a critical tradition that not only makes visible but also *pushes back* against diverse forms of oppression. In terms of my own social science praxis, this includes a commitment to subverting the notion of a 'researcher expert', and instead prioritising genuine listening, learning, and co-producing knowledge. As a white, Australian-born criminologist and social policy scholar (with Irish and English heritage on my father's side, and unknown heritage on my adopted mother's side), who is also a single mother and employed academic, I also strive to work in ways that are deeply reflexive and which continue to question my own complicity in the systems of power and privilege that my work seeks to resist and subvert. In doing so, I pursue methods of working both *within* and *beyond* my social scientific training, as well as the broader epistemic bounds of western modernity, knowing that liberation from these institutional constraints can also form an important part of the solution for pursuing better, fairer, and more just societies.

Gerhard Hoffstaedter (lecturer in anthropology)

I work with refugees in Southeast Asia and Australia and therefore I am always very conscious and reflexive of my positionality, power and identity (white, passport holder, employed) to situate myself in the field. I do not see myself as an advocate of 'voiceless' people, but as a cultural intermediary who builds bridges for a better mutual understanding and creator of interstitial spaces for inter-cultural engagement. This process is reliant on immersion and the kindness and support of the people we work with. I see their willingness and kindness towards me as a gift to me, which I always hope to return and as we know from anthropology, gift giving creates relationships and friendships within which we practice an ethics of care for each other.

Ned Binnie (undergraduate social science student)

I am an undergraduate social science and philosophy student, with a particular interest in social

theory. As one of the younger generations of social scientists, I believe that a little bit of naivety is a necessary part of my work. It is important to me to foster a certain hopeful idealism in striving for a better world for all through engaging with complex ideas and making them more manageable. Not yet firmly embedded within institutions, this position provides me with the ability to think outside of the established structures and engage with the world as I would like to see it. Through the social sciences I seek to better understand the organisation of society and how it could be done differently. This 'blue sky thinking' is important for real social change. Without thinking beyond the already established ways of doing things, how can we bring about a better world for all?

Reflection exercise

Think about the kind of approach you might or do take as a social scientist, either in the present or future. Then write your own short reflection. You might like to consider covering the following points:

- Who or what might/do you focus on in your social scientific work, and why?
- What is your positionality in relation to this work?
- What would/does drive you, personally, to do this work?
- What kinds of moral and ethical guidelines might/do you use to shape and influence your work?
- What might be/is *most* important to you, as a (current or future) social scientist?

What to do

As we touched on at the start of this concluding chapter, what qualifies as a 'good' social scientist changes depending on who you talk to, at what point in time, and in which field/sub-field. Nevertheless, it is also possible to distil some general qualities that most would consider desirable for those working in the social sciences; something we attempt to do in this final section. We do not pretend that these are all-encompassing, nor that *all* social scientists would agree about their prime importance. However, we set them out here as a means of sparking further reflexive thinking about the kind of social scientist *you* (the reader) wish to be in either the present or future.

Firstly, we contend that 'good' social scientists are skilled at **examining and understanding issues and phenomena from multiple perspectives,** never assuming that their own perspective is the only one that exists. This requires deep, active listening, coupled with a healthy dose of humility and a strong understanding that *all* knowledge is partial and that there is *always* more to learn.

This is related to a second desirable quality — an ability to **maintain a sense of reflexive practice,** questioning one's own assumptions, schemas, values, and biases, and understanding that we can never fully demarcate our social science practice from these. Instead, these *deeply inform* our practice: they influence what we choose to focus on, the opportunities that are presented to us, the way we are treated by others around us, how we interpret and respond to information, and much more. Thus, the objective is never to deny these, but instead to maintain a sense of reflexive curiosity about how they influence our behaviours, thinking, and more. In essence, and as Flyvbjerg's description of 'phronetic social science' (discussed earlier in the book) shows us, the point of the social sciences is to *embrace* its value-laden nature, and to use these values to answer questions about what the 'good life' looks like, and how we might get there.

Thirdly, 'good' social scientists take a **critical disposition to everything they hear and see.** They scratch below the 'surface', questioning assumptions and beliefs that may otherwise seem 'natural' or 'unquestionable'. As C. Wright Mills would say, they "make the familiar strange." This means

intentionally exposing oneself to different viewpoints and critiques on a range of topics. Reading and engaging with diverse news sources is one way to do this; another is to, as a social science researcher, intentionally step outside of one's sub-field or area of specific expertise to engage with publications, debates, and researchers that contradict one's own.

Fourthly, and relatedly, being a 'good' social scientist arguably no longer means *only* going 'deep' into one or two specific areas, as was common practice in the past. Instead, **'generalist' social scientists are increasingly desired in social science research and practice** as a means of improving inter-disciplinarity, breaking down knowledge 'siloes', and gaining traction against complex 'big' social issues (e.g., climate change). This doesn't mean one has no area of expertise, but instead that they also read and research more widely than this alone. Those skilled at forming 'bridging' (not just 'bonding') social capital can often excel in this area, as they are able to identify links between what might otherwise seem like unrelated areas, and then form the contacts and relationships needed to bridge divides. Often, having worked beyond the academy (e.g., in the private, non-profit, and/or public sectors) is a good means of building the skills and contacts needed to succeed at this.

Fifth, 'good' social scientists are also **strong written and verbal communicators.** It is one thing to discover new knowledge about the social world, but if this is locked away in impossible-to-access texts or unable to be articulated in ways that are intelligible to those who would directly benefit from this new knowledge, then there is a big piece of the puzzle missing. In this sense, social scientists must be skilled at communicating their findings, often to many 'publics', including the general public, politicians and policymakers, service providers, practitioners, and many more. Academic institutions are increasingly understanding research 'impact' as the social, economic, cultural, environmental (or more) benefits or changes that result from research. This stands in contrast to simplistic easily-quantifiable 'citation indexes' and similar. To be impactful, however, research must first be *understood.*

In sum, being a good social scientist is about more than just conducting research or analysing data. It requires a deep commitment to understanding the complexities of human behaviour and social systems, and a willingness to engage with diverse perspectives and experiences. To be a good social scientist, one must be driven by a passion for knowledge, a sense of responsibility to conduct ethical and meaningful research, and a desire to use that research to make a positive impact on the world.

The keys to success as a social scientist include developing a strong foundation in theory, methodology, and research ethics, as well as cultivating critical thinking skills, effective communication abilities, and a collaborative mindset. It is also important to stay up-to-date with the latest developments in the field (as well in other fields!), to remain open to new ideas and approaches, and to seek out opportunities to engage with the broader community of social scientists.

Ultimately, being a good social scientist is both a challenging and rewarding endeavor. It requires a lifelong commitment to learning, growth, and self-reflection, and a willingness to engage with the complex and ever-changing world in which we live. We hope that reading this book has given you some strong foundations to build upon when embarking on your journey into the social sciences — wherever it may lead you. And we hope that you will continue reflecting on your own social science practice as you go.

Resources to support further learning

Relevant readings:

- Bos, Jaap. 2020. *Research ethics for students in the social sciences*. Springer: Cham. Open Access Textbook.

Other resources:

- ['What's the point of social science research?' (YouTube, 1:30)](#) Oxford University.
- ['What skills will future social scientists need?' (YouTube, 1:21:26)](#) ESRC Festival, London.
- ['Activism and its role in anthropology' (Youtube, 9:00)](#) World101x: Anthropology of current world issues, University of Queensland.

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