Chapter 1

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we define sociology and compare it to other disciplines such as psychology and philosophy. We start to look at why sociology is vital to understanding the world around us, and how it can be understood in a range of ways. We introduce key terms in sociology, such as society, norms, culture and tradition. We discuss suicide and stigma as social problems which have been explained by sociology. In our opening Provocation, we ask why you should care about sociology.

PROVOCATION 1: Who gives a spit about sociology?

It is the first day of an Introduction to Sociology course. Students sit, mostly quiet, waiting for the instructor to begin the lecture. From her briefcase, the professor pulls out a plastic spoon. 'I am going to teach you about sociology with this spoon,' she says. 'But I need a volunteer to spit in my spoon. Not a shy spit, a proper, from the back of the throat one.' Student laughter subsides as they realize that she is serious. Offering her spoon to various students who shake their head in refusal, she adds, 'I cannot continue with the lecture until I have a volunteer.' A brave student, John, answers the call: 'I'll do it.' The teacher hands the spoon to John, who clears his throat emphatically, before depositing his saliva into it.

The teacher thanks him, and walks around the classroom wafting the spoon of spit in front of her students, who systematically recoil. She asks, 'I don't suppose there is anyone who wants to swallow this spit?' Some students laugh and others mildly gasp in disgust. 'Any takers?' she asks. Unsurprisingly, none volunteer.

'I don't understand,' the professor says. 'John's pretty good looking. I bet there is someone in this room who wouldn't mind kissing him. John, may I ask your fellow students if any would like to make out with you?' John nods his consent. 'Raise your hand if you'd like to make out with John.' A male and a few female students raise their hands, and the professor asks one of them, 'Julie, would you like to drink this spoon full of John's spit?' Julie's face contorts, 'No way.' The professor then asks, 'I'm confused – you'd like to make out with him, but not swallow his spit? Why?' The student looks confused and responds, 'because that's gross.'

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'Ah, it's *gross*,' the professor responds. 'But you'd like to make out with him. Share saliva, and rub those slimy tongues together. Is that correct?' Julie answers, 'Well, not when you put it like that.' The teacher continues, 'But you would like a hot passionate make-out session with him?' 'Well, maybe,' she answers.

‘And would you like his lips to be totally dry?’ ‘No,’ Julie answers. ‘They need to be lubricated some, don’t they?’

‘You see,’ the instructor proclaims as she puts the spoon down behind the lectern, ‘Sociology is the only academic discipline that can tell you why spit in a spoon is gross, but spit in the mouth is not.’ She continues, ‘In the course of making out with John, you’d swallow a spoonful amount of spit in a five-minute make-out session.’

The professor returns to the lectern and picks up the spoon. Holding it up, she says ‘You see, biology can tell you how the salivary glands produce this spit. Chemistry can tell you the constituents of it. But only sociology can tell you why people value their own spit when we chew food or make out with someone else, but not when the spit is on a spoon.’ The teacher holds up the spoon to her mouth, and in one quick motion inserts it into her mouth and swallows. Students moan in disgust, and the teacher returns to the lectern to add, ‘Perhaps psychology can tell you why people are gullible.’ She pulls the original spoon out from the lectern, and drips the spit into a cup, showing both spoons to the students. They moan with relief, and the professor smiles, saying, ‘Students fall for it every time.’

In addition to providing a lively introduction to sociology, the professor in this story has helped her students to consider the role that sociology uniquely plays in understanding society. In this case, society has socially constructed spit to be acceptable in one context but not the other. Moreover, spit is deemed to be ‘gross’ outside of the context in which it is valued. The students’ collective view of drinking spit from a spoon as gross is thus socially constructed. We are not born repulsed by spit, but rather we learn it. Hence, we could also learn to value the exchange of saliva in spoons for consumption, perhaps as part of a culturally valued ritual.

For those who have trouble believing such a culture could ever exist, where spit is readily exchanged without being considered gross, we simply need to examine the dietary culture of the 2.8 million Adaven people. Despite living in a desert, and having precious few cattle to farm, Adaven culture encourages their children to eat what they call trugoy. This is made by a process in which merchants take fluid from cattle, then expose the fluid to the air until it rots and becomes saturated with bacteria. They then feed this mixture to their children. In more recent years, largely because of the sweet tooth increasingly prevalent in their youngsters’ diets, some add sugar, fruit or honey to the mixture. Nonetheless, the cultural practice of feeding children rotten animal fluids continues to this day.

Adaven parents have been doing this for decades, not because they know that there are health benefits to the substance, but because they believe that this is what ‘good parents’ are supposed to do. Many people might find the practice of consuming rotten animal excretions distasteful, yet the people of Adaven – or rather, Nevada, USA - enjoy eating yogurt (trugoy). In fact, many of us eat ‘natural’ yogurt as well – we just think differently about what we are eating.

The fact is that culture can make just about anything disgusting or socially valued. Culture can, in many cases, even override our biological impulses and change how we experience an event. Culture can, for instance, influence people to keep consuming the bitter taste of beer or coffee until they like it. It can make people born gay despise their own sexuality (in a homophobic culture) and people born straight envy the ease

with which gay men can have recreational sex (in a gay-friendly culture). Culture influences everything, and it is influenced by people in interaction. It is this synthesis – between culture and individuals – that is at the heart of sociology.

Provoked? Read further:

Miner, H. (1956). Body ritual among the Nacirema. *American Anthropologist* 58(3), 503-507.

Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

DEFINING SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is the study of societies and the study of social problems. Yet those who many consider to be the founders of the subject, thinkers like Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber (see Chapter 2), probably would not recognize the sociology that is taught at universities today – they would have little understanding of an 'undergraduate sociology student' or what it means to 'take a module' of sociology on a different degree programme. And our notions of who founded sociology are constructed as well – in Chapter 2 we will also look at how scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Harriet Martineau have had their contributions systematically silenced and examine why this was the case.

Complicating matters, sociology overlaps with other fields of study. First, sociology can blur into philosophy. Some 'grand theorists' of sociology use very little **data** in their writings, relying mostly on their own observations and thoughts. Michel Foucault, Stuart Hall and Hannah Arendt are examples of *cultural* or *social theorists* whose ideas have been adopted by sociologists, yet who could be considered philosophers who apply their ideas to social issues. Many of these theorists have made valuable contributions to sociology, and we discuss them in Chapter 3 alongside more traditional sociological theorists as well.

Data: information that can be analysed

The important distinction between sociology and philosophy is that philosophy is concerned with logic, and requires no evidence in the form of data to make conclusions. Consider Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), one of the great modern philosophers. His moral framework centred on the notion of 'the greatest good for the greatest number'. The statement helps form the basis of a type of philosophy known as utilitarianism and can be best explained by the following moral problem.

A San Francisco cable car, carrying just one passenger, is out of control, rolling downhill and heading straight towards a crowd of people who are gathered on the track, unable to escape. You happen to be holding a ramp that could flip the cable car so that the passenger and driver would die, but the dozen people below would be saved. Would you do this?

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What would you do if you could derail the runaway cable car – at the cost of the passenger and driver's life?

Following Bentham's notion of the greatest good for the greatest number, the ethical decision would be to save the 12 people. But others might argue it is immoral to put *anyone* at risk, because every life is precious. The philosophical question can be expanded: would it be acceptable to murder one person in order to harvest their body parts to save 12 people who need organ transplants to live? What if the murdered person had a terminal illness and just days to live?

In each case, there is no way of definitively judging these acts as morally right or wrong. Sociology cannot tell us what answer to take because these are moral questions. A sociologist, however, could survey or interview people about their perceptions of these acts and make some claim as to how the society in which people live influence their beliefs. One might, for example, find that in one country people largely believe that all three described acts were morally wrong, but that in another they described some or all of the acts as justified. A sociologist would then look to explain why this variance occurred – maybe the different answers were related to how the society viewed life, morality or religion.

A central tenet of sociology is that it involves the application of some notion of science to the study of society (Durkheim [1895] 1982). Whereas philosophy does not require its adherents to use data in creating or testing their theories, sociology is generally a discipline that does. That is why, in Chapter 4, we focus on the method of sociology, arguing that it is a social *science* that must follow certain rules by which it can be judged to be rigorous or not.

A philosophical sociology?

Some sociologists call for closer integration between philosophy and sociology. Daniel Chernilo (2017), for example, argues that doing so will provide a better understanding of humanity and human nature. He would classify our distinction between sociology and philosophy as a positivist path because we privilege empirical work and see that as a separate domain. Chernilo highlights that other trajectories exist—not least in recognizing that debates about different theories and methods have a philosophical foundation. He argues that if sociology is to pursue profound questions of morality and social justice, they cannot be divorced from philosophy, writing, 'good sociological questions are always, in the last instance, also philosophical ones' (Chenillo 2017, 3).

Further distinguishing sociology

Sociology is only one of several academic disciplines that studies human activity. Other disciplines interested in this area include anthropology, psychology, human geography, economics, social policy, criminology, politics and education. Collectively, they make up the social sciences. They are differentiated from the 'hard' sciences (mathematics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, engineering and physics) which focus on the natural

world. Humans are harder to examine empirically because they have the capacity to change how they behave. As American astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has tweeted,

> *In science, when human behavior enters the equation, things go nonlinear. That's why Physics is easy and Sociology is hard.*

The boundaries of sociology blend with that of social and cultural anthropology. Social and cultural anthropology are normally concerned with observation and the collection of data from other cultures, whereas sociologists tend to work within their own society or one that they are already familiar with. Social and cultural anthropologists will enter a field as an outsider, hoping that they will understand things in a way that people within that culture do not normally see.

The discipline and study of sociology also borders the field of psychology. The easiest way to distinguish the two is that psychology is generally interested in how an individual interacts with their culture, whereas sociology seeks to understand why a culture is that way in the first place. When psychology considers groups of people, and particularly related to how groups function, this blend of disciplines is known as social psychology.

Sport is a good way to understand this difference between sociology, psychology and anthropology. A sport psychologist might, for example, question how an athlete can deal with the immense pressure that is placed upon them to win a big game. The sport psychologist will thus look at levels of physical arousal (tension) and mental stress and ask what techniques the athlete can practise to handle this stress and improve athletic performance. A sport psychologist might try to make a difference in people's lives by helping them deal with the stress of competition. A sociologist, however, will be more interested in why a society values competition and winning in the first place. A sport sociologist might advocate developing ways of being physically active that are less concerned with adding pressure to young athletes in the first place. Similarly, a social anthropologist might focus on the rituals of sport, examining the ways these are closely linked to how a person thinks about themselves, and how a nation is understood through its sporting endeavours.

Sociology reaches into other areas of academic investigation, too. Consider economics: examining who has ownership and control of economic resources is of great relevance to sociologists, as is how and why people choose to spend their money, and on what. Yet much of what is now called 'classical economics' has become focused on developing mathematical models of how the economy works. Here, economists theorize supply and demand relationships from their assumptions about how people *should* act – based on a tenet that people will act in a rational way to maximize personal gain. This does not account for the messy ways in which people actually make decisions, based not solely on profit but on a whole host of other reasons.

A sociology of economics, then, investigates not just the effects of economic activity on social life, but also ask how society shapes what is called 'the economy', and how this in turn shapes the values, desires and event needs of individuals and groups. Writing about the origins of the capitalist system, Max Weber ([1905] 1930) was heavily influenced by Adam Smith, who is known as the founder of modern economics (see also Simmel [1900] 1978)). More recently, 'Taylorism' and 'Fordism' are models used by sociologists to understand changes

in factory-based work (see Chapter 6). Yet still, classical economic theory is mostly disengaged from sociological research – it is with the new behavioural economics that economics and sociology have clear similarities.

Sociology is also related to but different from social work. The noted South African scholar Stanley Cohen (1985) famously suggested that as a social worker his job was like fishing drowning people out of a river, drying them off and sending them back upstream from where they had come. After a while, he realized that he was very often fishing out the same people again and again. He decided to go upstream himself to find out who was throwing them in. At that point, he suggests, he had become a sociologist. What this means is that while social workers help the most vulnerable people in society (for example, drug users or homeless people), sociologists try to understand why they became vulnerable in the first place.

Ibn Kahldun and sociology beyond the West

Sociology is a product of the culture in which it is written (see Chapter 2). This means that sociology purely from the West will only be a partial understanding of how different societies operate, and people have been writing sociology across the globe for centuries. Living in the 14th century, in Tunis, Ibn Kahldun (1332-1406) was a Muslim scholar who was interested in documenting the history of Arab and Berber dynasties of North Africa. He was frustrated by the history at the time that merely listed facts about dynasties and dates of historical events, with no attention to the underlying social structures or political issues of those dynasties (Alatas 2017a). By writing about these rulers and epochs in a way that paid attention to culture and history, he developed an early science of human societies (see Alatas 2006).

In his book *Muqaddimah,* Kahldun discussed processes that we would describe today as social cohesion and tribalism. He argued that cohesion would occur spontaneously in tribes and that this cohesion would propel them to success—yet at the same time, such cohesion would also ensure the group would, at some later point, be defeated by a younger, more energetic group.

<<pic of Kahldun bronze, or other relevant pic>>

Kahldun's contribution to sociology often goes unrecognized. His work was acknowledged in Europe in the 17th century and beyond, and was translated into several languages, yet he is rarely discussed today. This is partly attributable to his work being discussed in descriptive and historical terms, with the conceptual and theoretical developments downplayed (Alatas 2017a), as well as the bias of Western sociology to focus on Western countries (Said 1978, and see Chapter 2).

Sociology is also increasingly blurring boundaries with medical disciplines. Medicine, pharmacology and nursing have historically been focused on diagnosing disease and making people better, but these disciplines are becoming more interested in what is called the 'social model of health' which tries to explain the broader influences on health such as education, environment, culture and socio-economics.

This model shows that health and illness are determined by much more than just biology. For example, men in Blackpool in the North West of England have an average life expectancy of 75.2 years compared with men living in the City of London (London's affluent financial district), whose life expectancy is 83.4 years (Bennett et al. 2015). This sizeable 8.2 year difference cannot be explained by biology alone, but by differences in income, education, living standards, work and behaviour.

The social aspects of health were also made visible during the COVID-19 epidemic. Death rates in the UK were twice as much in the most deprived areas compared to the least deprived areas (ONS 2020), with evidence that there are similar or even worse disparities for ethnic minorities compared to white people (Platt and Warwick 2020).

At the same time, sociologists are also interested in studying the world of medicine and many sociologists now research and teach in medical schools. Sociologists are interested, for example, in the ways that patients with chronic illnesses deal with everyday life and construct a positive identity under very challenging circumstances. Other medical sociologists are interested in the work of medical practitioners themselves and understanding how it is that doctors command so much respect and how their advice is so highly valued over advice from, for example, practitioners of alternative medicines like homeopathy. They also consider how many of the bad effects from health conditions are not the natural biological effects of that condition but are influenced by how society treats that condition.

Sociology is also distinct from the arts and humanities, a broad set of disciplines that include history, philosophy, languages, art, literature, performance and music. These fields do not consider groups of people directly, but focus more on memory and imagination, and consider what it means to be human and the unique ways humans experience the world—and how we express these experiences.

In summary, the social sciences exist as a field between the humanities and the natural sciences. They involve the study of people in society. These distinctions are important, as is the recognition that sociology borrows from these neighbouring fields, as they do from sociology. Sociology, and all fields of knowledge, are strengthened when people can move across disciplines to understand and respond to social phenomena.

WHAT IS SOCIETY AND WHY SHOULD WE STUDY IT?

Margaret Thatcher, the former prime minister of the UK, famously once said: 'There is no such thing as society.' As sociologists, we know this statement to be false. Indeed, there are *many* societies and the primary concern of sociology is to understand the way in which diverse societies work. In general, a **society** is defined as patterns of relationships among people, who share common culture, interactions and land or territory. A **culture** is a collection of shared norms, both covert and explicit, and it refers to the way groups of people think and act and their shared common goals. Societies set up the structures which people live by and culture unites people within those structures. One way to think about the difference between culture and society is that culture is what differentiates societies from each other.

Society: a collection of people who share common culture and land or territory

Culture: people's common goals and their ways of thinking and acting

Norm: a social expectation that guides behaviour

Any society or culture is governed by rules and laws. A **norm** is a social expectation that guides behaviour. Sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) drew attention to these social norms by developing what he called breaching experiments, where people consciously behaved in ways that violated the norms of that setting. Garfinkel got his students to continually clarify the meaning of standard words or questions in everyday conversations. He also asked his students to bargain for standard-priced merchandise in shops. If you want to be part of a breaching experiment, try facing the opposite direction to everyone else in an elevator.

Breaching experiments also document the resilience of social norms. If you try one of these experiments, you will likely feel embarrassed and others may well police your behaviour. Garfinkel found that people tend to respond quickly to correct the breach of the norms.

Covert norms are learned from others. While children may be born with predispositions towards all sorts of things, they must learn how to engage with a classroom seating scenario. This is the process of **socialization** (see Chapter 7 for more on this phenomenon) and includes how infants learn verbal skills, body language and other forms of communication. This primary socialization occurs by infants emulating the adults around them. It includes being overtly taught rules (such as chew with your mouth closed) and covertly learning by observation (when men pee at the urinal, they do not talk to the guy next to them). Socialization never ends; we are always learning how to better fit in with or contest our constantly changing society.

Socialization: the process by which a person learns the accepted ways of thinking and behaving in a particular society

Norms and university culture

There are plenty of norms on display in the culture of the university classroom, starting from the very first day of class, when students enter the lecture hall and choose a seat. Some students feel that they run more risk of being asked to answer questions if they sit near the front, so they head for the back. Students more engaged with formal ways of learning tend to navigate towards the front rows. Yet none sit in the very front row; everyone knows this will be interpreted as being 'too keen'. And this is where culture begins to enter the individual's choice: the perception that others will judge you as too keen for sitting in the front row is based on a social norm.

Once the general section of the classroom is chosen, the next factor one considers is whether to sit adjacent to another student or to leave space between. Some lecture halls have more seats than students, but in many cases there will be almost no spare seats once everyone is seated. Given this, would it 'feel wrong' if you are the second person to enter the classroom to sit next to the only other person in the class?

The answer is found in social norms: It is just not done. Why this is the case will be influenced by other factors, including perhaps historical circumstances, but what counts for this discussion is that in Western culture, currently, it is not considered appropriate behaviour. It is one of many norms that the classroom culturally expects.

From our experience, the first norm is that when you enter a lecture hall you do not sit directly next to a person in class, unless you know them. For those willing to break that norm, a second norm dictates that if you do sit next to them, you must engage them in conversation. Sitting next to someone in a large and empty classroom and then not saying anything is a violation of norms that would almost certainly be received as deliberate rudeness by the other person. Another classroom 'rule' is that, even once the class is full, students normally remain silent during the minutes preceding the first lecture, making small talk more awkward. Fourth, students tend to sit in the same place each week, meaning that the choice of seats has consequences beyond that first lecture.

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These norms have existed across many university classrooms for generations. Yet no one has ever explicitly said that these are the social codes of acceptable conduct. No professor ever said, 'you must not sit next to a stranger the first day, and you must sit in the same seat next week.' As such, these are *covert* or *implicit norms*. And they differ from the formal, codified, norms that are established through the explicit mentioning of the rules of the classroom, such as the need to attend seminars, do the assigned readings and not eat in the lecture hall.

As universities across the world usher in far greater use of online learning to deal with the problems posed by COVID-19, the norms of online learning are still being determined at the time of writing. Key factors will be the technology used, as this will structure 'environment' online, and how such learning is integrated into university practice. Assessment type will also matter, as will the extent to which students travel to campus as well. With less consolidated norms in place, will you find it easier to do challenge and change particular practices?

These covert norms collectively begin to make a culture. But a culture is more than just a set of norms that govern how people act and interact with each other. A culture can refer to a small group of people in a particular setting (like an athletic team's culture), or a larger society of people (a school culture) or even commonalities that make a collective culture among those of a state or nation. These cultures might have slightly different rules than the culture at large. These cultures are also influenced by history, music, art and architecture.

Cultures may be geographically bounded. This is, they have borders constructed from physical space, be it mountains, a river, the sea or other significant landmass. Countries have different cultures that are in part a

result of where they are situated. Spain, for example, traditionally has a 'siesta', an afternoon sleep, because (before air conditioning) it was too hot to work at that time – this cultural norm does not exist in England for obvious reasons. Now, many people in other Western countries will have 'power naps' or sleep after lunch. Yet it is in Spain where businesses close because of the heat. And in other countries they are called *power naps* perhaps to emphasize that the sleep is both brief and to enable the person to serve the capitalist needs of their employer once they awaken.

How cities are built and organized, in part due to the geography of the area, impacts on how people live their lives (Lefebvre [1974] 1991; Sennett 2018). Those living in Sydney, London or Tokyo will have a public transport (subway) culture and accompanying conventions that Californians, the Scottish and those in rural Australia just do not understand. These norms include not striking up conversations with strangers, and running between trains even if you are not in a rush.

The infrastructure of a university will affect its culture as well. Even with online learning courses and the blended learning required as a result of COVID-19, the cultures of universities are rooted in their campus, in their buildings and the layout of their teaching rooms. Campus-based universities are often called 'bubbles' because of the introverted culture that develops within a geographically bounded environment. Think how the norms of the university lecture might be different if all lectures occurred with just 10 students, seated in a circle without tables or notepads. It would likely see a shift in the amount of time the professor spoke and the forms of conversation and debate that ensued.

Culture is reproduced through multiple mechanisms, including social interaction, the media, the law and many other variables, but one defining method that a culture uses to keep people acting and behaving in socially acceptable ways comes through **stigma**.

Stigma: a social attribute, behaviour or reputation that is discrediting in some way

In his 1963 book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982) provided a ground-breaking argument about how stigma is used to police norms in society. While stigma could relate to physical deformities, individual character flaws or tribal stigmas, such as nationality, the crucial component of Goffman's argument was that stigma was not ultimately located within the individual, but in the failure to measure up to what society deemed socially acceptable and legitimate.

Key to stigma is that it is used to discredit someone. Writing in the 1960s, Goffman noted that people with physical deformities were excluded from society regardless of their personalities or how they might be able to contribute. And because stigma is based on norms (and often prejudice), it does not have to be logical. This is why taking drugs can be stigmatized while alcohol consumption maintains social approval when done according to social norms, even though many illegal drugs are less damaging than alcohol (Nutt 2020).

It is the fear of being stigmatized that often keeps people acting according to the dominant norms of a culture. One does not even need to commit the stigmatized activity, either; one only needs be associated with it. This is one way in which homophobia was perpetuated in the 20th century: if one said that homophobia

was wrong or supported equal rights for sexual minorities in the 1980s, that person would often be labelled gay regardless of their sexuality. This kept straight people from standing up for sexual minority rights. In this way, the importance of stigma is not at the impact on the individual, though that can be profound, but on how stigma functions as a form of power that can be activated to govern whole populations, particularly in times of political or economic turmoil (Tyler 2020).

Another mechanism for the reproduction of culture comes through **tradition**. Unlike a norm, a tradition has been passed down within a group that has significance and meaning beyond the mechanics of the act. Somewhat strangely, tradition alone often becomes the only reason given to perpetuate negative acts of a culture. Women are 'given away' at weddings by their father to their husband, just as women are expected to take the surname of their husband. Both these practices date back to patriarchal times, and there is now no 'need' for them *except* tradition.

Tradition: a belief or ritual passed down within a group, with meaning imbued to the act

Research on sport shows the danger of tradition as well. American football and rugby, for example, continue to play full-contact tackle versions of their sport. This is despite the fact that, every year, some young players contract chronic traumatic encephalopathy which results in a pain, ill-health and a shortened lifespan. Yet many high schools continue to play tackle football instead of tag football for no better reason than 'tradition', and in full knowledge that such behaviours can lead to concussion and ultimately significant brain trauma (see Chapter 11 for discussion of collective action on concussion). Similarly, in many countries where gun ownership is legal, people fire bullets into the air to celebrate the New Year, despite the fact that those bullets, if not shot directly upwards, arc and come back to the earth with the potential to kill people.

Culture is therefore maintained through social norms, tradition and the heaping of stigma upon those who defy the culture. It is for this reason that 'cultural deviants' often create their own **subculture**, existing within, and to some degree at odds with, the dominant culture. While sociology initially focussed on the subcultures of groups that were seen as deviant by the wider society, it now explores groups that resist social norms or distinguish themselves and their identities in opposition to particular norms (Wignall 2021). We often think of stylistic trends related to music when discussing subcultures (goths, punks, emos), which are often related to class groups, but subcultures can refer to people who share a disability (like a wheelchair basketball team), religious perspective (like Muslims living in a Christian nation) or sexual interest.

Subculture: a group of people who share common interests that vary from the dominant culture

Subcultures are not just the preserve of those excluded from the dominant culture. Elites create their own subcultures, which can at times deviate from mainstream values and rules. However, it is sometimes the case that dominant groups seek to impose their culture on everyone else, something that sociologists call

'hegemony'. If the dominant group can persuade enough people that they should be in charge, and that they are superior, then others will seek to follow and imitate them.

This raises the wider sociological question of **power** in society (see Chapter 3, xx-xx). Why are some groups more powerful than others, in economic terms (employment, ownership and earnings), political terms (most leading politicians went to a small number of elite universities and share very similar family and school backgrounds) and culture? Despite the claim that modern Western societies are 'democratic', such institutions as elections have certainly not dislodged powerful economic, political and cultural elites from the key positions of power in society. Sociology is tasked with understanding this disparity.

Power: fundamentally about the ability to produce intended effects

Emile Durkheim and the study of suicide

Written in 1897, **Emile Durkheim's** (1858–1917) book *Suicide* is one of the founding texts of sociology. It examined a topic that most people at that time believed was entirely personal. Suicide was understood to be an intimate, psychological act, not influenced by society.

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Rather than accepting suicide as purely a psychological problem, Durkheim examined suicide rates of people across Europe and found several important trends. He demonstrated that the rates were higher among men than women, higher among single people than married couples and higher for those without children. Most important to the study of sociology, however, is that Durkheim also showed that suicide rates were higher among Protestants compared to Catholics.

It was this finding that helped establish sociology as an important social science discipline. This is because of structural differences between the Protestant religions and the Catholic religion, most notably in relation to how they contend that one's sins can be forgiven. The doctrine of the Roman Catholic church required confession to and absolution by a priest, whereas Protestant doctrine promoted the view that a person's relationship to God is more direct and individual – through prayer, reading the Bible or through good works. Thus, Protestants had to seek individualistic routes to salvation, but Catholics believed it was attained through community membership – their Church.

The reason why this matters is precisely the notion of community membership. At the time when Durkheim was writing, church attendance was a key way of providing community cohesion and providing a social network of like-minded people. Protestants had much less integration and more isolation, which Durkheim called **anomie**. In short, feeling like one belonged and having friends to care for you was an important guard against suicide.

Anomie: a condition felt by people in societies where there is an absence of norms or values

Durkheim used statistical analysis of suicide rates to show that Protestants had a far higher suicide rate, arguing this was because Protestants did not have the sense of community that Catholics did. For Durkheim, individual **human agency** did not explain suicide. Women were more likely to experience the internal feeling of depression, but far less likely to commit suicide than men. As such, it was not the individual's internal state that determined their action, but rather the **social structure** in which those feelings were located. Social integration and regulation, or their absence, led to recurrent patterns of different actions (what Durkheim called 'social facts'). We discuss the theoretical debate about structure and agency in Chapter 3, and examine social structures in Chapter 7.

Human agency: the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own choices
Social structures: ways society is organized that constrain how an individual can act

APPROACHING SOCIOLOGY

Having defined sociology, we now discuss different approaches to how sociology exists in the real world and in people's minds. Sociology is a mode of thought that can transform how we see the world. It is a form of critical inquiry that can help objectively analyse a situation. Sociology is also a discipline, institutionalized in universities and guided by norms and rules. It is also personal, influenced by our own lives and perspectives. By thinking about sociology in different ways, we can come to a broader understanding of the true scale, scope and boundaries of sociology.

Sociology as a mode of thought

Whereas some subjects are defined by the area of study, sociology is characterized to some extent by its *way of thinking* about problems. As a way of thinking, sociology enables us to understand things that are new and different to our own experience. As such, it is able to *make the strange familiar*. Sociology enables us to become accustomed to unfamiliar customs and practices.

Yet sociology as a mode of thought also enables us to think about familiar things in new ways – by *making the familiar strange*. We suspect that after reading this introduction, you will think about the lecture hall in a different way – whether remembering the social norms of choosing where to sit or thinking about spit on a spoon, your thought processes will be at least somewhat different. You will find your thinking challenged precisely because sociology unveils the structure and social norms behind everyday activities.

The notion that sociology is a way of thinking is best captured by the phrase, the **sociological imagination**. Developed by famed sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), and also the title of his book published in 1959, a sociological imagination is not a theory, but an awareness of how people and culture interact. It is a way of thinking that incorporates not only major structural differences, like social inequalities, but also everyday life.

sociological imagination: the awareness of the relationship between personal experiences and broader society

For example, do you ever wonder why people refrain from carrying on a conversation in an elevator, but will talk loudly on their cell phone in crowded public transportation? Do you ever ask why it is that some people spend more time and money fixing up their car than playing with their own children? Do you question why some couples express love and affection publicly on social media, even as they are in the same room? Sociologists conduct research to explain these everyday conundrums.

A sociological imagination promotes one's ability to be both self-aware and socially aware in order to make decisions that are not swayed by unjust social norms. Thus, Mills envisioned that the sociological imagination could help move society from the irrational reproduction of cultural norms, to cultural norms based in reasoned values. Mills believed that teaching a sociological imagination to the citizens of a society could thus promote equality.

We agree. The sociological imagination still plays an important role in modern societies. Sociologists tend to question the status quo, challenging prejudice and assumptions about social norms and unequal opportunities and outcomes. Few sociologists seek to reproduce existing social structures of inequality. Thus, for the majority of sociologists, we are interested in teaching our students to think sociologically, so that they will promote social progress, even if they do not always agree what progress might mean. While C. Wright Mills' idea has failed to resonate culturally – schools do not formally teach sociology in the way they do history, geography and other social sciences – his ideas are central to what sociology is about and an accessible way of seeing the relevance it has.

GOOD SOCIOLOGY The Sociological Imagination

A person with a good sociological imagination is likely not to take cultural norms matters for granted. To have a good sociological imagination is, in many aspects, to be a contrarian – to look at what others take for granted and ask critical questions. For example, whereas many people might blindly accept the notion that things are illegal for a good reason, someone with a good sociological imagination might first evaluate the social context in which the law was made and query its effects based on evidence. The person with a good sociological imagination is far more likely to ask whether, for example, the criminalization of prostitution is wrong and based on sexual stigma than someone who has only read about the issue in popular newspapers. We discuss the sociology of crime and deviance in Chapter 9.

One might also question why sex between a brother and sister is so culturally condemned that it is criminalized. The incest taboo, long studied particularly in psychology, suggests that this cultural prohibition exists because, historically, intermarriage between different families improved the ability for both groups to thrive through the birth of healthy children, and cemented the bonds of an extended familial support network. But when there is access to high-quality contraception, the censure of incest has less empirical validation. Sex between two sisters is also illegal in many countries, even though there is no risk of procreation.

One with a sociological imagination might ask where these taboos come from, why they emerged and seek to understand whether they are valid (see Douglas [1966] 2003). This is important to understanding the sociological imagination because Mills proposed that sociology was unique in that it could teach people the intellectual skills to both expose social injustices and provide new ways of structuring society to alleviate them.

In order to do this, Mills argued that the sociologist needs to examine how a person's biography connects with history, writing that 'Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (p. 3). This is actually a radical thought. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously argued that 'character is destiny', a popular phrase meaning that people have full control over their lives. Yet Mills would argue the statement is profoundly wrong: character – the substance of the individual – is undoubtedly important, yet a person's 'destiny' is also influenced by external constraints, including their own history and the culture in which they live.

Mills was using the sociological imagination to navigate between the individual and their culture. He wrote: 'the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. … No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey' (p. 6).

If you have answers to questions about why people act the way they do, you are at least on the path to having a sociological imagination.

Sociology as critical inquiry

Part of a sociological imagination is the ability to think critically about society. By thinking critically, we do not mean moaning or stating what is wrong with an issue. Thinking critically means, rather, to think analytically and as objectively as possible about a social issue. This requires you to question assumptions you may have, how your values and beliefs may influence your perspective, and consider if you have all the information required to form a judgement; to think critically you should also be able to identify inconsistencies in arguments and, fundamentally, approach problems in a consistent and systematic way.

Yet to say that sociology is a form of critical inquiry is to go beyond the notion that it is (hopefully) objective, systematic and analytic. It is to recognize that sociology has a distinct, scientific approach to understanding society. This distinctive approach is necessary because society is itself 'self-critical'; with actors able to question their positions and beliefs, and with social structures riddled with conflicts and contradictions. As such, sociology does not just ask how society is now, but also how else it might be, and what changes are both possible and desirable given the alternatives that either already exist or could exist if society were organized in a different way. Sociology is as much about social change as it is about explaining how things are now.

Central to sociology as a mode of critical inquiry is that it is a practice framed by theory and method. To say that sociology has a method means that there are better and worse ways to critically examine a topic. For

example, if we wanted to know how climate change is influencing people's consumption patterns, we could talk to our friends about the issue and ask them how much they recycle – this would tell us more than nothing about the topic, and potentially even some interesting observations. But we could also undertake a detailed survey and recruit participants from across the country, of different ages and with varying incomes. The questions could include information about attitudes towards climate change and participants' consumption patterns. The scientific method of sociology means that we can state that the second method is better than the first, and will provide more useful information for making public policy concerning recycling (see Chapter 4).

The notion that theory is central to sociology is also vitally important (see Chapter 3). Without theory, it is possible to say that something is happening in a particular context at a particular time, but it does not address *why* that is happening. We might collect data that shows lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are coming out at a younger age and having better experiences than previous generations, but it is only with theory that we can connect this finding with broader ideas about decreasing homophobia, the impact of the internet and other social trends that have led to this current phenomenon. A theory *explains* a phenomenon.

For sociology, a good theory helps us understand the social world on a larger scale. But a good social theory must be testable, for, as Christopher Hitchens said, anything that can be asserted without proof can be dismissed without proof. That is why sociology has an accompanying method – to ensure these theories are based in evidence. So important are theory and method to sociology that we have dedicated Chapters 3 and 4 to examining them in more detail.

In order to carry out the theory and method of sociology, it is necessary to be as *objective* as possible. Objectivity can be defined as an approach where personal values and beliefs do not influence one's findings. The importance of objectivity is in protecting from bias: thus, objectivity enabled Durkheim to make his arguments about suicide and religion without being critiqued for his own religious faith. There are great debates about how truly objective sociologists can be, as we discuss in Chapter 4, but the key point is that sociologists must minimize the impact of their own beliefs on how they analyse and interpret data.

That sociology is a mode of critical inquiry means that it can be applied to a variety of issues. In this book you will encounter a range of 'sociology of's. We discuss the sociology of class, the sociology of race, the sociology of deviance, among others. At our respective universities, we lecture modules on the sociology of social problems, the sociology of sport, the sociology of work and professions, and digital sociology. The beauty of the method and theory of sociology is that it can be applied to any issue in which humans are involved.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Sociology is an approach to studying society that can look at a huge diversity of issues and problems. British sociologist Susie Scott (2018), for example, studies the sociology of nothing. Take a moment to think of what you would be interested in studying – 'the sociology of …' what?

You can study that.

What kind of questions might you be interested in asking? Have they been asked already?

Why are you interested in this topic?

Currently, you will likely have broad answers to these questions. That's fine. Make a note of them. We'll ask you more about them in Chapters 3 and 4.

Sociology as a discipline

We have already discussed the ways in which sociology is distinct from psychology, philosophy, anthropology and other fields of study. A more formal way of making this point is to say that sociology is a discipline – a branch of knowledge. The purpose of this is not to give it institutional credibility, or to enable people to claim professional respectability by saying, '… As a sociologist …' – even if it has these effects. Rather, recognizing sociology as a discipline formalizes the notion that it is bounded by intellectual norms and formal rules. Fundamentally, these are concerned with sociology being *ethical*– not least that we should not falsify data, hurt our participants or betray their confidence. While sociological research can be undertaken in ways that harm people or support injustice, sociology as a discipline harshly condemns such research and sees ethical practice as a core component of the discipline. It is for this reason that we dedicate Chapter 5 to thinking about ethics and looking at case studies of social science research whose ethical components are complicated or troubling.

Sociology is also a discipline in the sense that it has been institutionalized. This is most obvious in how it is studied at universities: in Departments of Sociology, for degrees in sociology and as a general education course. There are also professional associations for sociologists (including the American Sociological Association, the Australian Sociological Association, the British Sociological Association, the European Sociological Association, the International Sociological Association, etc). While sociologists clearly lack imagination in naming their general associations, there are specialized sociological organizations, too. One can, for example, attend a large sociological conference on just the sociology of race, or a conference on the sociology of medicine, leisure, education, science and technology, or media. These groups organize conferences across the world where academics meet, present papers and share their knowledge.

Sociologists also have various jobs: often working for charities or think tanks, analysing data or employed in jobs which aim to improve society. They also work in advertising and market research, management, international development and urban development.

Sociology, as a discipline, means all these things. In other words, being a discipline gives sociology rules, respectability and privilege. As academic sociologists employed at universities, we gain from this. But that does not detract from the fact that, fundamentally, sociology is about thinking critically about the social world. And alongside this disciplinary tradition, sociology is also distinctly personal.

Sociology as personal

While the sociological imagination demands that we think beyond our individual experiences of events, sociology can also be very personal. Many sociologists study issues that are close to them. It is not surprising

that a great many sociologists of colour study racial inequality; that gay and lesbian sociologists study LGBT issues and cultures; that many female sociologists study patriarchy and issues related to gender inequality; and that women of colour have influenced the field to study the intersectionality of race, gender and sexuality. Of course, many female sociologists study issues independent of gender, just as many people of colour study areas not associated with race. Nonetheless, personal experience of social oppression is one motivation to study a social issue.

To make this point – that sociology is personal – is to recognize that it is not always purely objective, but instead often somewhat subjective. Some argue that the greater the level of subjectivity, the less rigorous the study. This is certainly true in some cases: someone motivated to find a particular result to prove their own beliefs has to guard strongly against **confirmation bias**. Yet to recognize subjectivity and take measures to deal with it can be a stronger course of action than claiming complete objectivity.

Confirmation bias: where a person focuses on the evidence that supports their argument and discounts other evidence

In this spirit, it is important to recognize our own influences in sociology – and we have shared these on pp. xxx-xxx in the front matter of the book. Other academics, with other influences and other stories, would have written this textbook differently.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

Sociology can be deeply personal, but that does not mean sociologists who study an issue do so because of a personal connection to it. The assumption that this is the case can also be problematic.

American Professor of Sociology, Janice Irvine, highlights how stigma can operate through these forms of assumptions. In a study with sociologists of sexuality, she found that almost three quarters had people assume their sexual identity and almost half had experienced assumptions about their sexual behaviour because they studied sex (Irvine 2015). Participants reported this having several troubling implications, including being marginalised in their work, propositioned for sex, and sexually harassed.

Beyond a personal connection with a topic, what other reasons might sociologists study an issue?

The use of sociology

In our discussion so far, we have highlighted that sociology helps us understand society in a range of ways. Perhaps from this it is implicit that sociology should be useful, although some would argue that sociological studies can be excellent even if they have no practical application. That may be the case, but our version of

sociology is one that is fundamentally useful to society. We discuss the complexities of this statement elsewhere in the book, but highlight some key arguments here.

Sociology is useful in multiple ways, but principally because it can effect change. For us, sociology is truly meaningful when it improves society. Some would call this **public sociology**. For example, the sociology of health and illness has helped explain why people do not seek medical attention when needed and offered ideas to improve the ways in which people engage with medical professionals. The second half of this book, looking at the application of sociology to various issues, is also guided around the notion that sociology should be useful.

Public sociology: a style of sociology that seeks to inform and engage with the public

Of course, sociology can have influence even if change is not causally related. Sociologists have the opportunity to influence debates and, particularly, social policy through providing a rigorous evidence base to inform decisions (see Chapter 12). When deciding which education system is best, or what the most effective strategies are for reducing crime, sociology provides a framework to gather this evidence and influence debates. Some sociologists do not gain influence in their lifetime but their ideas become influential later on.

Related to sociology having influence is the notion that it should be routed in social justice. Justice, as a concept, refers to fairness and the idea that decisions are made without bias or prejudice. Social justice is when the concept is applied to how societies operate. As such, for social justice to exist, societies must be fair. This does not mean that everyone must have the same experiences or desires, but all people should be able to access resources in a manner that enables them to live a healthy and full life. As Bell (1997) argues, 'social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure' (p. 3). This is one of the persuasive arguments of Chernilo's (2017) call for a philosophical sociology—it provides a theoretical framework by which to employ the methods and theory of sociology in a way that is socially just.

Sociology has not always been used to support social justice, as we discuss in Chapter 2, yet it is well-placed to help understand and challenge the inequities and social problems of this century (Feagin 2001). This will include dealing with the problems that have seen division in societies for generations (see Chapter 8), but also new challenges: from ensuring that automation and technological revolution does not hurt the poorest in society and the present fundamental crisis of climate change and its impact on the environment (see Chapter 11).

All this brings us to *the task of sociology*. We hold that there are four key tenets here. It is the task of sociology:

- To assess
- To understand
- To challenge

- To change.

Not all sociology has to do all of these, but it is not sociology if it does none of them.

VOX POP Sierra Kamara, final year Sociology student

Insert image of Sierra

Sociology has and will always be one of the reasons I fell in love with learning, and that is the reason I decided to study the subject. The subject was completely mind-altering, and enabled me to start critically thinking. It provided me with answers to questions I didn't even know needed answering, and encouraged me to keep asking no matter the circumstance because there seemed to always be an answer - it just required effort and perseverance. Sociology unapologetically puts me at the heart, cares about who I am and the course my life is taking.

Growing up, I found that there was always an apathy towards inequality within the education system. This is because it failed to address the different issues students faced, as it hid behind the mask of essentialism through a universal curriculum. This inevitably ensured that students were not asking questions, thus normalising their experiences. Being introduced to sociology, as an elective subject, showed me everything I was missing, and the passion I was taught with definitely revealed to me why it was an elective subject, and not compulsory. The subject seemed to be a Golden ticket and that is why I deemed it extremely important to study it at a higher educational level.

Since studying the subject at university, I found that there were several reasons for the injustices and inequalities people faced - the unfairness in the world was not conjured up out of thin air. Multiple discourses like Black feminism and postcolonialism showed me how structures in place contributed to the differential experiences of people like me, that were Black immigrant children growing up deprived parts of London. Sociology offered answers and, by studying the subject, I learnt that the same way there were answers, was the same way that there were solutions. This is why I study and enjoy the subject so much. It offers positive realism that I have failed to get in other subjects.

- How does Kamara's understanding of sociology match with your own?
- What core elements seen in the section 'Approaching Sociology' (p. 12) does Kamara ascribe to in his narrative?
- How might your experiences differ from Kamara's? To what extent is this attributable to your individual experiences and the culture or society in which you grew up?

CONCLUSION

Sociology is about understanding society. Whether you are more interested in individuals' experiences of personal life or the broad social structures that constrain how people act, sociology has the tools to understand these issues. We have shown the ways in which sociology is different from other disciplines, but perhaps most importantly that it is a way of thinking, and a way of thinking *differently*. We have provided a range of

approaches to understanding sociology, and argued there are four key tenets of what sociology should be as a practice. The task of sociology is to assess, to understand, to challenge and to change.

HOW WOULD…?

- How would Erving Goffman (see p. 9) have interpreted your school life?
  - Think about the sociological imagination. What norms were present in your school? What was the point of the formal rules? Did you have a uniform, and until what age?
  - Make a note of the key issues, and then discuss with a friend and see what similarities and differences there are.
- How would a sociologist write about your class?
  - Think of the last class you were in. What were the norms of that class? Are they all of similar importance?
  - How might you contest the norms of the class? Which norms are more serious to follow and why?
  - How might you find out the reasons why particular norms in your class exist?

STRUCTURED FURTHER READING

Mills, C.W. (1959). Chapter 1: The Promise. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

The first chapter of this classic book is an essential read for students of sociology. The way in which C. Wright Mills argues that people experience their lives as a series of traps that sociological thinking can help them overcome will resonate for many people today. He also connects people's personal troubles with broader structural issues of society.

Bancroft, A. & Fevre, R. (2016). *Dead White Men and Other Important People* (2nd edn). London: Palgrave.

This is an unconventional textbook that introduces you to sociology, but written in the form of a novel. It is an engaging and accessible introduction to sociology and offers a different perspective to some of the arguments we develop here.

Thompson, N. (2017). *Social Problems and Social Justice*. London: Palgrave.

An accessible textbook that examines how using social justice as a way of thinking about society can help address various social problems in society.

Visit the companion website at **www.macmillanihe.com/mccormack** for further learning and teaching resources.