



EXPLORING SOCIETY

Sociology for New Zealand Students 4th Edition

RUTH McMANUS
STEVE MATTHEWMAN
CHRIS BRICKELL
GREGOR McLENNAN
PAUL SPOONLEY



Ruth McManus teaches in and researches on sociology and death studies. President of New Zealand's national sociological association SAANZ for five years, Ruth is an inaugural executive member of the Society for Death Studies (NZ) set up in 2014, which promotes research and understanding across all areas of death studies with particular reference to New Zealand academic, professional, artistic and practitioner communities. Her books include *Death in a Global Age* (Macmillan, 2012) and *Death Down Under* (forthcoming).

Steve Matthewman is associate professor of sociology at the University of Auckland and outgoing president of the Sociological Association of Aotearoa New Zealand (SAANZ). His teaching and research interests include introductory sociology, the sociology of disasters, social theory and the sociology of technology, and his current research looks at the rebuilding of Christchurch following its two earthquakes. Steve's latest book is *Disasters, Risks and Revelation: Making Sense of Our Times* (Macmillan, 2015).

Chris Brickell is associate professor in gender studies at the University of Otago. He has published extensively on theories and histories of masculinity, sexuality, consumer culture and adolescence, as well as on the history of sociology in New Zealand. His best-known book is *Mates and Lovers: A History of Gay New Zealand* (Random House, 2008).

Gregor McLennan is professor of sociology at the University of Bristol, UK. He has written many books and articles on sociological theory, Marxism and the various 'posts' – post-modernism, post-colonial thought and post-secularism. Gregor was professor and head of department at Massey University from 1991 to 1997.

Distinguished Professor Paul Spoonley is the pro vice-chancellor of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Massey University. He is a fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand, the Auckland War Memorial Museum and the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. He was a senior Fulbright scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author or editor of 27 books, including the biography of Ranginui Walker *Mata Toa: The Life and Times of Ranginui Walker* (Penguin, 2009). He is a lead investigator on the government-funded research project, Capturing the Diversity Dividend of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

The sociological imagination: insights, themes and skills

Chapter aims

- To describe some of the key features of sociology
 - To introduce the three core themes that will be used throughout the book
 - To discuss the roles that theorising and research play in developing sociological knowledge
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Introduction

This chapter addresses three main tasks. Firstly, we say a few things about sociology – about what it is and what you can do with it. Secondly, we introduce the core themes that act as running threads throughout the book. These themes are interesting in their own right, but they also give us a useful ‘handle’ on the wide range of material covered in this book, and in the study of the discipline more generally. Thirdly, we want to highlight the two main characteristic and indispensable skills of social inquiry: theorising and researching. We particularly stress the role of theory in what sociologists do, because theorising is sometimes perceived by starting students as being ‘difficult’. This is actually a misperception, partly because research itself – or, expressed simply, *finding out* – is not exactly easy. People are complicated. But partly, too, it is because theory can very quickly become rewarding and enjoyable, once you get over any initial inhibitions around grasping and manipulating unfamiliar terminology. Students at all levels can readily ‘catch’ the infectious feeling of sharing in the real insights and engaging debates that theoretical ideas facilitate more than anything else. We want you to be that kind of infected and infectious student.

Why study sociology?

Let's begin with the most practical reason for studying anything at university: getting a decent job.

Sociology gives you valuable skills that can be applied to a wide range of endeavours. It is of increasing value in relation to employment and careers. Gone are the days when sociology was regarded, employment-wise, as something that you only took if you wanted to be a lecturer, a social worker or a prison educational officer (vital though those occupations are).

Why sociology is valuable

Three sociological insights tell us why this should be so. Firstly, we now live in a world with a more flexible job market, where 'generic skills' and adaptable credentials are more important than training in the kind of specialist but limited expertise that may quickly go out of date in today's era of 'precarious' work. Many first degrees from universities no longer take you straight into specialised employment – often you also have to take a higher degree, or learn 'on the job' with little background preparation. Secondly, we live in a society where the supply, interpretation and use of information are more important than they used to be. This hugely increases the face value of our two sociological skills: researching (finding out) and theorising (thinking about and explaining). In the world of big data we are positively awash with concepts and facts, and it takes people with good critical judgement to decide which are most valid and important for particular purposes. Being a 'researcher' is itself now an accepted occupation in its own right, whether undertaken as a freelancer or while institutionally employed in government departments, the press, think-tanks, large corporations, or the educational sector. Thirdly, in proportion as work becomes more information-driven and as organisations become more streamlined in competitive global markets, they risk losing sight of the *human* side of things, and feel the need to have a 'people-centred' aspect to their systems.

Few are better placed than sociologists to understand the pressures, perspectives and contradictions in achieving 'work–life balance' and in seeing where people from different social and ethnic backgrounds are 'coming from'. So, putting all this together: sociology turns out to deliver an ideal 'knowledge-society, people-centred' basis for a wide range of valued jobs in the media, politics, education and health, voluntary or third-sector work and commercial businesses.

Now to some of the 'intrinsic' motivations for doing sociology.

- **Sociology facilitates self-knowledge and self-development.** For people who have just left school, sociology provides a deeper understanding of the contemporary social world and our place within it than do many other disciplines. For more-mature students, sociology gives intellectual shape to the practical knowledge that they have already acquired in real life. Sociology enhances understanding partly by challenging common-view assumptions that are passed down to us, whether through our families, our peers or the mass media. The result is frequently liberating.
- **Sociology helps us understand the situation of other people.** Sociology is not just about self-development and self-understanding – it is not a ‘selfish’ subject – because it tells us that our individual situations and fate are intrinsically bound up with those of others. We are social beings. Some of these are ‘people like us’ while many are (apparently) very different, and sociologists seek to understand what makes everyone ‘tick’.
- **Sociology helps us understand the world.** We have long since moved beyond an exclusive interest in humans alone to think about all of those other things that contribute to human being and that make the world what it is. Thus, we are increasingly interested in energy, technology, non-human animals and the broader environment. Indeed, given how pressing today’s environmental problems are, it is imperative that sociologists think of these topics and their many connections. There is open talk of the prospect of the Sixth Mass Extinction event and/or movement into a new geological age, the Anthropocene; both of these, should they occur, will be the consequence of human activities.
- **Sociology helps us comprehend and shape social change.** A memorable slogan of one of the ‘founders’ of sociology, Karl Marx, was that the point was not only to interpret the world, but to change it. Sociology was born in the heat of a changing modern world around two hundred years ago, and it constantly forces us to think about whether society is ‘progressing’ or not; about who the winners and losers of social change are; about whose side we are on; and about how things can be changed for the better, and for everyone. Sociology is thus closely bound up with questions of social justice and attracts the sort of people who care about the world and the wellbeing of others.

What sociology is

Sociologists in Aotearoa New Zealand have spent a lot of time thinking about what sociology is and why we should do it (SAANZ, 2016). For co-author Steve Matthewman,

sociology is the discipline that seeks to understand ourselves and our world. It has a critical edge: sociologists expose relations of power and mechanisms of domination. Sociology also concerns itself with justice: we identify inequalities and commit to human flourishing. Finally, sociology has a utopian impulse. Part of our task is to educate and agitate for a better world.

On its website, the University of Canterbury's Sociology department defines sociology as:

the systematic study of society. Its practitioners analyse society in a great variety of ways to connect people's lives with public issues and concerns. Society is everywhere so sociology's scope is wide. This diversity is seen in the breadth of topics taught. At Canterbury, these include sociology of the body; ethnicity; mental health; criminology; exploring the past; the environment; and death studies. Add cities, religion, social movements and everyday life to this mix and you get a sense of the depth and diversity of this rich and rewarding discipline.

For Corrina Tucker, a lecturer at Massey University:

The initial attraction to sociology for me was that it allowed me to make much greater sense of my life and place in the world. In understanding that our agency is shaped by a multitude of systems, structures and experiences, I am able to better critically examine and question the complexities of our social world. This opens up possibilities for new ways of thinking about our social worlds, and for making progress towards more sustainable and equitable lives.

Sociology is a properly academic, and indeed a 'scientific', discipline: like other sciences, sociology takes a distinctive subject matter for analysis – one that represents an independent and complex reality – and produces systematic knowledge, rather than merely subjective opinion, about this reality. Sociology is also fascinating and compelling. And the scope of sociology is very broad – so broad, in fact, that a multitude of topic areas can be covered and a multitude of points of view can be debated. In sociology, little is ruled out as necessarily wrong, and no views, not even scientific views, are sacred. So while

sociologists do strive to ensure that their work is as thorough, and in that sense as impartial, as it can be, sociology is conducted by people who are already involved in what they study and are part of it. Sociology probably cannot, then, ever be a wholly disinterested enterprise, if by that we mean seeking to attain a ‘God’s-eye view’ of the world. We can reach towards objectivity as far as possible, but in sociology there will always be much scope for moral and political debate and attachment.

Defenders of pure objectivity – such people are not usually real scientists – sometimes tell us that ‘the facts speak for themselves’. But in fact, facts never speak for themselves; they always have to be interpreted to take on any significance. And interpretation always involves theorising and imagination and empathy as well – hence one of the key catch-phrases of our discipline: ‘the sociological imagination’. The originator of this phrase was C. Wright Mills, an American sociologist working in the 1950s, and his message still speaks to us today.

*Objectivity and
interpretation*

Mills describes the promise of sociology as ‘the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations between the two’ (Mills, 1959, p. 7). Mills emphasises that what we often experience as private troubles in life – unemployment perhaps, or relationship difficulties, or personal apathy – need to be seen not as personal matters at all, but rather as public issues: things to be debated and explored as general social phenomena. It was sociology’s great task, Mills thought, to open up the interface between private troubles and public issues, and he went on to outline three key general steps in developing an adequate sociology of contemporary social life (Mills, 1959, pp. 6–7):

1. What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? How does this society differ from other varieties of social order?
2. Where does this society stand in human history? What are its characteristic ways of history making?
3. What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted?

In other words, good opening questions for the sociologist include: How is society structured? How does it differ from others? What causes society to change? What sort of people prosper? Who has power?

The three themes of the book

The social and the personal

The personal

This theme simply extends Mills's contrast between personal troubles and public issues. It can be explained like this. We are all unique individuals. We have our own names, our own identities. We are our parents' children and nobody else's. We have our peculiar routines and practices; our own social, political and sexual preferences; and our very own emotions and thoughts. Sociologists do not deny these things. And yet there is something misleading about them, because as individuals we are profoundly shaped by, and live our lives within, an essentially social setting. Indeed, as social beings our thoughts about ourselves are determined in large measure by our social interactions.

We are our parents' children, for one thing, and those parents are themselves inescapably people of a certain social type – Pākehā or Māori, middle or working class, together or divorced, heterosexual or homosexual or bisexual or otherwise oriented, employed or unemployed, country folk or townies, Chinese or New Zealanders or Chinese New Zealanders. These social traits actually make up a large part of what we are; and they are social, not purely individual, characteristics.

The social

As individuals, we take on and reproduce **social roles** – as fathers, mothers, lovers, students, workers, etc. It is impossible to be lovers, for example, without negotiating in our most intimate encounters some very general and society-wide assumptions and expectations about sexuality, masculinity, femininity and so on. Similarly, it is impossible to be a parent without taking on board many authority structures and postures that are not so much freely chosen as imposed or at least pressed upon us by the norms and sanctions of the society in which we live.

Societal norms and pressures

We can choose some aspects of our working lives, of course, but few of us can choose whether to work or not – and anyway, the longer and harder and more thoughtfully we prepare ourselves for working options of a certain type, the more meaningful choice we are going to have. But that preparation itself involves immersion in further forms of strong socialisation – family values and rules, school, university, training, etc. – and the way we approach these matters is closely connected to our degree of social privilege. On top of that, schools and even governments do not themselves have that much room to manoeuvre in shaping the availability and nature of work: this is determined largely by the needs and fortunes of the labour market in a capitalist global economy. Then, once we do have a job, enter relationships and perhaps have children to provide for, further structuring routines kick in. We build up

habits and expectations in relation to the requirements and incentives currently available, get used to talking and acting in certain ways, and run our lives according to particular levels of resource, peer pressures and available belief systems. Our very **identities**, in other words, are forged in and through these roles, jobs, habits and expectations. We are not robots – society does not programme us and fully determine who we are, what we do, or how we think (critical sociology would be impossible if that were so). But dramatic breaks from general patterns and norms are relatively rare, and when the break is in a ‘downward’ direction – unemployment, lack of professional fulfilment, unwanted relationship break-ups, children ‘going off the rails’, experience of sexual violence – the psychological consequences are very serious, often resulting in ‘identity crisis’ and even the collapse of our sense of self.

So even in a society in which there is a lot of talk about ‘free choice’ and ‘self-empowerment’, the power of external social reality on individual judgement and values cannot be underestimated. The social meets the psychological at this point, as illustrated in a famous 1970s experiment led by Philip Zimbardo. Researchers asked approximately seventy American college students to participate in a prison scenario, in which – by the toss of a coin – some were to play guards and some to play inmates. The author summarises:

At the end of only six days we had to close down our mock prison because what we saw was frightening. It was no longer apparent to most of the subjects (or to us) where reality ended and their roles began. The majority had indeed become prisoners or guards, no longer able to clearly differentiate between role playing and self. There were dramatic changes in virtually every aspect of their behaviour, thinking and feeling. (Zimbardo, 1990, p. 177)

Finally, on this first theme, it is worth pointing out that how ‘the personal’ relates to ‘the social’ varies across cultures. Indeed, the very idea of a distinct individual self, placed inside each of us, as it were, deciding how to ‘respond’ to what is going on in the outside world that impinges upon us is itself the product of modern industrial, Western, liberal society. In ancient Greece and in many tribal societies, both past and present – including aspects of Māori community life – the individual simply does not have this cocooned, separate status. Rather, the individual is seen as much more ‘porous’ than this. Who we are can thus be seen, whether positively or negatively, as the creation of collective traditions, resources and values. The point is not necessarily to devalue individualism as such; it is merely to point out that it is one type of historically formed cultural value system rather than a changeless part of ‘human nature’.

Social roles are the expectations and attributes associated with social positions such as teacher, mother, father, worker, etc. **Identity** refers to the distinctive characteristics of persons in relation to social groups.

Cultural variations

The local and the global

Globalisation refers to the increasing inter-dependence between societies on a worldwide basis. **Capitalism** is the globally dominant economic system. It is based on private ownership of the means of production, a money economy and market exchange.

Interconnection through technology

Twenty years ago, a new ‘buzzword’ in sociology was taking hold: **globalisation**. Today, this concept has become commonplace, almost a cliché, in all sorts of journalistic and everyday contexts. Contrary to what some sceptics say about sociology and other disciplines being little more than common sense, the notion of globalisation provides an excellent example of how the jargon of social science actively shapes and re-enters the understandings of policy makers, professionals and citizens. (Other examples would include ‘altruism’, ‘bureaucracy’, ‘**capitalism**’, ‘charisma’, ‘cultural capital’, ‘division of labour’, ‘homophobia’, ‘institutional racism’, ‘gentrification’, ‘male domination’, ‘migrant labour’ and ‘moral panics’.)

During that period of 20 years or so, the fact and the idea of globalisation have taken a strong hold, and refer to the way in which, across all the crucial social spheres of economy, technology, culture and politics, we now live in a thoroughly interconnected world, one in which what happens elsewhere in the world has a deeper and faster impact on what happens ‘at home’ than ever before. It even blurs the boundaries between ‘home’ and ‘elsewhere’. In technology, for example, innovations in microcomputing – which itself hugely and continuously accelerates global communication – are led by globally connected teams, working in the main for multinational companies, marketing products that are sold and integrated into organisations across the world almost simultaneously. In the realm of the economy, to take another example, the global ‘credit crunch’ stemming from overstretched home mortgage markets in the USA in 2008 sent shockwaves through financial institutions everywhere, and had some of the major economic nations teetering on the brink of serious recession within a matter of weeks. Or again, patterns of economic mobility can readily be observed that seem to relentlessly take people from the poorer global South to the global North and, within every region, from the less ‘developed’ areas to more ‘advanced’ ones.

The complexity of globalisation

But if sociologists have helped everyone grasp the profound changes brought about by the globalisation process, we need to stress its *complexity*, too. It is the destiny of all ‘big ideas’ to begin in a very sweeping way, only – after further research and theorising – to go into a second, more considered phase of life. And so it is with ‘globalisation’. For one thing, globalisation is not as historically novel as is sometimes made out. From the well-marked trade routes, oceanic migrations (Polynesians were particularly skilled seafarers), religious interactions and warrior conquests of antiquity and mediaeval times, through the mercantile exploration and colonialism that opened up the ‘new worlds’ of indigenous peoples to European colonialists, and on again into



'Uncle Sam' demonstrating against the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Wellington, 2015.
SOURCE: DYLAN OWEN

the nineteenth century – the age of fully industrial capitalism – society has always been global. The twentieth century itself was notable perhaps above all for the total societal involvement in two world wars of unprecedented destructiveness. The process of drawing all peoples and all cultures into the modern global world, then, has been taking place cumulatively for a very long time.

We also need to be careful not to exaggerate how 'one-way' the traffic runs between 'the global' and 'the local'. For example, while the autonomy of individual countries seems to have declined, the existence of supra-national entities or movements – like the United Nations, NATO, the World Bank, the G8, the ASEAN pact, 'global Islam', or transnational organised crime – has by no means rendered the nation-state obsolete, nor has nationalism become a spent ideological force. Think of Brexit, Donald Trump's plans to 'build a wall' and 'make America great again', or the growth of far-right movements across the Western world. The reason for this is partly logistical: the world is too

The role of the nation-state

complex to have everything driven by decision making from a global ‘centre’. Power has to be devolved, and to be effectively devolved the regions, nations and localities have to retain significant authority. Thus, in the worldwide financial crisis that swept through almost every country in 2008, urgent action was taken by particular nation-states to shore up banks and investment companies to try to stall the plunge into serious recession, in some cases to the virtual ruin of the nation itself (for example Iceland) but in other cases to significant effect. The global downturn continued nevertheless, but in a chaotic way, because there is not actually something called ‘the global system’ as such that works coherently; there are only global phenomena working in, through and across nation-states. So the only antidote to apparent global chaos was not some newfangled post-national virtual force, but a rather old-fashioned resorting to international pacts made between political leaders – just as 64 years earlier the Bretton Woods Agreements sought to stabilise world financial institutions following the turmoil of the Great Depression and World War II.

Global branding

The failure to obliterate the local is also a matter of social meaning. We can never be the children of ‘everywhere’ – our identities and lives are always lived out in a particular way, in a particular place and time, and this means that even if our societies are indeed globally involved and influenced, those global processes in turn can take local forms and be reacted to in terms of local beliefs and practices. The New Zealand All Blacks, for instance, now stand as something of a global ‘brand’, admired and familiar across the whole world – and not only by sports fans. The All Blacks brand invokes images of supreme professionalism, physically honed and savvy masculinity, and Māori-inflected but robustly integrated ethnicity. The brand therefore speaks to foundational myths of nation, such as the one that says we have the best race relations in the world. The All Blacks’ egalitarian ‘team first’ ethos also speaks to another cherished myth, that we are a society of equals. These images are inevitably ‘touched up’ to a considerable extent, and they work by tingeing our perception of the sporting context with the general qualities and traditions that are putatively distinctive of Aotearoa alone. (Minus the problems, of course.) Yet, alongside further projections of the country as having a ‘pure’ natural environment and a national character of integrity, Brand New Zealand is one kind of expression of ‘glocalisation’ rather than of straightforward globalisation – glocalisation being the social space in which the local meets the global, with sometimes unpredictable results. For example, despite Aotearoa New Zealand being located in Polynesia and despite a long history of players of Samoan heritage playing for the All Blacks (well over 50 at the last count), our national team played a game in Chicago before it played one in Apia. Chicago is not a rugby town; Apia is.

In many ways, critics are right to say that globalisation is the way in which the powerful dominate the powerless in the world; that economic globalisation equates to exploitation; and that the relentless spread of common reference points in film and TV, advertising imagery, sport, literature and software programs, together with the prevailing use of English in cross-cultural communication, represents a new kind of 'cultural imperialism'. Yet it is also the case that the globalisation process has generated a significant 'anti-globalisation' movement. It has stimulated 'Southern' national economies like those of China, India and Brazil to grow very rapidly, fundamentally changing their earlier roles as either relatively stagnant or as acting merely as cheap servicers of the needs of American and other 'Northern' capitalist markets. In the 2008 economic crisis, China supplied around half the bail-out finance for collapsing Wall Street giants like Morgan Stanley, and even though China's own stock markets were also falling, China still managed to become the principal creditor lending to the USA, accumulating billions in foreign exchange while the world's leading power looked as if it was approaching bankruptcy.

So, while there are certainly imbalanced power relations at work, and 'the local' is constantly being pressured by 'the global', at the same time the global still needs the local, and the local – not least the global South – can even sometimes shape the global North by reacting back on it. Even such seemingly minor and 'cultural' things as hosting major sporting events like the Olympics (Rio de Janeiro 2016, London 2012, Beijing 2008) and Commonwealth Games (Gold Coast 2018, Glasgow 2014, Delhi 2010), or extending the number of Formula 1 Grand Prix venues (Mexico 2015, Bahrain 2012, India 2011, United Arab Emirates 2009), can be seen as part of an ongoing sea-change towards a many-sided global social politics.

To illustrate these matters further, take the ongoing story of 'the McDonaldization of society'. This phrase was coined by a sociologist (Ritzer, 2004) to describe the way in which a local Californian family restaurant, during the 1950s, began to take off as one of the first enterprises to deal in 'cloned' services to consumers – consumers who were imagined as wanting nothing more than a predictable, fast, cheap and cheerful food product. By 1991, McDonald's had 13,000 outlets in many countries, with a total sales turnover of US\$6.8 billion. In China, the biggest McDonald's in the world (with seating for 700) opened in April 1992, recording 40,000 customers on its first day. In Moscow – the previous heartland of the Communist world – the McDonald's was staffed by more than 1200 young people, who, like their counterparts everywhere else, are paid low wages for fast, intense, basic service. Half the company's profits come from outside the USA. The iconic Ronald McDonald figure has come to be better known across the world than the presidents of any particular



McDonald's outlets look more or less the same anywhere. This one is in Dunedin, in 2018.
SOURCE: CHRIS BRICKELL

country and, according to Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001), the golden arches are now more recognisable than the Christian cross. McDonald's thus became the very paradigm of modern service capitalism and dumbed-down cultural imperialism, and many other firms followed its model, cementing a common global culture of consumption that covered not only the production of food and the venue for family occasions but also all sorts of leisure needs and even essential services (some providers re-branded themselves as 'McDentists' and 'McDoctors').

McDonaldisation, as the spread and dominance of American/Northern service capitalism across the globe, is undeniable. And yet, in due course, its managers became aware that uniform, cheap, cheerful and globally predictable products were not necessarily what people wanted. They developed 'cultural' initiatives (children's competitions) and adopted charities to show that they were not just profit-making philistines. They altered marketing strategies: they primarily market to adults in Japan and to children in the USA and New Zealand, and in Indonesia their advertisements omit images of food and drink during Ramadan. They started to source local food produce to show that they were not there just to rip off local consumers, but rather to help local producers and uphold, as far as the model allowed, local traditions and colour. Japanese McDonald's restaurants serve the EBI Filet-O, a shrimp burger; India has a Maharaja Mac; and New Zealand has a KiwiBurger. McDonald's

managers had to get used to strong reactions against McDonaldisation through drives to eat wholesomely and locally. They had to compete with ‘globalisation from below’, where the very success of a new product or service in the global market depended on the retention of definite cultural characteristics, not their obliteration. People came to see that McDonaldisation symbolised, to use another George Ritzer phrase (Ritzer, 2007b), the ‘globalization of nothing’; that is, ‘non-places’ like identical shopping malls; ‘non-things’ like globally valid credit cards; faceless services like ATMs; and ‘non-people’ like teleworkers physically located in anonymous flatpack call-centres thousands of miles from the people whose local enquiries they are answering. Accordingly, there has been a development towards the globalisation of *something*, including ‘slow food’, and optimists think this could signal that the world may yet have a future more varied, pluralistic and equitable than the present. You are encouraged to consider for yourself what the balance is between ‘top-down’ globalisation and ‘bottom-up’ glocalisation as you go through this book.

Differences and divisions

Sociologists are interested in the way in which individuals come out of, and recombine to form, social groups. But how are we to understand ‘groupness’? This turns out to be a fascinating question, not least because new groups and new types of group are constantly coming into existence, with others disappearing. Sub-cultural style groups like bogans, hipsters, cosplayers and larpers have significant sociological characteristics and rituals of belonging, but they don’t last in the same form all that long. Social classes and ethnicities, however, tend to be regarded by many sociologists as much more stable, because they stem from ‘structural’ (socio-economic) rather than (only) ‘cultural’ characteristics and are therefore unlikely to disappear very quickly. But it’s not quite that simple, partly because it is often very difficult to rigidly separate out socio-economic aspects of group behaviour and motivation from ‘merely cultural’ aspects. Thus we find some sociologists identifying the ‘class’ characteristics of punks (some being a certain type of working-class person, others a certain type of middle-class person), while others deny that ‘class’ is any longer a structural feature of modern societies. The German theorist Ulrich Beck, for example, regarded class as a ‘zombie’ category – it only continues to exist because sociologists want it to, whereas in today’s cultural life (Beck’s message is more mixed when it comes to socio-economic life), class is now thought to be completely irrelevant (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). Even if we disagree with Beck about this, it is undeniable

Social groupings

Group belonging

that the human content of categories like ‘working class’ changes considerably over time – the type of people, how they work and live, what income they have, what their beliefs and aspirations are.

A major issue arising here is that while sociologists might be inclined to regard someone as a member of a particular group or class, that person themselves may not, and may not even recognise the group category as valid. And even where someone does recognise that they belong to a certain sort of group or group category (deaf people, let us say), they may not see that fact as the most important aspect of their identity (as they would if they thought of themselves as actively part of the ‘deaf community’). Finally, group belonging is not an exclusive or exhaustive matter. Just for the sake of argument and caricature, one and the same individual could be simultaneously deaf, working class, Māori, gay, a goth, a mother, unmarried, a student, a cricketer, an anti-globaliser and a semi-Buddhist. Apart from indicating something of the amazing range of groups and group life for sociologists to investigate, this array of social belonging raises further important matters. Is random multiple groupness very common, or is there a sociological rationale for related ‘strings’ of overlapping group belonging? Why is it that some aspects of belonging are conscious and others unconscious; some ‘ascribed’ and others ‘achieved’? Which aspects of groupness, and which types of groupness, seem to be more ‘structural’ and deep-seated than others? In what circumstances, and under which sociological lens, would we be prepared to say that one group characteristic or belonging is more fundamental to someone’s social existence than others? And does the social agent’s self-perception align with this ‘objective’ characterisation, or not?

Group differences and divisions

We could simplify this series of questions by saying that sociologists are first of all interested in group *differences* of all sorts; then they are interested in how it is that some group differences get reproduced as social *divisions*. The force of the concept of social division is that differences are often experienced not just as interesting variations but as *inequalities* between people, classes and cultures. They may work out in vitally different ways, determining such things as where people live, how well they live and how long they live (there is a vast literature on the social determinants of health). When people are consciously divided in this way, they do not see themselves as just plain different but as superior or inferior, lionised or stigmatised, gaining or losing. They see their basic group interests as being fundamentally opposed to the interests of other groups. Conscious social divisions of this kind then tend to take conflictual political forms, though not necessarily violent conflict.

Sociologists are preoccupied with figuring out what the key differences/divisions in a given society are, and how they got there. They observe the ways

in which people articulate and pursue their social interests in relation to these divisions and differences. They analyse how group divisions and differences get represented in society, in the mass media, in popular culture, by political parties and by the state.

Researching and theorising: it's a riot

Let's bring these sociological themes together again as we say something more about the importance of research and theorising. Let's think about *rioting*. Rioting often appears to people – especially people in privileged groups, in the media and in government – as surprising, unnecessary, mindless and 'deviant'. In conservative newspapers and other forms of media, riots are often vividly represented, and pigeonholed as basically criminal – the irresponsible acts of 'bad' people who should take up whatever personal troubles they have in a more constructive and patient manner, rather than turn them into public issues in this violent, useless way. Sociologists, however, need to take a more considered approach (which does not necessarily mean condoning riotous violence as such), looking for the deeper social causes of violent and apparently random disturbances, and also teasing out some of the social complexities behind apparently simple and inconsiderate behaviour such as looting, burning, and throwing dangerous missiles.

Take one of the most extensive and dramatic urban upheavals of the late twentieth century, the Los Angeles (LA) riots of 1992. Fifty-three people died in these riots, hundreds of businesses and buildings were burned to the ground, and very graphic scenes of violence and looting were beamed into living rooms all around the world as the story unfolded. Indeed, in an important sense, the LA riots were a media event, a mediated event. The initial incident that triggered the disorder, the beating by police of an African-American man, Rodney King, was caught on a personal video camera by a passer-by. This clip was then re-presented on the main TV networks, and tension mounted in the streets. The trial of the white officers involved was also shown on TV, and the riots were begun by people standing outside TV shops in their LA neighbourhoods who surged with anger when they saw that the officers had been acquitted. We know this because yet more TV cameras were filming those people watching the TV trial. Thereafter, nightly scenes of the blazing, ripping events were re-presented to the world at large. This sparked off further rioting in other US cities. And throughout the whole process, from the initial incident to the sombre aftermath, a long sequence of experts, protagonists and ordinary people were wheeled in front of the viewers to give an account

Los Angeles riots and the media

Representations are the re-presentations of actions, beliefs, events and things through the media and in a certain light.

Facts and viewpoints

of their own feelings, views and proposed remedies. The events were all too real, but so were the **representations** of the events and the different sorts of ‘representations of representations’, whether on TV or in the analyses of the various commentators.

Understanding the LA unrest sociologically involves coming to terms with many hard facts: the number of people dead or wounded, the number arrested, the figures for property damage and so on. There is also the need to find out about the full range of representations mentioned above. How did the police see it, how did the President see it, how did the shopkeepers see it, how did black youth see it? Was there a Latino point of view that was different from that of black people? Were any white people involved? Was there a discrepancy between the accounts of African-American and Korean-American people? (There was tension and some conflict between these two groups.) Did Americans generally think that the trial of the officers who beat Rodney King was fair? In addition to these facts relating to the events and to perspectives on them, there is important background data to get a grip on: What were the trends in income and employment levels among African-Americans in LA in the period leading up to the disturbances? Were the drop-out and truancy rates in schools increasing? What is the evidence of prior police racism or heavy-handedness? Does the record show that US justice is consistently fair to black Americans? Do black Americans think they get fair justice? What does a comparison between the situations and views of black, Latino and Korean people in LA reveal?

Research methods

You can see from this that sociologists have plenty to research, and there are different research methods we need to use. For example, if we want to know how many people died in the LA disturbances, or what property was destroyed, or what the extent of previous social deprivation was, we can collect and work through the relevant *documentary sources* (death certificates, police statistics, fire department damage assessment reports, school records, employment statistics, indices of housing and living standards). If instead we want to know what various groups of people thought about what happened and its significance, we could go and talk to them in interviews in order to get a better view. However, we can’t talk to everyone, so we might design a questionnaire that a large number of people might be prepared to fill in and return. This would probably give us more aggregate information, but not terribly *rich* information. To get that, we could seek ‘access’ into one of the local communities, spending a significant amount of time getting to know some people, observing them and discussing with them at length their life history, community characteristics, attitudes to authority, and hopes and fears. This kind of in-depth personal exchange, designed to develop in the sociologist a close-up feel for a particular

way of life that is reflected in reports that give a ‘voice’ to those being studied, is usually referred to as *ethnography*.

If we wanted to understand the pressures the police feel in situations such as the LA riots, we might temporarily join up with the police, or follow them around, to try to get a sense of their motivations and perceptions – and even just to find out what they do on the streets. This kind of research is sometimes known as *participant observation*. If we wanted to know how often items of news and comment on the riots appeared in the media, and the coloration of editorial opinion, we might collect all the relevant newspapers for the period and work out the column inches devoted to the subject, as compared with other subjects. We could then work out a scale of measurement to summarise the editorial values of the main papers towards the events. We could do a similar exercise on the importance of the events in terms of TV time (this involves what is called *content analysis*). We would also want to pay attention to the subtle ways in which the images and words that were published in the media to represent the riots – whether intentionally or unintentionally – conveyed a particular political or moral slant. Working like this on the meanings of the ‘texts’ of the riots – statements, interviews, reports, images, commentaries, testimonies – is known as the *semiotics* of sociological research.

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‘Finding out’ is thus an indispensable, and multi-dimensional, part of a sociologist’s practice. No single research method is intrinsically better than any other: everything depends on what it is that we want to find out. If you want to know what it was like growing up as a woman in Timaru during World War II, a life history methodology is more appropriate than a survey questionnaire. However, if you just want to know whether young wartime mothers also did stints of paid and unpaid work to help the war effort, a questionnaire sent to all women born between 1910 and 1925 and still currently living in Timaru might be better. How valuable such information is will depend further on the level of response to the survey.

In summary

Comparison and generalisation

In trying to understand what happened, and why, in Los Angeles in 1992, we have to ask general questions about the relationship between social violence, social conditions, the prevalence and impact of racism, and the role of the media in shaping or disseminating information about society and its defining events. We are asking about what goes on when differences between people

Concepts and labelling

Concepts are abstract ideas that refer to the general properties of chosen aspects of social life. For example, the concept of 'rioting' does not include details about specific riots, but allows us to make some general statements about how to understand the phenomenon of riots.

Hypotheses are propositions put forward for empirical testing.

Theories are bodies of ideas that attempt to explain in a general way why things happen as they do. Theorising involves abstracting an explanation from the particular features of a situation.

What theory is

take the form of serious social divisions and major clashes of group interest/belonging. To comprehend particular events, we need general **concepts** such as, in this case, *racism*, *poverty* and *multiculturalism*, but the particular exemplification of those concepts in turn qualifies them further. There is a constant tacking between the general and the particular, and 'middle-range' concepts are part of this – we may need to talk, for example, about the formation of a 'black underclass' or an African-Korean 'petite bourgeoisie' to help us see why different groups in similar areas of the same city reacted differently. Theoretical labelling, therefore, is indispensable, if only to develop working **hypotheses**. Such labelling is frequently controversial. Think, for example, of the different connotations of calling what happened in LA a 'criminal riot' as against 'social disorder', or 'an urban uprising', or even 'political rebellion'. On their own, 'the facts' don't tell us decisively which set of concepts is most appropriate, but they do help test the value of **theories**, just as theories endow the facts with sociological meaning. Theories act as interpretations that direct us to certain sorts of evidence, and the evidence in turn helps us to fine-tune the theories and concepts.

What, then, is *theory*? Theory comes into play whenever we wish to explain something. It involves developing concepts and arguments that answer 'why' questions ('Why did that happen?' 'Why is there racism?') and 'what' questions ('What sort of social phenomenon is a "riot"? 'What type of social system is the current free-market-based economy in Aotearoa New Zealand?'). Theory is indispensable for getting us to think about the deep significance of things by abstracting from the countless particular features of a situation to try to get to the essential forces and relationships at work within them.

You should not make the common mistake of assuming that just because theorising involves abstraction, it only takes place in academia and has to take the form of impenetrable jargon. Language itself is a kind of everyday theoretical toolkit – the word-concept *dog*, for example, abstracts from and 'includes' every particular Rover, Sheba, Patch and Lassie that exists. And we theorise too in our ordinary lives, all the time, and sometimes in painful circumstances. For example, people thrash about in their minds various ideas and hypotheses concerning why their relationship broke down, why they became unemployed, or why they dislike or are disliked by certain other people.

An important staging post on the way from the particular to the general (and back again) is by way of sociological comparison, both historically and across different social situations. The LA riots had many unique features, but some of the same fundamental processes (to do with racism and urban deprivation – the intersection of race and class, in other words) can be observed in earlier LA rioting in 1965, known as the Watts riots. Or, if we want to focus

Sociological comparison

on how rioting itself raises consciousness of poverty and oppression, such that we even want to call certain types of riot ‘uprisings’, it would not be absurd to draw out some similarities between LA in 1965/1992 and the storming of the Bastille in Paris in 1789 – this was the event that sparked the first great social revolution of modern times, the French Revolution, from which stemmed our whole modern vocabulary of equality and social justice. If 1789 and even 1992 feel like a long time ago, we can bring more-recent riots into the picture, such as those in the north of England in 2001 in cities like Bradford (no deaths; 300 arrests) and those in the *banlieues* (autonomous suburbs) of Paris, Lyon and more than a hundred other towns in France in 2005 (1 death; 9000 burnt vehicles; 3000 arrests).

And all the time, as sociologists we must be critically reviewing the use of labels – including labels of our own – to depict the phenomenon in question. For example, serious disturbances took place in December 2005 around the Sydney beachfront district of Cronulla. Analysis of these events mostly talked of ‘rioting’, but phrases like ‘fracas’, ‘skirmishes’ and ‘demonstrations’ were also used, partly because relatively little serious disorder/violence/damage occurred (no deaths; 2 stabbings; 512 offences recorded; 12 arrests). The terminology of random ‘beach battles’ intermingled with that of social ‘rioting’ because those on the receiving end quickly responded with counter-actions of their own. The confusion of phraseology also comes about because the sense in which Cronulla was a ‘race riot’, as predominantly presented, is not self-evident. Some said it was a matter of the ‘local community’ or ‘surfer culture’ responding to ‘outsiders’ who were not prepared to accept the local norms. In more racialised terms, the events were coded as the actions of ‘white Aussies’ against ‘Middle Eastern’ types, especially ‘Arabs’ or ‘Lebs’ (Lebanese – though some Greek, Turkish, and Jewish people participated, possibly simply in response to this kind of casual offensive stereotyping). What we call a disturbance like this is additionally dependent on what we think caused it in the first place. Some of the ‘surfer’ groups – but is ‘surfer’ itself really an adequate sociological description here? – claimed that they were only peacefully protesting about an earlier series of derogatory gestures by Muslim men denouncing ‘bikini culture’ and the uncleanness of the ‘slut’ girls who frequented the beaches. Whether or not this was actually true, it was raised to the status of urban myth by the consistently provocative commentaries of a local radio chat-show host, insisting on how good old Aussie white values were being insolently rejected by those who had no right to do so. How far these sentiments were fully shared by those gathering on the beach ready for a fight, by the peaceable residents of the adjacent areas, and by Australian citizens as a whole, soon became the subject of heated political controversy, raising crucial matters of national identity and the prospects

[Reviewing the use of labels](#)

for positive multiculturalism – and not only in ‘Oz’. Thus, the sense in which Cronulla was a ‘riot’, the sense in which it was a ‘race riot’ or a ‘racist riot’, and the ultimate significance of this apparently minor and short-lived event all require careful conceptual thinking as well as good empirical investigation.

Differences between cases

It is instructive to reflect on the similarities and differences across the different social disturbances we have touched on. They all seem to involve issues of class, ethnicity and gender, but in different combinations and through different vehicles. As suggested, they also raise crucial questions of the relationship between multiculturalism, democracy and social justice, but again in different ways. For example, the recent European events – and even Cronulla to some extent – involved religious group consciousness (people identifying as Muslims or Christians) and represented the concerns of second- or third-generation migrant communities. Neither of these factors was significantly in the mix in LA. Then again, the French and British cases differ from each other too, due to the divergent political models of ‘multicultural integration’ being contested, and due to the varying national and ethnic backgrounds of the protesters (North African in the French situation; South Asian in the British; Middle Eastern in Australia). The accidental electrocution of two children hiding from the police triggered the French riots; government representatives singled out drug trafficking as justifying the heavier policing of the *banlieues* prior to the revolts, as against the communities’ allegations of gratuitous police racism and protest against the casualisation of young people’s work contracts (making it harder than ever for the disadvantaged to gain steady jobs). These clashes of perspective had no direct equivalent in the English situation, where the immediate reason for the disturbances was a provocative neo-fascist march (countered by an anti-Nazi demonstration) close to the area dominated by British Muslims. And yet issues of policing were part of the immediate circumstances in all three riots.

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Looking for connections

Is socially prompted rioting the same in the global South as it is in the global North? As always, the answer is both ‘yes’ and ‘no’. It tends to be ‘yes’ in the huge megacities, where not only do the movements and predicaments of the urban poor find similar expression but ‘sub-cultural’ conflicts of a more cultural or gendered kind can also emerge. In Mexican cities in 2007, for example, there were a number of violent riots against the ‘emo’ style that was gaining favour among young men, as it offended strong norms of masculinity. Yet, nothing, you might think, could be as different from the riots illustrated so far as the ones that took place in Tahiti in 1995 (no deaths; 20 injured; Papeete international airport set on fire; 50 jailed; 3000 participants;

French troops brought in to impose martial law). The demographics (population, economy, levels and types of racism) were very dissimilar, and the principal reason for the Tahitian disturbance was manifestly political rather than social or sub-cultural: the French had detonated a nuclear test bomb in nearby waters, posing a huge threat to health and environment, with no consultation whatsoever.

However, there are some deeper connections to be uncovered. One is the persistent tendency of some sections of the press to characterise rioting as almost inexplicably irrational – Melbourne’s *Herald Sun*, for example, declared: ‘Bomb Rage – Riots Sweep Tahiti – Rioters carved a blazing trail of destruction through the paradise island of Tahiti yesterday in a wave of fury sparked by French nuclear tests’. Another overlap is that the Tahitian rioters were predominantly poor, a situation heightened by sharp increases in unemployment in the preceding period. Moreover, the events in Tahiti – like those in Paris and Bradford – represented significant religious differences, with the protesters being predominantly Catholic and the governing élites largely Protestant. And, arguably similar to the French and British cases, the Tahitians were reacting to the continuing perceived arrogance or indifference of a kind of neo-colonialism, in which some groups are regarded as disposable. Not only was democracy flouted in the decision to go ahead with the nuclear test, but the French also manipulated the Tahitian electoral system for years so as to sustain Francophile president and wealthy businessman Gaston Flosse in office. Such interference continued for another decade until finally Flosse lost out to Oscar Temaru – someone portrayed as better representing the interests of ‘ordinary people’ and supporting full Polynesian independence (as it happens, he was a New Zealand citizen as well).

Conclusion

We have tracked far and wide in this introduction to the ‘dazzling and compelling’ enterprise of sociology (Giddens, 2006, p. 4), and we hope your appetite has been whetted for what is to come. We have been trying to demonstrate above all how conceptual theorising and empirical finding out go hand in hand. We next want to present one version of the ‘story of sociology’ from its inception, after which follows a range of substantive topic chapters, all exploring a variety of theoretical perspectives, and all organised according to the themes we have covered.

Study questions

- 1.1 Think about an aspect of social life that concerns you (for example youth suicide, unemployment, children's education, health care, domestic violence, surfing sub-cultures, etc.). Taking each of the three themes – the social and the personal, the local and the global, and differences and divisions – outline some of the questions a sociologist might bring to the social issue you have chosen.
 - 1.2 How would you begin finding out about the social issue you identified in Question 1.1? Which research methods would provide you with answers that are relevant to your questions?
 - 1.3 What kinds of theoretical concepts, hypotheses and generalisations could be utilised in your enquiries around Questions 1.1 and 1.2?
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