

Second, there is widespread internal migration from rural areas to urban ones – as in the case of the developing Hong Kong–Guangdong megacity. People are drawn to cities in the developing world either because their traditional systems of rural production have disintegrated, or because the urban areas offer superior job opportunities. Rural poverty prompts many people to try their hand at city life. They may intend to migrate to the city only for a relatively short time, aiming to return to their villages once they have earned enough money. Some actually do return, but most find themselves forced to stay, having for one reason or another lost their position in their previous communities.

See chapter 5, 'The Environment', for a discussion of the consequences of global population growth.

Challenges of urbanization in the developing world

Economic implications

As a growing number of unskilled and agricultural workers migrate to urban centres, the formal economy often struggles to absorb the influx into the workforce. In most cities in the developing world, it is the informal economy that allows those who cannot find formal work to make ends meet. From casual work in manufacturing and construction to small-scale trading activities, the unregulated informal sector offers earning opportunities to poor or unskilled workers.

Informal economic opportunities are important in helping thousands of families to survive in urban conditions, but they have problematic aspects as well. The informal economy is untaxed and unregulated. It is also less productive than the formal economy. Countries where economic activity is concentrated in this sector fail to collect much-needed revenue through taxation. The low level of productivity also hurts the general economy – the proportion of the

GDP generated by informal economic activity is much lower than the percentage of the population involved in the sector.

The OECD (Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development) estimates that a billion new jobs will be needed by 2025 to sustain the expected population growth in cities in the developing world. It is unlikely that all of these jobs will be created within the formal economy. Some development analysts argue that attention should be paid to formalizing or regulating the large informal economy, where much of the 'excess' workforce is likely to cluster in the years to come.

Environmental challenges

The rapidly expanding urban areas in developing countries differ dramatically from cities in the industrialized world. Although cities everywhere are faced with environmental problems, those in developing countries are confronted by particularly severe risks. Pollution, housing shortages, inadequate sanitation and unsafe water supplies are chronic problems for cities in less developed countries.

Housing is one of the most acute problems in many urban areas. Cities such as Calcutta and São Paulo are massively congested; the rate of internal migration is much too high for the provision of permanent housing. Migrants crowd into squatters' zones, which mushroom around the edges of cities. In urban areas in the West, newcomers are most likely to settle close to the central parts of the city, but the reverse tends to happen in developing countries, where migrants populate what has been called the 'septic fringe' of the urban areas. Shanty dwellings made of sack-ing or cardboard are set up around the edges of the city wherever there is a little space.

In São Paulo, it is estimated that there was a 5.4 million shortfall in habitable homes in 1996. Some scholars estimate that the shortage is as high as 20 million, if the definition of 'habitable housing' is interpreted more strictly. Since the 1980s, the chronic deficit

of housing in São Paulo has produced a wave of unofficial 'occupations' of empty buildings. Groups of unhoused families initiate 'mass squats' in abandoned hotels, offices and government buildings. Many families believe that it is better to share limited kitchen and toilet facilities with hundreds of others than to live on the streets or in *favelas* – the makeshift shantytowns on the edges of the city.

City and regional governments in less developed countries are hard-pressed to keep up with the spiralling demand for housing. In cities such as São Paulo there are disagreements among housing authorities and local governments about how to address the housing problem. Some argue that the most feasible route is to improve conditions within the *favelas* – to provide electricity and running water, pave the streets and assign postal addresses. Others fear that makeshift shantytowns are fundamentally uninhabitable and should be demolished to make way for proper housing for poor families.

Congestion and over-development in city centres lead to serious environmental problems in many urban areas. Mexico City is a prime example. There, 94 per cent of the city consists of built-up areas, with only 6 per cent of land being open space. The area of 'green spaces' – parks and open stretches of green land – is far below that found in even the most densely populated North American or European cities. Pollution is a major problem, coming mostly from the cars, buses and trucks which pack the inadequate roads of the city, the rest deriving from industrial pollutants. It has been estimated that living in Mexico City is equivalent to smoking 40 cigarettes a day. In March 1992, pollution reached one of its highest levels ever. Whereas an ozone level of just under 100 points was deemed 'satisfactory' for health, in that month the level climbed to 398 points. The government had to order factories to close down for a period, schools were shut and 40 per cent of cars were banned from the streets on any one day.



The concept and practices of sustainable development are discussed in more detail in chapter 5, 'The Environment'.

Social effects

Many urban areas in the developing world are overcrowded and under-resourced. Poverty is widespread and existing social services cannot meet the demands for healthcare, family planning advice, education and training. The unbalanced age distribution in developing countries adds to their social and economic difficulties. Compared to industrialized countries, a much larger proportion of the population in the developing world is under the age of fifteen. A youthful population needs support and education, but many developing countries lack the resources to provide universal education. When their families are poor, many children must work full time, and others have to scratch a living as street children, begging for whatever they can. When the street children mature, most become unemployed, homeless or both.

The future of urbanization in the developing world

In considering the scope of the challenges facing urban areas in developing countries, it can be difficult to see prospects for change and development. Conditions of life in many of the world's largest cities seem likely to decline even further in the years to come. But the picture is not entirely negative.

First, although birth rates remain high in many countries, they are likely to drop in the years to come as urbanization proceeds. This in turn will feed into a gradual decrease in the rate of urbanization itself. In West Africa, for example, the rate of urbanization should drop to 4.2 per cent per year by 2020,



Population growth is discussed chapter 4, 'Globalization and the Changing World', chapter 13, 'Global Inequality', and chapter 5, 'The Environment'.

down from an annual rate of 6.3 per cent growth over the previous three decades.

Second, globalization is presenting important opportunities for urban areas in developing countries. With economic integration, cities around the world are able to enter international markets, to promote themselves as locations for investment and development, and to create economic links across the borders of nation-states. Globalization presents one of the most dynamic openings for growing urban centres to become major forces in economic development and innovation. Indeed, many cities in the developing world are already joining the ranks of the world's 'global cities', as we shall see shortly.

Cities and globalization

Before modern times, cities were self-contained entities that stood apart from the predominantly rural areas in which they were located. Road systems sometimes linked major urban areas, but travel was a specialized affair for merchants, soldiers and others who needed to cross distances with any regularity. Communication between cities was limited. The picture in the first decade of the twenty-first century could hardly be more different. Globalization has had a profound effect on cities by making them more interdependent and encouraging the proliferation of horizontal links between cities across national borders. Physical and virtual ties between cities now abound, and global networks of cities are emerging.

Some people have predicted that globalization and new communications technology might lead to the demise of cities as we know them – the Helsinki virtual village profiled in 'Global Society 6.2' provides one possibility. This is because many of the traditional functions of cities can now be carried out in cyberspace rather than in dense and congested urban areas. For example, financial markets have gone elec-

tronic, e-commerce reduces the need for both producers and consumers to rely on city centres and 'e-commuting' permits a growing number of employees to work from home rather than in an office building.

Yet, thus far, such predictions have not been borne out. Rather than undermining cities, globalization is transforming them into vital hubs within the global economy. Urban centres have become critical in coordinating information flows, managing business activities and innovating new services and technologies. There has been a simultaneous dispersion and concentration of activity and power within a set of cities around the globe (Castells 1996).

Global cities

The role of cities in the new global order has been attracting a great deal of attention from sociologists (Marcuse and van Kempen 2000; Massey 2007). Globalization is often thought of in terms of a duality between the national level and the global, yet it is the largest cities of the world that comprise the main circuits through which globalization occurs (Sassen 1998). The functioning of the new global economy is dependent on a set of central locations with developed informational infrastructures and a 'hyperconcentration' of facilities. It is in such points that the 'work' of globalization is performed and directed. As business, production, advertising and marketing assume a global scale, there is an enormous amount of organizational activity that must be done in order to maintain and develop these global networks.

Saskia Sassen has been one of the leading contributors to the debate on cities and globalization. She uses the term **global city** to refer to urban centres that are home to the headquarters of large, transnational corporations and a superabundance of financial, technological and consulting services. In *The Global City* (1991), Sassen based her work on the study of the three cities we introduced at the start of this

chapter: New York, London and Tokyo. The contemporary development of the world economy, she argued, has created a novel strategic role for major cities. Most such cities have long been centres of international trade, but they now have four new traits:

- 1 They have developed into 'command posts' – centres of direction and policy-making – for the global economy.
- 2 Such cities are the key locations for financial and specialized service firms, which have become more important in influencing economic development than in manufacturing.
- 3 They are the sites of production and innovation in these newly expanded industries.
- 4 These cities are markets on which the 'products' of financial and service industries are bought, sold or otherwise disposed of.

New York, London and Tokyo have very different histories, yet we can trace comparable changes in their nature over the past two or three decades. Within the highly dispersed world economy of today, cities like these provide for central control of crucial operations. Global cities are much more than simply places of coordination, however; they are also contexts of production. What is important here is not the production of material goods, but the production of the specialized services required by business organizations for administering offices and factories scattered across the world, and the production of financial innovations and markets. Services and financial goods are the 'things' made by the global city.

The downtown areas of global cities provide concentrated sites within which whole clusters of 'producers' can work in close interaction, often including personal contact, with one another. In the global city, local firms mingle with national and multi-national organizations, including a multi-

plicity of foreign companies. Thus 350 foreign banks have offices in New York City, plus 2,500 other foreign financial corporations; one out of every four bank employees in the city works for a foreign bank. Global cities compete with one another, but they also constitute an interdependent system, partly separate from the nations in which they are located.

Other authors have built on Sassen's work, noting that as globalization progresses, more and more cities are joining New York, London and Tokyo in the ranks of the 'global city'. Castells has described the creation of a tiered hierarchy of world cities – with places such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Chicago, Frankfurt, Los Angeles, Milan, Zurich and Osaka serving as major global centres for business and financial services. Beneath these, a new set of 'regional centres' is developing as key nodes within the global economy. Cities such as Madrid, São Paulo, Moscow, Seoul, Jakarta and Buenos Aires are becoming important hubs for activity within the so-called 'emerging markets'.

THINKING CRITICALLY

The Helsinki virtual village is described as a 'technological utopia'. List the effects – positive and negative – that mobile phones have already had on our society. Based on your list, what might be some of the unintended consequences of such extensive mobile phone connectivity? Could such technology help to re-create the kind of *Gemeinschaft* or 'community' bonds that Tönnies (2001 [1887]) bemoaned the loss of? Or is it more likely that this technology will make people more isolated? How would that be brought about?

Inequality in the global city

The new global economy is highly problematic in many ways. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the new dynamics of

Global Society 6.2 The Helsinki 'virtual village'

Jari Mielonen and his colleagues have a motto: 'Sanoista tekoihin', which loosely translates to 'Don't talk – make it happen'. Mielonen is chief technology officer of Sonera, Finland's leading telecommunications company and one of Europe's most aggressive players in the wireless market. 'Everyone's been talking about possibilities', he says. 'Nobody's been saying, "This is it. Touch and feel. Try it!"'

That's why he and a group of businesspeople, academics and city planners are collaborating to turn a new development on the tussocky shore of the Gulf of Finland into the world's first wireless community. It's a simple but intriguing idea: give the workers and residents of a new Helsinki suburb a state-of-the-art wireless infrastructure and the very latest wireless services; to log on, locals won't even need a computer – just a mobile phone. Then stand back and watch how the info-age town of the future actually functions.

The site, known as Arabianranta (Arabia shore), is a flat, windswept, mostly barren expanse named for the pottery works that once stood there. Even before Mielonen and his colleagues started hatching plans to turn the area into a wireless wonderland, it had been earmarked by the city of Helsinki for development as a tech hub. If all goes as planned, by 2010 the location will be home to about 12,000 residents and 700 IT companies with some 8,000 employees, along with 4,000 students enrolled at local universities. It will also be home to a real-world experiment in community networking that will untangle some of the most pressing questions about the social effects of pervasive connectivity. Will the constant availability of wireless connection make communities more cohesive, or more isolated? How will people balance privacy concerns with the obvious advantages of extended wireless reach? And how much connectivity – once it becomes the status quo – will people really want?

Construction has already begun on the first wave of new office buildings and homes. Alongside the concrete and steel pilings, another, less visible, framework is being built here by Sonera and its partners – IBM, local software producer Digia, and the European-based Symbian Alliance, a joint effort involving Ericsson, Motorola, Nokia, Matsushita and Psion. They are creating what they call the Helsinki virtual village, a wireless interactive community for the entire suburb of Arabianranta. HVV will include a local area network and a wide range of services

available through broadband fibre-optic cable and wireless links, which will be accessible anytime, anywhere. Users will be able to participate in HVV via any wireless handset, as well as by PC and digital TV.

For instance, residents could consult their personal calendar wherever they happen to be – in front of a computer at the office, watching TV at home or using a mobile phone on the go. The envisioned menu of offerings will let them create their own social organizations, office networks or mobile commerce opportunities, and a profiling system will let them control and update their personal data minute by minute.

Now HVV is throwing mobility into the mix, making communication casual and unobtrusive. IBM Nordic's Kurt Lonnqvist, who has watched his children grow up in a mobile-tech world, believes Finnish society has changed forever. Young people can be spontaneous about making social plans, he says. On the streets, they're continually sending a stream of messages back and forth to their friends: 'Where R U?' 'Let's meet!' 'C U at the bar.' Lonnqvist believes his children have become freer about the way they lead their lives than his generation is. 'They live with mobility every day. It's a way of life.'

At the Helsinki University of Technology, sociologist Timo Kopomaa has tried to track these changes in Finnish society. 'Spontaneity is something that is going to stay', he says. 'It's a new generation that has grown up with these devices, and their lives are bound up with them.' He studied groups of young phone-users and noted several differences in lifestyle. Today's society may be more casual, but that doesn't mean social ties are disappearing. In fact, he found that phones are drawing people together in new ways. Young 'telesurfers' often have larger social circles than non-phone-users. Close friends or relatives are in almost constant contact with each other, tending to share experiences as they happen. For friends, this has brought a new sense of tele-intimacy; for parents, reassurance.

Kopomaa believes the new wireless intimacy affects the workplace as well. 'The mobile phone softens the structure of the working day', he says. 'Workers don't have to plan so rigidly anymore – each day can unfold as meetings are set up when needed.'

Source: © Shaw 2001

inequality visible within the global city. The juxtaposition between the central business district and impoverished inner-city areas of many global cities should be seen as inter-related phenomena, as Sassen and others remind us. The 'growth sectors' of the new economy – financial services, marketing, high technology – are reaping profits far greater than any found within traditional economic sectors. As the salaries and bonuses of the very affluent continue to climb, the wages of those employed to clean and guard their offices are dropping. This process echoes the analysis of sociologists such as Manuel Castells and geographers like David Harvey, both of whom have argued that the city is not just a place or location for social relations, but is itself the product of struggles and conflicts amongst social groups. Sassen (2001) argues that we are witnessing the 'valorization' of work located at the forefront of the new global economy, and the 'devalorization' of work, which occurs behind the scenes.



Deprivation and social exclusion are discussed in chapter 12, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare', and inequalities in chapter 13, 'Global Inequality'.

Disparities in profit-making capabilities are expected in market economies, but the magnitude of the disparities in the new global economy is having a negative effect on many aspects of the social world, from housing to the labour market. Those who work in finance and global services receive high salaries, and the areas where they live become gentrified. At the same time, orthodox manufacturing jobs are lost, and the very process of gentrification creates a vast supply of low-wage jobs – in restaurants, hotels and boutiques. Affordable housing is scarce in gentrified areas, forcing an expansion of low-income neighbourhoods. While central business districts are the recipients of massive influxes of investment in real estate, development and telecommunications, marginalized areas are left with few resources.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Does Davis's vision of Los Angeles show us the future for all major cities (see Global Society 6.3)? Which aspects of his thesis are familiar from cities that you know? How widespread is the separation of rich neighbourhoods from poorer communities? If poor people are being excluded from large parts of cities, where are they likely to live in the future? What could governments do to tackle these forms of urban social exclusion?

Governing cities in a global age

Like globalization, urbanization is double-edged and contradictory. It has both creative and destructive effects on cities. On the one hand, it allows for the concentration of people, goods, services and opportunities. But at the same time, it fragments and weakens the coherence of places, traditions and existing networks. Alongside the new potentials created by centralization and economic growth are the dangerous effects of marginalization. Not only in developing countries, but in industrialized ones as well, many city-dwellers operate on the periphery, outside the realm of formal employment, the rule of law and civic culture.

Although globalization is aggravating many of the challenges facing cities around the world, it is also making room for cities and local governments to play a revitalized political role. Cities have become more important than ever before as nation-states are increasingly unable to manage global trends. Issues such as ecological risk and volatile financial markets are operating at levels far above that of the nation-state; individual countries – even the most powerful – are too 'small' to counter such forces. Yet nation-states also remain too 'large' to address adequately the rich diversity of needs found within cosmopolitan urban areas. Where the nation-state is unable to act effectively, local and city governments

Global Society 6.3 Social inequalities in 'cities of quartz'

Within modern global cities, a geography of 'centrality and marginality' is taking shape. Alongside resplendent affluence, there is acute poverty. Yet although these two worlds coexist side by side, the actual contact between them can be surprisingly minimal. As Mike Davis (1990/2006) has noted in his study of Los Angeles, there has been a 'conscious hardening' of the city's surface against the poor – hence the metaphor of rock-hard 'quartz'. Accessible public spaces have been replaced by walled compounds, neighbourhoods are guarded by electronic surveillance, rich residents hire private police to keep street gangs at bay and 'corporate citadels' have been created. In Davis's words:

To reduce contact with untouchables, urban redevelopment has converted once vital pedestrian streets into traffic sewers and transformed public parks into temporary receptacles for the homeless and wretched. The American city . . . is being systematically turned inside out – or, rather, outside in. The valorized spaces of the new megastructures and super-

malls are concentrated in the center, street frontage is denuded, public activity is sorted into strictly functional compartments, and circulation is internalized in corridors under the gaze of private police. (1990: 232)

According to Davis, life is made as 'unliveable' as possible for the poorest and most marginalized residents of Los Angeles. Benches at bus stops are barrel-shaped to prevent people from sleeping on them, the number of public toilets is fewer than in any other North American city, and sprinkler systems have been installed in many parks to deter the homeless from living in them. Police and city-planners have attempted to contain the homeless population within certain regions of the city, but in periodically sweeping through and confiscating makeshift shelters, they have effectively created a population of 'urban bedouins'.

» See chapter 21, 'Crime and Deviance', for a discussion of situational crime prevention and other recent crime-prevention techniques.

may be more 'agile forms for managing the global' (Borja and Castells 1997).

» For more on social movements, see chapter 22, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

Jordi Borja and Manuel Castells (1997) argue that there are three main realms in which local authorities can act effectively to manage global forces. First, cities can contribute to economic productivity and competitiveness by managing the local 'habitat' – the conditions and facilities that form the social base for economic productivity. Economic competitiveness in the new economy depends on a productive qualified workforce; to be productive, that workforce needs a strong educational system for its children, good public transport, adequate and affordable housing, capable law enforcement, effective emergency services and vibrant cultural resources.

Second, cities play an important role in ensuring socio-cultural integration within

diverse multiethnic populations. Global cities bring together individuals from dozens of countries, varying religious and linguistic backgrounds, and different socio-economic levels. If the intense pluralism found within cosmopolitan cities is not countered by forces of integration, then fragmentation and intolerance can result. Especially in cases where the effectiveness of the nation-states for promoting social cohesion is compromised for historic, linguistic or other reasons, individual cities can be positive forces for social integration.

Third, cities are important venues for political representation and management. Local authorities have two inherent advantages over the nation-state in managing global issues: they enjoy greater legitimacy with those they represent, and they have more flexibility and room for manoeuvre than national structures. As explored in chapter 22, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements', many citizens feel that national political systems do not adequately



Shanghai is one of the ten largest cities in the world and China's financial and economic hub. This risks damaging the social coherence of place and tradition. However, innovative use of city space can reduce this effect. For example, here women are practising tai chi in the heart of the city.

represent their interests and concerns. In cases where the nation-state is too distant to represent specific cultural or regional interests, city and local authorities are more accessible forums for political activity.

Cities as political, economic and social agents

A great many organizations, institutions and groups cross paths within cities. Domestic and international businesses, potential investors, government bodies, civic associations, professional groups, trade unions and others meet and form links in urban areas. These links can lead to collective and joint actions in which cities act as social agents in political, economic, cultural and media spheres.

Examples of cities as economic actors have been increasing in recent years. In Europe, beginning with the recession of the

1970s, cities have banded together to promote investment and generate new forms of employment. The Eurocities movement, which now encompasses Europe's 50 largest cities, was formed in 1989. Asian cities such as Seoul, Singapore and Bangkok have been particularly effective as economic actors, acknowledging the importance of speed of information about international markets and the need for flexible productive and commercial structures.

Some cities construct medium- and long-term strategic plans to address the complex challenges before them. Under such plans, local government authorities, civic groups and private economic agents can work together to refurbish the urban infrastructure, organize a world-class event or shift the employment base away from industrial enterprises to knowledge-based ones. Birmingham, Amsterdam, Lyons, Lisbon, Glasgow and Barcelona are examples of

6.2 Global sport as urban renewal?

Jowell to tell how Olympics funds will be repaid: Proceeds from land sales to replenish lottery. Agreement aims to dispel fears of arts bodies.

By Andrew Culf

Members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) were impressed by the importance placed on urban regeneration in London's successful bid for the 2012 Olympic Games. The plan for 2012 focuses on the regeneration of some 500 acres of land in the Stratford area of East London, one of the most deprived areas in the UK. However, although advocates hope that this global sporting event will be a catalyst for urban regeneration, critics are concerned about the financing of the games and its long-term consequences, discussed in the article below, written in June 2007.

The 2012 London Olympics

The government will outline today [27 June 2007] how the national lottery will be repaid the £675m that is to be siphoned off to pay for the rising costs of the 2012 Olympics.

A memorandum of understanding between Tessa Jowell, the Olympics minister, and Ken Livingstone, the mayor of London, will explain how the money is to be clawed back from land

sales from the Olympic Park at Stratford, east London. The deal, which has taken three months, is an attempt by the government to show that lottery good causes will not lose out as a result of the larger than anticipated £9.3bn bill for the games.

Arts, heritage, sports and charity campaigners had expressed dismay that the public sector funding package for London 2012 included an additional £675m diversion from the lottery from 2009. The lottery was originally expected to contribute £1.5bn, but that figure rose to £2.2bn to deal with a black hole in the government's original calculations.

They warned the cuts could have a devastating affect on the cultural sector and also jeopardise the aim of increasing grassroots participation in sport.

Under the terms of the memorandum – which will be deposited in the library of the House of Commons – Ms Jowell and Mr Livingstone explain that the £675m will start to be repaid after 2012 once the London Development Agency has recovered the £650m it has spent on acquiring the Olympic Park site.

The LDA plans to sell 68 hectares for development and is confident that rising land prices will make such a sell-off lucrative. Continuing land sales will fund the staged payback to the lottery. The memorandum says the first phase after the LDA has recovered its costs will be a



An artist's impression of the London 2012 Olympic Stadium in Stratford, a deprived area of London's East End. Is this an example of long-term regeneration or just a short-term political fix?

repayment of £506m to lottery good causes and £125m to the LDA.

Once those sums have been achieved, in the second phase, the lottery will receive the remaining £169m, while the LDA will get £375m. This means that the bulk of the lottery cash will be repaid faster than previously anticipated. The memorandum replaces the deal between Ms Jowell and Mr Livingstone in 2003 when agreement was reached on how the cost would be shared between London's council tax payers and the lottery.

Opposition parties, which have criticized the government over the budget for the games, are

expected to react sceptically to the memorandum. They described the old agreement as a 'back of an envelope calculation' cooked up before London really thought it could win the bid.

Last night a Whitehall source said: 'What Tessa Jowell promised in March has been agreed with the mayor of London. It is only fair that lottery good causes, having contributed a further £625m to the costs of the Olympics, should benefit and see their money coming back and they will.'

Source: Guardian newspaper, 27 June 2007

European cities that have carried out successful urban renewal projects with the help of strategic plans.

The case of Barcelona is particularly noteworthy. Launched in 1988, the Barcelona 2000 Economic and Social Strategic Plan brought together public and private organizations under a shared vision and action plan for transforming the city. The Barcelona municipal government and 10 additional bodies (including the chamber of commerce, the university, the city port authority and trade unions) have been overseeing the implementation of the plan's three main objectives: to connect Barcelona with a network of European cities by improving the communication and transport infrastructure, to improve the quality of life of Barcelona's inhabitants and to make the industrial and service sector more competitive, while promoting promising new economic sectors.

One of the cornerstones of the Barcelona 2000 plan took place in 1992, when the city hosted the Olympic Games. Staging the Olympics allowed Barcelona to 'internationalize' itself; the city's assets and vision were on display for the whole world to see. In the case of Barcelona, organizing a world-class event was crucial on two fronts: it enhanced the profile of the city in the eyes of the world and it generated additional

enthusiasm within the city for completing the urban transformation (Borja and Castells 1997). Sport, it seems, can now play an important part in urban regeneration (Taylor et al. 1996).

THINKING CRITICALLY

Can sporting events really lead to lasting urban regeneration? Who will benefit from the 2012 London Olympics? Developers? Government or opposition politicians? The deprived communities of East London? What kinds of beneficial infrastructural developments may be left behind for residents to make use of when the games have finished?

The role of city mayors

As cities assume a new importance in the global system, the role of city mayors is also changing. Major world cities are becoming relatively independent actors in the global system and elected mayors of large cities are able to provide a type of personalized leadership that can be crucial in promoting urban agendas and raising a city's international profile. The London-based organization, City Mayors, works to raise the profile of mayors internationally and, since 2004, has awarded the title of 'World Mayor' based

on the outcome of an online poll. In 2006, the title was won by John So, mayor of Melbourne, Australia with city mayors from Makati City in the Philippines, Dubrovnik in Croatia and Antananarivo in Madagascar in the top 10 places, showing the global spread of the mayor role.

In several prominent cases in which cities have successfully transformed their image, the role of the city mayor has been decisive. The mayors of Lisbon and Barcelona, for example, were driving forces behind efforts to elevate their cities to the ranks of the world's major urban centres. Likewise, mayors in smaller cities can play a crucial role in making the city known internationally and in attracting new economic investment. In the UK, London's affairs were devolved to an elected mayor, Ken Livingstone, in 2000. He set about pursuing a distinctive set of policies, including investing in public transport, introducing a congestion charge in the city centre and increasing the stock of affordable housing for 'key workers' such as teachers and nurses. Livingstone also strongly supported London's successful bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games. However, in 2008 Livingstone lost the mayoral election to Boris Johnson, who opposed plans to extend congestion charging further into the London suburbs. Many commentators saw this as a major reason for Johnson's success.

In the United States, city mayors have become a powerful economic and political force in recent decades. As gun-related violence has soared in American cities, more than 20 city mayors have abandoned reliance on federal attempts to pass gun control legislation and have filed lawsuits against the gun manufacturers on behalf of their cities. Former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani generated a firestorm of controversy – but grudging respect from many – by implementing tough 'law-and-order' policies aimed at lowering crime rates. New York's violent crime rate dropped dramatically during the 1990s; strict 'quality of life' policies aimed at the homeless popu-

lation transformed the face of New York's busy streets. After the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, Giuliani's determined leadership set the tone for the world's media, and he was named *Time* magazine's Person of the Year for 2001.

In many cities around the world, mayors are enjoying increased influence as spokespeople for their cities and regions. City mayors are often able to shape the policy agenda for areas that lie outside the city limits by entering into agreements with communities in the general metropolitan area. These types of partnerships can be drawn on in attracting foreign investment, for example, or in bidding to play host to a world-class event.

Conclusion: cities and global governance

Cooperation between cities is not restricted to the regional level. There is a growing acknowledgement that cities can and should play a significant role in addressing international political, economic and social issues. Informal and formal networks of cities are emerging as globalizing forces draw disparate parts of the world more closely together. The problems facing the world's largest cities are not isolated ones; they are embedded in the larger context of a global economy, international migration, new trade patterns and the power of information technology.

We have noted elsewhere that the complexities of our changing world are demanding new forms of democratic international governance. Networks of cities should figure prominently among these new mechanisms. One such structure already exists – a World Assembly of Cities and Local Authorities is convened in parallel to the UN's Habitat Conference. Bodies such as the World Assembly promise to allow the gradual integration of city organizations into structures presently composed of national governments.

The heightened involvement of cities has the potential to democratize international relations; it may also make them more efficient. As the world's urban population continues to grow, more and more policies

and reforms will need to be targeted at populations living in urban areas. City governments will be necessary and vital partners in these processes.

Summary points

1. Early approaches to urban sociology were dominated by the work of the Chicago School, whose members saw urban processes in terms of ecological models derived from biology. Louis Wirth developed the concept of urbanism as a way of life, arguing that city life breeds impersonality and social distance. These approaches have been challenged, without being discarded altogether.
2. The more recent work of David Harvey and Manuel Castells connects patterns of urbanism to the wider society, rather than treating urban processes as self-contained. The modes of life people develop in cities, as well as the physical lay-out of different neighbourhoods, express broad features of the development of industrial capitalism.
3. In traditional societies, only a small minority of the population lived in urban areas. In the industrialized countries today, between 60 and 90 per cent do so. Urbanism is developing very rapidly in the developing world as well.
4. The expansion of suburbs and dormitory towns has contributed to inner-city decay. Wealthier groups tend to move out of the centre of the city to live in low-rise housing and more homogeneous neighbourhoods. A cycle of deterioration is set under way, so that the more suburbia expands, the greater are the problems faced by those living in the inner cities. Urban recycling – including the refurbishing of old buildings to put them to new uses – has become common in many large cities.
5. Massive processes of urban development are occurring in developing countries. Cities in these societies differ in major respects from those of the West and are often dominated by makeshift illegal housing, where conditions of life are extremely impoverished. The informal economy is pronounced in many cities in the developing world. Governments often cannot meet the growing demands of the population for education, healthcare and family planning.
6. Cities are being strongly influenced by globalization. Global cities are urban centres, such as New York, London and Tokyo, that are home to the headquarters of large corporations and a superabundance of financial, technological and consulting services. A set of regional cities, such as Seoul, Moscow and São Paulo, are also developing as key nodes of the global economy.
7. As cities become more important within the global economy, their relationship with outlying regions is altered. Cities become disconnected from the region and nation in which they are located and horizontal links with other global cities take on greater significance. Global cities are characterized by high levels of inequality. Great affluence and abject poverty coexist side by side, but contact between the two worlds can be minimal.
8. The role of cities as political and economic agents is increasing. City governments are positioned to manage the effects of some global issues better than national governments. Cities can contribute to economic productivity and competitiveness, promote social and cultural integration, and serve as accessible venues for political activity. Some cities construct strategic plans to promote the city's profile by hosting a world-class event or carrying out urban renewal and economic development programmes. City mayors are becoming important political forces for advancing urban agendas.
9. As globalization progresses, the role of cities in addressing international issues is likely to grow. Regional and international networks of cities are emerging and may become more actively involved in forms of global governance currently composed of nation-states.

Further reading

To get an overview of urban sociology, David Byrne's *Understanding the Urban* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) is a good place to begin and Mike Savage, Allan Warde and Kevin Ward's *Urban Sociology, Capitalism and Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) gives a comprehensive account of this field.

On cities, Doreen Massey's *World City* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) takes London as a case study of a global city, while the UN-Habitat's *The State of the World's Cities: The Millennium Development Goals and Urban Sustainability* (London: Earthscan Publications, 2006) gives much comparative information on cities across the world.

It may be a little old now, but Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983) remains an inspiring book dealing especially with the *experience* of urban modernity, and is well worth the effort.

Debates on cities and the restructuring of space are well handled in Peter Marcuse and Ronald van Kempen's (eds) *Globalizing Cities: A New Spatial Order?* (Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 2000). Fran Tonkiss's *Space, the City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005) is not an easy read, but it does offer an account of social theories of the city.

Finally, Jan Lin's *The Urban Sociology Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) is an edited collection of urban sociology 'classics' and, as such, is a very helpful resource.

Internet links

A USA site on sustainable architecture, building and culture:

www.sustainableabc.com/

Centre for Urban History, based at the University of Leicester, UK:

www.le.ac.uk/urbanhist/

UK Government's Neighbourhood Renewal Unit:

www.neighbourhood.gov.uk/

City Mayors – a useful resource on the role of mayors across the world:

www.citymayors.com/

H-Urban – A discussion forum for urban history and urban studies:

www.h-net.org/~urban/ *Home page
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=lm&list=H-Urban> *Discussion logs

Radical Urban Theory – 'writings on the modern urban condition':

www.radicalurbantheory.com/

Virtual Cities Resource Centre – online cities:

www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/planning/virtualcities.html



CHAPTER 7

Social Interaction and Everyday Life

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People in close proximity to each other – such as at this gym – engage routinely in ‘civil inattention’.

Shaun is a fitness instructor at an expensive city health club, where he has worked for many years. Over time, he has come to know hundreds of people who exercise at the gym. He worked with some of them when they first joined, explaining to them how to use the equipment. He met many others in his role as an instructor of ‘spinning’ classes (a group session on exercise bikes). Others he has come to know through casual contact, since many of the same people work out at the same time every week.

The personal space is limited within the gym, due to the proximity of the exercise equipment. For example, in the weight-training circuit, one section contains a number of machines that are very near to each other. Members



'Leave me alone!' On public transport, people try to protect their personal space.

must work in close proximity to others working out, and they constantly cross one another's paths as they move from machine to machine.

It is almost impossible for Shaun to walk anywhere in this physical space without making eye contact with someone else he has at least met. He will greet many of these patrons the first time he sees them in the day, but afterwards it is usually understood that they will go about their own business without acknowledging one another in the way they did earlier.

When passers-by quickly glance at one another and then look away again, they demonstrate what Erving Goffman (1967, 1971) calls the **civil inattention** we require of

one another in many situations. Civil inattention is not the same as ignoring another person. Each individual indicates recognition of the other person's presence, but avoids any gesture that might be taken as too intrusive. Civil inattention to others is something we engage in more or less unconsciously, but it is of fundamental importance to the existence of social life, which must proceed efficiently and, sometimes amongst total strangers, without fear. When civil inattention occurs among passing strangers, an individual implies to another person that she has no reason to suspect his intentions, be hostile to him or in any other way specifically avoid him.

The best way to see the importance of this

is by thinking of examples where it does not apply. When a person stares fixedly at another, allowing her face openly to express a particular emotion, it is normally with a lover, family member or close friend. Strangers or chance acquaintances, whether encountered on the street, at work or at a party, virtually never hold the gaze of another in this way. To do so may be taken as an indication of hostile intent; for example, racists have been known to give a 'hate stare' to passers-by from other ethnic groups.

Even friends in close conversation need to be careful about how they look at one another. Each individual demonstrates attention and involvement in the conversation by regularly looking at the eyes of the other, but not staring into them. To look too intently might be taken as a sign of mistrust about, or at least failure to understand, what the other is saying. Yet if neither party engages the eyes of the other at all, each is likely to be thought evasive, shifty, or otherwise odd.

Why study daily life?

Why should we concern ourselves with such seemingly trivial aspects of social behaviour? Passing someone on the street or exchanging a few words with a friend seem minor and uninteresting activities, things we do countless times a day without giving them any thought. In fact, the study of such **apparently insignificant forms of social interaction** is of major importance in sociology – and, far from being uninteresting, is one of the most absorbing of all areas of sociological investigation. There are three reasons for this.

First, our day-to-day routines, with their almost constant interactions with others, give structure and form to what we do; we can learn a great deal about ourselves as social beings, and about social life itself, from studying them. Our lives are organized around the repetition of similar patterns of behaviour from day to day, week to week,

month to month, and year to year. Think of what you did yesterday, for example, and the day before that. If they were both weekdays, in all probability you got up at about the same time each day (an important routine in itself). If you are a student, you may have gone off to a class fairly early in the morning, perhaps making the journey from home to campus that you make virtually every weekday. You perhaps met some friends for lunch, returning to classes or private study in the afternoon. Later, you retraced your steps back home, possibly going out in the evening with other friends.

Of course, the routines we follow from day to day are not identical, and our patterns of activity at weekends usually contrast with those on weekdays. And if we make a major change in our life, like leaving college to take up a job, alterations in our daily routines are usually necessary; but then we establish a new and fairly regular set of habits again.

Second, the study of everyday life reveals to us how humans can act creatively to shape reality. Although social behaviour is guided to some extent by forces such as roles, norms and shared expectations, individuals perceive reality differently according to their backgrounds, interests and motivations. Because individuals are capable of creative action, they continuously shape reality through the decisions and actions they take. In other words, reality is not fixed or static; it is created through human interactions. This notion of the 'social construction of reality' lies at the heart of the symbolic interactionist perspective and was introduced in chapter 1.

Third, studying social interaction in everyday life sheds light on larger social systems and institutions. All large-scale social systems, in fact, depend on the patterns of social interaction that we engage in daily. This is easy to demonstrate. Consider again the case of two strangers passing in the street. Such an event may seem to have little direct relevance to large-scale, more permanent forms of social organization. But when we take

into account many such interactions, this is no longer so. In modern societies, most people live in towns and cities and constantly interact with others whom they do not know personally. Civil inattention is one among other mechanisms that give city life, with its bustling crowds and fleeting, impersonal contacts, the character it has.

In this chapter, we shall discuss non-verbal communication such as facial expressions and bodily gestures, and explore how our identities are 'embodied'. We will then move on to analyse everyday speech – how we use language to communicate to others the meanings we wish to get across. Finally, we will focus on the ways in which our lives are structured by daily routines, paying particular attention to how we coordinate our actions across space and time. In this chapter we also find that the study of small, everyday practices that sociologists of social interaction investigate are not separate from any of the large-scale issues examined in the later chapters of this book, such as gender or class; instead, we find that they are intimately linked. We look at two specific examples of the link between micro- and macrosociology in the two 'Using your sociological imagination' boxes in this chapter.



Recent theories on the impact of larger social structures on the everyday 'lifeworld' can be found in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives in Sociology'.

Non-verbal communication

Social interaction requires numerous forms of non-verbal communication – the exchange of information and meaning through facial expressions, gestures and movements of the body. Non-verbal communication is sometimes referred to as 'body language', but this is misleading, because we characteristically use such non-verbal cues to eliminate or expand on what is said with words.

The human face, gestures and emotions

One major aspect of non-verbal communication is the facial expression of emotion.

When we compare the human face with that of other species, it does seem remarkably flexible and capable of manipulation. The German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990) argued that studying the face shows how human beings, like all other species, have naturally evolved over a long period of time, but also that this biological basis has been overlain with cultural features in the process of social development. Compare the human face with that of our closest evolutionary relatives, the apes. The ape face is furry and quite rigid in structure, permitting a limited amount of movement. The human face, in contrast, is naked and very flexible, able to contort into a wide variety of postures. In some parts of the world, 'gurning' competitions are even held to see who can pull the strangest facial expressions – some of these are, indeed, *very* strange. Without this evolved physiological malleability, human communication, as we know it, would be impossible. Therefore, Elias (1987) sees the development of the human face as closely linked to the evolutionary 'survival value' of effective communication systems. Whilst apes do make extensive use of 'whole body' communication, humans can communicate a varied range of emotions on just the 'signalling board' of the face. For Elias, such facial communication of emotions demonstrates that in human beings, the natural and the social are always inextricably intertwined.

Paul Ekman and his colleagues developed what they call the Facial Action Coding System (FACS) for describing movements of the facial muscles that give rise to particular expressions (Ekman and Friesen 1978). By this means, they have tried to inject some precision into an area notoriously open to inconsistent or contradictory interpretations – for there is little agreement about how emotions are to be identified and

classified. Charles Darwin, the originator of evolutionary theory, claimed that basic modes of emotional expression are the same in all human beings. Although some have disputed the claim, Ekman's research among people from widely different cultural backgrounds seems to confirm this. Ekman and Friesen carried out a study of an isolated community in New Guinea, whose members had previously had virtually no contact with outsiders. When they were shown pictures of facial expressions expressing six emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, fear, surprise), the New Guineans were able to identify these emotions.

According to Ekman, the results of his own and similar studies of different peoples support the view that the facial expression of emotion and its interpretation are innate in human beings. He acknowledges that his evidence does not conclusively demonstrate this, and it may be that widely shared cultural learning experiences are involved; however, other types of research support his conclusions. Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1973) studied six children born deaf and blind to see how far their facial expressions were the same as those of sighted, hearing individuals in particular emotional situations. He found

that the children smiled when engaged in obviously pleasurable activities, raised their eyebrows in surprise when sniffing at an object with an unaccustomed smell and frowned when repeatedly offered a disliked object. Since they could not have seen other people behaving in these ways, it seems that these responses must have been innately determined. Using the FACS, Ekman and Friesen identified a number of the discrete facial muscle actions in newborn infants that are also found in adult expressions of emotion. Infants seem, for example, to produce facial expressions similar to the adult expression of disgust (pursing the lips and frowning) in response to sour tastes.

But although the facial expression of emotion seems to be partly innate, individual and cultural factors influence what exact form facial movements take and the contexts in which they are deemed appropriate. How people smile, for example, the precise movement of the lips and other facial muscles, and how fleeting the smile is all vary between cultures.

There are no gestures or bodily postures that have been shown to characterize all, or even most, cultures. In some societies, for instance, people nod when they mean no, the opposite of Anglo-American practice.

Paul Ekman's photographs of the facial expressions of a tribesman from a remote community in New Guinea helped to test the idea that basic modes of emotional expression are the same amongst all people. Look carefully at each facial expression. Which of the six emotions used by Ekman above do you think is being conveyed in each one? Check to see if you were right by looking at the 'Thinking Critically' box overleaf.



Gestures that Europeans and Americans tend to use a great deal, such as pointing, seem not to exist among certain peoples (Bull 1983). Similarly, a straightened forefinger placed at the centre of the cheek and rotated is used in parts of Italy as a gesture of praise, but appears to be unknown elsewhere. Like facial expressions, gestures and bodily posture are continually used to fill out utterances, as well as conveying meanings when nothing is actually said. All three can be used to joke, or show irony or scepticism.

The non-verbal impressions that we convey often inadvertently indicate that what we say is not quite what we mean. Blushing is perhaps the most obvious example of how physical indicators can contradict our stated meanings. But there are many more subtle signs that can be picked up by other people. As an example, a trained eye can often detect deceit by studying non-verbal cues. Sweating, fidgeting, staring or shifting eyes, and facial expressions held for a long time (genuine facial expressions tend to evaporate after four or five seconds) could indicate that a person is being deceptive. Thus, we use facial expressions and bodily gestures of other people to add to what they communicate verbally and to check how far they are sincere in what they say and whether we can trust them.

Gender and the body

Is there a gender dimension to everyday social interaction? There are reasons to believe that there is. Because interactions are shaped by the larger social context, it is not surprising that both verbal and non-verbal communication may be perceived and expressed differently by men and women. Understandings of gender and gender roles are greatly influenced by social factors and are related broadly to issues of power and status in society.

For example, the political philosopher Iris Marion Young (1949–2006) explored gendered bodily experience in a famous arti-

THINKING CRITICALLY

From left to right, Ekman's instructions were to show how your face would look if:

- 1 Your friend had come and you were *happy*.
- 2 Your child had died and you were *sad*.
- 3 You were *angry* and about to fight.
- 4 You saw a dead pig that had been lying there a long time: *disgust*.

How many did you get right? Look at the faces again – is it easier to see the different emotions being expressed when you know the context? Have you ever misunderstood how someone is feeling, and if so, why did their facial expression not give away their emotional state? Are there *different ways* of facially expressing happiness, sadness and so on?

cle, 'Throwing Like a Girl' (1980, 2005). Young argued that the distinctive 'half-hearted' movements – such as throwing a ball or stone – made by women are not biologically determined, but are the product of discourses and practices which encourage girls and young women to experience their bodies as 'objects for others' from an early age. Such bodily training, she suggested, embodies an 'inhibited intentionality', reflecting feminine norms of restricted bodily comportment and movement. In short, male-dominated societies produce a majority of women who are 'physically handicapped'. In contrast, men learn to experience their bodies as active and forceful 'objects for themselves', which is reflected in their more aggressive bodily movements, particularly noticeable in sports, for example. For young boys, therefore, to be accused of 'throwing like a girl' is a dreadful insult and an attack on their identity as a male.

These dynamics are evident even in standard interactions in daily life. Take as an example one of the most common non-

verbal expressions: eye contact. Individuals use eye contact in a wide variety of ways, often to catch someone's attention or to begin a social interaction. In societies where men on the whole dominate women in both public and private life, men may feel freer than women to make eye contact with strangers.

A particular form of eye contact – staring – illustrates the contrasts in meaning between men and women of identical forms of non-verbal communication. A man who stares at a woman can be seen as acting in a 'natural' or 'innocent' way; if the woman is uncomfortable, she can evade the gaze by looking away or choosing not to sustain the interaction. On the other hand, a woman who stares at a man is often regarded as behaving in a suggestive or sexually leading manner. Taken individually, such cases may seem inconsequential; when viewed collectively, they help reinforce patterns of gender inequality (Burgoon et al. 1996).

There are other gender differences in non-verbal communication as well. Men tend to sit in more relaxed ways than women. Men tend to lean back with their legs open, whereas women tend to have a more closed body position, sitting upright, with their hands in their lap and their legs crossed. Women tend to stand closer to the person they are talking to than men; and men make physical contact with women during conversation far more often than the other way around (women are generally expected to view this as normal). Studies have also shown that women tend to show their emotions more obviously (through facial expressions), and that they seek and break eye contact more often than men. Sociologists have argued that these seemingly small-scale micro-level interactions reinforce the wider macro-level inequality in our society. Men control more space when standing and sitting than women because they tend to stand further away from the person they are talking to and because they tend to sprawl when sitting, and they demonstrate control through more

frequent physical contact. Women, it has been argued, seek approval through eye contact and facial expression; when men make eye contact, a woman is more likely to look away than another man. Thus, it is argued, micro-level studies of non-verbal forms of communication provide subtle cues, which demonstrate men's power over women in wider society (Young 1990).

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler argued that these expressions of gendered identities illustrate that gender is 'performative'. What does she mean by this? Butler says that many feminists rejected the idea that gender is biologically or naturally fixed. But, in doing so, they separated gender (culture) from sex (biology), arguing that gendered norms of behaviour were built upon biologically determined male and female bodies. Butler rejects this position, arguing that there are *no* biologically determined identities lying beneath the cultural expressions of gender. Instead, gender identities are established precisely *through* their continuous performance. There is simply no essential, natural or biological basis to gender even though the belief that there is such a basis is very widespread within many societies and such beliefs shape people's behaviour. Butler's position is that gender identity is not a question of *who you are*, but of *what you do*, and it therefore follows that gender identity is much more fluid and unstable than was previously thought. If Butler is right, then there may be much more scope for people to choose how they perform gender and thus to resist the dominant or hegemonic forms of gendered identity.

See chapter 14, 'Sexuality and Gender', for R. W. Connell's wider theory of hegemony in relation to gender and identity.

Embodiment and identities

The gendering of bodily experience and movement described above complements theories of gender identity, which are

7.1 Women and men in public

As we saw in chapter 1, microsociology, the study of everyday behaviour in situations of face-to-face interaction and macrosociology, the study of the broader features of society like class or gender hierarchies, are inextricably connected (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Giddens 1984). Here, we look at an example of how an event that may seem to be a prime example of microsociology – a woman walking down the street is verbally harassed by a group of men – is in fact also linked to the bigger issues that make up macrosociology.

In her study *Passing By: Gender and Public Harassment* (1995), Carol Brooks Gardner found that in various settings – most famously, the edge of construction sites – these types of unwanted interaction occur as something women frequently experience as abusive.

Although the harassment of a single woman might be analysed in microsociological terms by looking at a single interaction, it is not fruitful to view it so simply. Such harassment is typical of street talk involving men and women who are strangers (Gardner 1995). And these kinds of interaction cannot simply be understood without also looking at the larger background of gender hierarchy in society. In this way, we can see how micro- and macroanalysis are connected. For example, Gardner linked the harassment of women by men to the larger system of gender inequality,



"So far, so good. Now let's hear your wolf-whistling."

represented by male privilege in public spaces, women's physical vulnerability and the omnipresent threat of rape.

Without making this link between micro- and macrosociology, we can only have a limited understanding of these interactions. It might seem as though these types of interaction are isolated instances or that they could be eliminated by teaching people good manners. Understanding the link between micro and macro helps us see that in order to attack the problem at its root cause, one would need to focus on eliminating the forms of gender inequality that give rise to such interactions.

discussed in detail in chapter 8, 'The Life-Course'. As that chapter shows, both Sigmund Freud and Nancy Chodorow argued – in different ways – that people *learn* gender roles and gendered behaviour in interaction with significant other people, such as key family members, from a very early age. What we can add to this from the sociological work on bodily experience and non-verbal communication above, is that a person's gender identity is also expressed through experience of their own and other people's bodies and bodily movements.

Gender identity is both socially created and 'embodied'. In fact the general concept of **identity** has become central to many areas of sociology over recent years. But what is an identity?

Richard Jenkins (1996) says that identity is, 'our understanding of who we are and of who other people are', and of course this also includes *their* understanding of themselves and of us too. It follows then, that all human identities must be 'social identities', because they are formed in the continuing processes of interaction in social life. Identi-

THINKING CRITICALLY

It has been suggested that gender relations in modern societies are becoming more equal. If this is so, then there should be signs of such growing equality in the everyday non-verbal behaviour of men and women. Think about some of the routine social situations you have been involved in recently – do you notice any changes in people's behaviour that might suggest a movement towards gender equality? What about your own behaviour? Is it noticeably different from that of your parents and grandparents? What social changes would you point to that might explain these generational changes in behaviour?

ties are made, not given. Nevertheless, we can see three central parts to identities; they are partly individual or personal; they are partly collective or social; and they are always 'embodied'. As Jenkins puts it:

Selves without bodies don't make much sense in human terms. Even ghosts or spirits, if we recognise them as human, once had bodies; even the disembodied world of cyberspace depends, in the not-so-final-resort, on bodies in front of computer screens. We reach out with our selves and others reach out to us. (1996: 47)

A good example of the close linkage between social identity and **embodiment** is in Goffman's study of 'stigma' (discussed in chapter 10). He shows how disabled people, for example, can be stigmatized on the basis of readily observable physical impairments (discredited stigma), which then make individual identities more difficult to 'manage' than some non-physical impairments, which can be more easily hidden (discrediting stigma).

Identities are also multilayered, consisting of several sources. A simple distinction can be made between *primary* and *secondary* identities, which are connected to the processes of

primary and secondary socialization respectively. Primary identities are those that are formed in early life and include gender, race/ethnicity and perhaps also disability/impairment. Secondary identities build on these and would include those associated with **social roles** and **achieved statuses** such as occupational roles and social status positions. Clearly, social identities are quite complex and fluid, changing as people gain new roles or leave behind old ones.

An important consequence of the discussion so far is that identities mark out *similarities* and *differences* in social interactions. Individual or personal identity feels quite unique and different from other people, especially in the individualized modern societies, and is perceived by others as such. Our personal names are one illustration of this individual difference. In many societies today, parents increasingly seek out unique names for their offspring to mark them out as unique and different from the crowd, rather than choosing names that are commonly used. In contrast, collective identities display similarity with others. To identify yourself (and be identified) as working class, an environmentalist or a professional sociologist can be sources of group solidarity, pride or perhaps even individual shame at being part of a particular group. Whatever the perception we may have of our own social identities, the example

THINKING CRITICALLY

Think of an occasion when your identity has been challenged – perhaps you were asked to provide ID or some other personal identification. How did the experience make you feel – uneasy, scared, worried? – and how did you react? How did you 'prove' you were who you claimed to be? How might some social roles change people's bodily comportment and movements? Do you think such changes would affect their individual and social identity – in what ways?

demonstrates that individual and social identities are tightly bound together within the embodied self (Burkitt 1999).

The social rules of interaction

Although we routinely use non-verbal cues in our own behaviour and in making sense of the behaviour of others, much of our interaction is done through talk – casual verbal exchange – carried on in informal conversations with others. It has always been accepted by sociologists that language is fundamental to social life. Recently, however, an approach has been developed that is specifically concerned with how people use language in the ordinary contexts of everyday life.

Ethnomethodology is the study of the ‘ethnomethods’ – the folk, or lay, methods – people use to *make sense* of what others do, and particularly of what they say. Harold Garfinkel, whose work is discussed below, coined the term ‘ethnomethodology’. We all apply these methods, normally without having to give any conscious attention to them. Often we can only make sense of what is said in conversation if we know the social context, which does not appear in the words themselves. Take the following conversation (Heritage 1985):

- A: I have a 14-year-old son.
 B: Well, that’s all right.
 A: I also have a dog.
 B: Oh, I’m sorry.

What do you think is happening here? What is the relation between the speakers? What if you were told that this is a conversation between a prospective tenant and a landlord? The conversation then becomes sensible: some landlords accept children but do not permit their tenants to keep pets. Yet if we do not know the social context, the responses of individual B seem to bear no relation to the statements of A. *Part* of the

sense is in the words, and *part* is in the way in which the meaning emerges from the social context.

Shared understandings

The most inconsequential forms of daily talk assume complicated, shared knowledge brought into play by those speaking. In fact, our small talk is so complex that it has so far proved impossible to program even the most sophisticated computers to converse convincingly with human beings for very long. The words used in ordinary talk do not always have precise meanings, and we ‘fix’ what we want to say through the unstated assumptions that back it up. If Maria asks Tom: ‘What did you do yesterday?’ there is no obvious answer suggested by the words in the question themselves. A day is a long time, and it would be logical for Tom to answer: ‘Well, at 7.16, I woke up. At 7.18, I got out of bed, went to the bathroom and started to brush my teeth. At 7.19, I turned on the shower. . . .’ We understand the type of response the question calls for by knowing Maria, what sort of activities she and Tom consider relevant, and what Tom usually does on a particular day of the week, among other things.

‘Interactional vandalism’

We have already seen that conversations are one of the main ways in which our daily lives are maintained in a stable and coherent manner. We feel most comfortable when the tacit conventions of small talk are adhered to; when they are breached, we can feel threatened, confused and insecure. In most everyday talk, conversants are carefully attuned to the cues being given by others – such as changes in intonation, slight pauses or gestures – in order to facilitate conversation smoothly. By being mutually aware, conversants ‘cooperate’ in opening and closing interactions, and in taking turns to speak. Interactions in which one party is conversationally ‘uncooperative’, however, can give rise to tensions.

Garfinkel's students created tense situations by intentionally undermining conversational rules as part of a sociological experiment. But what about situations in the real world in which people 'make trouble' through their conversational practices? One US study investigated verbal interchanges between pedestrians and street people in New York City to understand why such interactions are often seen as problematic by passers-by. The researchers used a technique called **conversation analysis** to compare a selection of street interchanges with samples of everyday talk. Conversation analysis is a methodology that examines all facets of a conversation for meaning – from the smallest filler words (such as 'um' and 'ah') to the precise timing of interchanges (including pauses, interruptions and overlaps).

The study looked at interactions between black men – many of whom were homeless, alcoholic or drug-addicted – and white women who passed by them on the street. The men would often try to initiate conversations with passing women by calling out to them, paying them compliments or asking them questions. But something 'goes wrong' in these conversations, because the women rarely respond as they would in a normal interaction. Even though the men's comments are seldom hostile in tone, the women tend to quicken their step and stare fixedly ahead. The following shows attempts by Mudrick, a black man in his late 50s, to engage women in conversation (Duneier and Molotch 1999):

[Mudrick] begins this interaction as a white woman, who looks about 25, approaches at a steady pace:

- 1 MUDRICK: I love you baby.
She crosses her arms and quickens her walk, ignoring the comment.
- 2 MUDRICK: Marry me.
Next, it is two white women, also probably in their mid-twenties:
- 3 MUDRICK: Hi girls, you all look very nice today. You have some money? Buy some books.

They ignore him. Next, it is a young black woman:

- 4 MUDRICK: Hey pretty. Hey pretty.
She keeps walking without acknowledging him.
- 5 MUDRICK: 'Scuse me. 'Scuse me. I know you hear me.
Then he addresses a white woman in her thirties:
- 6 MUDRICK: I'm watching you. You look nice, you know.
She ignores him.

Negotiating smooth 'openings' and 'closings' to conversations is a fundamental requirement for urban civility. These crucial aspects of conversation were highly problematic between the men and women. When the women resisted the men's attempts at opening a conversation, the men ignored the women's resistance and persisted. Similarly, if the men succeeded in opening a conversation, they often refused to respond to cues from the women to close the conversation once it had got under way:

- 1 MUDRICK: Hey pretty.
- 2 WOMAN: Hi how you doin'.
- 3 MUDRICK: You alright?
- 4 MUDRICK: You look very nice you know. I like how you have your hair pinned.
- 5 MUDRICK: You married?
- 6 WOMAN: Yeah.
- 7 MUDRICK: Huh?
- 8 WOMAN: Yeah.
- 9 MUDRICK: Where the rings at?
- 10 WOMAN: I have it home.
- 11 MUDRICK: Y'have it home?
- 12 WOMAN: Yeah.
- 13 MUDRICK: Can I get your name?
- 14 MUDRICK: My name is Mudrick, what's yours?
She does not answer and walks on.
(Duneier and Molotch 1999)

In this instance, Mudrick made 9 out of the 14 utterances that comprised the interaction to initiate the conversation and to elicit further responses from the woman. From the

Classic Studies 7.1 Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodological experiments

The research problem

Misunderstandings are commonplace in social life. Sometimes they go unresolved but at others, they can provoke irritation and frustration. Anyone who has been told, 'listen when I'm talking to you', or, 'you just don't get it, do you?', will be aware of just how quickly apparently trivial misunderstandings can escalate into anger and aggression. But why do people get so upset when the minor conventions of talk are not followed? The founder of ethnomethodology, Harold Garfinkel, investigated this issue with some of his students.

Garfinkel's explanation

For a smooth-running everyday existence, people must be able to take for granted certain aspects of their lives. These 'background expectancies' include the organization of ordinary conversations, such as knowing when to speak and when not to, what we can assume without formally stating it – and so on. Garfinkel (1963) explored such unspoken assumptions with student volunteers who set out to 'breach' the conventions of daily life. The students were asked to engage a friend or relative in conversation and to insist that casual remarks or general comments be actively pursued to make their meaning more precise. So, if someone said, 'Have a nice day', the student was to respond, 'Nice in what sense, exactly?' 'Which part of the day do you mean?' and so on. One of these exchanges ran as follows (E is the student volunteer, S is their friend):

- S: How are you?
 E: How am I in regard to what? My health, my finance, my school work, my peace of mind, my ... ?
 S: [*red in the face and suddenly out of control*]: Look! I was just trying to be polite. Frankly, I don't give a damn how you are.

Why would a friend get so upset so quickly?

Garfinkel's answer is that the stability and meaningfulness of our daily social lives depend on the sharing of unstated cultural assumptions about what is said and why. If we were not able to

take these for granted, meaningful communication would be impossible. Any question or contribution to a conversation would have to be followed by a massive 'search procedure' of the sort Garfinkel's subjects were told to initiate, and interaction would simply break down. What seem at first sight to be unimportant conventions of talk, therefore, turn out to be fundamental to the very fabric of social life, which is why their breach is so serious.

In everyday life, people sometimes deliberately feign ignorance of unstated knowledge. This may be done to rebuff the others, poke fun at them, cause embarrassment or call attention to a double meaning in what was said. Consider, for example, this all too typical exchange between parent (P) and teenager (T):

- P: Where are you going?
 T: Out.
 P: What are you going to do?
 T: Nothing.

The responses of the teenager are effectively the opposite of those of the student volunteers above. Rather than pursuing enquiries where this is not normally done, the teenager provides no appropriate answers at all – essentially saying, 'Mind your own business!'

The first question might elicit a different response from another person in another context:

- A: Where are you going?
 B: I'm going quietly round the bend.

B deliberately misreads A's question in order ironically to convey worry or frustration. Comedy and joking thrive on such deliberate misunderstandings of the unstated assumptions involved in talk. There is nothing threatening about this so long as the parties concerned recognize that the intent is to provoke laughter.

By delving into the everyday world which we all inhabit, Garfinkel shows us that the normal, smooth-running social order that some sociologists simply take for granted is in fact a social process of interaction, which has to be

continually reproduced over the course of every day. Social order is hard work! However, in his 'breaching experiments', Garfinkel was also able amply to demonstrate just how robust is the fabric of daily life. The students were able to explain and apologize to their friends and families once the experiment was over, but what might have happened had they carried on behaving in such pedantic and uncooperative ways? Would they have been shunned and thrown out of the family home or referred to a doctor or psychiatrist as suffering from a mental illness? Social reality may be socially constructed, but this is still a very hard construction that is impossible to ignore.

Critical points

Given that ethnomethodology set out to criticize much mainstream sociology and is usually seen as an alternative to, rather than a school of thought within, sociology, it has been the subject of much criticism. However, we need only note the most important ones. First, ethnomethodology seeks to understand the world from the viewpoint of 'ordinary actors'. While this may bring about some useful insights, critics argue that it leaves the conclusions from ethnomethodological research open to a charge of subjectivism – that they only apply to the particular subjects being studied – and therefore it is not legitimate to generalize from them. Second, many sociologists argue that the focus on micro-level order and disorder leaves

ethnomethodology remarkably detached from the key structural determinants affecting people's life chances, such as gender, race/ethnicity and social class. Ethnomethodology's aversion to social structural analysis and general theories of society seem to leave its studies cast adrift from crucial questions about the operation of power in the structuring of social life. Finally, ethnomethodology does not look for the causes of social phenomena, but only to describe how they are experienced and made sense of by people 'on the ground'. Again, many sociologists see this lack of causal explanation to be a major problem, which essentially rules out the idea that the study of social life could be 'scientific'.

Contemporary significance

Ethnomethodology is an important approach to the study of everyday life and social interaction, which is usually seen alongside other microsociologies such as phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. Sociologists who are interested in large-scale social structures, power relations within the international system of nation-states and long-term socio-historical change will always find ethnomethodology disappointing. But taken on its own terms, this theoretical approach has produced much insightful work on the operation of daily life and how it is experienced and made sense of by the people who constitute and reproduce it. It therefore remains an influential perspective amongst scholars and students of everyday life.

transcript alone, it is quite evident that the woman is not interested in talking, but when conversation analysis is applied to the tape recording, her reluctance becomes even clearer. The woman delays all her responses – even when she does give them, while Mudrick replies immediately, his comments sometimes overlapping hers. Timing in conversations is a very precise indicator; delaying a response by even a fraction of a second is adequate in most everyday interactions to signal the desire to change the course of a conversation. By betraying these

tacit rules of sociability, Mudrick was practising conversation in a way that was 'technically rude'. The woman, in return, was also 'technically rude' in ignoring Mudrick's repeated attempts to engage her in talk. It is the 'technically rude' nature of these street interchanges that make them problematic for passers-by to handle. When standard cues for opening and closing conversations are not adhered to, individuals feel a sense of profound and inexplicable insecurity.

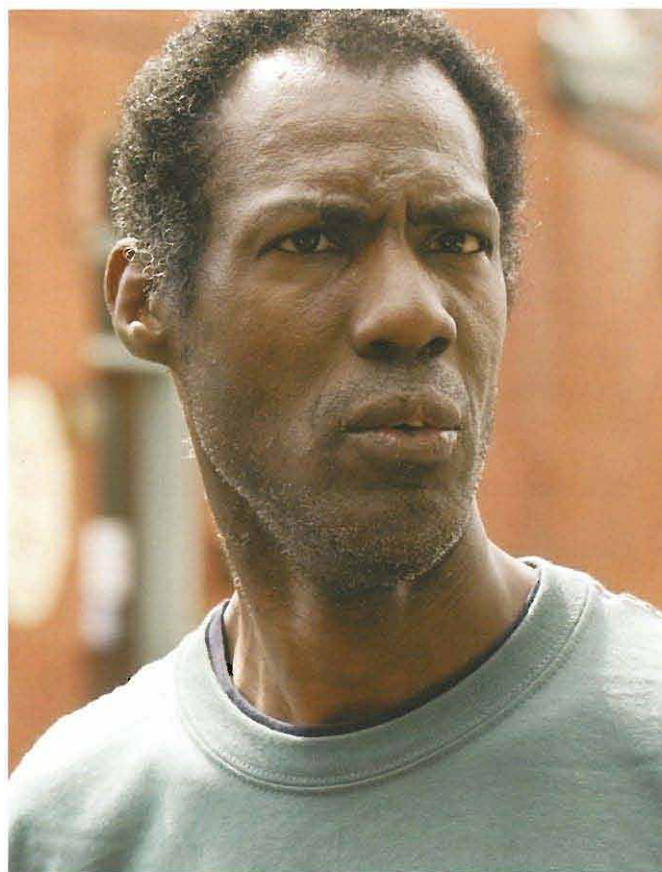
The term **interactional vandalism** describes cases like these, in which a

subordinate person breaks the tacit rules of everyday interaction that are of value to the more powerful. The men on the street often conform to everyday forms of speech in their interactions with one another, local shopkeepers, the police, relatives and acquaintances. But when they choose to, they subvert the tacit conventions for everyday talk in a way that leaves passers-by disoriented. Even more than physical assaults or vulgar verbal abuse, interactional vandalism leaves victims unable to articulate what has happened.

This study of interactional vandalism provides another example of the two-way links between micro-level interactions and forces that operate on the macro-level. To the men on the street, the white women who ignore their attempts at conversation appear distant, cold and bereft of sympathy – legitimate ‘targets’ for such interactions. The women, meanwhile, may often take the men’s behaviour as proof that they are indeed dangerous and best avoided. Interactional vandalism is closely tied up with overarching class, gender and racial structures. The fear and anxiety generated in such mundane interactions help to constitute the outside statuses and forces that, in turn, influence the interactions themselves. Interactional vandalism is part of a self-reinforcing system of mutual suspicion and incivility.

Response cries

Some kinds of utterance are not talk but consist of muttered exclamations, or what Goffman (1981) has called **response cries**. Consider Lucy, who exclaims, ‘Oops!’ after knocking over a glass of water. ‘Oops!’ seems to be merely an uninteresting reflex response to a mishap, rather like blinking your eye when a person moves a hand sharply towards your face. It is not a reflex, however, as shown by the fact that people do not usually make the exclamation when alone. ‘Oops!’ is normally directed towards others present. The exclamation demonstrates to witnesses that the lapse is only



Being approached by a stranger who breaks the tacit rules of ‘standard’ social interaction can leave people feeling threatened or uncomfortable.

minor and momentary, not something that should cast doubt on Lucy’s command of her actions.

‘Oops!’ is used only in situations of minor failure, rather than in major accidents or calamities – which also demonstrates that the exclamation is part of our controlled management of the details of social life. Moreover, the word may be used by someone observing Lucy, rather than by Lucy herself, or it may be used to sound a warning to another. ‘Oops!’ is normally a curt sound, but the ‘oo’ may be prolonged in some situations. Thus, someone might extend the sound to cover a critical moment in performing a task. For instance, a parent may utter an extended ‘Oops!’ or ‘Oopsadaisy!’ when playfully tossing a child in the air. The sound covers the

brief phase when the child may feel a loss of control, reassuring him and probably at the same time developing his understanding of response cries.

This may all sound very contrived and exaggerated. Why should we bother to analyse such an inconsequential utterance in this detail? Surely we do not pay as much attention to what we say as this example suggests? Of course not – on a conscious level. The crucial point, however, is that we take for granted an immensely complicated, continuous control of our appearance and actions. In situations of interaction, we are never expected just to be present on the scene. Others expect, as we expect of them, that we will display what Goffman calls 'controlled alertness'. A fundamental part of being human is continually demonstrating to others our competence in the routines of daily life.

Face, body and speech in interaction

Let us summarize at this point what we have learned so far. Everyday interaction depends on subtle relationships between what we convey with our faces and bodies and what we express in words. We use the facial expressions and bodily gestures of other people to fill in what they communicate verbally and to check if they are sincere in what they say. Mostly without realizing it, each of us keeps a tight and continuous control over facial expression, bodily posture and movement in the course of our daily interaction with others.

Face, bodily management and speech, then, are used to convey certain meanings and to hide others. We also organize our activities in the contexts of social life to achieve the same ends, as we shall now see.

Encounters

In many social situations, we engage in what Goffman calls **unfocused interaction**

with others. Unfocused interaction takes place whenever individuals exhibit mutual awareness of one another's presence. This is usually the case anywhere that large numbers of people are assembled together, as on a busy street, in a theatre crowd or at a party. When people are in the presence of others, even if they do not directly talk to them, they continually communicate non-verbally through their posture and facial and physical gestures.

Focused interaction occurs when individuals directly attend to what others say or do. Social interaction will often involve both focused and unfocused exchanges. Goffman calls an instance of focused interaction an **encounter**, and much of our day-to-day life consists of encounters with other people – family, friends, colleagues – frequently occurring against the background of unfocused interaction with others present on the scene. Small talk, seminar discussions, games and routine face-to-face contacts (with ticket attendants, waiters, shop assistants and so forth) are all examples of encounters.

Encounters always need 'openings', which indicate that civil inattention is being discarded. When strangers meet and begin to talk at a party, the moment of ceasing civil inattention is always risky, since misunderstandings can easily occur about the nature of the encounter being established (Goffman 1971). Hence, the making of eye contact may first be ambiguous and tentative. The person who is looking to make eye contact can then act as though he had made no direct move if the overture is not accepted. In focused interaction, each person communicates as much by facial expression and gesture as by the words actually exchanged. Goffman distinguishes between the expressions individuals 'give' and those they 'give off'. The first are the words and facial expressions people use to produce certain impressions on others. The second are the clues that others may spot to check their sincerity or truthfulness. For instance, a restaurant-owner listens with a polite smile to the state-

ments that customers give about how much they enjoyed their meals. At the same time, she is noting the signals the customers give off – how pleased they seemed to be while eating the food, whether a lot was left over, and the tone of voice they use to express their satisfaction, for example.

Waiters and other workers in the service industries are, of course, told to smile and be polite in their social interaction with customers. In a famous study of the airline industry, Arlie Hochschild describes this 'emotional labour' (see chapter 1).

THINKING CRITICALLY

In some societies today, surveys show that women and older people believe it to be unsafe for them to walk out after dark. In recent years, young people in the UK who wear 'hoodies' (a type of jacket with large hood) have been seen as 'threatening' by many older groups of people. How might Anderson's study help us to understand such interactions and what do they tell us about the macrosociological relationships between younger and older generations?

Impression management

Goffman and other writers on social interaction often use notions from the theatre in their analyses. The concept of **social role**, for example, originated in a theatrical setting. Roles are socially defined expectations that a person in a given **status**, or **social position**, follows. To be a teacher is to hold a specific position; the teacher's role consists of acting in specified ways towards her pupils. Goffman sees social life as though played out by actors on a stage – or on many stages, because how we act depends on the roles we are playing at a particular time. People are sensitive to how they are seen by others and use many forms of **impression management** to compel others to react to them in the ways they



"Hmmm... what shall I wear today...?"

wish. Although we may sometimes do this in a calculated way, usually it is among the things we do without conscious attention. When Philip attends a business meeting, he wears a suit and tie and is on his best behaviour; that evening, when relaxing with friends at a football game, he wears jeans and a sweatshirt and tells a lot of jokes. This is impression management.

As we noted above, the social roles that we adopt are highly dependent on our social status. A person's social status can be different depending on the social context. For instance, as a 'student', you have a certain status and are expected to act in a certain way when you are around your professors. As a 'son or daughter', you have a different status from a student, and society (especially your parents) has different expectations for you. Likewise, as a 'friend', you have an entirely different position in the social order, and the roles you adopt would change accordingly. Obviously, a person has many statuses at the same time. Sociologists refer to the group of statuses that you occupy as a **status set**.

Sociologists also like to distinguish between ascribed status and achieved status. An **ascribed status** is one that you

7.2 Street encounters

Have you ever crossed to the other side of the street when you felt threatened by someone behind you or someone coming towards you? One sociologist who tried to understand simple interactions of this kind is Elijah Anderson. Anderson began by describing social interaction on the streets of two adjacent urban neighbourhoods in the United States. His book, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community* (1990), found that studying everyday life sheds light on how social order is created by the individual building blocks of infinite micro-level interactions. He was particularly interested in understanding interactions when at least one party was viewed as threatening. Anderson showed that the ways many blacks and whites interact on the streets had a great deal to do with the structure of racial stereotypes, which is itself linked to the economic structure of society. In this way, he showed the link between micro-interactions and the larger macro-structures of society.

Anderson began by recalling Erving Goffman's description of how social roles and statuses come into existence in particular contexts or locations. Goffman (1959) wrote:

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or bring into play information already possessed. . . . Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and they may expect of him.

Following Goffman's lead, Anderson (1990) asked what types of behavioural cues and signs make up the vocabulary of public interaction? He concluded that:

Skin colour, gender, age, companions, clothing, jewellery, and the objects people carry help identify them, so that assumptions are formed and communication can occur. Movements (quick or slow, false or sincere, comprehensible or incomprehensible) further refine this public communication. Factors like time of day or an activity that 'explains' a person's presence can also



affect in what way and how quickly the image of 'stranger' is neutralized. If a stranger cannot pass inspection and be assessed as 'safe', the image of predator may arise, and fellow pedestrians may try to maintain a distance consistent with that image.

Anderson showed that the people most likely to pass inspection are those who do not fall into commonly accepted stereotypes of dangerous persons: 'Children readily pass inspection, while women and white men do so more slowly, black women, black men, and black male teenagers most slowly of all.' In showing that interactional tensions derive from outside statuses such as race, class and gender, Anderson shows that we cannot develop a full understanding of the situation by looking at the micro-interactions themselves. This is how he makes the link between micro-interactions and macro-processes.

Anderson argues that people are 'streetwise' when they develop skills such as 'the art of avoidance' to deal with their felt vulnerability towards violence and crime. According to Anderson, whites who are not streetwise do not recognize the difference between different kinds of black men (such as between middle-class youths and gang members). They may also not know how to alter the number of paces to walk behind a 'suspicious' person or how to bypass 'bad blocks' at various times of day.

Studies such as this one demonstrate how microsociology is useful in illuminating the broad institutional patterns that are the content of macrosociology. Face-to-face interaction is clearly the main basis of all forms of social organization, no matter how large scale. We could not build up a full account of gender and race in our society from these studies alone, yet we could certainly contribute significantly to understanding these issues better.

are 'assigned' based on biological factors such as race, sex or age. Thus, your ascribed statuses could be 'white', 'female' and 'teenager'. An **achieved status** is one that is earned through an individual's own effort. Your achieved statuses could be 'graduate', 'athlete' or 'employee'. While we may like to believe that it is our achieved statuses that are most important, society may not agree. In any society, some statuses have priority over all other statuses and generally determine a person's overall position in society. Sociologists refer to this as a **master status** (Hughes 1945; Becker 1963). The most common master statuses are those based on gender and race. Sociologists have shown that in an encounter, one of the first things that people notice about one another is gender and race (Omi and Winant 1994). As we shall see shortly, both race and gender strongly shape our social interactions.

Adopting roles: intimate examinations

For an example of collaboration in impression management that also borrows from

the theatre, let us look at one particular study in some detail. James Henslin and Mae Biggs studied a specific, highly delicate type of encounter: a woman's visit to a gynaecologist (1971, 1997). At the time of the study, most pelvic examinations were carried out by male doctors and the experience was therefore (and sometimes still is) fraught with potential ambiguities and embarrassment for both parties. Men and women in the West are socialized to think of the genitals as the most private part of the body, and seeing, and particularly touching, the genitals of another person is ordinarily associated with intimate sexual encounters. Some women feel so worried by the prospect of a pelvic examination that they refuse to visit the doctor, male or female, even when they suspect there is a strong medical reason to do so.

Henslin and Biggs analysed material collected by Biggs, a trained nurse, from a large number of gynaecological examinations. They interpreted what they found as having several typical stages. Adopting a dramaturgical metaphor, they suggested

that each phase could be treated as a distinct scene, in which the parts played by the actors alter as the episode unfolds. In the prologue, the woman enters the waiting room preparing to assume the role of patient and temporarily discarding her outside identity. Called into the consulting room, she adopts the 'patient' role, and the first scene opens. The doctor assumes a business-like, professional manner and treats the patient as a proper and competent person, maintaining eye contact and listening politely to what she has to say. If he decides an examination is called for, he tells her so and leaves the room; scene one is over.

As he leaves, the nurse comes in. She is an important stagehand in the main scene shortly to begin. She soothes any worries that the patient might have, acting as both a confidante – knowing some of the 'things women have to put up with' – and a collaborator in what is to follow. Crucially, the nurse helps alter the patient from a person to a 'non-person' for the vital scene – which features a body, part of which is to be scrutinized, rather than a complete human being. In Henslin and Biggs's study, the nurse not only supervises the patient's undressing, but also takes over aspects that normally the patient would control. Thus, she takes the patient's clothes and folds them. Most women wish their underwear to be out of sight when the doctor returns, and the nurse makes sure that this is so. She guides the patient to the examining table and covers most of her body with a sheet before the physician returns.

The central scene now opens, with the nurse as well as the doctor taking part. The presence of the nurse helps ensure that the interaction between the doctor and the patient is free of sexual overtones and also provides a legal witness should the physician be charged with unprofessional conduct. The examination proceeds as though the personality of the patient were absent; the sheet across her separates the genital area from the rest of her body, and



In normal social life in Saudi Arabia, interaction between men and women is highly regulated and intimate contact in public is forbidden. However, in a medical setting, other social rules take precedence, although these are still carefully managed.

her position does not allow her to watch the examination itself. Apart from any specific medical queries, the doctor ignores her, sitting on a low stool, out of her line of vision. The patient collaborates in becoming a temporary non-person, not initiating

Classic Studies 7.2 Erving Goffman on the drama of everyday life

The research problem

Very often we watch people in public situations who seem to be 'performing' or 'playing to the crowd'. If we are honest, we would probably admit that we also treat the world a little like a stage at times, putting on a show for the benefit of other people. But why do we do this? And when we do it, is it really *us* – our 'real selves' – doing the performing? If 'all the world's a stage', what happens *behind the scenes* of public life? And what is the relationship between the front and backstage regions? Erving Goffman (1922–82) studied this issue in several publications and research studies, producing the most detailed accounts of people's 'performances' and backstage behaviour.

Goffman's explanation

Much of social life, Goffman suggests, can be divided into front regions and back regions. **Front regions** are social occasions or encounters in which individuals act out formal roles; they are essentially, 'on-stage performances'. *Teamwork* is often involved in creating front-region performances. Two prominent politicians in the same party may put on an elaborate show of unity and friendship before the television cameras, even though each privately detests the other. A wife and husband may take care to conceal their quarrels from their children, preserving a front of harmony, only to fight bitterly once the children are safely tucked up in bed.

The **back regions** are where people assemble the props and prepare themselves for interaction in the more formal settings. Back regions resemble the backstage of a theatre or the off-camera activities of filmmaking. When they are safely behind the scenes, people can relax and give vent to feelings and styles of behaviour they keep in check when on stage. Back regions permit 'profanity, open sexual remarks, elaborate griping ... rough informal dress, "sloppy" sitting and standing posture, use of dialect or substandard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressiveness and "kidding," inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts, minor self-involvement such as humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching and flatulence' (Goffman 1959). Thus, a

waitress may be the soul of quiet courtesy when serving a customer, but become loud and aggressive once behind the swing doors of the kitchen. Probably few people would continue to patronize restaurants if they could see all that goes on in the kitchens.

American sociologist, Spencer Cahill, led a research team studying social interaction in the public toilets (or 'bathrooms') of shopping centres, college campuses, bars and restaurants (Cahill et al. 1985). Using Goffman's idea of front and back regions, Cahill found that what Goffman (1959) called 'performance teams' would sometimes retreat into public toilets to conceal embarrassment when a collective performance goes wrong. Cahill recounts a conversation between three young women in the bathroom of a student centre on a college campus:

- A: That was sooo embarrassing! I can't believe that just happened. [*general laughter*]
- B: He must think we are the biggest bunch of losers.
- A: I can't believe I just screamed loud enough for everyone to hear.
- C: It really wasn't all that loud. I'm sure he didn't hear you.
- B: ———, we didn't see him right away, and I did try to tell you but you were so busy talking that I ...
- A: I can't believe that just happened. I feel like such an asshole.
- B: Don't worry 'bout it. At least he knows who you are now. Are you ready?
- A: I'm so embarrassed. What if he's still out there?
- B: You're going to have to see him at some point.

Such defensive strategies buy individuals and teams the time to gather themselves before going out to face the 'audience' again.

Goffman (1959) argued that performance teams routinely use backstage regions for such purposes. They also discuss and rehearse the performance before it actually takes place. At times, backstage discussions will be concerned with morale of particular individuals or of the whole team.



The division between front and backstage of social life is vividly depicted here by two doctors relaxing together after a busy day in the hospital.

Goffman's approach is usually described as 'dramaturgical'; that is, it is an approach based on an analogy with the theatre, with its front and backstage regions. However, we have to bear in mind that this is an analogy. Goffman is *not* suggesting that the social world really *is* a stage, but that, using the dramaturgical analogy, we can study certain aspects of it and learn more about why people behave in the ways they do.

Critical points

Critics of Goffman's approach make some similar points to those levelled at other microsociologies. Perhaps he does not give enough recognition to the role that power plays in shaping social relations, tending to understand interactions from the participants' point of view. The dramaturgical analogy can also be questioned. This may be a good model for studies of organizations and 'total institutions', but may not be so useful outside elsewhere. Similarly, Goffman's theatrical analogy works best in modern Western societies which have developed a division between the public and the private realms of life (front and back stages). But

in other societies, this division is either less pronounced or just does not exist in the same form (see discussion of the !Kung on page 272); Goffman's perspective may not have quite the same purchase on life within these societies.

Contemporary significance

Goffman's work has had a profound influence not only on sociology as a discipline, but on numerous scholars, who have been inspired to become professional sociologists after reading his works. He is widely acknowledged to have made some of the most thoughtful and stimulating contributions to the discipline. Many sociologists today continue to refer to his original works for examples of how to carry out microsociological work and the concepts he developed (stigma, master status, front and back stage, and so on), have become part of the very fabric of sociology in a variety of fields. For example, his work is discussed in many places in this book, including chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability', chapter 21, 'Crime and Deviance' and chapter 8, 'The Life-Course'.

conversation and keeping any movements to a minimum.

In the interval between this and the final scene, the nurse again plays the role of stagehand, helping the patient to become a full person once more. After the doctor has left the room, the two may again engage in conversation, the patient expressing relief that the examination is over. Having dressed and re-groomed herself, the patient is ready to face the concluding scene. The doctor re-enters the room and, in discussing the results of the examination, again treats the patient as a complete and responsible person. Resuming his polite, professional manner, he conveys that his reactions to her are in no way altered by the intimate contact with her body. The epilogue is played out when she leaves the doctor's surgery, taking up again her identity in the outside world. The patient and the doctor have thus collaborated in such a way as to manage the interaction and the impression each participant forms of the other.

Personal space

There are cultural differences in the definition of personal space. In Western culture, people usually maintain a distance of at least three feet when engaged in focused interaction with others; when standing side by side, they may stand more closely together. In the Middle East, people often stand closer to one another than is thought acceptable in the West. Westerners visiting that part of the world are likely to find themselves disconcerted by this unexpected physical proximity.

Edward T. Hall, who has worked extensively on non-verbal communication, distinguishes four zones of personal space. *Intimate distance*, of up to one and a half feet, is reserved for very few social contacts. Only those involved in relationships in which regular bodily touching is permitted, such as lovers or parents and children, operate within this zone of private space.

Personal distance, from one and a half to four feet, is the normal spacing for encounters with friends and close acquaintances. Some intimacy of contact is permitted, but this tends to be strictly limited. *Social distance*, from four to twelve feet, is the zone usually maintained in formal settings such as interviews. The fourth zone is that of *public distance*, beyond twelve feet, preserved by those who are performing to an audience.

In ordinary interaction, the most fraught zones are those of intimate and personal distance. If these zones are invaded, people try to recapture their space. We may stare at the intruder as if to say, 'Move away!' or elbow him aside. When people are forced into proximity closer than they deem desirable, they might create a kind of physical boundary; a reader at a crowded library desk might physically demarcate a private space by stacking books around its edges (Hall 1969, 1973).

Here, gender issues also play a role, in much the same way as in other forms of non-verbal communication. Men have traditionally enjoyed greater freedom than women in the use of space, including movement into the personal space of women who may not necessarily be intimates or even close acquaintances. A man who guides a woman by the arm when they walk together, or who places a hand on her lower back when showing her through a door, may be doing so as a gesture of friendly care or politeness. The reverse phenomenon, however – a woman entering a man's personal space – is often construed as flirtation or a sexual advance. New laws and standards regarding sexual harassment in many Western countries seek to protect people's personal space – both men and women – from unwanted touching or contact by others.

Interaction in time and space

Understanding how activities are distributed in time and space is fundamental to analysing encounters, and also to understanding social life in general. All interaction is situated – it occurs in a particular place and has a specific duration in time. Our actions over the course of a day tend to be ‘zoned’ in time as well as in space. Thus, for example, most people spend a zone – say, from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. – of their daily time working. Their weekly time is also zoned: they are likely to work on weekdays and spend weekends at home, altering the pattern of their activities on the weekend days. As we move through the temporal zones of the day, we are also often moving across space as well: to get to work, we may take a bus from one area of a city to another, or perhaps commute in from the suburbs. When we analyse the contexts of social interaction, therefore, it is often useful to look at people’s movements across time-space.

The concept of **regionalization** will help us understand how social life is zoned in time-space. Take the example of a private house. A modern house is regionalized into rooms, hallways and floors if there is more than one storey. These spaces are not just physically separate areas, but are zoned in time as well. The living rooms and kitchen are used most in the daylight hours, the bedrooms at night. The interaction that occurs in these regions is bound by both spatial and temporal divisions. Some areas of the house form back regions, with ‘performances’ taking place in the others. At times, the whole house can become a back region. Once again, this idea is beautifully captured by Goffman:

Of a Sunday morning, a whole household can use the wall around its domestic establishment to conceal a relaxing slovenliness in dress and civil endeavour, extending to all rooms the informality that is usually restricted to kitchen and

bedrooms. So, too, in American middle-class neighbourhoods, on afternoons the line between children’s playground and home may be defined as backstage by mothers, who pass along it wearing jeans, loafers, and a minimum of make-up. ... And, of course, a region that is thoroughly established as a front region for the regular performance of a particular routine often functions as a back region before and after each performance, for at these times the permanent fixtures may undergo repairs, restoration, and rearrangement, or the performers may hold dress rehearsals. To see this we need only glance into a restaurant, or store, or home, a few minutes before these establishments are opened to us for the day. (1959: 128)

Clock time

In modern societies, the zoning of our activities is strongly influenced by clock time. Without clocks and the precise timing of activities, and thereby their coordination across space, industrialized societies could not exist (Mumford 1973). The measuring of time by clocks is today standardized across the globe, making possible the complex international transport systems and communications we now depend on. World standard time was first introduced in 1884 at a conference of nations held in Washington. The globe was then partitioned into 24 time zones, each one hour apart, and an exact beginning of the universal day was fixed.

Fourteenth-century monasteries were the first organizations to try to schedule the activities of their inmates precisely across the day and week. Today, there is virtually no group or organization that does not do so – the greater the number of people and resources involved, the more precise the scheduling must be. Eviatar Zerubavel (1979, 1982) demonstrated this in his study of the temporal structure of a large modern hospital. A hospital must operate on a 24-hour basis, and coordinating the staff and resources is a highly complex matter. For instance, the nurses work for one time

period in ward A, another time period in ward B, and so on, and are also called on to alternate between day- and night-shift work. Nurses, doctors and other staff, plus the resources they need, must be integrated together both in time and in space.

The ordering of space and time

The Internet is another example of how closely forms of social life are bound up with our control of space and time. The Internet makes it possible for us to interact with people we never see or meet, in any corner of the world. Such technological change 'rearranges' space – we can interact with anyone without moving from our chair. It also alters our experience of time, because communication on the electronic highway is almost immediate. Until about 50 years ago, most communication across space required a duration of time. If you sent a letter to someone abroad, there was a time gap while the letter was carried by ship, train, truck or plane to the person to whom it was written.

People still write letters by hand today, of course, but instantaneous communication has become basic to our social world. Our lives would be almost unimaginable without it. We are so used to being able to switch on the TV and watch the news or make a phone call or send an email to a friend in another part of the world that it is hard for us to imagine what life would be like otherwise.

Everyday life in cultural and historical perspective

Some of the mechanisms of social interaction analysed by Goffman, Garfinkel and others seem to be universal. But much of Goffman's discussion of civil inattention and other kinds of interaction primarily concerns societies in which contact with strangers is commonplace. What about small-scale traditional societies, where there are no strangers and few settings in

which more than a handful of people are together at any one time?

To see some of the contrasts between social interaction in modern and traditional societies, let's take as an example one of the least developed cultures in terms of technology remaining in the world: the !Kung (sometimes known as the Bushmen), who live in the Kalahari Desert area of Botswana and Namibia, in southern Africa (Lee 1968, 1969; the exclamation mark refers to a click sound one makes before pronouncing the name). Although their way of life is changing because of outside influences, their traditional patterns of social life are still evident.

The !Kung live in groups of some 30 or 40 people, in temporary settlements near water-holes. Food is scarce in their environment, and they must walk far and wide to find it. Such roaming takes up most of the average day. Women and children often stay back in the camp, but equally often the whole group spends the day walking. Members of the community will sometimes fan out over an area of up to a 100 square miles in the course of a day, returning to the camp at night to eat and sleep. The men may be alone or in groups of two or three for much of the day. There is one period of the year, however, when the routines of their daily activities change: the winter rainy season, when water is abundant and food much easier to come by. The everyday life of the !Kung during this period is centred on ritual and ceremonial activities, the preparation for and enactment of which is very time-consuming.

The members of most !Kung groups never see anyone they do not know reasonably well. Until contacts with the outside became more common in recent years, they had no word for 'stranger'. While the !Kung, particularly the males, may spend long periods of the day out of contact with others, in the community itself there is little opportunity for privacy. Families sleep in flimsy, open dwellings, with virtually all activities open to public view. No one has studied the !Kung

with Goffman's observations on everyday life in mind, but it is easy to see that some aspects of his work have limited application to !Kung social life. There are few opportunities, for example, to create front and back regions. The closing off of different gatherings and encounters by the walls of rooms, separate buildings and the various neighbourhoods of cities common in modern societies are remote from the activities of the !Kung.

The form of social interaction of the !Kung is very different from the interaction that takes place in the modern city. City life forces us to interact almost constantly with strangers.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Think about your recent holidays and note the reasons why you chose those locations. Did you ever consider the impact your visit would have on:

- the *society* and *people* you were visiting - what *resources* are needed? what kind of *jobs* are required to service the tourist's needs?
- the *natural environment* – in terms of *travel, infrastructure* needed, damage to *ecosystems*.

Do the benefits of global tourism outweigh the damage it causes? What are those benefits?



A famous account of urban social interaction is that of Georg Simmel, whose work is discussed in chapter 6, 'Cities and Urban Life'.

The social construction of reality: the sociological debate

Within sociology, many different theoretical frameworks are used to explain social reality. These theories differ in their explanations of social phenomena, yet they share the assumption that social reality exists independently of people's talking about it or living in it. This assumption has been challenged by a broad body of socio-

logical thought known as **social constructionism**.

Social constructivists believe that what individuals and society perceive and understand as reality is itself a construction, a creation of the social interaction of individuals and groups. Trying to 'explain' social reality is to overlook and to reify (regard as a given truth) the processes through which such reality is constructed. Therefore, social constructivists argue that sociologists need to document and analyse these processes and not simply be concerned with the concept of social reality they give rise to. Social constructionism has been seen as an important influence on the postmodern school of thought in sociology (see chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?').

In their 1966 classic study, *The Social Construction of Reality*, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann examined common-sense knowledge – those things that individuals take for granted as real. They emphasized that these 'obvious' facts of social reality may differ among people from different cultures, and even among different people within the same culture. The task becomes an analysis of the processes by which individuals come to perceive what is 'real' to them as real.

Social constructivists apply the ideas of Berger and Luckmann to the investigation of social phenomena, to illuminate the ways in which members of society come to know and simultaneously create what is real. While social constructivists have examined such diverse topics as medicine and medical treatment, gender relations and emotions, much of their work has focused on social problems, such as the crime 'problem'.

The work of Aaron Cicourel (1968) provides an example of social constructionist research in the area of youth crime. Sometimes, data regarding rates and cases of youth crime are taken as given (that is, as real), and theories are created to explain the patterns observed in the data. For example, at first glance arrest and court data would seem to indicate that young people from

Global Society 7.1 International tourist interactions

Have you ever had a face-to-face conversation with someone from another country? Or connected to an overseas website? Have you ever travelled to another part of the world? If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, you have witnessed the effects of globalization on social interaction.

Globalization – a relatively recent phenomenon – has changed both the frequency and the nature of interactions between people of different nations. The historical sociologist Charles Tilly, in fact, defines globalization in terms of these changes. According to Tilly, 'globalization means an increase in the geographic range of locally consequential social interactions' (Tilly 1995: 1–2). In other words, with globalization, a greater proportion of our interactions come to involve, directly or indirectly, people from other countries.

What are the characteristics of social interactions that take place between individuals of different nations? Important contributions to the study of this problem have been made by those working in the area of the sociology of tourism. Sociologists of tourism note that globalization has greatly expanded the possibilities for international travel, both by encouraging an interest in other countries and by facilitating the movement of tourists across international borders. Between 1982 and 2002, the number of visits to the UK made by overseas residents doubled, and spending on these visits more than tripled. These visitors now pump almost £12 billion a year into the UK economy. Britons are also travelling the world in record numbers (ONS 2004b).

High levels of international tourism, of course, translate into an increase in the number of face-to-face interactions between people of different countries. The sociologist John Urry (1990) argues that the 'tourist gaze' – the expectation on the part of the tourist that he or she will have 'exotic' experiences while travelling abroad – shapes many of these interactions. Urry compares the tourist gaze to Foucault's conception of the medical gaze (see chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability'). Urry argues that the tourist gaze is just as socially organized by professional experts, systematic in its application and as detached as the medical gaze, but this time it is organized in its search for 'exotic' experiences. These are experiences that violate our everyday expectations about how social interaction and interaction with

the physical environment are supposed to proceed.

Britons travelling in the United States, for example, may delight in the fact that the Americans drive on the right-hand side of the road. At the same time, such behaviour is disconcerting to drivers from the UK. Our rules of the road are so ingrained that we experience systematic violations of those rules as strange, weird and exotic. Yet, as tourists, we take pleasure in this strangeness. In a sense, it is what we have paid money to see when we go abroad – along with the Empire State Building or the Eiffel Tower. Imagine how disappointed you would be if you were to travel to a different country only to find that it was almost exactly the same as the city or town in which you grew up.

Yet most tourists do not want their experiences to be too exotic. A popular destination for young, particularly US, travellers in Paris, for example, is a McDonald's restaurant. Some go to see if there is any truth to the line from Quentin Tarantino's movie *Pulp Fiction* that, because the French use the metric system, McDonald's 'quarter pounder with cheese' hamburgers are called 'Royales with cheese' (it is true, by the way). Britons travelling abroad often cannot resist eating and drinking in British- and Irish-style pubs. Sometimes such diversions are the result of curiosity, but often people enjoy the comfort of eating familiar food in a familiar setting. The contradictory demands for the exotic and the familiar are at the heart of the tourist gaze.

The tourist gaze may put strains on face-to-face interactions between tourists and locals. Locals who are part of the tourist industry may appreciate overseas travellers for the economic benefits they bring to the places they visit. Other locals may resent tourists for their demanding attitudes or for the overdevelopment that often occurs in popular tourist destinations. Tourists may interrogate locals about aspects of their everyday lives, such as their food, work and recreational habits; they may do this either to enhance their understanding of other cultures or to judge negatively those who are different from themselves.

As tourism increases with the march of globalization, sociologists will have to watch carefully to see what dominant patterns of interaction emerge between tourists and locals, and to determine, among other things, whether these interactions tend to be friendly or antagonistic.

single-parent families are more likely to commit delinquent acts than those from two-parent homes. Some sociologists have therefore developed explanations for this observed relationship: perhaps children from single-parent homes have less supervision, or perhaps they lack appropriate role models.

By contrast, Cicourel observed the *processes* involved in the arrest and classification of youths suspected of committing crimes; that is, he observed the creation of the 'official' crime data. He discovered that police procedures in the handling of young offenders rely on common-sense understandings of what young offenders are 'really like'.

For example, when youths from lower-class families were arrested, police were more likely to view their offences as results of poor supervision or a lack of proper role models, and would retain the young people in custody. Offenders from upper-class homes, however, were more likely to be released to their parents' care, where police and parents believed the young person could receive proper discipline. Thus, the practices of police serve formally to assign the label of 'young offender' more often to those from lower-class homes than to those from upper-class homes – even when the youths have committed similar offences. This assignment produces the very data, which in turn confirm the relationships held by the common-sense views; for example, that young people from poor families are more likely to engage in crime. Cicourel's study shows that, through interacting with other people in society, we transform our common-sense notions of reality into independent, 'objective' proof of their own validity.

Social constructionism is not without its critics. Sociologists Steve Woolgar and Dorothy Pawluch (1985) argue that social constructivists aim to show the subjective creation of social reality, yet in doing so selectively view certain features as objective and others as constructed. For example, in

analyses examining which young people become labelled as delinquent, social constructivists often argue that the initial behaviours reported for the young people are identical; therefore, any differences between those labelled as criminals and those avoiding such a label must be due to the construction of the label itself. Critics argue that social constructionism inconsistently presents the initial behaviours as objective, while arguing that the labelling process is subjective (*ibid.*).

Other sociologists have criticized social constructionism for its unwillingness to accept broader social forces as powerful influences on observable social outcomes. For example, some critics have argued that while reality may be a constructed perpetuation of common-sense beliefs, these beliefs themselves may be caused by existing social factors such as capitalism or patriarchy.

Ultimately, social constructionism offers a theoretical approach to understanding social reality that radically differs from most other sociological approaches. Rather than assuming that social reality objectively exists, social constructivists work to document and analyse the processes through which social reality is constructed, such that the construction then serves to confirm its own status as social reality.

Social interaction in cyberspace

In modern societies, in complete contrast to the !Kung, we constantly interact with others whom we may never see or meet. Almost all of our everyday transactions, such as buying groceries or making a bank deposit, bring us into contact – but *indirect* contact – with people who may live thousands of miles away.

Now that email, instant messaging, online communities and chat rooms have become facts of life for many people in industrialized countries, what is the nature of these interactions, and what new complexities are emerging from them?

Sceptics argue that indirect communication through email and the Internet contains a wealth of problems not found in face-to-face social interaction. As Katz et al. put it: 'To type is not to be human, to be in cyberspace is not to be real; all is pretence and alienation, a poor substitute for the real thing' (2001: 407). In particular, supporters of this view argue that computer-mediated communication technology is too limited to prevent users hiding behind false identities. This also allows trickery, lechery, manipulation, emotional swindles and so on:

The problem lies in the nature of human communication. We think of it as a product of the mind, but it's done by bodies: faces move, voices intone, bodies sway, hands gesture. ... On the Internet, the mind is present but the body is gone. Recipients get few clues to the personality and mood of the person, can only guess why messages are sent, what they mean, what responses to make. Trust is virtually out the window. It's a risky business. (Locke and Pascoe 2000)

Yet defenders of new technology argue that there are ways in which good or bad reputations can be built and trust can be established, thereby reducing the risks of online communication.

Furthermore, Internet enthusiasts argue that online communication has many inherent advantages that cannot be claimed by more traditional forms of interaction such as the telephone and face-to-face meetings. The human voice, for example, may be far superior in terms of expressing emotion and subtleties of meaning, but it can also convey information about the speaker's age, gender, ethnicity or social position – information that could be used to the speaker's disadvantage. Electronic communication, it is noted, masks all these identifying markers and ensures that attention focuses strictly on the content of the message. This can be a great advantage for women or other traditionally disadvantaged groups whose opinions are sometimes devalued in other settings (Locke and Pascoe 2000). Electronic interaction is

often presented as liberating and empowering, since people can create their own online identities and speak more freely than they would elsewhere.

Internet sceptics have also argued that indirect, online communication encourages isolation and prevents real friendships from forming, but this does not seem to reflect the reality. A survey of Internet users carried out between 1995 and 2000 showed that, far from increasing social isolation, Internet usage is associated with significant and increased online and offline social interactions. The survey found that Internet users tend to communicate with others through other media – especially by the telephone – more than non-users do, meet face-to-face with friends more than non-users and interact with others more in general (Katz et al. 2001).

THINKING CRITICALLY

From your own experience, can the online environment ever match the trust established by relationships in face-to-face relationships? Could the wider use of personal webcams increase the trust we have in Internet communications? What can we learn about online trust from the eBay system and experience described in 'Global Society 7.2'?

Conclusion: the compulsion of proximity?

Despite the rise in indirect communication, however, it seems that humans still value direct contact. People in business, for instance, continue to attend meetings, sometimes flying halfway around the world to do so, when it would seem much cheaper and more efficient to transact business through a conference call or video link. Family members could arrange 'virtual' reunions or holiday gatherings using electronic real-time communications, but we all recognize that they would lack the warmth and intimacy of face-to-face celebrations.

Global Society 7.2 Building trust in cyberspace?

Public debate on Internet security has tended to focus on issues of online banking fraud, the use of false identities and the problems associated with children using chatrooms that may be monitored by predatory paedophiles. Such worries make many people wary and erode trust in the online environment. Sociologists have been interested in the auction website, eBay, which has become a global phenomenon; some 165,000 Americans alone are estimated to be making a living purely from selling via eBay (Epley et al. 2006). Below is a short extract which discusses how eBay has sought to increase levels of trust for buyers and sellers in its services.

The 'eBay' feedback system

Currently the largest, and one of the oldest person-to-person Internet auction houses is eBay. Launched in 1995, eBay soon attracted more than 100 million people around the world who buy and sell products on the eBay websites. Remarkably, eBay offers no warranties or guarantees for any of the goods that are auctioned off – buyers and sellers assume all risks for the transaction, with eBay serving as a listing agency. It would seem to be a market ripe with the possibility of large-scale fraud and deceit, and yet the default rate for trades conducted through eBay is remarkably small. Both eBay and the participants in its market credit an institutionalized reputation system at the site – known as the Feedback Forum – for the very high rate of successful trades.

After every seller's or bidder's name is a number in parenthesis. In the case of a seller, the information is displayed as follows:

Seller name (265)

The number is a summary measure of a person's reputation in the eBay market. Registered users are

allowed to post positive, negative or neutral comments about users with whom they have traded. Each positive comment is given a score of +1, each negative comment is given a score of -1, with neutral comments not affecting one's score in either direction. At certain levels, market participants are also awarded a colour star which marks the number of net positive comments they have received. . . .

One is able to contact the person via email by clicking on the name; clicking on the number following someone's name leads to their full feedback profile. There one finds the full list of comments, with email links and ratings numbers for every evaluator as well (thus, one can explore the reputation of the evaluators just as one can for the evaluated). A typical positive comment might be 'Well packaged, fast delivery. Highly recommended. A1!' . . .

A high feedback rating is an extremely valuable asset. Many participants report that they are more willing to trade with someone with a high rating, or even that they will only trade with individuals with high ratings. In that sense, some traders are able to create a brand identity that increases their volume of sales or even the price at which they are able to sell items. . . . Even a few negative ratings can seriously damage a reputation, and so frequent traders are very careful about nurturing their rating by providing swift execution of honest trades. The potential damage of a negative comment is a subject of great concern among frequent participants. . . . One can choose to make one's entire feedback profile private, but this is a huge disadvantage in a market which relies on these reputations.

Source: Adapted from Kollock (1999)

An explanation for this phenomenon comes from Deirdre Boden and Harvey Molotch (1994), who have studied what they call the **compulsion of proximity**: the need of individuals to meet with one another in situations of co-presence, or face-to-face interaction. People put themselves out to

attend meetings, Boden and Molotch suggest, because situations of co-presence, for reasons documented by Goffman in his studies of interaction, supply much richer information about how other people think and feel, and about their sincerity, than any form of electronic communication. Only by

actually being in the presence of people who make decisions affecting us in important ways do we feel able to learn what is going on and feel confident that we can impress them with our own views and our own sincerity. 'Co-presence', Boden and Molotch (1994) say, 'affects access to the

body part that "never lies", the eyes – the "windows on the soul". Eye contact itself signals a degree of intimacy and trust; co-present interactants continuously monitor the subtle movements of this most subtle body part.'

Summary points

1. Many apparently trivial aspects of our day-to-day behaviour turn out on close examination to be both complex and important aspects of social interaction. An example is the gaze – looking at other people. In most interactions, eye contact is fairly fleeting. To stare at another person could be taken as a sign of hostility – or on some occasions, of love. The study of social interaction is a fundamental area in sociology, illuminating many aspects of social life.
2. Many different expressions are conveyed by the human face. It is widely held that basic aspects of the facial expressions of emotion are innate. Cross-cultural studies demonstrate quite close similarities between members of different cultures both in facial expression and in the interpretation of emotions registered on the human face.
3. The study of ordinary talk and conversation has come to be called 'ethnomethodology', a term first coined by Harold Garfinkel. Ethnomethodology is the analysis of the ways in which we actively – although usually in a taken-for-granted way – make sense of what others mean by what they say and do.
4. We can learn a great deal about the nature of talk by studying response cries (exclamations).
5. Unfocused interaction is the mutual awareness individuals have of one another in large gatherings when not directly in conversation together. Focused interaction, which can be divided up into distinct encounters, or episodes of interaction, is when two or more individuals are directly attending to what the other or others are saying and doing.
6. Social interaction can often be illuminatingly studied by applying the dramaturgical model – studying social interaction as if those involved were actors on a stage, having a set and props. As in the theatre, in the various contexts of social life there tend to be clear distinctions between front regions (the stage itself) and back regions, where the actors prepare themselves for the performance and relax afterwards.
7. All social interaction is situated in time and space. We can analyse how our daily lives are 'zoned' in both time and space combined by looking at how activities occur during definite durations and at the same time involve spatial movement.
8. Some mechanisms of social interaction may be universal, but many are not. The !Kung of southern Africa, for example, live in small mobile bands, where there is little privacy and thus little opportunity to create front and back regions.
9. Modern societies are characterized largely by indirect interpersonal transactions (such as making bank deposits), which lack any co-presence. This leads to what has been called the compulsion of proximity, the tendency to want to meet in person whenever possible, perhaps because this makes it easier to gather information about how others think and feel, and to accomplish impression management.

Further reading

There is no single introductory text covering all of the issues in this chapter, but the main themes can be approached in some of the following.

A good place to start is with the idea of 'everyday life', so Tony Bennett and Diane Watson's edited *Understanding Everyday Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) contains some worthwhile chapters. Brian Roberts's *Micro Social Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) is a well-written introduction to the development of the microsociological tradition.

Following on from the chapter's introduction to social identities, Richard Jenkins's *Social Identity*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2004) is very readable and contains many everyday examples. Issues of identity and social

inequality can then be taken further in Kath Woodward's *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 2004).

For something more specific on the work of Garfinkel and others, you could try David Francis and Stephen Hester's *An Invitation to Ethnomethodology: Language, Society and Interaction* (London: Sage, 2004).

Or, if Goffman's ideas are more to your taste, there is no one better to introduce it than Goffman himself, so see his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 [1969]), which is a brilliant example of what he has to offer sociology. Then, should you want to place Goffman's work into wider context, Phil Manning's *Erving Goffman and Modern Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992) or Greg Smith's *Erving Goffman* (London: Routledge, 2006) are well worth the effort.

Internet links

ComResources Online – Online resources for non-verbal communications:
www.natcom.org/ctronline/nonverb.htm

An introduction to symbolic interactionism based at Grinnell College, USA:
<http://web.grinnell.edu/courses/soc/s00/soc111-01/IntroTheories/Symbolic.html>

Ethno/CA News – online resource for ethnomethodology and conversation analysis:
www2.fmg.uva.nl/emca/

Website with information on the life and work of Erving Goffman:
<http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/goffmanbio.html>



CHAPTER 8

The Life-course

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At the start of J. K. Rowling's first Harry Potter adventure, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, the shrewd wizard Albus Dumbledore leaves Harry, a newly orphaned infant, at the doorstep of his non-magician (or 'Muggle') uncle and aunt's house. Harry has already shown himself to have unique powers, but Dumbledore is concerned that if left in the wizard world, Harry will not mature healthily. 'It would be enough to turn any boy's head', he says. 'Famous before he can walk and talk! Famous for something he won't even remember. Can't you see how much better off he'll be, growing up away from all that until he's ready to take it?' (Rowling 1998).

The Harry Potter novels, each of which follows Harry through a single school year, are based on the principle that there is no adventure greater than that of growing up. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry may be unusual, but it is still a school, which helps young people to develop a set of values for life. We all pass through important life stages, such as the passage from childhood into adolescence and then on to adulthood, and the Harry Potter books also trace these transitions. For example, as the series progresses, Harry feels the onset of sexual urges, to which he responds with an entirely common awkwardness. Sport is an important activity during which children learn about camaraderie and ambition, and Harry plays the wizard sport 'Quidditch'. The function of many classic children's stories is to make the process of growing up understandable, whether they're set in a fairy-tale universe, our own world or – as in the Harry Potter series – both.

For sociologists, **socialization** is the process whereby the helpless human infant gradually becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable person, skilled in the ways of the culture into which he or she was born. Socialization of the young allows for the more general phenomenon of social reproduction – the process whereby societies have structural continuity over time. During the course of socialization, especially in the early years of life, children learn the ways of their elders, thereby perpetuating their values, norms and social practices. All societies have characteristics that endure over long stretches of time, even though their existing members die and new ones are born. Societies have many distinctive social and cultural aspects that have persisted for generations – not least the different languages spoken by their members.

As we will see in this chapter, socialization connects the different generations to one another. The birth of a child alters the lives of those who are responsible for its upbringing

– who themselves therefore undergo new learning experiences. Parenting usually ties the activities of adults to children for the remainder of their lives. Older people still remain parents when they become grandparents, of course, thus forging another set of relationships connecting the different generations with each other. Although the process of cultural learning is much more intense in infancy and early childhood than later, learning and adjustment go on throughout a person's life.

The sections that follow deal with the theme of 'nature versus nurture', a common debate in sociology. We shall first examine the main theoretical interpretations put forward by different writers on how and why children develop as they do, including theories that explain how we develop gender identities. Then we move on to discuss the main groups and social contexts that influence socialization during the course of individuals' lives, from childhood to later life. Finally, we explore some of the most important sociological issues surrounding ageing.

Culture, society and child socialization

Theories of child development

One of the most distinctive features of human beings, compared to other animals, is that humans are *self-aware*. How should we understand the emergence of a sense of self – the awareness that the individual has a distinct identity separate from others? During the first months of his life, the infant possesses little or no understanding of differences between human beings and material objects in his environment, and has no awareness of self. Children do not begin to use concepts like 'I', 'me' and 'you' until the age of 2 or later. Only gradually do they then come to understand that others have distinct identities, consciousness and needs separate from their own.

Classic Studies 8.1 George Herbert Mead on the social self

The research problem

It has often been said that human beings are the only creatures who know that they exist and that they will die. Sociologically, this means that human individuals are *self-aware*. With a moment's reflection, we may all accept that this is so. But just how do humans gain that self-awareness? Is it innate or learned? Surely this is a research problem for psychology though? Why would sociologists be interested in the individual self? The American sociologist and philosopher, George Herbert Mead, investigated how children learn to use the concepts of 'I' and 'me' to describe themselves. But unusually at the time, Mead insisted that a sociological perspective was necessary if we are to understand how the self emerges and develops.

Mead's explanation

Since Mead's ideas formed the main basis of a general tradition of theoretical thinking – **symbolic interactionism** – they have had a very broad impact in sociology. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that interaction between human beings takes place through symbols and the interpretation of meanings (see chapter 1). But in addition, Mead's work provides an account of the main phases of child development, giving particular attention to the emergence of a sense of self.

According to Mead, infants and young children first of all develop as *social* beings by imitating the actions of those around them. Play is one way in which this takes place, and in their play small children often imitate what adults do. A small child will make mud pies, having seen an adult cooking, or dig with a spoon, having observed someone gardening. Children's play evolves from simple imitation to more complicated games in which a child of 4 or 5 years old will act out an adult role. Mead called this 'taking the role of the other' – learning what it is like to be in the shoes of another person. It is only at this stage that children acquire a developed sense of self. Children achieve an understanding of themselves as separate agents



Children's play has a serious side, enabling them to start to develop a social self.

– as a 'me' – by seeing themselves through the eyes of others.

We achieve self-awareness, according to Mead, when we learn to distinguish the 'me' from the 'I'. The 'I' is the unsocialized infant, a bundle of spontaneous wants and desires. The 'me', as Mead used the term, is the **social self**. Individuals develop **self-consciousness**, Mead argued, by coming to see themselves as others see them, which allows for an 'internal conversation' between the individual 'I' and the social 'me'. According to Mead's theory, this conversation is what we call 'thinking'.

A further stage of child development, according to Mead, occurs when the child is about 8 or 9 years old. This is the age at which children tend to take part in organized games, rather than unsystematic play. It is at this period

that they begin to understand the overall **values** and *morality* according to which social life is conducted. To learn organized games, children must understand the rules of play and notions of fairness and equal participation. Children at this stage learn to grasp what Mead termed the **generalized other** – the general values and moral rules of the culture in which they are developing.

Critical points

Mead's theory of the social self has been criticized on several grounds. First, some argue that it effectively eliminates all biological influences on the development of the self, when it is clear from biology and neuroscience that there is a biological basis to the human self. However, this criticism appears not to recognize that Mead's notion of the 'I' represents the 'unsocialized infant'. Second, Mead's theory seems to rely on the 'I' and the 'me' working cooperatively to ensure the smooth functioning of the self. But critics argue that this downplays the internal tensions and conflicts that people experience deeply, and which Freud and Chodorow's theories seem better able to explain (see pages 292–5 for details of Freud and Chodorow's theories). Mead also has little to say about the effects of unbalanced power relationships on the socialization of children. Finally, and again unlike Freud, Mead's

explanation has no room for the unconscious mind as a motive force in human behaviour and consequently lacks the concept of 'repression', which has proved essential to psychoanalytic practice.

Contemporary significance

Mead's work was very important for the development of sociology. His was the first genuinely sociological theory of self formation and development, which insisted that if we are properly to understand ourselves, then we must start with the social process of human interaction. In this way he showed that the self is not an innate part of our biology, nor does it emerge simply with the developing human brain. What Mead demonstrated is that the study of the individual's self cannot be divorced from the study of society – and that requires a sociological perspective.

Although Freud's approach to the human psyche has perhaps overshadowed Mead's during the twentieth century, at least in relation to psychological practice and the treatment of mental disorders, symbolic interactionism continues to produce insightful findings from a perspective rooted in Mead's sociological theories. And in this sense, Mead's ideas still have much to offer new generations of sociological researchers.

The problem of the emergence of self is a much-debated one and is viewed rather differently in contrasting theoretical perspectives. To some extent, this is because the most prominent theories about child development emphasize different aspects of socialization.

Jean Piaget and the stages of cognitive development

The Swiss student of child behaviour, Jean Piaget, worked on many aspects of child development, but his most well-known writings concern cognition – the ways in which children learn to think about them-

selves and their environment. Piaget placed great emphasis on the child's active capability to make sense of the world. Children do not passively soak up information, but instead select and interpret what they see, hear and feel in the world around them. Piaget described several distinct stages of cognitive development during which children learn to think about themselves and their environment. Each stage involves the acquisition of new skills and depends on the successful completion of the preceding one.

Piaget called the first stage, which lasts from birth up to about the age of 2, the **sensorimotor stage**, because infants

learn mainly by touching objects, manipulating them and physically exploring their environment. Until the age of about four months or so, infants cannot differentiate themselves from their environment. For example, a child will not realize that her own movements cause the sides of her crib to rattle. Objects are not differentiated from persons, and the infant is unaware that anything exists outside her range of vision. Infants gradually learn to distinguish people from objects, coming to see that both have an existence independent of their immediate perceptions. The main accomplishment of this stage is that, by its close, children understand their environment to have distinct and stable properties.

The next phase, called the **pre-operational stage**, is the one to which Piaget devoted the bulk of his research. This stage lasts from the ages of 2 to 7. During the course of it, children acquire a mastery of language and become able to use words to represent objects and images in a symbolic fashion. A 4-year-old might use a sweeping hand, for example, to represent the concept 'aeroplane'. Piaget termed the stage 'pre-operational' because children are not yet able to use their developing mental capabilities systematically. Children in this stage are **egocentric**. As Piaget used it, this concept does not refer to selfishness, but to the tendency of the child to interpret the world exclusively in terms of his own position. A child during this period does not understand, for instance, that others see objects from a different perspective from his own. Holding a book upright, the child may ask about a picture in it, not realizing that the other person sitting opposite can only see the back of the book.

Children at the pre-operational stage are not able to hold connected conversations with another. In egocentric speech, what each child says is more or less unrelated to what the other speaker said. Children talk together, but not to one another in the same sense as adults. During this phase of development, children have no general understand-

ing of categories of thought that adults tend to take for granted: concepts such as causality, speed, weight or number. Even if the child sees water poured from a tall, thin container into a shorter, wider one, she will not understand that the volume of water remains the same – and concludes rather that there is less water because the water level is lower.

A third period, the **concrete operational stage**, lasts from the ages of 7 to 11. During this phase, children master abstract, logical notions. They are able to handle ideas such as causality without much difficulty. A child at this stage of development will recognize the false reasoning involved in the idea that the wide container holds less water than the thin, narrow one, even though the water levels are different. She becomes capable of carrying out the mathematical operations of multiplying, dividing and subtracting. Children by this stage are much less egocentric. In the pre-operational stage, if a girl is asked, 'How many sisters do you have?' she may correctly answer 'one'. But if asked, 'How many sisters does your sister have?' she will probably answer 'none', because she cannot see herself from the point of view of her sister. The concrete operational child is able to answer such a question with ease.

The years from 11 to 15 cover what Piaget called the **formal operational stage**. During adolescence, the developing child becomes able to grasp highly abstract and hypothetical ideas. When faced with a problem, children at this stage are able to review all the possible ways of solving it and go through them theoretically in order to reach a solution. The young person at the formal operational stage is able to understand why some questions are trick ones. To the question, 'What creatures are both poodles and dogs?' the individual might not be able to give the correct reply but will understand why the answer 'poodles' is right and appreciate the humour in it.

According to Piaget, the first three stages of development are universal; but not all adults reach the third, formal operational stage. The development of formal

operational thought depends in part on processes of schooling. Adults of limited educational attainment tend to continue to think in more concrete terms and retain large traces of egocentrism.

The Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1986 [1934]) provided a useful critique of Piaget's influential ideas. He argued that the processes of learning which Piaget describes are dependent on social structures and interactions. Vygotsky saw that the opportunities for learning available to children from various social groups differed considerably, and this strongly influenced children's ability to learn from their engagements with the world outside their self. In short, learning and cognitive development are not immune from the social structures within which they are embedded. Just as these structures constrain some groups and enable others to become wealthy, so they also constrain and enable their cognitive development.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Reflecting on the processes of socialization, how do these differ from common-sense ideas of 'brainwashing' or 'indoctrination'? What impact might a *lack* of early socialization have on the formation of the human infant's self-awareness? Explain your answer with reference to the theories above.

Agencies of socialization

Sociologists often speak of socialization as occurring in two broad phases, involving a number of different agencies of socialization. **Agencies of socialization** are groups or social contexts in which significant processes of socialization occur. Primary socialization occurs in infancy and childhood and is the most intense period of cultural learning. It is the time when children learn language and basic behavioural patterns that form the foundation for later learning. The family is the main agent of socialization during this phase. Secondary socialization takes place later in childhood

and into maturity. In this phase, other agents of socialization take over some of the responsibility from the family. Schools, peer groups, organizations, the media and, eventually, the workplace become socializing forces for individuals. Social interactions in these contexts help people learn the values, norms and beliefs that make up the patterns of their culture.

The family

Since family systems vary widely, the range of family contacts that the infant experiences is by no means standard across cultures. The mother everywhere is normally the most important individual in the child's early life, but the nature of the relationships established between mothers and their children is influenced by the form and regularity of their contact. This is, in turn, conditioned by the character of family institutions and their relation to other groups in society.

In modern societies, most early socialization occurs within a small-scale family context and children spend their early years within a domestic unit containing mother, father and perhaps one or two other children. In many other cultures, by contrast, aunts, uncles and grandparents are often part of a single household and serve as care-takers even for very young infants. Yet even within modern societies there are many variations in the nature of family contexts. Some children are brought up in single-parent households, some are cared for by two mothering and fathering agents (divorced parents and step-parents). A high proportion of women with families are now employed outside the home and return to their paid work relatively soon after the births of their children. In spite of these variations, the family normally remains the major agency of socialization from infancy to adolescence and beyond –



We look at issues concerning families in more detail in chapter 9, 'Families and Intimate Relationships'.

in a sequence of development connecting the generations.

Families have varying 'locations' within the overall institutions of a society. In most traditional societies, the family into which a person was born largely determined the individual's social position for the rest of his or her life. In modern societies, social position is not inherited at birth in this way, yet the region and social class of the family into which an individual is born affects patterns of socialization quite distinctly. Children pick up ways of behaviour characteristic of their parents or others in their neighbourhood or community.

We look at issues of class in more depth in chapter 11, 'Stratification and Social Class'.

Varying patterns of childrearing and discipline, together with contrasting values and expectations, are found in different sectors of large-scale societies. It is easy to understand the influence of different types of family background if we think of what life is like, say, for a child growing up in a poor ethnic-minority family living in a run-down area of a city compared to one born into an affluent white family in the suburbs (Kohn 1977).

Of course, few if any children simply take over unquestioningly the outlook of their parents. This is especially true in the modern world, in which change is so pervasive. Moreover, the very existence of a range of socializing agencies in modern societies leads to many divergences between the outlooks of children, adolescents and the parental generation.

Schools

Another important socializing agency is the school. Schooling is a formal process: students pursue a definite curriculum of subjects. Yet schools are agencies of socialization in more subtle respects. Children are expected to be quiet in class, be punctual at lessons and observe rules of school discipline. They are required to accept and respond to the authority of the teaching

staff. Reactions of teachers also affect the expectations children have of themselves. These expectations in turn become linked to their job experience when they leave school. Peer groups are often formed at school, and the system of keeping children in classes according to age reinforces their impact.

We discuss socialization within education systems in chapter 19, 'Education'.

Peer relationships

Another socializing agency is the **peer group**. Peer groups consist of children of a similar age. In some cultures, particularly small traditional societies, peer groups are formalized as age-grades (normally confined to males). There are often specific ceremonies or rites that mark the transition of men from one age-grade to another. Those within a particular age-grade generally maintain close and friendly connections throughout their lives. A typical set of age-grades consists of childhood, junior warriorhood, senior warriorhood, junior elderhood and senior elderhood. Men move through these grades not as individuals, but as whole groups.

The family's importance in socialization is obvious, since the experience of the infant and young child is shaped more or less exclusively within it. It is less apparent, especially to those of us living in Western societies, how significant peer groups are. Yet even without formal age-grades, children over the age of 4 or 5 usually spend a great deal of time in the company of friends the same age. With both partners now working, peer relationships amongst young children who play together in day-care centres are likely to become even more important today than they were before (Corsaro 1997; Harris 1998).

Peer relations are likely to have a significant impact beyond childhood and adolescence. Informal groups of people of similar ages, at work and in other situations, are usually of enduring importance in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviour.

8.1 Socialization in the school playground

In her book *Gender Play* (1993), the sociologist Barrie Thorne looked at socialization by observing how children interact in the playground. As others had before her, she wanted to understand how children come to know what it means to be male and female. Rather than seeing children as passively learning the meaning of gender from their parents and teachers, she looked at the way in which children actively create and recreate the *meaning* of gender in their interactions with each other. The social activities that schoolchildren do together can be as important as other agents for their socialization.

Thorne spent two years observing fourth and fifth graders at two schools in Michigan and California, sitting in the classroom with them and observing their activities outside the classroom. She watched games such as 'chase and kiss' – known by names such as 'kiss-catch' in the UK – so as to learn how children construct and experience gender meanings in the classroom and on the playground. Thorne found that peer groups have a great influence on gender socialization, particularly as children talk about their changing bodies, a subject of great fascination. The social context created by these children determined whether a child's bodily change was experienced with embarrassment or worn with pride. As Thorne (1993) observed:



In school playgrounds, girls tend to play only with other girls and boys with other boys. Why should this be so?

.....

If the most popular women started menstruating or wearing bras (even if they didn't need to), then other girls wanted these changes too. But if the popular didn't wear bras and hadn't ... gotten their periods, then these developments were viewed as less desirable.

Thorne's research is a powerful reminder that children are social actors who help create their social world and influence their own socialization. Still, the impact of societal and cultural influences is tremendous, since the activities that children pursue and the values they hold are determined by influences such as their families and the media.

The mass media

Newspapers, periodicals and journals flourished in the West from the early 1800s onward, but they were confined to a fairly small readership. It was not until a century later that such printed materials became part of people's daily experience. The spread of **mass media** involving printed documents was soon accompanied by electronic communication – radio, television, records and videos, bringing with them concerns

about undue influence on opinions, attitudes and behaviour. The media plays a large role in shaping our understanding of the world and therefore in socialization.

Much early research on the influence of the media, especially television, on childhood development has tended to see children as passive and indiscriminating in their reactions to what they see. But Hodge and Tripp (1986) emphasized that children's responses to TV involve interpreting, or 'reading', what

they see, not just registering the content of programmes. Since then, researchers have arrived at a more balanced understanding of the influence of the mass media in socialization processes and now see television, for example, as one important agency of socialization alongside several others.

THINKING CRITICALLY

How do you think the balance of socializing agencies is changing in an age of rapid globalization? Which socialization agencies are becoming more influential and which are becoming less significant? What problems might this produce for the socialization of society's new members?

Gender socialization

Agencies of socialization play an important role in how children learn **gender roles**. Let us now turn to the study of **gender socialization**, the learning of gender roles through social factors such as the family and the media.

Reactions of parents and adults

Many studies have been carried out on the degree to which gender differences are the result of social influences. Studies of mother–infant interaction show differences in the treatment of boys and girls even when parents believe their reactions to both are the same. Adults asked to assess the personality of a baby give different answers according to whether or not they believe the child to be a girl or a boy. In one experiment, five young mothers were observed in interaction with a six-month-old called Beth. They tended to smile at her often and offer her dolls to play with. She was seen as 'sweet', having a 'soft cry'. The reaction of a second group of mothers to a child the same age, named Adam, was noticeably different. The baby was likely to be offered a train or other 'male toys' to play with. Beth and Adam were actually the same child, dressed in different clothes (Will et al. 1976).

Gender learning

Gender learning by infants is almost certainly unconscious. Before children can accurately label themselves as either a boy or a girl, they receive a range of pre-verbal cues. For instance, male and female adults usually handle infants differently. The cosmetics used by women contain scents different from those the baby might learn to associate with males. Systematic differences in dress, hairstyle and so on provide visual cues for the infant in the learning process. By the age of 2, children have a partial understanding of what gender is. They know whether they are a boy or a girl, and they can usually categorize others accurately. Not until the age of 5 or 6, however, does a child know that a person's gender does not change, that everyone has gender and that sex differences between girls and boys are anatomically based.

The toys, picture books and television programmes with which young children come into contact all tend to emphasize differences between male and female attributes. Toy stores and mail-order catalogues usually categorize their products by gender. Even some toys that seem neutral in terms of gender are not so in practice. For example, toy kittens and rabbits are recommended for girls, while lions and tigers are seen as more appropriate for boys.

Vanda Lucia Zammuner (1986) studied the toy preferences of children aged between 7 and 10 in Italy and Holland. Children's attitudes towards a variety of toys were analysed; stereotypically masculine and feminine toys, as well as toys presumed not to be gender-typed, were included. Both the children and their parents were asked to assess which toys were suitable for boys and which for girls. There was close agreement between the adults and the children. On average, the Italian children chose gender-differentiated toys to play with more often than the Dutch children – a finding that conformed to expectations, since Italian culture tends to hold a more traditional view of gender divisions than does Dutch society. As in other studies, girls

8.2 Children's stories, TV and film

More than 30 years ago, Lenore Weitzman and her colleagues (1972) carried out an analysis of gender roles in some of the most widely used pre-school children's books and found several clear differences in gender roles. Males played a much larger part in the stories and pictures than females did, outnumbering females by a ratio of 11 to 1. When animals with gender identities were included, the ratio was 95 to 1. The activities of males and females also differed. The males engaged in adventurous pursuits and outdoor activities that demanded independence and strength. Where girls did appear, they were portrayed as passive and were confined mostly to indoor activities. Girls cooked and cleaned for the males or awaited their return. Much the same was true of the adult men and women represented in the storybooks. Women who were not wives and mothers were imaginary creatures like witches or fairy godmothers. There was not a single woman in all the books analysed who held an occupation outside the home. By contrast, the men were depicted as fighters, policemen, judges, kings and so forth.

More recent research suggests that things have changed somewhat but that the large bulk of children's literature nevertheless remains much the same (Davies 1991). Fairy-tales, for example, embody traditional attitudes towards gender and towards the sorts of aims and ambitions that girls and boys are expected to have. 'Some day my prince will come': in versions of fairy-tales from several centuries ago, this usually implied that a girl from a poor family might dream of wealth and fortune. Today, its meaning has become more closely tied to the ideals of romantic love. Some feminists have tried to rewrite some of the most celebrated

fairy-tales, reversing their usual emphases: 'I really didn't notice that he had a funny nose. And he certainly looked better all dressed up in fancy clothes. He's not nearly as attractive as he seemed the other night. So I think I'll just pretend that this glass slipper feels too tight' (Viorst 1986). Like this version of *Cinderella*, however, these rewrites are found mainly in books directed at adult audiences, and have hardly affected the tales told in innumerable children's books.

Analyses of television programmes and films designed for children show that most still conform to the findings about children's books. Studies of the most frequently watched cartoons show that most of the leading figures are male and that males dominate the active pursuits. Similar images are found in the commercials that appear throughout the programmes.

However, there are some exceptions to this repetitively gendered pattern. The 2001 film *Shrek* (and its sequels) told a fairly conventional fairy-tale story of princes, princesses and ogres, whilst also subverting conventional fairy-tale gender and character roles. The film's marketing tagline was: 'The greatest fairytale never told' – 'The Prince isn't charming. The Princess isn't sleeping. The sidekick isn't helping. The ogre is the hero. Fairy-tales will never be the same again.' *Shrek* (the ugly ogre) is actually the hero of the film, while Fiona (the beautiful princess) is an independent woman with martial arts skills who turns into an ogress at night. The 'happy ending' arrives when *Shrek* kisses Fiona, she turns permanently into an ogress and they get married, thus reversing the traditional story of the ogre turning into a handsome young prince, reflecting Western ideals of beauty and bodily perfection. Such representations remain a small minority of total output at present, however.

from both societies chose gender-neutral or boys' toys to play with far more than boys chose girls' toys. Clearly, gender socialization is very powerful, and challenges to it can be upsetting. Once a gender is 'assigned', society expects individuals to act like 'females' and 'males'. It is in the practices of everyday life that these expectations are fulfilled and reproduced (Bourdieu 1990; Lorber 1994).

The sociological debate

Sigmund Freud's theory

Perhaps the most influential – and controversial – theory of the emergence of gender identity is that of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). According to Freud, the learning of gender differences in infants and

THINKING CRITICALLY

Why is gender socialization so pervasive? Next time you go shopping, watch a film, watch television soap operas or talk to older and younger relatives, note how often conventional gender assumptions are evident. Also, note down anything that might challenge conventional assumptions. Are such challenges likely to become more widespread in future?

young children is centred on the possession or absence of the penis. 'I have a penis' is equivalent to 'I am a boy', while 'I am a girl' is equivalent to 'I lack a penis'. Freud is careful to say that it is not just the anatomical distinctions that matter here; the possession or absence of the penis are symbolic of masculinity and femininity.

At around the age of 4 or 5, the theory goes, a boy feels threatened by the discipline and autonomy his father demands of him, fantasizing that the father wishes to remove his penis. Partly consciously, but mostly on an unconscious level, the boy recognizes the father as a rival for the affections of his mother. In repressing erotic feelings towards the mother and accepting the father as a superior being, the boy identifies with the father and becomes aware of his male identity. The boy gives up his love for his mother out of an unconscious fear of castration by his father. Girls, on the other hand, supposedly suffer from 'penis envy' because they do not possess the visible organ that distinguishes boys. The mother becomes devalued in the little girl's eyes, because she is also seen to lack a penis and to be unable to provide one. When the girl identifies with the mother, she takes over the submissive attitude involved in the recognition of being 'second best'.

Once this phase is over, the child has learned to repress his erotic feelings. The period from about the age of 5 to puberty, according to Freud, is one of latency – sexual activities tend to be suspended until the

biological changes involved in puberty reactivate erotic desires in a direct way. The latency period, covering the early and middle years of school, is the time at which same-gender peer groups are most important in the child's life.

Major objections have been raised to Freud's views, particularly by feminists, but also by many other authors (Mitchell 1975; Coward 1984). First, Freud seems to identify gender identity too closely with genital awareness; other more subtle factors are surely involved. Second, the theory seems to depend on the notion that the penis is superior to the vagina, which is thought of as just a lack of the male organ. Yet why should the female genitals not be considered superior to those of the male? Third, Freud treats the father as the primary disciplining agent, whereas in many cultures the mother plays the more significant part in the imposition of discipline. Fourth, Freud argues that gender learning is concentrated at the age of 4 or 5. Most later authors have emphasized the importance of earlier learning, beginning in infancy.

Carol Gilligan's theory

Carol Gilligan (1982) has further developed Chodorow's analysis (see 'Classic Studies 8.2'). Her work concentrates on the images that adult women and men have of themselves and their attainments. Women, she agrees with Chodorow, define themselves in terms of personal relationships and judge their achievements by reference to the ability to care for others. Women's place in the lives of men is traditionally that of caretaker and helpmate. But the qualities developed in these tasks are frequently devalued by men, who see their own emphasis on individual achievement as the only form of 'success'. Concern with relationships on the part of women appears to them as a weakness rather than as the strength that in fact it is.

Gilligan carried out intensive interviews with about 200 American women and men of varying ages and social backgrounds. She

Classic Studies 8.2 Nancy Chodorow on attachment and separation

The research problem

You may think or have been told that men find it difficult to express their emotions and, instead, tend to 'bottle it up' or 'keep a stiff upper lip'. Conversely, women are apparently more likely to express how they are feeling. But why should this be so? Are women really just naturally better than men at forming close emotional relationships? Such common-sense assumptions formed the basis of Nancy Chodorow's (1978) work on gender identity. Like many others, Chodorow made use of Freud's approach in studying gender development, but modified it in major respects to account for important gender differences.

Chodorow's explanation

Chodorow (1978, 1988) argues that learning to feel male or female derives from the infant's attachment to his parents from an early age. She places much more emphasis than Freud does on the importance of the mother rather than the father. Children tend to become emotionally involved with the mother, since she is easily the most dominant influence in their early lives. This attachment has at some point to be broken in order for the child to achieve a separate sense of self – the child is required to become less closely dependent.

Chodorow argues that the breaking process occurs in a different way for boys and girls. Girls remain closer to the mother – able, for example, to go on hugging and kissing her and imitating what she does. Because there is no sharp break from the mother, the girl, and later the adult woman, develops a sense of self that is more continuous with other people. Her identity is more likely to be merged with or dependent on another's: first her mother, later a man. In Chodorow's view, this tends to produce characteristics of sensitivity and emotional compassion in women.

Boys gain a sense of self via a more radical rejection of their original closeness to the mother, forging their understanding of masculinity from what is not feminine. They learn not to be 'sissies' or 'mummy's boys'. As a result, boys are relatively unskilled in relating

closely to others; they develop more analytical ways of looking at the world. They take a more active view of their lives, emphasizing achievement, but they have repressed their ability to understand their own feelings and those of others.

To some extent, Chodorow reverses Freud's emphasis. Masculinity, rather than femininity, is defined by a loss, the forfeiting of continued close attachment to the mother. Male identity is formed through separation; thus, men later in life unconsciously feel that their identity is endangered if they become involved in close emotional relationships with others. Women, on the other hand, feel that the absence of a close relation to another person threatens their self-esteem. These patterns are passed on from generation to generation, because of the primary role women play in the early socialization of children. Women express and define themselves mainly in terms of relationships. Men have repressed these needs and adopt a more manipulative stance towards the world.

Critical points

Chodorow's work has met with various criticisms. Janet Sayers (1986), for example, has suggested that Chodorow does not explain the struggle of women, particularly in current times, to become autonomous, independent beings. Women (and men), she points out, are more contradictory in their psychological make-up than Chodorow's theory suggests. Femininity may conceal feelings of aggressiveness or assertiveness, which are revealed only obliquely or in certain contexts (Brennan 1988). Chodorow has also been criticized for her narrow conception of the family, one based on a white, middle-class model. What happens, for example, in one-parent households or, as in many Chicano communities, families where children are cared for by more than one adult (Segura and Pierce 1993)?

Contemporary significance

These legitimate criticisms do not undermine Chodorow's central ideas, which remain

important in the study of gender socialization. They teach us a good deal about the nature of femininity and masculinity, and they help us to understand the origins of what has been called

'male inexpressiveness' - the difficulty men have in revealing their feelings to others (Bourdieu 2001).

asked all the interviewees a range of questions concerning their moral outlook and conceptions of self. Consistent differences emerged between the views of the women and the men. For instance, the interviewees were asked: 'What does it mean to say something is morally right or wrong?' Whereas the men tended to respond to this question by mentioning abstract ideals of duty, justice and individual freedom, the women persistently raised the theme of helping others. Thus a female college student answered the question in the following way: 'It [morality] has to do with responsibilities and obligations and values, mainly values. ... In my life situation I relate morality with interpersonal relationships that have to do with respect for the other person and myself.' The interviewer then asked: 'Why respect other people?' and received the answer: 'Because they have a consciousness or feelings that can be hurt, an awareness that can be hurt' (Gilligan 1982).

The women were more tentative in their moral judgements than the men, seeing possible contradictions between following a strict moral code and avoiding harming others. Gilligan suggests that this outlook reflects the traditional situation of women, anchored in caring relationships, more than it does the 'outward-looking' attitudes of men. Women have in the past deferred to the judgements of men, while being aware that they have qualities that most men lack. Their views of themselves are based on successfully fulfilling the needs of others, rather than on pride in individual achievement (Gilligan 1982).

The life-course

The various transitions through which individuals pass during their lives seem at first to be biologically fixed. This common-sense view of the human **life-cycle** is widely accepted in society and strongly suggests that there exists a universal and uniform set of stages through which all people pass. For example, everyone who lives to old age has been an infant, a child, a youth and an adult, and everyone dies eventually. However, historically and sociologically, this is not correct. These apparently natural biological stages are part of the human **life-course**, which is social as well as biological (Vincent 2003). The concept of the life-course rather than life-cycle reflects the acknowledgement by sociologists that there is considerable variation in different societies and over time and therefore variation also across the life-course. Stages of the life-course are influenced by cultural differences and also by the material circumstances of people's lives in given types of society.

For example, in modern Western societies, death is usually thought of in relation to elderly people, because most people live to be over 70. In the traditional societies of the past, however, more people died at a younger age than survived to old age, and death therefore carried a different meaning and set of expectations.

Other social factors, such as social class, gender and ethnicity, also influence the way that the life-course is experienced. For example, in nineteenth-century Britain and elsewhere, children of the upper classes routinely attended boarding schools and continued their education over an extended period. However, for children

from working-class families, the expectation was of labour not education, and it was not unusual for 13-year-old boys to work in coal-mining and other industries, while many girls of the same age went into domestic service. Clearly, the notion of a set of *universal* and age-related stages making up the life-course is not borne out by the evidence.

The individual life-course is not only structured by the major social divisions of social class, gender and ethnicity, but is also historically situated. One way of thinking about this aspect is to consider the concepts of birth cohorts and generations. **Cohorts** are simply groups of people with something in common and birth cohorts are therefore groups of people who are born in the same year. Why should this be important? Sociologists argue that such groups tend to be influenced by the same major events and, though they may well respond differently to these, they nonetheless share a common experience. In large measure, their life-course experiences have common cultural and political reference points, such as specific governments, conflicts, musical trends and so on. Recent examples would be the terror attacks in New York, Madrid, London and elsewhere, as well as the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. Although people do have divergent different views about these events, they still share a common currency of experiences which gives shape to the life-course.

Finally, the Hungarian-born sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947), made a strong claim regarding the influence of particular **generations** on life-course experience. Generations can be thought of as groups of people who are born in either the same year or series of years. Mannheim (1972 [1928]:105) said: 'Individuals who belong to the same generation . . . are endowed . . . with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process.' Mannheim's claim is that generational location can be as influential in shaping people's attitudes and beliefs as their social-class position. Generations tend to experience

the world, and their place in it, rather differently. Hence we can speak of a 'generation gap', a 'lost generation [of youth]' or 'generation X' to describe the historical location of different generations. The assumption behind all such descriptions is that the generation of people in question is very different from that which came before.

For example, sociologists and historians have identified the different attitudes and experiences of the 'baby-boom' generation (Gillon 2004) and the 'Beat generation' (Charters 2001), to name but two. The baby-boomers are said to be those born after the Second World War, roughly between 1946 and 1964, when many countries experienced large increases in their birth rates, arguably in large measure as a result of post-war economic growth and prosperity. Baby-boomers had many new experiences; television in the home which consolidated a specific generational experience and identity, a new youth culture, rising income levels and more liberal attitudes to sex and morality. The experiences of baby-boomers were significantly different from those of their parents, and, with the creation of 'youth' as a stage of life, so too was their experience of the life-course. Indeed, Mannheim's argument suggests that this generation actually changed society itself. This dual aspect of giving shape to the life-course and for producing social change is one reason why Mannheim sees generations as akin to social classes in their potential impact on individual identities and social life.

Childhood

To people living in modern societies, **childhood** is a clear and distinct stage of life. Children are distinct from babies or toddlers; childhood intervenes between infancy and the teen years. Yet the concept of childhood, like so many other aspects of social life today, has only come into being over the past two or three centuries.

Until recently, sociologists tended to discuss children and childhood in the



The hippy youth culture of the 1960s and '70s was an important generational influence on social identities in the USA and other developed societies.

context of primary socialization within the family (see chapter 9). This often gave the impression that childhood is merely a transitory stage leading towards the more socio-logically significant period of adulthood when *individuals* become involved in work, reproduction and building relationships. However, this conception is based on the notion of a stable *adulthood*, which is increasingly being challenged as permanent 'jobs for life' diminish along with permanent, lifelong relationships in the more fluid or 'liquid modernity' that characterizes the contemporary world (Lee 2001; Bauman 2000).

The idea of childhood as mere transition also ignores the *social structural* position of children within different societies. That is, children should be conceptualized as a distinct social group, in the same way as, for example, social classes and ethnic groups

are. As a distinct social group, children tend to experience life through their own culture, with its unique symbols and rituals, and they also have a similar status to some other minority groups, which has often led to them being exploited as a cheap source of labour (James et al. 1998). Childhood has also been shown to be socially constructed; the experience of childhood and its meaning for society are diverse, both in different historical periods and across geographical regions in the same time period (Jenks 2005).

In many earlier societies, young people moved directly from a lengthy infancy into working roles within the community. The French historian Philippe Ariès (1965) argued that 'childhood', conceived of as a separate phase of development, did not exist in medieval times. In the paintings of medieval Europe, children are portrayed as little adults, with mature faces and the same

style of dress as their elders. Children took part in the same work and play activities as adults, rather than in the childhood games we now take for granted.

Into the early twentieth century, in most Western countries, children were put to work at what now seems a very early age. There are countries in the world today, in which young children are engaged in full-time work, sometimes in physically demanding circumstances (such as coal-mines and agriculture). The idea that children have distinctive rights and that the use of child labour is 'obviously' morally repugnant are really quite recent developments and are not universally accepted. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) came into force in 1990, setting out the basic rights of all children across the world, which all UN member states have ratified (except the USA and Somalia). The UNCRC defines a child as anyone under the age of 18, unless nation-states already have an earlier definition.

The attempt to universalize the rights of children and definitions of childhood in very different social and economic contexts is a bold one that raises some important issues. Is the UN definition culturally sensitive to different societies, or does it impose Western ideas of children and childhood onto the rest of the world? Can the governments of the developing world really put in place the same safeguards for protecting children's rights that already largely exist in the developed societies? And if they do, will it restrict economic development and effectively restrict the income-generating capacity of the poorest families? For example, in many developing countries, 'street children' earn money for poor families by selling goods, and if states penalize such practices as 'deviant', then how will such families survive? These are very difficult questions which are currently being worked out in policy and practice across the world.

Because of the long period of childhood that we recognize today, societies are now in some respects more child-centred than traditional ones. But a child-centred society, it must be emphasized, is not one in which all children experience love and care from parents or other adults. The physical and sexual abuse of children is a commonplace feature of family life in present-day society, although the full extent of such abuse has only recently come to light. Child abuse has clear connections with what seems to us today like the frequent mistreatment of children in pre-modern Europe.

It seems possible that as a result of changes currently occurring in modern societies, the separate character of childhood is diminishing once more, bringing adult-child relations towards crisis point (Prout 2004). The uncertainties associated with globalization processes and the kind of rapid social changes we explored in chapter 4 are leading to new social constructions of childhood. Prout (2004: 7) suggests: 'These new representations construct children as more active, knowledgeable and socially participative than older discourses allowed. They are more difficult to manage, less biddable and hence are more troublesome and troubling.' It seems that relationships between adults and children are in a period of flux and major disturbance.

Other observers have suggested that children now grow up so fast that the previously solid boundary between adults and children is rapidly diminishing, leading to the 'disappearance' of childhood in the developed societies (Postman 1995; Buckingham 2000). They point out that even small children may watch the same television programmes as adults, thereby becoming much more familiar early on with the adult world than did preceding generations. Children are becoming consumers at an earlier age and are consuming adult products such as TV programmes, mobile phones and advertising. All of this may mean that the protected period of childhood which characterized the developed countries for most



The issue of child labour is discussed in chapter 13, 'Global Inequality'.

of the twentieth century, may be being eroded today.

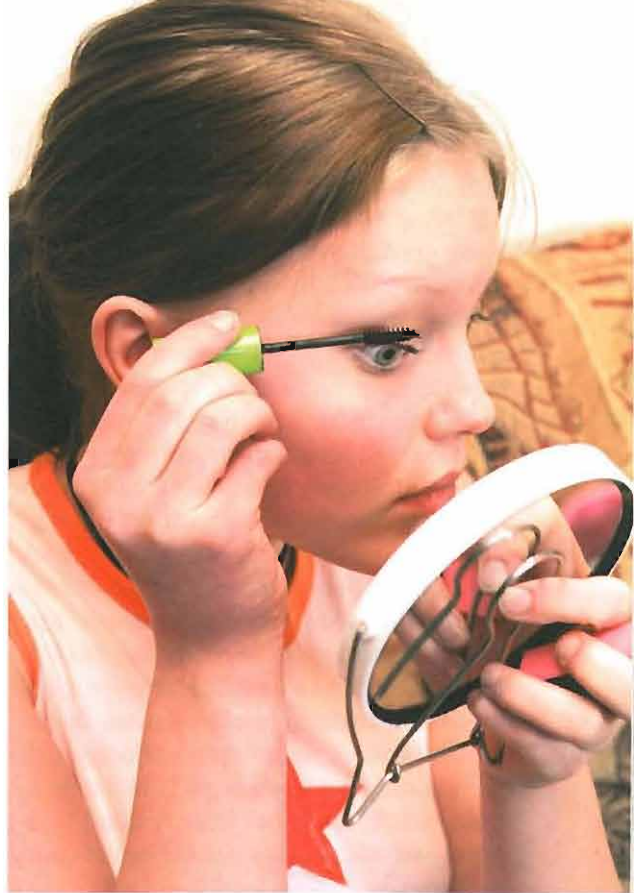
The teenager and youth culture

The idea of the 'teenager', so familiar to us today, also did not exist until recently. The biological changes involved in puberty (the point at which a person becomes capable of adult sexual activity and reproduction) are universal. Yet in many cultures these do not produce the degree of turmoil and uncertainty often found among young people in modern societies. In cultures that foster age-grades, for example, with distinct ceremonies that signal a person's transition to adulthood, the process of psychosexual development generally seems easier to negotiate. Adolescents in such societies have less to 'unlearn', since the pace of change is slower. There is a time when children in Western societies are required to be children no longer: to put away their toys and break with childish pursuits. In traditional cultures, where children are already working alongside adults, this process of unlearning is normally much less jarring.

In Western societies, teenagers are betwixt and between: they often try to follow adult ways, but they are treated in law as children. They may wish to go to work, but they are constrained to stay in school. Teenagers in the West live in between childhood and adulthood, growing up in a society subject to continuous change.

Linked to the idea of the teenager is that of **youth culture**, a general way of life associated with young people, especially in the developed countries. In many other societies, past and present, the concept of youth culture in this sense does not exist and children move towards adulthood much earlier without the intermediate stage of 'youth'.

Sociologists first reported on youth culture in the 1950s and '60s, when older teenagers moving into employment began to benefit from post-war affluence, using their earnings to buy fashionable clothes, pop records and other products in the



In modern Western societies young teenagers hover between childhood and adulthood.

emerging consumer markets (Savage 2007). A 'culture of youth' began to coalesce, which looked different from the mainstream, and which constructed new meaningful worlds out of which sprang the spectacular youth subcultures of teddy boys, mods, rockers and skinheads and, later, hippies, punks, rastas, goths and many more. With hindsight, it seems that sociologists gave disproportionate attention to the small but highly visible subcultures – which tended to be male-dominated – and not enough time to understanding the majority of young people and the ways in which they make sense of their own lives. For instance, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (1975) identified a widespread and more concealed 'culture of the bedroom' amongst girls, which enabled groups of friends to participate in the culture of youth, but which had been largely ignored in the rush to analyse

'deviant' (male) subcultures in the public sphere.

Steven Miles (2000) suggests that the concepts of youth culture and youth subcultures have misled us into seeing all young people as essentially similar, involved in counter-cultural and deviant activity or experiencing unique social disadvantage. Indeed, historian Geoffrey Pearson (1983) did find deviant youth subcultures back in nineteenth-century Britain, including the original 'hooligans', identified by their aggressive attitudes, peaked caps, neck-scarves, bell-bottom trousers and close-cropped hairstyle with a fringe over the forehead. However, he argued that, like all subsequent deviant subcultures, such as mods and rockers, hooligans were in part socially created, as more traditional social groups sought out scapegoats to blame for their own 'respectable fears' around social problems. Clearly, the mainstream of young people did not – and still do not – fit such deviant descriptions.



Deviant youth subcultures are discussed in chapter 21, 'Crime and Deviance'.

Instead, Miles proposes the concept of *youth lifestyles*, which suggests a diversity of experience within mainstream youth and focuses on the question, 'How ... do young people interact with and negotiate the social worlds in which they construct their everyday lives?' (Miles 2000: 2). Such a perspective reminds us of both the common, shared experiences of youth in a rapidly changing world and the different responses young people adopt towards it.

Young adulthood

Sociologists have started to theorize a relatively new phase within the life-course in developed societies, which we can call **young adulthood** (Goldscheider and Waite 1991), though the systematic study of this stage is not yet as fully developed as that of childhood or later life. Young adulthood

seems increasingly to be a specific stage in personal and sexual development in modern societies, which has been described in various ways: as post-adolescence, late adolescence and so on. It is said to characterize those people in their 20s and perhaps early 30s who live relatively independent lives, but have not yet married or had children and as a consequence, are still experimenting with their relationships and lifestyles.

However, this stage is not seen as being experienced in the same way by all social classes and ethnic groups. It is particularly amongst more affluent groups that people in their early 20s are taking the time to travel, and explore sexual, political and religious affiliations (Heath and Cleaver 2003). Indeed, the importance of this postponement of the responsibilities of full adulthood is likely to grow, given the extended period of education many people now undergo in the developed world. This stage of life is also likely to become much less gendered, as more young women go on to university and forge careers instead of settling into traditional family life at an early age. We can expect scholars studying the life-course to carry out more research on this stage over the next few years.

Mature adulthood

As we noted above, the sociological study of childhood is a latecomer to the discipline, mainly because childhood itself was seen as simply a transitional period leading to adulthood. Conversely though, the study of adulthood preoccupied sociologists during the twentieth century and most sociological research in many varied fields has simply taken adulthood as an unquestioned assumption underpinning their work. For example, the study of doctor-patient relationships simply assumed mature adult doctors and patients alike, with little or no regard for the different experiences of children or young adults.

Hence, much of this book is concerned primarily with the experiences and lives of mature adults and we can only make some very general comments about this here.

Most young adults in the modern world today can look forward to a life stretching right through to old age. But in pre-modern times, few could anticipate such a future with much confidence – and nor do young adults in the poorer parts of the developing world today. Death through sickness or injury was much more frequent among all age groups than it is today, and women in particular were at great risk because of the high rate of mortality in childbirth.

On the other hand, some of the strains that people experience now were less pronounced in previous times. People usually maintained a closer connection with their parents and other kin than in today's more mobile populations, and the routines of work they followed were much the same as those of their forebears. In current times, major uncertainties must be resolved in marriage, family life and other social contexts. People increasingly have to 'make' their own lives, more so than in the past. Amongst many social groups, the creation of sexual and marital ties now mainly depends on individual initiative and selection rather than being fixed by parents, though this is not, of course, the case in all cultures. Such individual choice can be experienced as a freedom, but the responsibility to *have* to choose can also impose its own pressures.

Keeping a forward-looking outlook in middle age has taken on a particular importance in modern societies. Most people do not expect to be doing the same thing all their lives, as was the case for the majority in traditional cultures. Individuals who have spent their lives in one career may find the level they have reached in middle age unsatisfying and further opportunities blocked. Women who have spent their early adulthood raising a family and whose children have left home may feel themselves to be without any social value. The phenomenon

of a 'mid-life crisis' is very real for many middle-aged people. A person may feel she has thrown away the opportunities that life had to offer, or she will never attain goals cherished since childhood. Yet growing older need not lead to resignation or bleak despair; a release from childhood dreams can be liberating.

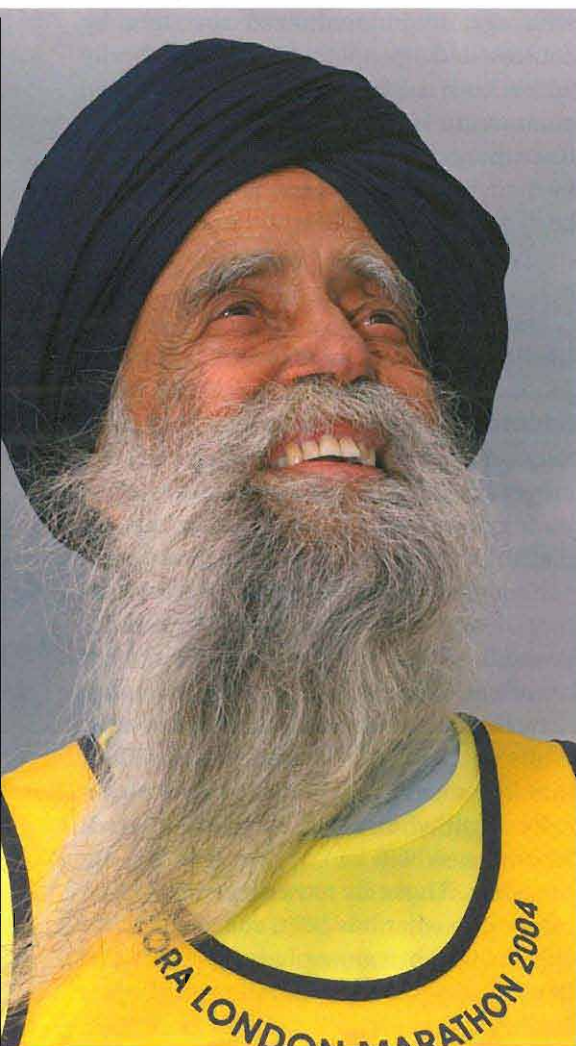
Later life

In traditional societies, older people were often accorded a great deal of respect. Among cultures that included age-grades, the elders usually had a major – often the final – say over matters of importance to the community. Within families, the authority of both men and women mostly increased with age. In industrialized societies, by contrast, older people tend to lack authority within both the family and the wider social community. Having retired from the labour force, they may be poorer than ever before in their lives. At the same time, there has been a great increase in the proportion of the population over the age of 65, as we see in the next section.

Transition to the age-grade of elder in a traditional culture often marked the pinnacle of the status an individual could achieve. In modern societies, retirement may bring the opposite consequences. No longer living with their children and often having retired from paid work, older people may find it difficult to make the final period of their life rewarding. It used to be thought that those who successfully cope with later life do so by turning to their inner resources, becoming less interested in the material rewards that social life has to offer. While this may often be true, it seems likely that in a society in which many are physically healthy in later life, an outward-looking view will become more and more prevalent. Those in retirement might find renewal in what has been called the 'third age', in which a new phase of education begins (see also the discussion in chapter 19, 'Education').

In the section that follows, we look at the sociological issues surrounding ageing in more detail than the earlier life-course stages. This is for two reasons. First, the study of later life and ageing (gerontology) is very well established, with a significant body of evidence, which is reflected here. Second, major concerns over the consequences of an ageing world population have been at the centre of important social, political and economic debate since the mid-1970s and these claims will also be considered.

Fauja Singh was still running marathons in his 90s.



Ageing

Fauja Singh ran his first London marathon in 2000, at the age of 89. It took him 6 hours and 54 minutes. He had last run seriously 53 years earlier. When he recorded a near-identical marathon time in 2001, he found he had knocked almost an hour off the world record for the over-90s. In 2002 he trimmed his time down to 6 hours and 45 minutes. That year, 407 runners took longer than Singh to complete the London marathon; many were in their 30s. When Singh was that age, he was running cross-country races in his native India. By the time India gained independence in 1947, new priorities had led Singh to hang up his running shoes at the age of 36. A lifetime later – widowed and living in Ilford, East London – with four children, thirteen grandchildren and five great-grandchildren scattered across three continents, he began looking for new challenges. He started to punctuate his daily walks with bursts of jogging. His legs soon regained their lost strength. Then Singh saw a television programme about the marathon and was inspired. He began to run marathons all over the world and raised thousands of pounds for charity (Askwith 2003), even running a 2007 half-marathon in Jalandhar at the age of 94.

People, especially in the richer countries, are leading longer, healthier and more productive lives than ever before. When she became monarch in 1952, Queen Elizabeth II sent 273 birthday telegrams to congratulate British centenarians on their 100th birthdays. By the end of the twentieth century, that figure had risen to more than 3,000 per year (Cayton 2002), and in 2007 there were around 9,000 British people over 100 years of age, 90 times more than in 1911. Growing old can be a fulfilling and rewarding experience; or it can be filled with physical distress and social isolation. For most older people, the experience of ageing lies somewhere in between.

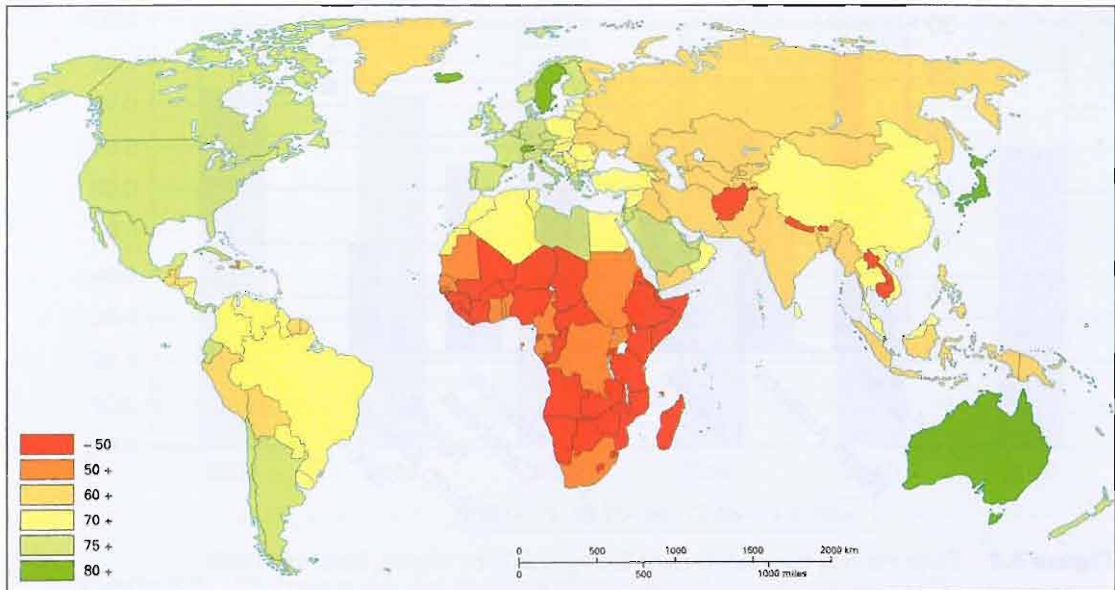


Figure 8.1 Global life expectancy (average life expectancy at birth)

Source: Created from CIA Factbook 2007

The greying of human societies

Throughout the world, societies are ageing, but they are not doing so evenly. One example is the startling national differences in average life expectancy (see figure 8.1). Taking the two extremes, in 2006, average life expectancy at birth for women in Swaziland was 32.62 years and for men just 31.84 years; but in Andorra it was 86.62 for women and 80.62 years for men. Such grossly unequal life chances illustrates in a stark way the very different ageing experiences of people across the world and the various meanings attached to the idea of a 'life-course' in different parts of the world. In the developed world, being 32 years of age does not mean that one is approaching the end of a life but merely indicates the period of young adulthood. As we will see later in this chapter, such wide disparities in average life expectancy also shape the experiences of death, dying and bereavement.

So, although most of this section will focus on debates and evidence from the relatively wealthy developed countries, we have to bear in mind that the situation in the

developing world is very different and the 'ageing experience' differs accordingly.

A 1998 report by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA 1998) notes that the population of those aged 65 and older worldwide grew by about 9 million in 1998. By 2010, this population will grow by 14.5 million and by 2050 it will grow by 21 million. The most rapid growth of the 65 and older group will take place in the industrialized nations of the world, where families have fewer children and people live longer than in poorer countries. In the industrialized countries, the percentage of the older population grew from 8 per cent in 1950 to 14 per cent in 1998, and it is projected to reach 25 per cent by 2050. After the middle of the century, the developing nations will follow suit, as they experience their own elder explosion.

The populations of most of the world's societies are ageing as the result of a decline in both birth and death rates, although the populations of the developing countries continue to have shorter life spans because of poverty, malnutrition and disease (see chapter 13, 'Global Inequality'). The world's average life expectancy grew from 46 in 1950

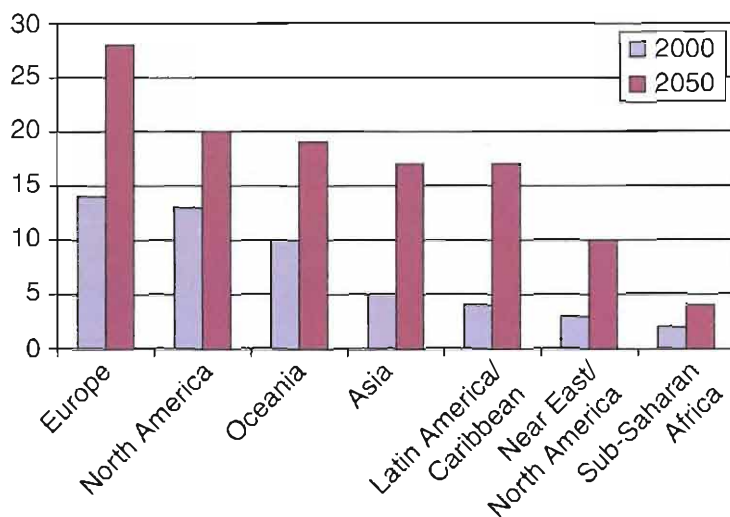


Figure 8.2 Proportion of population over the age of 65 by region, 2000 and 2050 (projected)

Source: UNFPA 2004

to 50 in 1985 and will reach 71 by 2025 (UNFPA 1998). By that time, some 800 million people will be over the age of 65, nearly a threefold increase in numbers from 1990 (see figure 8.2). Among the very old (those over 86), whose medical and service needs are the greatest, the number will increase by half in North America, while it will double in China and grow nearly one and a half times in West Africa (Sokolovsky 1990). This growth will place increasing demands on the resources of many countries that are already too poor to support their populations adequately.

This explosion has enormous implications for social policy. More than 150 nations currently provide public assistance for people who are elderly or disabled, or for their survivors when they die. Older people are especially likely to require costly health-care services. Their rapid growth in numbers threatens to strain the medical systems in many industrial nations, where the cost of providing healthcare to older people is likely to overwhelm government budgets.

Looking at the changing demographic statistics, some sociologists and gerontologists now refer to the **greying** of the population (Peterson 1999). 'Greying' is the result

of two long-term trends in industrial societies: the tendency of families to have fewer children (discussed in chapter 9, 'Families and Intimate Relationships'), and the fact that people are living longer. As figure 8.3 shows, a long-term shift in the age structure of developed societies is under way, which means, for example, that around one-third of Europe's population will be over the age of 65 by the year 2050.

Over the twentieth century, average life expectancy also increased, and infant mortality decreased. In Britain, for example, average life expectancy at birth will have increased from 45 years for men born in 1900 to 77 years for men born between 2005 and 2010. For a British woman, life expectancy will have risen from 48 to 81 over the same period. Most of these gains occurred in the first half of the twentieth century and were largely due to the improved chances for survival among the young. In 1921 in the UK, 84 infants in 1,000 live births died before the age of one, but by 2002 the rate was just 4.8 deaths for every 1,000 live births (HMSO 2004). An upward trend in life expectancy is shared across most industrialized and developing societies.

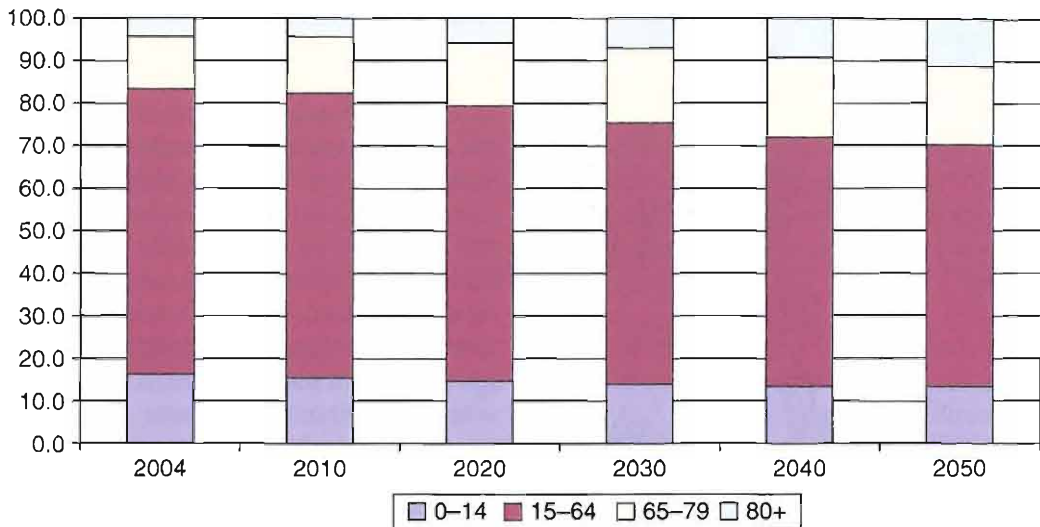


Figure 8.3 Changes in the age structure of European Union population, 2005

Source: European Union 2005

However, in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, life expectancy has actually reduced since the mid-1980s, mainly because of the enormous and continuing impact of HIV/AIDS. Russia also experienced a lowering of average life expectancy after the mid-1990s, which some analysts ascribe to the effects of increasing poverty and, in particular, widespread alcohol abuse.

How do people age?

In examining the nature of ageing we will draw on studies of **social gerontology**, a discipline concerned with the study of the social aspects of ageing. Studying ageing is a bit like examining a moving target. As people grow older, society itself changes at the same time, and so does the very meaning of being 'old' (Riley et al. 1988). For people born into the developed societies in the first quarter of the twentieth century, a secondary education was regarded as more than sufficient for most of the available jobs, and the majority of people did not expect to live much past their 50s – and then only at the cost of suffering a variety of disabilities. Today, those very same people find them-

selves in their 70s and 80s; many are relatively healthy, unwilling to disengage from work and social life, and in need of more schooling than they ever dreamed would be necessary.

What does it mean to age? **Ageing** can be sociologically defined as the combination of biological, psychological and social processes that affect people as they grow older (Abeles and Riley 1987; Atchley 2000). These processes suggest the metaphor of three different, although interrelated, developmental 'clocks': first, a biological one, which refers to the physical body; second, a psychological one, which refers to the mind and mental capabilities; and, third, a social one, which refers to cultural norms, values and role expectations having to do with age. There is an enormous range of variation in all three of these processes, as will be shown below. Our notions about the meaning of age are rapidly changing, both because recent research is dispelling many myths about ageing, and because advances in nutrition and health have enabled many people to live longer, healthier lives than ever before.

Biological ageing

There are well-established biological effects of ageing, although the exact chronological point at which they occur varies greatly from individual to individual, depending on genetics and lifestyle. In general, for men and women alike, biological ageing typically means:

- declining vision, as the eye lens loses its elasticity (small type is the bane of most people over 50);
- hearing loss, first of higher-pitched tones, then of lower-pitched ones;
- wrinkles, as the skin's underlying structure becomes more and more brittle (millions of pounds invested in skin lotion and increasingly common surgical face-lifts only delay the inevitable);
- a decline of muscle mass and an accompanying accumulation of fat, especially around the middle (eating habits that were offset by exercise when you were 25 come back to haunt you when you are 50); and
- a drop in cardiovascular efficiency, as less oxygen can be inhaled and utilized during exercise (lifelong runners who ran a six-minute mile at the age of 30 are happy to break an eight-minute mile once they turn 60).

The normal processes of ageing cannot be avoided, but they can be partly compensated for and offset by good health, proper diet and nutrition, and a reasonable amount of exercise (John 1988). Lifestyle can make a significant health difference for people of all ages. For many people, the physical changes of ageing do not significantly prevent them from leading active, independent lives well into their 80s. Some scientists have even argued that with a proper lifestyle and advances in medical technology, more and more people will be able to live relatively illness-free lives until they reach their biological maximum, experiencing only a brief period of sickness just

before death (Fries 1980). There is a debate about when, or even if, people are genetically programmed to die (Kirkwood 2001). About 90–100 years seems to be the upper end of the genetically determined age distribution for most human beings, although some have argued that it may be as high as 120 (Rusting 1992; Treas 1995). When the world's oldest officially recorded person, the Frenchwoman Jeanne Calment, died in 1997, she was 122, rode a bicycle until the age of 100 and had met Vincent van Gogh as a child. Other people have claimed to be even older, though their ages cannot be verified.

Even though the majority of older people in the developed societies suffer no significant physical impairment and remain physically active, unfortunate stereotypes about the 'weak and frail elderly' continue to exist (Heise 1987). These stereotypes have more to do with the social than the biological meaning of ageing in Western culture, which is increasingly preoccupied with youthfulness and fears of growing old and dying. Traditionally, older people in the West were seen as knowledgeable, wise and a source of good advice and in some cultures they are still seen this way: as active and valuable members of society.

Psychological ageing

The psychological effects of ageing are much less well established than the physical effects, although research into the psychology of ageing is continuing at an expanding pace (Diehl and Dark-Freudeman 2006). Even though such things as memory, learning, intelligence, skills and motivation to learn are widely assumed to decline with age, research into the psychology of ageing suggests a much more complicated process (Birren and Schaie 2001).

Memory and learning ability, for example, do not decline significantly until very late in life for most people, although the speed with which one recalls or analyses information may slow down somewhat, giving the false impression of mental impairment. For

most older people whose lives are stimulating and rich, such mental abilities as motivation to learn, clarity of thought and problem-solving capacity do not appear to decline significantly until very late in life (Baltes and Schaie 1977; Schaie 1979; Atchley 2000).

Current research has focused on the extent to which memory loss relates to other variables, such as health, personality and social structures. Scientists and psychologists argue that intellectual decline is not necessarily irreversible, and they are working on ways to identify older people at risk so that medical intervention may be taken which will allow longer maintenance of higher levels of intellectual function (Schaie 1990).

Even Alzheimer's disease, the progressive deterioration of brain cells which is the primary cause of dementia in later life, is relatively rare in non-institutionalized persons under 75, although it may afflict as many as half of all people over 85. Recent research, particularly in the controversial area of stem cells, has created the hope that the treatment of Alzheimer's disease may one day be possible.

Social ageing

Social age consists of the norms, values and roles that are culturally associated with a particular chronological age. Ideas about social age differ from one society to another and, at least in modern industrial societies, change over time as well. Societies such as Japan and China have traditionally revered older people, regarding them as a source of historical memory and wisdom. Societies such as the UK and the USA are more likely to dismiss them as non-productive, dependent people who are out of step with the times – both because they are less likely to have the high-tech skills so valued by young people and because of their culture's obsession with youthfulness. Huge amounts are now being spent on prescription drugs, plastic surgery and home remedies that promise eternal youth. These



"We rarely watch television. Most of our free time is devoted to sex."

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include such things as tummy-tucks and face-lifts, anti-baldness pills and lotions, and pills that claim to increase memory and concentration. In the USA, three weeks after it hit the market in 1998, the anti-impotence drug Viagra accounted for a staggering 94 per cent of all prescription drug sales (Hotz 1998).

Role expectations are extremely important sources of one's personal identity. Some of the roles associated with ageing are generally positive: lord and lady, senior adviser, doting grandparent, religious elder, wise spiritual teacher. Other roles may be damaging, leading to lowered self-esteem and isolation. Highly stigmatizing stereotypical roles for older people exist: think of phrases like 'grumpy old', 'silly old', 'boring old' and 'dirty old' man or woman (Kirkwood 2001). In fact, like all people, older people do not simply passively play out assigned social roles; they actively shape and redefine them (Riley et al. 1988). We discuss discrimination against older people below (pp. 317–20).

THINKING CRITICALLY

Are you concerned about ageing? List which elements of the ageing process are particularly worrying. Would you describe these elements as biological, psychological or social aspects of ageing? Sociologically, how would you explain the fact that many people in modern societies try so hard to delay the inevitable *biological* ageing process?

Growing old: competing sociological explanations

Social gerontologists have offered a number of theories regarding the nature of ageing. Some of the earliest theories emphasized individual adaptation to changing social roles as a person grows older. Later theories focused on how social structures shape the lives of older people and on the concept of the life-course. The most recent theories have been more multifaceted, focusing on the ways in which older people actively create their lives within specific institutional contexts.

First generation of theories: functionalism

The earliest theories of ageing reflected the functionalist approach that was dominant in sociology during the 1950s and '60s. They emphasized how individuals adjusted to changing social roles as they aged and how those roles were useful to society. The earliest theories often assumed that ageing brings with it physical and psychological decline and that changing social roles have to take this decline into account (Hendricks 1992).

The American sociologist Talcott Parsons, one of the most influential functionalist theorists of the 1950s, argued that society needs to find roles for older people consistent with advanced age. He expressed concern that the USA, in particular, with its

emphasis on youth and its avoidance of the subject of death, had failed to provide roles that adequately drew on the potential wisdom and maturity of its older citizens. Moreover, given the greying of society that was evident even at that time, Parsons argued that this failure could well lead to older people becoming discouraged and alienated from society. In order to achieve a 'healthy maturity', Parsons (1960) argued, older people need to adjust psychologically to their changed circumstances, while society needs to redefine the social roles of older people. Traditional roles (such as work) have to be abandoned, and new forms of productive activity (such as volunteer service) need to be identified.

Parsons's ideas anticipated those of **disengagement theory**, the notion that it is functional for society to remove people from their traditional roles when they grow older, thereby freeing up space for others (Cumming and Henry 1961; Estes et al. 1992). According to this perspective, given the increasing frailty, illness and dependency of older people, it becomes all the more dysfunctional for them to occupy traditional social roles they are no longer capable of adequately fulfilling. Older people should therefore retire from their jobs, pull back from civic life and eventually withdraw from other activities as well. Disengagement is assumed to be functional for the larger society because it opens up roles that were formerly filled by older people to younger ones, who will presumably carry them out with fresh energy and new skills. Disengagement is also assumed to be functional for older people because it enables them to take on less taxing roles consistent with their advancing age and declining health. A number of studies of older adults do indeed report that the large majority feel good about retiring, which they claim has improved their morale and increased their happiness (Palmore 1985; Howard 1986).

While there is obviously some truth to disengagement theory, the idea that older

people should completely disengage from the larger society takes for granted the prevailing stereotype that later life necessarily involves frailty and dependence. Critics of functionalist theories of ageing argue that they emphasize the need for older people to adapt to existing conditions, but they do not question whether or not the circumstances faced by older people are just. In reaction, another group of theorists arose – those growing out of the social conflict tradition (Hendricks 1992).

Second generation of theories: age stratification theory and life-course theory

From the mid-1970s, a new range of theories was introduced into gerontology (Estes et al. 2003). Two of the most important contributions were *age stratification theory* and the *life-course model*. Age stratification theory looks at the role and influence of social structures, such as retirement policy, on the process of individual ageing and on the wider stratification of older people in society. One important aspect of age stratification theory is the concept of *structural lag* (Riley et al. 1994). This provides an account of how structures do not keep pace with changes in the population and in individuals' lives. For example, in many European countries, when the retirement age was set at 65 soon after the Second World War, life expectancy and quality of life for older people was considerably lower than it is today.

Like the age stratification approach, the life-course perspective also moved beyond looking at ageing in terms of individual adjustment. This perspective views ageing as one phase of a lifetime shaped by the historical, social, economic and environmental factors that occurred at earlier ages in the life-course. Thus the life-course model views ageing as a process that continues from birth to death. In this, it contrasts with earlier theories that focus solely on the elderly as a distinctive group. The theory bridges micro- and macrosociology in

examining the relationships between psychological states, social structures and social processes (Elder 1974).

Third generation of theories: political economy theory

One of the most important strands in the study of ageing in recent years has been the *political economy perspective* pioneered by Carroll Estes. Political economy theory provides an account of the role of the state and capitalism as contributing to systems of domination and marginalization of older people.

Political economy theory focuses on the role of economic and political systems in shaping and reproducing the prevailing power arrangements and inequalities in society. Social policy – in income, health or social security, for example – is understood as the result of social struggles, conflicts and the dominant power relations of the time. Policy affecting older people reflects the stratification of society by gender, race and class. As such, the phenomena of ageing and old age are directly related to the larger society in which they are situated and cannot be considered in isolation from the other social forces (Estes and Minkler 1991; Estes et al. 2003).

Aspects of ageing

Although ageing is a process which presents new possibilities, it is also accompanied by a set of unfamiliar challenges. As people age, they face a combination of physical, emotional and material problems that can be difficult to negotiate. One challenge that marks a significant transition is retirement. For most people, work does not just pay the bills; it also contributes to their sense of personal identity. In this case, retirement does not only lead to a loss of income; it can also lead to a loss of status to which many people find it difficult to adjust. Another significant transition that many older people face is the loss of a spouse. Widowhood can represent the loss of a partner of

40 or 50 years, and someone who has been the main source of companionship and support.

The older population reflects the diversity within societies. Older people are rich, poor and in between; they belong to all ethnic groups; they live alone and in families of various sorts; they vary in their political values and preferences; and they are gay and lesbian as well as heterosexual. Furthermore, like other people, they are diverse with respect to health. These differences can influence the ability of older people to maintain their autonomy and overall well-being.

As well as the diversity of the older population noted above, 'later life' now covers a wide and increasing age span. A distinction is often drawn between the third and fourth ages of life in modern societies. The third age covers the years from 50 to 74, when people are able to lead active independent

lives, increasingly free from day-to-day parenting responsibilities and the labour market. Many in this group have the time and money to fund an expanding consumer market and culture. The success of Saga in the UK, a company that aimed its tours and other products solely at the over-50s market, is evidence of the increasing power of the 'grey pound'. In contrast, the fourth age refers to the years of life when people's independence and ability to care fully for themselves is more seriously challenged.

In this section, we look at the effects of inequality, gender and ethnicity on the experience of ageing.

Inequality and older people

Overall, older people in developed societies tend to be more materially disadvantaged than other segments of the population (figure 8.4). However, older people's

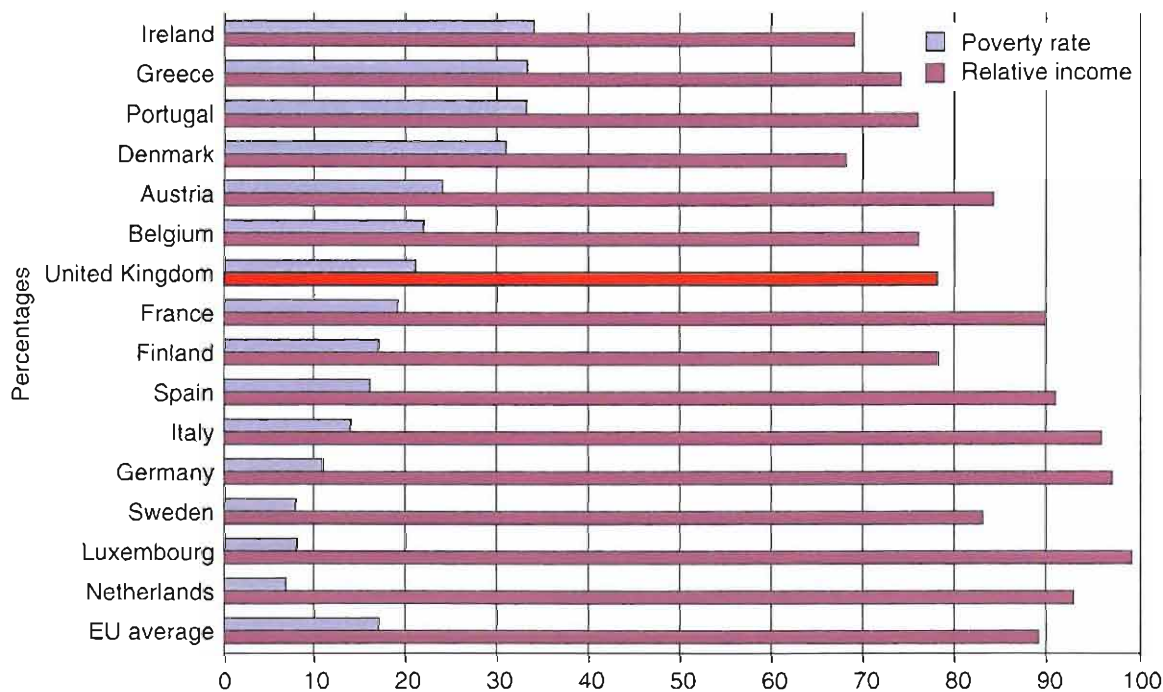


Figure 8.4 Poverty rate^a and relative income^b of people aged 65+: EU comparison, 1998
^a Percentage with income below 60 per cent of the median equivalized income of the national population
^b Median equivalized income of those aged 65 and over as a percentage of the population aged 0 to 64
 Source: HMSO Social Trends 34 (2004), p. 7



For some, old age is a time of acute poverty, ill health, depression and loneliness.

subjective feelings about their standard of living are not solely based on material factors, but draw on other reference groups to which they compare themselves. Comparisons are possible with their memories of earlier life. In this, they are likely to compare themselves positively with the past in material terms (although not necessarily in moral or social ones). However, they are also likely to compare themselves with the standard of living that they enjoyed before retirement, which is likely to be materially better than their current position. Older people may also compare themselves with the average living conditions of society as a whole or of other retirees. Thus there is no common subjective experience of inequality amongst older people (Vincent 1999).

The inequalities of class, race and gender are often exacerbated when a person stops paid work, so the added inequality of later life means that older women, minorities and manual workers are poorer than peer equivalents in middle age. Retirement can

result in a loss of income that may cause a significant drop in an older person's standard of living. The ability to build up a private occupational or personal pension during working life is one of the key determinants of income inequality between pensioners. Consequently, it is older men who were previously employed as professionals or managers who tend to have the highest gross weekly income in later life.

» We look at poverty amongst older people in more detail in chapter 12, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

The feminization of later life

Across all the world's societies, women tend to live longer than men.

» A more detailed exploration of such inequalities can be found in chapter 13, 'Global Inequality'.

Because of this, widowhood is the norm for older women. In the UK for example, almost half of women over the age of 65, and four-fifths of women aged 85 and over, are

widowed. By contrast, more than three-quarters of men aged between 65 and 69 are married, falling to 60 per cent by their early 80s (HMSO 2004). This numerical predominance of women has been described as the 'feminization of later life' in European countries (see figure 8.5).

Although there were a disproportionate number of women in the older age group in Europe throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the proportion of women to men has fluctuated and is now declining somewhat. In many European countries, there are currently more than three times as many women as men over the age of 85, but this figure is predicted to fall to just twice as many by 2021. One reason for the change in

the proportion of women to men is because so many young men died during the First World War in 1914–18. The women of this generation began to reach retirement age in 1961, which began a sharp rise in the sex ratio imbalance amongst older people. A second reason for the declining imbalance between older men and women is the more rapid fall in male, rather than female, mortality over the age of 65 during the second half of the twentieth century. Figure 8.6 shows how the sex ratio among older people in the UK has fluctuated from 1951 to the predicted ratio in 2031.

'Feminization' is not without its problems, however. Older women are more likely than their male contemporaries to be poor.

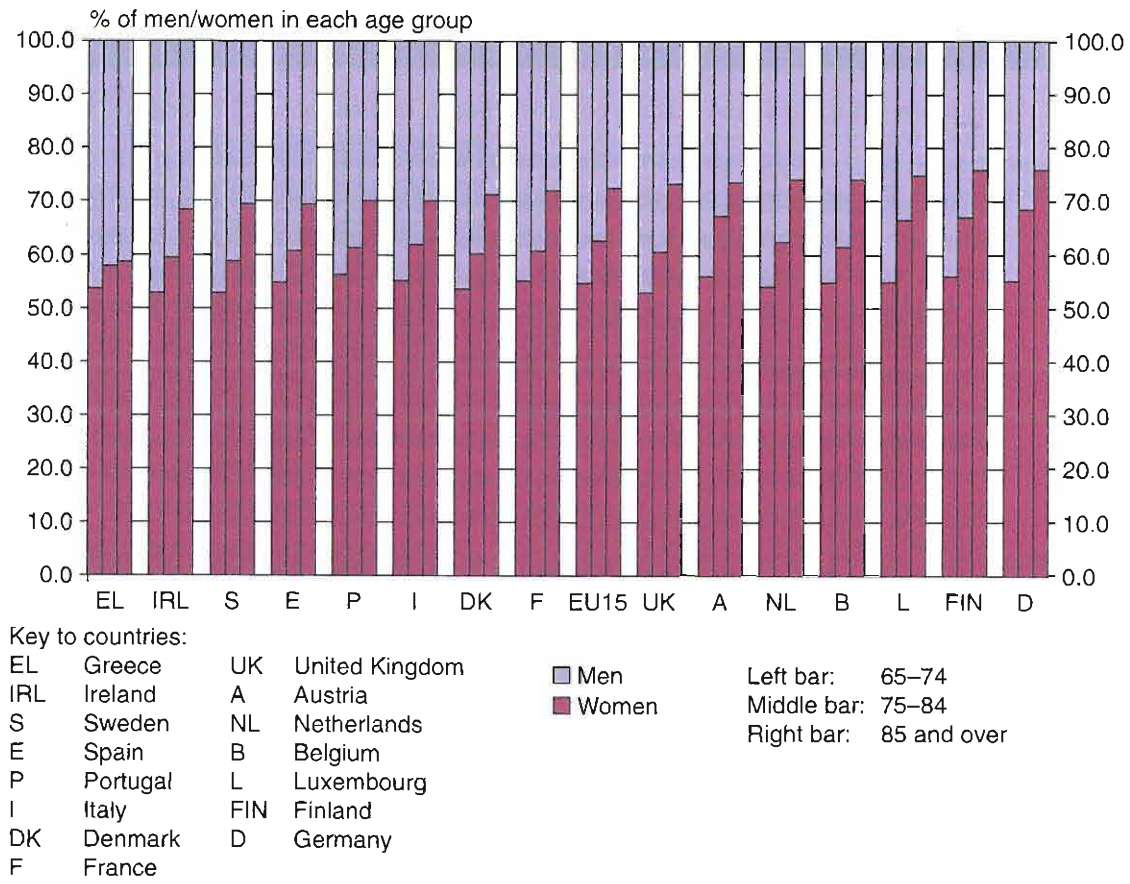


Figure 8.5 Proportions of men and women aged 65+ by age group, 2000

Source: Winqvist, K. (2002) *Women and Men Beyond Retirement*, Statistics in focus: population and social conditions, No 21 (Luxemburg: Eurostat)

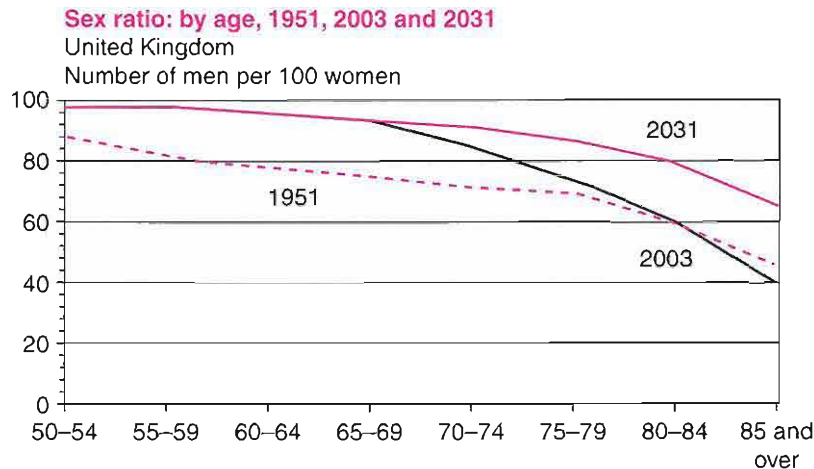


Figure 8.6 Sex ratios amongst older people

Source: Office for National Statistics, 2005

The ability to build private pension entitlements is one of the main causes of inequalities in wealth between older people. In most countries, women are far less likely to have the same pension entitlements as men because of the gender gap in pay and also the loss of lifetime earnings associated with having children. In 2004, only 43 per cent of older women in the UK had any income from private pensions (including widows' pensions based on their late husbands' private pensions), compared to 71 per cent of men (HMSO 2004).

Studies reveal that, as well as having lower personal incomes than men, older women also suffer inequalities in other resources, such as car-ownership. Only 42 per cent of UK women aged between the ages of 75 and 84 have a car, compared to 66 per cent of men. The discrepancy in car-ownership may not seem a major concern, but it can significantly restrict women's overall mobility and their access to healthcare, shopping and contact with others.

Finally, with increasing age, women suffer more than men from disability. This means that they require more assistance and support simply to carry out everyday tasks and personal care routines, such as bathing

and getting in and out of bed. But the living situations of older men and women also have a gender dimension. As one study of a selection of European countries by Delbès et al. (2006) found, it seems that women grow old alone, but men grow old with a partner (see figure 8.7). Older women were also twice as likely as men to live in an institution, and the authors suggest that perhaps men find it more difficult to deal with their partners' health problems than do women. There are also some differences between Northern and Southern Europe. For instance, 56 per cent of Finnish women and 59 per cent of German women live alone after the age of 75, compared to just 30 per cent of Portuguese women.

There are some cultural and policy differences that may explain such findings. South European countries tend to see 'multigenerational co-residence' as the preferred option for keeping older relatives at home, whereas North European states tend to have better-developed welfare services, which perform some of the same functions, but can lead to individuals being able to live alone. It is clear, then, that there are specific gendered patterns of care amongst the older population.

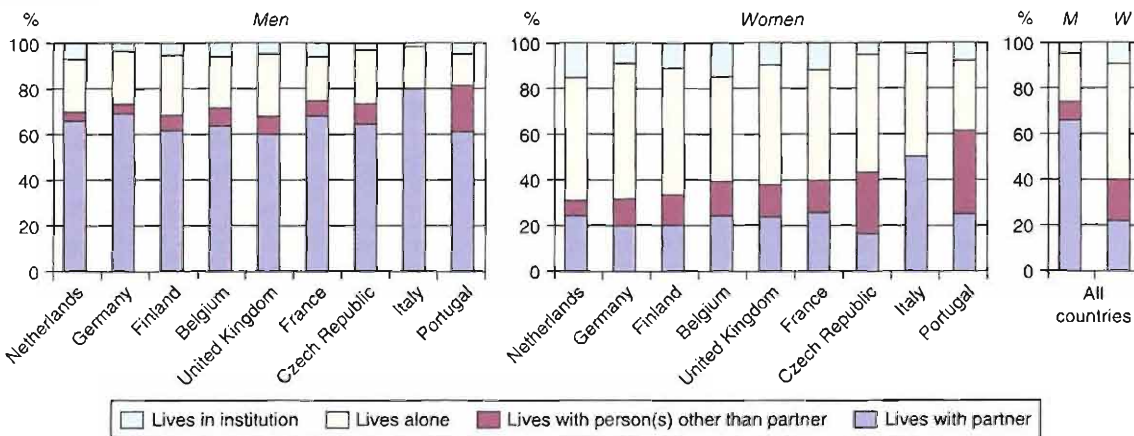


Figure 8.7 Living arrangements of people aged 75+ in nine European countries, 2000, by gender

Source: Delbès, C., Gaymu, J. and Springer, S. (2006) 'Women Grow Old Alone, but Men Grow Old with a Partner. A European Overview', *Population & Societies*, 419 (January).

Age and ethnicity

The income of older people from ethnic minorities also tends to be lower than that of their white counterparts, and reliance on means-tested benefits is greater (Berthoud 1998). Older people from ethnic minorities groups are also disadvantaged in other measures of wealth, such as car-ownership and housing tenure (although certain groups, such as Indian and Chinese groups, have rates of home-ownership comparable to that of white populations). For example, in general, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in the UK have high rates of poverty compared to other groups, and this pattern is continued into later life.

Ginn and Arber (2000) examined ethnic and gender differences in the income of individuals amongst the older population in the UK. They found that older Asian women tend to be particularly disadvantaged. Retired ethnic minorities are often unable to supplement their state pension with an occupational or private one. Table 8.1 illustrates this issue: almost three-quarters of the white population are in receipt of an occupational pension compared to fewer than half of the Asian/

Asian British and black/black British populations. The lack of a private pension reflects shorter employment records in Britain for the largely migrant older ethnic population, discrimination in the labour market, the limited availability and type of jobs found in the areas where minorities have settled and sometimes a lack of fluency in English. For older women in some specific minority groups, economic disadvantage may also result from cultural norms acting as a barrier to employment earlier in life. Such patterns of structured disadvantage can be found amongst many other ethnic minority populations in Europe and internationally.

The politics of ageing

'The global ageing crisis'?

As we saw earlier in the chapter, the proportion of the European population over the age of 65 is almost 20 per cent, and will continue to grow. This significant shift in age distribution within the population presents specific challenges for all industrialized countries. One way of understanding why, is by thinking about the **dependency ratio** – the rela-

Table 8.1 Components of mean gross income of UK pensioner units and the proportion in receipt of income, by ethnic minority group, 2003–6

Ethnic Minority groups	All	White	Asian/Asian British	Black/Black British
Gross income <i>of which</i>	343	346	256	261
Benefit income	154	154	140	149
State Pension	113	114	78	96
Income related benefits	19	19	39	34
Disability benefits	13	13	11	10
Occupational pension	88	89	42	43
Personal pension income	10	10	7	5
Investment income	31	32	21	8
Earnings	56	57	43	53
Other income	3	3	3	3
Proportion of pensioners in receipt of:				
Benefit income	99%	99%	97%	98%
State Pension	97%	97%	80%	92%
Income related benefits	31%	31%	46%	46%
Disability benefits	23%	23%	21%	19%
Occupational pension	72%	73%	45%	42%
Personal pension income	60%	61%	31%	44%
Investment income	11%	12%	4%	5%
Earnings	14%	15%	10%	18%

Notes:

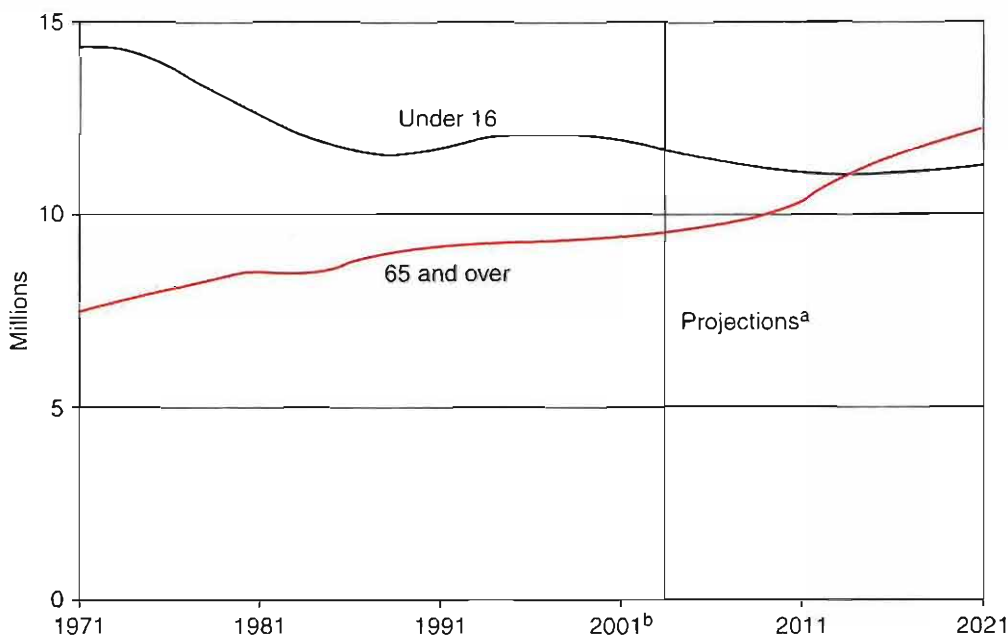
(1) Data based on the average of three years of results from 2003/4, 2005/6 FRS data and updated to 2005/6 prices

Source: UK Department for Work and Pensions 2007

relationship between the number of *children* and *retired people* (considered 'dependent') on the one hand, and the number of *people of working age* on the other (see figure 8.8 for the UK). Such trends have several causes. Modern agriculture, improved sanitation systems, better epidemic control and medicines have all contributed to a decline in mortality throughout the world. In most societies today, especially in the developed world, fewer children die in infancy and more adults survive to later life. As the proportion of older people continues to grow, the demands on social services and health systems will increase as well. The growth in life expectancy means that

pensions will need to be paid for more years than they are at present.

However, the working population funds the programmes that support the older population. As the old-age dependency ratio grows, some argue that increasing strain will be placed on available resources. In the light of demographic projections, governments, interest groups and policy-makers are being forced to look ahead and to develop proposals for meeting the needs of a changing population. Some pension associations are now warning that the current pension payment scheme is not sustainable indefinitely. They have called for an increase in the minimum pension age for both women (now



^a 2001-based projections.

^b Population estimates for 2001 and 2002 include provisional results from the Manchester matching exercise.

Figure 8.8 Dependent population by age, UK, 1971–2021

Source: HMSO Social Trends 34 (2004), p.17

60, rising to 65) and men (now 65) to 70, in order to compensate for increased longevity.

Some critics argue that all this 'dependency talk' is unnecessarily alarmist and is just not an accurate depiction of the implications of contemporary demographic change. It also risks constructing negative interpretations of older people that stigmatize and stereotype them. In a study of the American pension system, *Social Security: The Phony Crisis* (1999), Dean Baker and Mark Weisbrot showed that even on highly conservative assumptions about economic growth, the forecast insolvency of the social security system in the USA within 30 years is highly unlikely to happen. They argue that much of the pressure to privatize the system has come from Wall Street. This is because, if a state-paid system of social security were to be replaced with individual private pensions, America's financial-services

industry would stand to gain 130 million new investment accounts.

In *The Imaginary Time Bomb* (2002), British sociologist Phil Mullan has argued that those who believe the ageing population is a ticking time bomb about to bring about a series of devastating social problems are falling for a series of myths that he seeks to defuse. For example, on healthcare, Mullan argues that it is a myth that an ageing population will mean an exponential rise in ill health and dependency. He responds that ageing is not an illness, and most elderly people are neither ill nor disabled. One of the reasons that people are living longer is the improvement in living conditions over the past century, and he argues that, if this improvement continues, elderly people will be fitter and healthier than their predecessors. Categorizing older people as a 'dependent population' along-

side children constructs this social group as a problem for society at large. However, it can be argued that a new affluence has spread across society and across the life-course and although not all older people are uniformly fit and financially secure, later life has changed very much for the better for many people looking forward to retirement (Gilleard and Higgs 2005).

Many of the concepts that have conventionally been applied to the position of people in later life – for example, that they are socially disengaged or dependent upon the state – nowadays seem insufficient. For example, the generation of adults now reaching retirement age grew up in the post-war years of the 1950s and 1960s, when youth culture became dominated by 'conspicuous consumption' of fashion, music and so on. As older people, maintaining the habits they picked up as younger people, they continue to be important consumers, and enjoy an independent lifestyle.

Arber and Ginn (2004) argue that the idea of dependency itself now needs reconsidering. First, the age ranges used to define dependency (under 16 and over 64) no longer reflect the actual patterns of employment in this country. Fewer young people now enter the labour market full time at the age of 16, tending instead to stay in formal education for longer, and most workers leave the labour market some years before the age of 65. At the same time, more women than ever before are in paid employment, off-setting the shorter duration of employment amongst men.

Second, activity that benefits the economy is not confined to active participation in the labour market. Evidence from the UK shows that, rather than being a burden, older people make many productive economic and social contributions. Older people are often involved in providing unpaid and informal care to less able partners, drastically reducing the cost to the state of provision of health and personal care. They are also a major source of care provision for grandchildren, allowing daughters and



“Hello, we’re new age pensioners”

daughters-in-law to enter the labour market. Older people are also active in voluntary organizations. Arber and Ginn suggest that older people may also be an important source of financial support for their grown-up children – for example, providing them with loans, educational fees, gifts and help for housing. Many studies have also found that older parents continue to provide emotional support for their adult children, particularly during times of difficulty, such as divorce.

THINKING CRITICALLY

List some of the financial implications brought about by the ‘greying’ of the world’s population. How could national governments and international bodies deal with these implications and the pressure on pension provision, social welfare and health services? Should older people be required to work longer and retire later?

Ageism

Activist groups have started to fight against ageism – discrimination against people on the basis of their age – seeking to encourage

Global Society 8.1 China's ageing population

Every day at 8 a.m., home help Wei Qing arrives at pensioner Ge Qigong's one-roomed apartment and sets about cleaning the cramped but tidy space. Mr Ge is not wealthy. Wei Qing's first job is to unlock the bathroom, which is shared by nine families.

'We're just like friends', she said. 'I've been looking after him for a year, when I'm done with my chores we sit down and have a chat.'

Her wages are paid by the Shanghai government. Mr Ge said he would not be able to afford to pay on his own.

'I didn't get any pension from the pen company I used to work for', he said. 'I have to rely on the government, they give us RMB 460 (£30) a month and they take care of our medical bills.'

This level of care – his rent is also paid – is not uncommon in Shanghai. Although China is still a developing country, the city is proud of the way it looks after its many pensioners.

But future generations of pensioners may not be so lucky. Around 7.5 per cent of the Chinese population is over 65, but in the next quarter century that number will increase to 30 per cent. It will be one of the greatest demographic changes in history.

'The pressure on the working age population will be much bigger than before', said Professor Peng Xizhe, a population expert, at Shanghai's Fudan University.

'Ageing is mainly caused by China's population control programmes in the past. At the beginning stage of the one-child policy . . . no one really realized that ageing would be such a serious population or social problem', he added.

The drop in fertility caused by the so-called one-child policy is beginning to feed through into the working population. This generation of Chinese pensioners are supported by at least six workers paying taxes. In 30 years' time there will only be three workers for every Chinese pensioner.

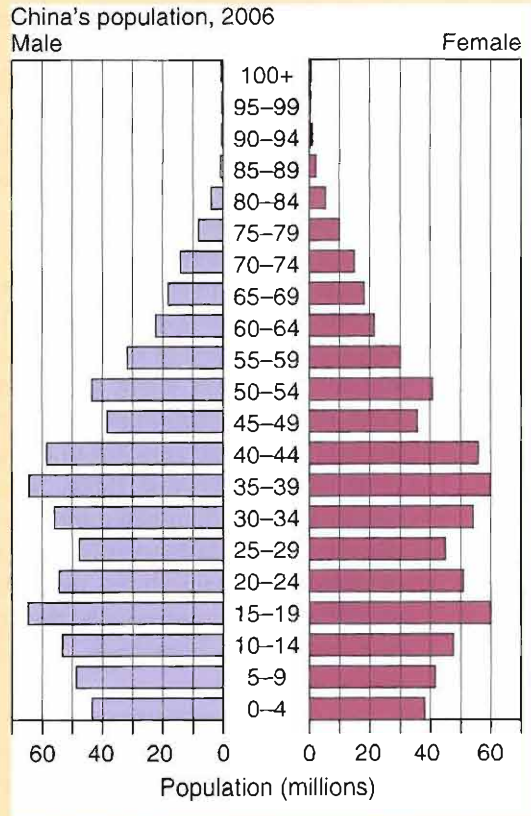


Figure 8.9 China's population, 2006

Source: US Census Bureau

And, as China develops, people are living longer. The average life expectancy for a woman born in Shanghai is now 82 years old, equivalent to many developed countries.

With a population that is living longer and a workforce that is getting smaller, the pressure is on China to get rich before it gets old.

Source: Adapted from BBC News, 16 October 2006

a positive view of later life and older people. Ageism is an ideology just as sexism and racism are. There are as many false stereotypes of older people as there are in other areas. For instance, it is often believed that older workers are less competent than younger ones, that most people over 65 are in

hospitals or homes for the elderly, and that a high proportion are senile. All these beliefs are erroneous. The productivity and attendance records of workers over 60 are superior on average to those of younger age groups; 95 per cent of people over 65 live in private dwellings; and only about 7 per cent of those

between 65 and 80 show pronounced symptoms of senile decay. In the UK, the government has put forward proposals to ban age discrimination, which could cover recruitment, training (including entry to higher education), promotion, pay, job-retention and – importantly – retirement.

In one study (Levin 1988), college students were shown a photograph of the same man at ages 25, 52 and 73, and were asked to rate him in terms of a variety of personality characteristics. The ratings were significantly more negative for the man depicted at the age of 73. When he looked old in his photograph, the students were more likely to perceive him negatively, even though they knew absolutely nothing about him. The mere fact that he was older was sufficient to trigger a negative cultural stereotype. Widely shared cultural stereotypes of 'grumpy old men' can lead to private opinions that are hurtful to older people.

The sociologist Bill Bytheway has provided a theoretical account of ageism that draws on social constructionism (an approach introduced in chapter 7, 'Social Interaction and Everyday Life'). Bytheway (1995) begins by questioning the reality of the terms 'old age' and 'elderly'. He argues that we presume that these terms have some kind of universal reality that they do not in fact have. He demonstrates by asking what we mean by the term 'old age': 'Is it a condition, a period of life, a state of mind, or what?' Is there any scientific evidence that something exists that can be called old age? If it exists, how do people enter it and become elderly? To Bytheway, the categories we use to describe ageing – such as 'the elderly' and 'the old' – are themselves ageist. They are socially constructed in order to legitimize the separation and management of people on the basis of their chronological age by dominant groups with something to gain from the inequalities associated with ageism.

Countries vary widely in what they are doing to cope with their growing numbers



Older people often provide much-needed help to their communities, for example by looking after grandchildren.

of older people. As we have seen already, the UK relies primarily on the state pension and the National Health Service to provide a safety net to serve the financial and health needs of older people. Other industrial nations provide a much broader array of services. In Japan, for example, men and women remain active well into later life because the Japanese culture encourages this activity and because business policies often support post-retirement work with the same company the person worked for before retirement. A number of national laws in Japan support the employment and training of older workers, and private businesses also support retraining.

The combination of greying and globalization will shape the lives of older people throughout the world well into this century. Traditional patterns of family care will be challenged, as family-based economies continue to give way to labour on the farms and in the offices and factories of global businesses (family patterns are already changing in the West, as we see in the discussion of 'the beanpole family' in chapter 9). Like the industrial nations early in the twentieth century, all societies will be challenged to find roles for their ageing citizens. This challenge will include identifying new means of economic support, often financed by government programmes. It will also entail identifying ways to incorporate rather than isolate older people, by drawing on their considerable reserves of experience and talents.

Death, dying and bereavement

The sociology of death and dying

Sociologists have only recently become interested in the universal human experiences of dying, death and bereavement. One reason why the study of death and dying has not been more central to sociology, is that death marks the *end* of an individual's participation in the social world and therefore seems to lie outside sociology's main concerns. Societies continue to develop even though individuals die, and social development, rather than individual deaths, has been the focus of sociology. Another reason is that within modern societies themselves, death and dying have long been 'taboo subjects', not a topic for polite conversation. One early research study was Glaser and Strauss's *Awareness of Dying* (1965), which looked at the experience of death and dying in a US hospital's cancer ward, but this was an exception rather than the norm.

Since the 1990s, the neglect of death and dying has been rectified by the devel-

opment of a new research field – the sociology of death, dying and bereavement (Clark 1993). One of the founders of this field is British sociologist Tony Walter, whose work has focused on the ways in which societies organize death, dying and mourning (1994, 1999). How do societies care for the hundreds of thousands of dying people? Practically, how do they deal with this number of dead bodies? What support is provided for the many more bereaved relatives? What beliefs are held about the prospects for the dead when their earthly lives are over? The answer to such questions turns out to be quite varied. Anthropologists have long studied cultural differences in death rituals in small-scale societies and within developing countries, but the modern sociology of death has been primarily focused on the developed world. Even here there are cultural differences in the social organization of death. Nonetheless, sociologists have been struck by some key, *shared* features of modern industrial societies in relation to their handling of death.

Theorizing death in modern societies

One main feature of modern societies is that, until quite recently, death has tended to be hidden 'behind the scenes' of social life. In previous times and in many non-industrialized societies today, a majority of people experience the final process of dying while at home, with family and friends in close attendance. But in most modern societies today, death typically occurs in hospitals and nursing homes – relatively impersonal settings that are distanced from the mainstream of social life. On death, bodies are then moved to different parts of the buildings, thereby maintaining a physical distance between living patients, their families and the dead (Ariès 1965).

In *The Loneliness of the Dying* (1985), Norbert Elias connects this modern hiding

away of death and dying to the increasing life expectancy we looked at earlier in this chapter. He argues:

The attitude to dying and the image of death in our societies cannot be completely understood without reference to this relative security and predictability of individual life and the correspondingly increased life expectancy. Life grows longer, death is further postponed. The sight of dying and dead people is no longer commonplace. It is easier in the normal course of life to forget death. (1985: 8)

However, Elias sees that the modern way of death and dying presents emotional problems for people reaching this stage of their lives. Although hospitals provide the best available nursing care and scientific medicine and use new medical technologies, the patient's contact with family members and friends is usually seen as inconveniencing treatment and care regimes, and is therefore restricted to short, specific times of the day. But this rational management of the patient's treatment may well deny people the essential emotional comfort of being close to their loved ones, which they actually need most in the final period of life. In modern societies, dying can be a very lonely process indeed.

Zygmunt Bauman (1992) offers another perspective on the distancing of modern people from death and dying. He argues that modern societies deny and defer death long into the future, by turning the ultimate and inevitable ending of life into a multitude of smaller, 'non-ultimate' and potentially resolvable 'health hazards' and illnesses. Mortality is therefore effectively 'deconstructed', which brings the endless defensive battles against ageing and death right into the centre of daily life. People become used to treating, curing and managing their chronic illnesses, for example. In particular, modern societies place a high value on youthfulness, and the quest to remain 'young' – both physically and

emotionally (staying 'young at heart') – takes up a large part of many people's lives. As we noted above, there are now huge markets for anti-ageing treatments, vitamin supplements, cosmetic surgery and fitness equipment, as the demand for youthfulness increases. Bauman describes such actions as part of a 'life strategy', though of course, people may not always acknowledge that their attempts to stay young and fit are ultimately futile defensive actions to avoid acknowledging their own mortality.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Are you concerned about ageing? List which elements of the ageing process are particularly worrying? Would you describe these elements as biological, psychological or social aspects of ageing? Sociologically, how would you explain the fact that many people in modern societies try so hard to delay the inevitable *biological* ageing process?

Recent developments

Since the mid-1990s, sociologists have noted some significant changes in the way that death, dying and bereavement are dealt with in modern societies. First, the hospice movement, which started in the 1960s, aims to offer an alternative to the impersonality of hospitals for terminally ill people. The first modern hospice was founded in London in 1967 by Dame Cicely Saunders and many hospices in the UK and USA have a Christian basis. The UK has some 231 hospice (29 for children), which are based on the principle that death and dying are a natural part of life and that the quality of life for dying people should be as positive as possible. Hospices encourage family and friends to continue to play a part in the patient's life, even in the final stages. Saunders actually believed that the pain

8.3 An ageless future?

In *Stories of Ageing* (2000), Mike Hepworth uses literature to encourage his readers to 'explore fiction as an imaginative resource for understanding variations in the meaning of the experience of ageing in society'. In the section below, Hepworth discusses how science and technology could radically alter how we understand ageing:

For centuries in Western culture ageing has been imagined as a condition of existence from which human beings can only be rescued by supernatural forces. True, there has always been the quest to prolong active life, but until very recently the search has been a dream rather than a reality. And when people have experienced eternal life it has more often than not been a curse rather than a blessing, as in the legend of *The Wandering Jew* and *The Flying Dutchman*. [In literature, sometimes] supernatural forces do intervene in the apparently natural order of things to arrest the normal processes of physical ageing, as happens in the case of Faust (Fielder 1946), who makes a pact with the Devil and sells his own soul, and in Oscar Wilde's novel about moral corruption *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian Gray is an aesthete with wondrous good looks whose face and body remain mysteriously unmarked by his excessive indulgence in immoral practices; all external signs of his debauchery (in this story a form of premature ageing) are mysteriously transferred to his portrait. When he finally attacks the painting with a knife in an attempt to destroy the evidence of his past he succeeds only in destroying himself, so close has the affinity between the portrait and himself become. On his death the portrait reverts back to the original image of youth – 'all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty' (Wilde 1960: 167) – leaving the dead body unrecognisably that of an old man, 'withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage' (ibid.).

Outside the realms of legend and the romantic imagination there was until very recently only one future of ageing in Western culture if one was lucky to live long enough to grow old: the Christian vision of the inevitable



In 2007, South African paralympian, Oscar Pistorius, was allowed to run against able-bodied athletes while sporting authorities debated whether his carbon-fibre prosthetics gave him an unfair advantage. In January 2008, it was decided that they did and he was not allowed to take part in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. The idea of the 'cyborg' – part human, part technology – may not be as fanciful as it sounds.

decline of the human body, death and an afterlife of either Heaven or Hell. The dualistic separation of the body from the soul in Christian thought regards the ageing of the body in the temporal world as a brief testing ground for eternal spiritual life beyond the veil. The corruption of the flesh frees the soul or essential self for an other-worldly existence out of time. Heaven is the compensation for graceful or virtuous ageing and not looking for pacts with the Devil to prolong a youthfully active life.

But times are rapidly changing and the emergence of modern scientific medicine and technology has offered an alternative promise to release from the ageing body in this world rather

than the next (Katz 1996). One of the interesting features of this development is that contemporary models of an ageless future have become predominantly biological rather than essentially spiritual (Cole 1992). The prevailing belief now is that it is the science of the biological body, and not the religion of the eternal immaterial soul, which will arrest the process of ageing and extend the period of youthful life. The prominent social gerontologist Jabber F. Gubrium (1986) has commented on our reluctance in contemporary society to accept the 'normality' of a biologically limited life span. The widespread faith in the limitless potential of science to solve human problems encourages us to turn expectantly to medical science to transform ageing from the natural termination of the life-course into a disease, which is potentially curable. In this optimistic vision of the future of ageing the biological risks associated with later life will be curable and the human life span extended well beyond the biblical three score years and ten. One of these days ageing will disappear from the human agenda

when cures for the illnesses associated with growing older have been found and ailing and malfunctioning body parts can be replaced.

One way of defeating the ageing process is for humans to become cyborgs or to assume the 'post-human' bodies of partly biological and partly technological beings (Featherstone and Renwick 1995). [Unlike Drew Leder's idea of the 'dys-appearing body' (1990), which makes its presence felt as pain, disease and dysfunction], this vision of the future is one where the dys-appearing body literally disappears. Any part of the internal body which causes distress in later life will be removed and replaced with a genetically engineered or transplanted substitute. The story of the ageing body will thus become not a story of how individuals cope or come to terms with its limitations but science fiction come true. The body will be a machine and the meaning of ageing may cease to be a matter of concern.

Source: Hepworth 2000: 124–5

relief regimes within hospices made euthanasia unnecessary. The growth of more personalized forms of care for terminally ill people may make the modern experience of dying much less impersonal than Elias had thought.

Second, there seem to be some emerging ways of dealing with death and bereavement that are much more informal than those in the past. Some sociologists have described these as 'postmodern' developments (see chapter 3 for a discussion of postmodern social theory) in which more individualistic and therefore, diverse approaches to dealing with death, are emerging (Bauman 1992; Walter 1994). For example, it is becoming more common for people to personalize their own or their relatives' funerals: playing pop music, giving their own speeches and insisting on colourful clothing rather than relying on the traditional rituals of the churches. It is also becoming more commonplace for

relatives to mark road-accident deaths with flowers at the scene of a crash as an individual way of remembering the dead, rather than, or in addition to, the ritual of attending a cemetery to tend the grave. Since the 1980s, in many of the developed societies, people have embarked on a quest for new rituals in dying and mourning to replace the older, more formal, religious ones (Wouters 2002). This development may represent an attempt by people to find new public rituals which match their own individual and personal needs, and may signal the movement of death and dying out of its previously hidden location within society.

Summary points

1. Socialization is the process whereby the helpless infant gradually becomes a self-aware, knowledgeable human being, skilled in the ways of the given culture and environment.
2. According to G. H. Mead, the child achieves an understanding of being a separate agent by seeing how others behave towards him or her in social contexts. At a later stage, playing organized games and learning the rules of play, the child comes to understand 'the generalized other' – general values and cultural rules.
3. Jean Piaget distinguishes several stages in the development of the child's capability to make sense of the world. Each stage involves the acquisition of new cognitive skills and depends on the successful completion of the preceding one. According to Piaget these stages of cognitive development are universal features of socialization.
4. Agencies of socialization are structured groups or contexts within which significant processes of socialization occur. In all cultures, the family is the principal socializing agency of the child during infancy. Other influences include peer groups, schools and the mass media. Socialization continues throughout the life-cycle.
5. Gender socialization begins virtually as soon as an infant is born. Even parents who believe they treat children equally tend to produce different responses to boys and girls. These differences are reinforced by many other cultural influences.
6. Biological, psychological and social ageing are not the same and may vary considerably within and across cultures. It is important not to confuse a person's social age with their chronological age. Physical ageing is inevitable, but for most people, proper nutrition, diet and exercise can preserve a high level of health well into later life.
7. Because of low mortality and fertility rates, Western societies are rapidly greying or ageing. The older population constitutes a large and rapidly growing category that is extremely diverse economically, socially and politically. However, it is now possible to divide a third and a fourth age representing the 'young-old' and the 'old-old'. The greying of the population has resulted in a greater 'dependency ratio'. This has led to new debates about the funding of services for older people.
8. Functionalist theories of ageing originally argued that the disengagement of older people from society was desirable. Disengagement theory held that older people should pull back from their traditional social roles as younger people move into them. Activity theory, on the other hand, soon came to emphasize the importance of being engaged and busy as a source of vitality. Conflict theorists of ageing have focused on how the routine operation of social institutions produces various forms of inequality among older people. The most recent theories regard older people as capable of taking control over their own lives and playing an active role in politics and the economy.
9. Older people are more likely to be materially disadvantaged than other groups. Older women are also more likely to suffer from poverty than their male counterparts, and older members of ethnic minorities are more likely to suffer poverty than older white people.
10. Death, dying and bereavement have now become part of life-course studies. Many developed societies have hidden death and dying behind the scenes of social life but some now appear to be undergoing an informalization of mourning as people seek new, less rigid, more individualized public rituals and personalized ways of dealing with death and dying.

Further reading

Two very good texts which follow from some of the key issues on ageing in this chapter are, Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs's *Contexts of Ageing: Class, Cohort and Community* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), which has a special focus on the 'third age'; and Bill Bytheway's *Ageism* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), which is a very accessible account of discrimination against older people.

From there, you could explore ageing in a European context in John Bond, Sheila M. Peace, Freya Dittmann-Kohli and Gerben Westerhof's edited *Ageing in Society: European Perspectives on Gerontology*, 3rd edn (London: Sage Publications, 2007). Miriam Bernard and Thomas Scharf's edited *Critical Perspectives on Ageing Societies* (Ageing and the Life-course Series) (Bristol: Policy Press, 2007), explores current debates in this field.

Looking to the future, Phil Mullan's *The Imaginary Time Bomb: Why an Ageing*

Population is Not a Social Problem (London: A. B. Tauris, 2000) makes a critical argument against the idea that the greying of societies is inevitably problematic. Then John A. Vincent, Chris Phillipson and Murna Downs's edited collection of 21 essays, *The Futures of Old Age* (London: Sage Publications, 2005) takes these issues further by looking ahead to both the possibilities and problems facing ageing societies.

A comprehensive and worthwhile – if very large (770 pages) – book, which can be approached for particular life-course subjects, is Malcolm Johnson's edited *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Finally, anyone interested in reading more about the sociological issues surrounding death, dying and bereavement could try Glennys Howarth's *Death and Dying: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) and/or Tony Walter's *The Revival of Death* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Internet links

The World Health Organization on Ageing and the Life-course:
www.who.int/ageing/en/

HelpAge International – a good source of information on ageing across the world:
www.helpage.org/Home

The Centre for Policy on Ageing (UK):
www.cpa.org.uk/index.html

OECD – research on ageing, mainly in the developed world:
www.oecd.org/topic/0,2686,en_2649_37435_1_1_1_1_37457,00.html

The United Nations Programme on Ageing:
www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/

The Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath, UK:
www.bath.ac.uk/cdas/



CHAPTER 9

Families and Intimate Relationships

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Romantic love has not always been at the centre of intimate relationships.

Have you ever been in love? Almost certainly you have. Most people from their teens onwards know what being in love is like. Love and romance provide, for many of us, some of the most intense feelings we ever experience. But why do people fall in love? The answer at first sight seems obvious. Love expresses a mutual and physical attachment that two individuals feel for one another. These days, we might be sceptical of the idea that love is 'for ever', but falling in love, we tend to think, is an experience arising from universal human emotions. It seems natural for a couple who fall in love also to want personal and sexual fulfilment in their relationship, perhaps by marrying and/or starting a family.

Yet this situation, which may just appear 'natural' to most of us today, is in fact very unusual. Beginning a long-term partnership, or starting a family, with

someone with whom you have fallen in love is not an experience that most people across the world have. In early modern Europe, royal and aristocratic marriages were very often arranged primarily on political grounds, or for reasons of enhancing or maintaining family status. And although 'arranged marriages' across the world are now less common than once they were, amongst certain South Asian communities, they remain the norm. In all these cases, falling in love is rarely thought of as having any connection to marriage or starting a family. The idea of basing a long-term partnership on romantic love did not become widespread in European societies until fairly recently, and has never existed at all in many other cultures where more material or pragmatic reasons take precedence.

Only in modern times have love and sexuality come to be seen as closely connected in the Western industrialized societies. John Boswell, a historian of medieval Europe, has remarked on the unusual nature of modern ideas about romantic love. In Europe during the Middle Ages, virtually no one married for love; there was even a medieval saying: 'To love one's wife with one's emotions is adultery.' In those days and for centuries afterwards, men and women married mainly in order to keep property in the hands of the family or to raise children for working on the family farm. Once married, they may have become close companions, but this happened after marriage rather than before. People sometimes had sexual affairs outside marriage, but these inspired few of the emotions we currently associate with love. Romantic love was regarded as at best a weakness and at worst a kind of sickness.

Modern attitudes today are almost completely the opposite. Boswell quite rightly speaks of the 'virtual obsession of modern industrial culture' with romantic love:

Those immersed in this 'sea of love' tend to take it for granted. . . . Very few

premodern or non-industrialized contemporary cultures would agree with the contention – uncontroversial in the West – that 'the purpose of a man is to love a woman, and the purpose of a woman is to love a man.' Most human beings in most times and places would find this a very meagre measure of human value! (Boswell 1995: xix)

It was only in the late eighteenth century that the concept of romantic love began to make its presence felt. Romantic love – as distinct from the near universal compulsions of passionate love – involved idealizing its object. The notion of romantic love more or less coincided with the emergence of the novel as a literary form and the spread of romantic novels played a vital part in spreading the idea (Radway 1984). For women in particular, romantic love involved telling stories about how the relationship could lead to personal fulfilment.

Romantic love, therefore, cannot be understood as a natural part of human life; rather, it has been shaped by broad social and historical influences. For most people in the industrialized world today, the couple – married or unmarried – is at the core of what the family is. The couple came to be at the centre of family life as the economic role of the family dwindled and love, or love and sexual attraction, became the basis of forming marriage ties. However, we will also see later in this chapter that the term 'family' should by no means only be understood as involving a heterosexual couple and their children.

Today, most people in the developed countries believe that a good relationship is based on emotional communication or intimacy. The idea of intimacy, like so many other familiar notions we have discussed in this book, is a recent one. Marriage was never in the past based on intimacy and emotional communication, and although this was important to a good marriage, it was not the foundation of it. For the modern couple, it is. Communication is the means of establishing a good relationship in the first place, and it is

the chief rationale for its continuation. A good relationship is a relationship of equals, in which both parties have equal rights and obligations. In such a relationship, each person has respect, and wants the best, for the other. Talk, or dialogue, is the basis of making the relationship work. Relationships function best if people do not hide too much from each other: there has to be mutual trust. And trust has to be worked at; it cannot just be taken for granted. Finally, a good relationship is one free from arbitrary power, coercion or violence (Giddens 1993).

The theme of much of this book has been social change. We live in a turbulent, difficult and unfamiliar world today. Whether we like it or not, we all must come to terms with the mixture of opportunity and risk it presents. The discussion of romantic love shows that nowhere is this observation truer than in the domain of personal and emotional life.

How do we begin to understand the nature of these changes and their impact on our lives? It is only possible to understand what is going on with intimate relationships and with the family as a social institution today if we know something about how people lived in the past and how people currently live in societies across the world. So in this chapter, we look at the historical development of marriage and the family. We then examine families and intimate relationships in Europe, using Britain – the first industrializing society (see chapter 4) – as a reference point for our national comparisons. The final section of the chapter looks at some of the theoretical perspectives that attempt to explain the family and intimate relationships, before concluding by turning to the current debate on ‘family values’.

Basic concepts

We need first of all to define some basic concepts, particularly those of **family**, kinship and marriage. A family is a group of persons directly linked by kin connections,

the adult members of whom assume responsibility for caring for children. **Kinship** ties are connections between individuals, established either through marriage or through the lines of descent that connect blood relatives (mothers, fathers, siblings, offspring, etc.). **Marriage** can be defined as a socially acknowledged and approved sexual union between two adult individuals. When two people marry, they become kin to one another; the marriage bond also, however, connects together a wider range of kinspeople. Parents, brothers, sisters and other blood relatives become relatives of the partner through marriage.

Family relationships are always recognized within wider kinship groups. In virtually all societies we can identify what sociologists and anthropologists call the **nuclear family**, two adults living together with their own or adopted children in a **household**. Households are single individuals or groups of people who share a common housing unit, common living rooms and the essentials for living, such as food. In most traditional societies, the nuclear family was part of a larger kinship network of some type. When close relatives other than a married couple and children live either in the same household or in a close and continuous relationship with one another, we speak of an **extended family**. An extended family may include grandparents, brothers and their wives, sisters and their husbands, aunts and nephews.

In most Western societies, marriage, and therefore the family, are associated with **monogamy**. It is illegal for a man or woman to be married to more than one spouse at any one time. This is not the case everywhere, however. In a famous comparison of several hundred societies in the mid-twentieth century, George Peter Murdock (1949) found that **polygamy**, which allows a husband or wife to have more than one spouse, was permitted in more than 80 per cent of them. There are two types of polygamy: **polygyny**, in which a man may be married to more than one woman at the

same time, and **polyandry**, much less common, in which a woman may have two or more husbands simultaneously. In 1998, the *Ethnographic Atlas Codebook* reported that of 1,231 societies worldwide, 453 had occasional polygyny, 588 had more regular polygyny and just 4 had polyandry – a total of 84 per cent, a similar proportion to that found by Murdock 50 years earlier. The majority of these polygamous societies were in parts of Africa and South Asia. The best-known group to practise polygamy in the West are the Fundamentalist Mormons, based largely in Utah, in the United States, where although the practice is illegal, prosecutions are rare. The practice of having many wives was abandoned by mainstream Mormons a century ago as a condition of Utah becoming part of the United States. It is estimated that 30,000 fundamentalists still practise polygamy in Utah.

Many sociologists believe that we cannot speak about 'the family' as if there is just one model of family life that is more or less universal. There are many different family forms: two-parent families, step-families,

lone-parent families and so on. The sociologist Diana Gittins (1993) has argued that it seems more appropriate to speak of 'families' rather than 'the family'. Referring to 'families' emphasizes the diversity of family forms. While as a shorthand term we may often speak of 'the family', it is vital to remember what a variety this covers.

The family in historical context

Sociologists once thought that, prior to the modern period, the predominant form of family in Western Europe was of the extended type. Research has shown this view to be mistaken. The nuclear family, consisting of a father, mother and dependent children, seems long to have been pre-eminent. Pre-modern household size was larger than it is today, but the difference is not especially great. In England, for example, throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the average household size was 4.75 persons (though

An unusual family photograph showing Utah polygamist Tom Green with his five wives and some of his 29 children.



this included domestic servants). Today the average household size in the UK is around 2.4 people (HMSO 2004), though this masks some large differences across ethnic groups. For example, white British and black Caribbean households average 2.2 people, while Bangladeshi and Pakistani households average 4.4 and 4.1 persons respectively (HMSO 2007). The UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands lie at the lower end of the European spectrum of household size; Portugal, Spain, Malta and Slovakia are at the higher end, averaging around 3.0 persons per household (Eurostat 2007).

The development of family life

Children in pre-modern Europe were often working – helping their parents on the farm – from the age of 7 or 8. Those who did not remain in the family enterprise frequently left the parental household at an early age to do domestic work in the houses of others or to follow apprenticeships. Children who went away to work in other households would rarely see their parents again.

Other factors made family groups even more impermanent than they are now, in spite of the currently high rates of divorce. Rates of mortality (the number of deaths per 1,000 of the population in any one year) for people of all ages were much higher. A quarter or more of all infants in early modern Europe did not survive beyond the first year of life, in contrast to well under 1 per cent today, and women frequently died in childbirth. The death of children or of one or both spouses often shattered family relations.

The historian John Boswell (mentioned at the start of this chapter) has noted:

In premodern Europe marriage usually began as a property arrangement, was in its middle mostly about raising children, and ended about love. Few couples in fact married 'for love', but many grew to love each other in time as they jointly managed their household, reared their offspring, and shared life's experiences. Nearly all surviving epitaphs to spouses evince

profound affection. By contrast, in most of the modern West, marriage begins about love, in its middle is still mostly about raising children (if there are children), and ends – often – about property, by which point love is absent or a distant memory. (1995: xxi)

The way we never were? Myths of the traditional family

Many people, generally writing from a conservative point of view, argue that family life is becoming dangerously undermined. They contrast what they see as the decline of the family with more traditional and stable forms of family life. But was the family of the past as peaceful and harmonious as many people recall it, or is this simply an idealized fiction? In *The Way We Never Were* (1992), Stephanie Coontz points out that, as with other visions of a previous golden age, the rosy light shed on the 'traditional family' dissolves when we look back to previous times to see what things really were like.

Many admire the apparent discipline and stability of the nineteenth-century Victorian family. However, because families at this time suffered especially high death rates, the average length of marriages was fewer than 12 years, and more than half of all children saw the death of at least one parent by the time they were 21. The admired discipline of the Victorian family was rooted in the strict authority of parents over their children. The way in which this authority was exercised would be considered exceedingly harsh by today's standards.

If we consider the Victorian family of the 1850s, the ideal family still eludes us. In this period, some middle-class wives were more or less confined to the home. According to Victorian morality, women were meant to be strictly virtuous, while men were sexually licentious: many visited prostitutes and paid regular visits to brothels. In fact, wives and husbands often had little to do with one another, communicating only through their children. Moreover, domesticity was not even an option for poorer social groups of

Classic Studies 9.1 Lawrence Stone on the family in Europe

The research problem

Modern families seem very different from previous families. No one can be unaware that modern family life has undergone much change even within a single generation. But what were families like hundreds of years ago? Did people have the same attitudes to sex and marriage? What functions did families perform in earlier societies? In *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (1980), historical sociologist, Lawrence Stone, tried to answer these questions, charting some key changes leading from pre-modern to modern forms of family life in Europe. In doing so, he distinguished three phases in the development of the family from the 1500s to the 1800s.

Stone's explanation

In the early 1500s, the main English family form was a type of nuclear family. People lived in fairly small households but maintained relationships that were embedded within the community, including other kin. Families were not so clearly separated from the community as many are today. Stone argues that the family at that time was not a major focus of *emotional* attachment or dependence for its members. For example, people did not experience, or look for, the emotional closeness that we associate with family life today.

Sex within marriage was not regarded as a source of pleasure, but as a necessity to propagate children. Individual freedom of choice in marriage and other matters of family life were subordinated to the interests of parents, other kin or the community. Outside aristocratic circles, where it was sometimes actively encouraged, erotic or romantic love was regarded by moralists and theologians as a sickness. As Stone puts it, the family during this period 'was an open-ended, low-keyed, unemotional, authoritarian institution. . . . It was also very short-lived, being frequently dissolved by the death of the husband or wife or the death or very early departure from the home of the children' (1980: 17).

This type of family was succeeded by a 'transitional form' that lasted from the early

seventeenth century to the beginning of the eighteenth. This later type was largely confined to the upper reaches of society, but it was very important because from it spread attitudes that have since become almost universal. The nuclear family became a more separate entity, distinct from ties to other kin and to the local community. There was a growing stress on the importance of marital and parental love, although there was also an increase in the authoritarian power of fathers.

In the third phase, the type of family we are most familiar with in the West today gradually evolved. This family is a group tied by close emotional bonds, enjoying a high degree of domestic privacy, preoccupied with the rearing of children. It is marked by the rise of **affective individualism** – the formation of marriage ties on the basis of personal selection, guided by sexual attraction or romantic love. Sexual aspects of love came to be glorified within marriage instead of in extramarital relationships. The family became geared to consumption rather than production, as a result of the increasing number of workplaces that were separate from the home. Women became associated with domesticity and men with being 'breadwinners'. In recent decades, the idea of a male breadwinner 'heading' the family is being increasingly challenged, as more women enter the workplace and family structures continue to diversify.

Critical points

Stone's three-phase history has been subjected to much critique. First, a series of medieval historians has shown, against his thesis, that love was quite often found in English marriages before the eighteenth century. Second, many have seen Stone's main arguments as rather unoriginal. For instance, describing the demise of extended kin groups and the consequent rise of individualism was a theme in the work of Max Weber and other early social scientists. Third, Stone's linkage of the lack of emotional closeness to harsh material conditions of life ignores many anthropological studies documenting very loving relationships within

family groups in very poor communities (by modern standards). Stone's theory of emotional development then appears much weaker.

Contemporary significance

The critical reception of Stone's work has led to some significant revisions to his long story of English family history. However, social science research often develops through empirical criticism of bold theses such as Stone's, which point out where the theory's generalizations claim more than the evidence will support. No single piece of research in historical sociology

will ever tell us the whole truth about a period covering as long as three centuries, but the contemporary value of Stone's work is twofold. First, it stimulated others to try and prove him wrong, to refute the thesis in some way and, in so doing, we gained more accurate knowledge of an earlier period of social life; second, Stone was not afraid to adopt a sociological imagination in his study of historical materials, looking for patterns in social development. This is an important aspect of sociological work, which can be traced all the way back to the discipline's founders.

this period. In factories and workshops, families worked long hours with little time for a home life. Child labour was also very common in these groups.

Our most recent memory draws us to the 1950s as the time of another possible 'ideal family'. This was a period when many women worked in the home, while men were perceived as responsible for earning the 'family wage'. Yet large numbers of women did not actually want to retreat to a purely domestic role, and felt miserable and trapped in it. Many women had held paid jobs during the Second World War as part of the war effort and they lost these jobs when men returned home. Men were still emotionally removed from their wives and often observed a strong sexual double standard, seeking sexual adventures for themselves but setting a strict code for their spouse.

The American author Betty Friedan (1921–2006) wrote a best-selling book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), about women's lives in the 1950s. Friedan struck a chord with many thousands of women within and outside the USA when she spoke of the 'problem with no name'. That is, the oppressive nature of a domestic life bound up with childcare, domestic drudgery and a husband who only occasionally put in an appearance and with whom little emotional

communication was possible. Even more severe than an oppressive home life were the alcoholism and violence suffered within many families during a time when society was not fully prepared to confront these issues.

As sociologists, we must be careful not to let people's ideas of how society *ought* to be affect our reporting of the *evidence* of society's reality, however disturbing that might be.

THINKING CRITICALLY

If the traditional family, as described above, is 'a myth', why do so many people still believe in it? What social consequences might follow from people's belief in and commitment to this mythical family form?

Families in global context

There is a diversity of family forms today in different societies across the world. In some areas, such as more remote regions in Asia, Africa and the Pacific Rim, traditional family systems are little altered. In most developing countries, however, widespread changes are occurring. The origins of these changes are complex, but several factors can be picked out as especially important.



Was the nuclear family ever really the norm?

One is the spread of Western culture. Western ideals of romantic love, for example, have spread to societies in which they were previously unknown. Another factor is the development of centralized government in areas previously composed of autonomous smaller societies. People's lives become influenced by their involvement in a national political system; moreover, governments make active attempts to alter traditional ways of behaviour. Because of the problem of rapidly expanding population growth, for example in China, states frequently introduce programmes that advocate smaller families, the use of contraception, and so forth. A further influence is the large-scale migration from rural to urban areas. Often men go to work in towns or cities, leaving family members in the home village. Alternatively, a nuclear family group will move as a unit to the city. In both cases, traditional family forms and

kinship systems may become weakened. Finally, and perhaps most important, employment opportunities away from the land and in such organizations as government bureaucracies, mines, plantations and – where they exist – industrial firms tend to have disruptive consequences for family systems previously centred on landed production in the local community.

In general, these changes can be seen as creating a worldwide movement towards the breaking down of extended family systems and household kinship groups, though relations between kinspeople continue to be important sources of social bonds. William J. Goode first documented the decline of extended families in his book *World Revolution in Family Patterns* (1963), and though the trends he identified were appropriate given the evidence available at the time, it is now clear that, globally, families are developing in a variety of different

directions. A significant criticism of Goode's argument is its reliance on structural functionalist theory, as set out by Talcott Parsons (see chapter 3 for a discussion of Parsons's ideas). For example, Goode argued that as the process of modernization spread across the world, it is likely that the 'conjugal [or nuclear] family' would become the dominant form because of its close 'fit' with the needs of industrialization and industrial culture. Since the 1960s though, the pace of social change and its impact on families has led to some changes that Goode simply could not have foreseen and, as we will see later in this chapter, families today seem to be more notable for their diverse range of forms than for their uniform character.

Recent empirical studies of the family in a global perspective have reinforced this conclusion. One important recent study is Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn's *Between Sex and Power* (2004), an extensive global history of the family over the entire twentieth century and thus beyond Goode's timeframe. Therborn discusses five major family types that have been shaped by particular religious or philosophical world-views: sub-Saharan African (Animist); European/North American (Christian); East Asian (Confucian); South Asian (Hindu) and West Asia/North Africa (Islamic). Two others – the Southeast Asian and Creole American – are described as 'interstitial systems', combining elements from more than one of the five major types.

The institution of the family, Therborn argues, has been structured by three central elements across all these familial types: patriarchy or male dominance, marriage and non-marriage in the regulation of sexual behaviour, and fertility and birth control measures in the production of demographic trends. Focusing on these three elements allows international comparisons to be made. We can take each element in turn.

Patriarchal power *within* the family has generally declined over the twentieth

century. He identifies two key periods of change. The first was after the First World War, when women were needed to work for the war effort, and the Russian Revolution, which challenged the patriarchal ideology of women's 'natural' domestic role in favour of egalitarian ideals. The second was between the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and the 1975 'International Women's Year', when second-wave feminism reinforced the shifting position of women in society, gaining legislative measures to enable women formally to participate in public life outside of their domestic role. The second period of change, argues Therborn, was more noticeable in Europe and America, with less pronounced changes in the family situations of South Asia, West Asia and North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. In more recent years, he sees evidence that the economic power of women has been growing in the textile and electronics industries in the developing world, which could reshape patriarchal family relations there too.

Marriage and family patterns have changed across the world in the twentieth century, but Therborn's studies lead to a different conclusion from that reached in Goode's earlier work. The different family types are *not* becoming increasingly similar, conforming to the Western nuclear family model. In most developed countries, intimate relationships have become more open and less bound by tradition, especially since the 1960s. The combination of increasing rates of divorce, high remarriage rates and more people living alone seems to disprove the thesis of a convergence of family structures, even in the West. Therborn also argues that there is no evidence that such change and fluidity in family life is spreading globally. For example, in most of Asia, people remain committed to monogamy within marriage, while in sub-Saharan Africa, polygamous relationships continue to be the norm. The nuclear family, so important in functionalist theory, does not look set to dominate in the twenty-first century.

Finally, Therborn sees possibly the major change of the last century to be a falling global fertility rate, with the significant exception of sub-Saharan Africa. This is the product of more effective birth control methods, rising economic prosperity and the increasing movement of women into the paid workforce, thereby improving their own position within societies. As we discuss in detail in chapter 8, 'The Life-Course', such demographic changes will mean, for most countries, that populations will decline and societies will 'age', with a higher proportion of older people living longer.

If diversity is the most notable feature of families across the world, are there any general patterns emerging? Perhaps the most important general changes we can observe at this point are:

- 1 Clans and other kin-based groups are declining in influence.
- 2 There is a widespread trend towards the free selection of a spouse.
- 3 The rights of women are becoming more widely recognized, in respect to both the initiation of marriage and decision-making within the family.
- 4 Higher levels of sexual freedom, for men and women, are developing in some societies that were previously very restrictive.
- 5 There is a general trend towards the extension of children's rights.
- 6 There is an increased acceptance of same-sex partnerships, though this is unevenly distributed across the world's societies.

It would be a mistake to exaggerate these trends; many of them are still being fought for and are bitterly contested. For example, the suppression of women's rights in Afghanistan under the Taliban from 1996 to 2001 – discussed in chapter 22, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements' – shows that such trends are not uniform. Moreover, there are differences in the speed at which change is occurring, and there are

reversals and countertrends that have to be considered too.

Families and intimate relationships

Given the culturally diverse character of modern societies, there are considerable variations in family and marriage too. Some of the most striking include differences between family patterns of white and non-white people, and we need to consider why this is so. We will then move on to examine issues surrounding divorce and remarriage in relation to contemporary patterns of family life. Let us first, however, describe some basic characteristics which nearly all families in Britain, most of Europe and the industrialized world share.

Key features of the family in European and other Western countries, include the following:

- 1 The family is monogamous, monogamy being established in law. Given the high rate of divorce that now exists in the industrialized countries, however, some observers have suggested that this marriage pattern should be called *serial monogamy*. That is to say, individuals are permitted to have a number of spouses in sequence, although no one may have more than one wife or husband at any one time. It is misleading, though, to muddle legal monogamy with sexual practice. It is obvious that a high proportion of Europeans engage in sexual relations with individuals other than their spouses.
- 2 European marriage is based on the idea of romantic love. Affective individualism has become the major influence. Couples are expected to develop mutual affection, based on personal attraction and compatibility, as a basis for contracting marriage relationships. Romantic love as part of marriage has become 'naturalized' in the developed

world; it seems to be a normal part of human existence, rather than a distinctive feature of modern culture. Of course, the reality is divergent from the ideology. The emphasis on personal satisfaction in marriage has raised expectations which sometimes cannot be met, and this is one factor involved in the increasing rate of divorce.

- 3 The modern family is patrilineal and neo-local. **Patrilineal** inheritance involves children taking the surname of the father. In the past it also meant that property would usually pass down the male line, although this is far less common today. (Many societies in the developing world are **matrilineal** – surnames, and often property, pass down the female line.) A **neo-local residence** pattern involves a married couple moving into a dwelling away from both their families. Neo-localism, however, is not an absolutely fixed trait of European family life. Many families, particularly in poorer, working-class or South Asian neighbourhoods, are **matrilocal** – the newly weds settle in an area close to where the bride's parents live (if the couple lives near or with the groom's parents, it is called **patrilocal**).
- 4 The modern family is often described as nuclear, consisting of one or two parents living in a household with their children, although nuclear family units are by no means completely isolated from other kin ties. However, the dominance of the nuclear family is being eroded in the industrialized world, as we will see below.

Development and diversity in family patterns

In the 1980s, Rapoport et al. argued that, 'families in Britain today are in transition from coping in a society in which there was a single overriding norm of what a family should be like to a society in which a plurality of norms are recognised as legitimate

and, indeed, desirable' (1982: 476). Substantiating this argument, they identified five types of diversity: *organizational, cultural, class, life-course* and *cohort*. We could add to this list *sexual* diversity. The diversity of family forms that Rapoport et al. identified is even more obvious across European societies today than when they first wrote about Britain in 1982.



Socialization and life stages are also discussed in chapter 8, 'The Life-Course'.

Families *organize* their respective individual domestic duties and their links with the wider social environment in a variety of ways. The contrast between 'orthodox' families – the woman as 'housewife', the husband as 'breadwinner' – and dual-career or one-parent families illustrates this diversity. *Culturally*, there is greater diversity of family benefits and values than used to be the case. The presence of ethnic minorities (such as families of South Asian or West Indian origin, which are discussed below) and the influence of movements such as feminism have produced considerable cultural variety in family forms. Persistent *class* divisions between the poor, the skilled working classes and the various groupings within the middle and upper classes sustain major variations in family structure. Variations in family experience during the *life-course* are fairly obvious. For instance, one individual might come into a family in which both parents had stayed together, and go on to marry and then divorce. Another person might be brought up in a single-parent family, be multiply married and have children by each marriage.

The term *cohort* refers to generations within families. Connections between parents and grandparents, for example, have probably now become weaker than they were. On the other hand, more people now live into old age, and three 'ongoing' families might exist in close relation to one another: married grandchildren, their parents and the grandparents. There is also greater

sexual diversity in family organizations than ever before. As homosexuality becomes increasingly accepted in many Western societies, partnerships and families are formed based on partnerships between homosexual as well as heterosexual couples.

» Gay marriage and civil partnerships are discussed in chapter 14, 'Sexuality and Gender'.

South Asian families

Among the variety of family types in Europe, there is one pattern distinctively different from most others – that associated with South Asian groups. The South Asian popu-

lation of the UK numbers more than a million people today. Migration began in the 1950s from three main areas of the Indian subcontinent: Punjab, Gujarat and Bengal. In Britain, these migrants formed communities based on religion, area of origin, caste and, most importantly, kinship. Many migrants found their ideas of honour and family loyalty almost entirely absent among the indigenous British population. They tried to maintain family unity, but housing proved a problem. Large old houses were available in run-down areas; moving up-market usually meant moving into smaller houses and breaking up the extended family.

South Asian extended families show strong familial bonds.



South Asian children born in Europe today are often exposed to two very different cultures. At home, their parents expect or demand conformity to the norms of cooperation, respect and family loyalty. At school, they are expected to pursue academic success in a competitive and individualistic social environment. Most choose to organize their domestic and personal lives in terms of the ethnic subculture, as they value the close relationships associated with traditional family life. Yet involvement with Western culture has brought changes. The Western tradition of marrying 'for love' frequently comes into conflict with the practice of arranged marriages within Asian communities. Such unions, arranged by parents and family members, are predicated on the belief that love comes from within marriage. Young people of both sexes are demanding greater consultation in the arrangement of their marriages.

Statistical findings from the UK Policy Study Institute's fourth national survey of ethnic minorities (Modood et al. 1997) indicate that Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and African-Asians were the ethnic groups most likely to be married. In 2001, among all families with dependent children, 65 per cent of Asian or Asian British one-family households consisted of a married couple, while among whites and African-Caribbeans, the percentages were somewhat lower. Cohabitation was proportionately smaller amongst Asian and Asian British couples with children than it was amongst other ethnic groups (see table 9.1). Although there appear to be some signs of change among South Asian families in Britain – such as young people wanting a greater say in marriages and a slight rise in divorces and lone-parent households – on the whole, South Asian ethnic groups in the UK and across Europe continue to have remarkably strong familial bonds.

Black families

Families of African-Caribbean origin in Europe have a different structure again. In

the UK there are far fewer black women aged between 20 and 44 living with a husband than there are white women in the same age group. Rates of divorce and separation are higher among African-Caribbeans than among other ethnic groups in Britain. As a result, lone-parent households are more common among African-Caribbeans than among any other ethnic minority; yet, unlike other groups, single African-Caribbean mothers are more likely to be employed (Modood et al. 1997). The high proportion of lone-parent families (the vast majority of which are headed by the mother) amongst the black or black British population compared to other ethnic groups can be seen in table 9.1.

In the UK, the same factors seem to be at work among black families in the poorer neighbourhoods of London and other European cities. Many discussions of black families concentrate on the low rates of formal marriage, but some observers believe that this emphasis is misplaced. The marriage relationship does not necessarily form the structure of the black family as it does for the family in other groups. Extended kinship networks are important in West Indian groups – much more significant, relative to marital ties, than in most white European communities. A mother heading a lone-parent family is likely to have a close and supportive network of relatives to depend on. Siblings also play an important role in many African-Caribbean families by helping to raise younger children (Chamberlain 1999). This contradicts the idea that black single parents and their children necessarily form unstable families.

Inequality within the family

Balancing work and care

Gender inequalities vary across the world's societies. A 2007 survey by the World Economic Forum found that women had made the most progress towards equal participation in Sweden, with Norway,

Table 9.1 British families with dependent children: by ethnic group,^a 2001 (%)

	One family households			Other households with dependent children	All
	Married couple families	Cohabiting couple families	Lone-parent families		
White	60	12	22	6	100
Mixed	38	11	39	12	100
Asian or Asian British					
Indian	68	2	10	21	100
Pakistani	61	2	13	24	100
Bangladeshi	63	2	12	23	100
Other Asian	66	3	12	19	100
All Asian or Asian British	65	2	11	22	100
Black or black British					
Black Caribbean	29	11	48	12	100
Black African	38	7	36	19	100
Other Black	24	9	52	15	100
All black or black British	32	9	43	15	100
Chinese	69	3	15	13	100
Other ethnic group	67	3	18	12	100
All ethnic groups	60	11	22	7	100

^a Of household reference person

Source: HMSO Social Trends 34 (2004): 28

Finland and Iceland making up the top four standings. The UK came ninth. Yemen came in last, with Saudi Arabia, Chad and Pakistan completing the bottom four positions. However, in balancing work and care, one of the major factors affecting women's careers is the male *perception* that for female employees, work comes second to having children.

One study carried out in Britain in the mid-1980s investigated the views of managers interviewing female applicants for positions as technical staff in the health services (Homans 1987). The researchers found that the interviewers always asked the women about whether or not they had, or intended to have, children (in 2004 a

European Directive formally prohibited 'discrimination on grounds of pregnancy and maternity'). They virtually never followed this practice with male applicants. When asked why, two themes ran through their answers: women with children may require extra time off for school holidays or if a child falls sick, and responsibility for childcare is a mother's problem rather than a parental one.

Some managers thought their questions indicated an attitude of 'caring' towards female employees. But most saw such a line of questioning as part of their task to assess how far a female applicant would prove a reliable colleague. Thus, one manager remarked:



There is a high proportion of lone parents amongst the UK's African-Caribbean population.

It's a bit of a personal question, I appreciate that, but I think it's something that has to be considered. It's something that cannot happen to a man really, but I suppose in a sense it's unfair – it's not equal opportunity because the man could never find himself having a family as such. (Homans 1987)

While men cannot biologically 'have a family' in the sense of bearing children, they can be fully involved in and responsible for childcare. Such a possibility was not taken into account by any of the managers studied. The same attitudes were held about the promotion of women. Women were seen as likely to interrupt their careers to care for young children, no matter how senior a position they might have reached. The few women in this study who held senior management positions were all without children, and several of those who planned to have children in the future said they

intended to leave their jobs and would perhaps retrain for other positions subsequently. Most managers accepted the principle that women should have the same career opportunities as men, but the bias in their attitudes was closely linked to cultural ideas of who is responsible for parenting.

In addition, as we saw earlier, the average wage of employed women is well below that of men, although the difference has narrowed somewhat over the past 30 years. In the 25 countries of the European Union, the gender pay gap (the difference between average gross hourly pay of men and women) in 2004 stood at 15 per cent, though this has reduced from 17 per cent in 1998 (Eurostat 2007). Even within the same occupational categories, women on average earn lower salaries than men.

In *Working Women Don't Have Wives* (1994), Terri Apter argues that women find

themselves struggling with two contradictory forces. They want and need economic independence, but at the same time they want to be mothers to their children. Both goals are reasonable, but while men with wives who take prime responsibility for domestic work can achieve them, women cannot do likewise. Greater flexibility in working life is one partial solution. Much more difficult is getting men to alter their attitudes.

THINKING CRITICALLY

List all of the factors you can think of as to why men tend not to be as involved in domestic tasks as women. What connections are there between these factors and social stereotypes of men and women? How could such gendered stereotypes be changed?

Housework

Although there have been revolutionary changes in women's status in recent decades in Europe, including the entry of women into male-dominated professions, one area of work has lagged far behind: **housework**. Because of the increase in the number of married women in the workforce, and their resulting change in status, it was presumed that men would contribute more to housework. On the whole, this has not been the case. Although men now do more housework than they did three decades ago and women do slightly less (as can be seen from the data in table 9.2), the balance is still unequal and varies widely across Europe. In Greece, Turkey and Malta the female-male difference in time spent on housework remains more than 70 per cent, a disparity that reduces to below 30 per cent in Sweden and Denmark. The European average gender difference sits at 53 per cent, which indicates that in the area of housework, at least, gender equality still has quite a way to go.

This conclusion is borne out in many European studies. Surveys in the UK have found that women still do the majority of housework and childcare, on average

spending 4 hours 3 minutes per day on these activities compared to 2 hours 17 minutes for men (HMSO 2005). Some sociologists have argued that where women are already working in the paid sector, this extra work, in effect, amounts to a 'second shift' (Hochschild 1989; Shelton 1992). In the late 1980s, findings like these led Arlie Hochschild to call the state of relations between women and men a 'stalled revolution'. Why does housework remain women's work? This question has been the focus of a good deal of research in recent years.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that it is the result of economic forces: household work is exchanged for economic support. Because women earn, on average, less than men, they are more likely to remain economically dependent on their husbands and thus perform the bulk of the housework. Until the earnings gap is narrowed, women are likely to remain in their dependent position. Hochschild (1989) has suggested that women are thus doubly oppressed by men: once during the 'first shift' and then again during the 'second shift'. But while this dependency model contributes to our understanding of the gendered aspects of housework, it starts to break down when applied to situations where the wife earns more than her husband. For instance, of the husbands studied by Hochschild who earned less than their wives, none of them shared in the housework.

The problem can be approached from a symbolic interactionist perspective, asking how the performance or non-performance of housework is related to the gender roles created by society. For example, through interviews and participant observation, Hochschild found that the assignment of household tasks falls clearly along gendered lines. Wives do most of the daily chores, such as cooking and routine cleaning, while husbands tend to take on more occasional tasks, such as mowing the lawn or doing home repairs. The major difference between these two types of task is the amount of control the individual has over

Table 9.2 People doing daily housework in Europe (%)

Country	Sex respondent		Total	Female–Male difference
	Male	Female		
Finland	64	95	79	31
Sweden	65	90	77	25
Romania	60	93	76	33
Denmark	65	86	74	21
Hungary	46	93	70	47
Slovakia	47	92	70	45
Luxembourg	44	92	69	48
Belgium	44	91	68	47
Estonia	53	84	68	31
Bulgaria	33	95	66	62
Lithuania	44	90	66	46
Netherlands	47	86	66	39
Germany	36	90	64	54
Latvia	43	85	64	42
Portugal	27	96	62	69
France	32	86	61	54
Slovenia	30	96	61	66
Austria	28	89	59	61
Greece	18	94	59	76
UK	36	80	58	44
Italy	26	88	57	62
Turkey	15	91	57	76
Ireland	33	78	56	45
Malta	21	91	54	70
Cyprus	19	80	53	61
European average*	35	88	62	53

* Sample was weighted according to the population size of each country.

Source: Voicu, B., Boicu, M. and Strapcova, K. (2007) Engendered Housework: A Cross European Analysis (IRISS Working Paper, May 2007).

when they do the work. The jobs done by women in the home are those that tend to bind them to a fixed schedule, whereas men's household tasks are done less regularly and are more discretionary.

In *Feeding the Family* (1991), the sociologist Marjorie Devault looked at how the caring activities within a household are socially constructed as women's work. She argues that women perform the bulk of the housework because the family 'incorporates a strong and relatively enduring association of caring activity with the woman's position in the household'. Observing the division of responsibility for cooking, Devault remarks that the gendered relations of feeding and eating 'convey the message that giving service is part of being a woman, and receiving it is fundamentally part of being a man'. Even in households where men contribute, an egalitarian division of household labour between spouses is greatly impeded when the couple have children – children require constant attention, and their care schedules are often unpredictable. Mothers overwhelmingly spend more time on childrearing tasks than do their spouses (Shelton 1992).

Sociologists argue that underlying this inequitable distribution of tasks is the implicit understanding that men and women are responsible for, and should operate in, different spheres. Men are expected to be providers, while women are expected to tend to their families – even if they are breadwinners as well as mothers. Expectations like this reinforce traditional gender roles learned during childhood socialization. By reproducing these roles in everyday life, men and women 'do gender' and reinforce gender as a means for society to differentiate between men and women.

Intimate violence

Since family or kin relations form part of everyone's existence, family life encompasses virtually the whole range of emotional experience. Family relationships

– between wife and husband, parents and children, brothers and sisters, or distant relatives – can be warm and fulfilling. But they can equally well contain the most pronounced tensions, driving people to despair or filling them with a deep sense of anxiety and guilt. This side of family life belies the rosy images of harmony that are quite often emphasized in TV commercials and elsewhere in the popular media. Domestic violence and the abuse of children are two of the most disturbing aspects.

Sexual abuse of children

The sexual abuse of children can be defined as the carrying out of sexual acts by adults with children below the age of consent (16 years old in Britain). Incest refers to sexual relations between close kin. Not all incest counts as child sexual abuse. For example, sexual intercourse between brother and sister is incestuous, but does not fit the definition of abuse. In child sexual abuse, an adult is essentially exploiting an infant or child for sexual purposes. Nevertheless, the most common form of incest is one that is also child sexual abuse – incestuous relations between fathers and young daughters.

Incest, and child sexual abuse more generally, are phenomena that have been 'discovered' only in the past few decades. Of course it has long been known that such sexual acts occur, but it was assumed by most social observers that the strong taboos that exist against this behaviour meant that it was extremely uncommon. This is not the case. Child sexual abuse has proved to be disturbingly commonplace. It is probably found more often among poorer families, but exists at all levels of the social hierarchy – as well as in institutions.

Although in its more obvious versions its nature is plain, the full extent of child sexual abuse is difficult, if not impossible, to calculate accurately because of the many forms it can assume. Corrine May-Chahal and Maria Herczog's (2003) 'informed estimate' suggests that 10–20 per cent of children in Europe will be sexually assaulted during



Families can be the setting of violence and tension as well as affection and support, with children later replicating their experiences in adulthood and parenthood.

their childhood. The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child helped to raise awareness of child sexual abuse and, in a 1999 survey, only 1 per cent of Europeans had never heard of child sexual abuse within the family. In the same survey, 97 per cent thought that child sexual abuse *was* a form of violence (ibid.). However, no fully agreed definitions of either child abuse in general or child sexual abuse in particular have been arrived at, either by researchers or in the courts, and this makes cross-national comparisons highly unreliable.

In the UK, one section of the Children Act 1989 speaks of 'significant harm' being caused by lack of reasonable care – but what is 'significant' is left quite vague. The *National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children* (NSPCC) defines four categories of abuse: 'neglect', 'physical abuse', 'emotional abuse' and 'sexual abuse'. Sexual

abuse is defined as 'sexual contact between a child and adult for the purpose of the adult's sexual gratification' (Lyon and de Cruz 1993).

Force or the threat of violence is involved in many cases of incest. In some instances, children are more or less willing participants, but this seems quite rare. Children are sexual beings, of course, and quite often engage in mild sexual play or exploration with one another. But most of the children subjected to sexual contact with adult family members find the experience repugnant, shameful or disturbing. There is now considerable material to indicate that child sexual abuse may have long-term consequences for its sufferers. Studies of prostitutes, juvenile offenders, adolescent runaways and drug-users show that a high proportion have a history of child sexual abuse. Of course, correlation is not causation. Demonstrating that people in these

categories have been sexually abused as children does not show that such abuse was a causal influence over their later behaviour. Probably a range of factors is involved, such as family conflicts, parental neglect and physical violence.

Domestic violence

We may define domestic violence as physical abuse directed by one member of the family against another or others. Studies show that the prime targets of physical abuse are children, especially small children. In England, the horrific murder of an 8-year-old girl, Victoria Climbié, in February 2000 brought extreme forms of domestic violence against children to the public's attention. Victoria, who had come to Europe from West Africa, died of hypothermia after months of torture and neglect inflicted by her great-aunt, Marie Therese Kouao, and the woman's boyfriend, Carl Manning. Her abusers were jailed for life in November 2000. During their trial, police and health and social services were all criticized for missing opportunities to save the girl. The government ordered an inquiry, chaired by Lord Laming, which examined the role of the professionals and made recommendations to the government on how to prevent such a tragedy from happening again (Laming 2003).

Violence by men against their female partners is the second most common type of domestic violence. In the UK, two women each week are killed by their partners. At any one time 10 per cent of women are experiencing domestic violence, and it affects between a third and a quarter of women at some point in their lives. Domestic violence is the most common crime against women, who are at greater risk of violence from men in their own families or from close acquaintances than they are from strangers (Rawstome 2002).

On 27 November 2006, the Council of Europe launched a campaign to combat violence against women, including domestic violence. The campaign stated:

An overview of figures for the prevalence of violence against women suggests that one-fifth to one-quarter of all women have experienced physical violence at least once during their adult lives, and more than one-tenth have suffered sexual violence involving the use of force. Secondary data analysis supports an estimate that about 12% to 15% of all women have been in a relationship of domestic abuse after the age of 16. Many more continue to suffer physical and sexual violence from former partners even after the break-up.

Levels of domestic violence in Eastern Europe were not really known about until after the break-up of the former Soviet Union in 1991, which brought with it a more open exchange of information. Surveys by the Astra Network (Central and Eastern European Women's Network for Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights) in 1993 found that 29 per cent of women in Romania, 22 per cent in Russia, 21 per cent in Ukraine and more than 42 per cent of married and cohabiting women in Lithuania, said they had been victims of 'physical or sexual violence or threats of violence by their present partner'. In the same year, some 60 per cent of divorced women in Poland reported having been hit at least once by their former husbands (UNICEF 2000b).

Globally, domestic violence is similarly widespread. A study by the *Commonwealth Fund* estimated that almost 4 million women are physically abused each year in the United States, while a 1995 survey by the Beijing Marriage and Family Affairs Research Institute discovered that 23 per cent of husbands admitted to beating their wives. In 1993, some 60 percent of Chilean women involved in a relationship for two years or more were surveyed: 60 per cent said they had been abused by their male partner. The Domestic Violence Research Group in Japan found that 59 percent of the 796 women questioned in 1993 reported having been physically abused by their partner. Finally, in 1992, surveys in Ecuador and

Korea found that 60 percent of low-income women in the former and 38 per cent of women in the latter reported having been beaten by their spouse or partner in the previous year (Marin et al. 1998).

The issue of domestic violence attracted popular and academic attention during the 1970s as a result of the work undertaken by feminist groups with refuge centres for 'battered women'. Before that time, domestic violence, like child abuse, was a phenomenon that was tactfully ignored as a private matter. Feminist studies of patriarchy and domestic violence drew attention to the ways in which such privatization of violence and abuse worked to uphold the dominance of men in patriarchal societies. It was feminist studies which documented the prevalence and severity of violence against women in the home. Most violent episodes between spouses reported to the police involve violence by husbands against their wives. There are far fewer reported cases of women using physical force against their husbands. Feminists have pointed to such statistics to support their claims that domestic violence is a major form of male control over women.



For theories and evidence of patriarchy, see chapter 14, 'Sexuality and Gender'.

In a backlash against feminist arguments, conservative commentators have claimed that violence in the family is not about patriarchal male power, as feminists contend, but about 'dysfunctional families'. Violence against women is a reflection of the growing crisis of the family and the erosion of standards of morality. They question the finding that violence from wives towards husbands is rare, and suggest that men are less likely to report instances of violence against them from their wives than vice versa (Straus and Gelles 1986).

Such assertions have been strongly criticized by feminists and by other scholars who argue that violence by females is in any case more restrained and episodic than that

of men, and much less likely to cause enduring physical harm. They argue that it is not sufficient to look at the 'number' of violent incidents within families. Instead, it is essential to look at the meaning, context and effect of violence. 'Wife battering' – the regular physical brutalizing of wives by husbands – has no real equivalent the other way round. Research found that violence by women against their male partners is often defensive rather than offensive, with women resorting to violence only after suffering repeated attacks over time (Rawstorne 2002). Men who physically abuse children are also much more likely to do so in a consistent way, causing long-standing injuries, than are women.

Why is domestic violence relatively commonplace? Several sets of factors are involved. One is the combination of emotional intensity and personal intimacy characteristic of family life. Family ties are normally charged with strong emotions, often mixing love and hate. Quarrels which break out in the domestic setting can unleash antagonisms that would not be felt in the same way in other social contexts. What seems only a minor incident can precipitate full-scale hostilities between partners or between parents and children. A man tolerant towards eccentricities in the behaviour of other women may become furious if his wife talks too much at a dinner party or reveals intimacies he wishes to keep secret.

A second influence is the fact that a good deal of violence within the family is actually tolerated, and even approved of. Although socially sanctioned family violence is relatively confined in nature, it can easily spill over into more severe forms of assault. Many children in Britain have at some time been slapped or hit, if only in a minor way, by one of their parents. Such actions quite often meet with general approval on the part of others, and they are probably not even thought of as 'violence' – although there is increasing pressure from some groups for the UK to follow many of the

other European countries, which have legislation outlawing the physical punishment of children.

Social Class

While no social class is immune to spousal abuse, several studies indicate that it is more common among low-income couples (Cherlin 1999). More than three decades ago, William Goode (1971) suggested that low-income men may be more prone to violence because they have few other means with which to control their wives, such as a higher income or level of education. In addition, the high levels of stress induced by poverty and unemployment may lead to more violence within families. In support of these assertions, Gelles and Cornell (1990) found that unemployed men are nearly twice as likely as employed men to assault their wives.

Divorce and separation

The rise of divorce

For many centuries in the West and other parts of the world, marriage was regarded as virtually indissoluble. A divorce was granted only in very limited cases, such as non-consummation of marriage. Today, however, legal divorce is possible in virtually all of the industrialized and developing societies of the world. Only in Malta and the Philippines is divorce still not legally recognized, though Maltese couples can obtain a 'foreign divorce' from another country if one or both partners are 'habitually resident' there. Seen in a global perspective, these are now isolated examples. Most countries have moved rapidly towards making divorce more easily available.

The so-called adversarial system used to be characteristic of virtually all industrialized countries. For a divorce to be granted, one spouse had to bring charges (for example, cruelty, desertion or adultery) against the other. The first 'no fault' divorce laws were introduced in some countries in the mid-1960s. Since then, many Western

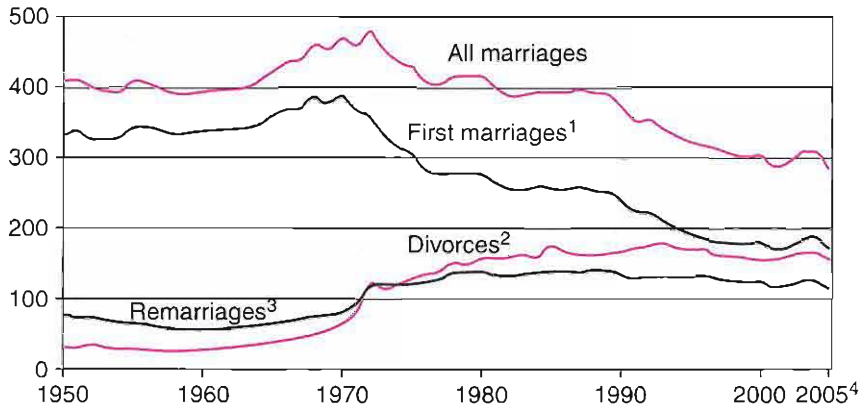
states have followed suit, although the details vary. In the UK, the Divorce Reform Act, which made it easier for couples to obtain a divorce and contained 'no fault' provisions, was passed in 1969 and came into effect in 1971. The 'no fault' principle was further consolidated in a new bill passed in 1996.

Between 1960 and 1970 the divorce rate in Britain grew by a steady 9 per cent each year, doubling within that decade. By 1972 it had doubled again, partly as a result of the 1969 Act, which made it easier for many in marriages that had long been 'dead' to get a divorce. Since 1980 the divorce rate has stabilized to some degree, but remains at a very high level compared to any previous period. Around two-fifths of all marriages in the UK now end in divorce. The fall in the number of marriages each year and the rise in the number of divorces are shown in figure 9.1.

Similar trends in marriage and divorce can be seen across the European Community, with some national variations. Marriage rates over the decade 1994–2004 have generally fallen (see figure 9.2), with the notable exception of the Nordic countries: Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland.

Taking a longer view of European divorce rates shows that since the 1960s, rates have risen and remained higher in most national contexts (see figure 9.3), though the exceptions this time are some Eastern European countries such as Romania and Croatia where divorce rates have gone down. The patterns of marriage and divorce in the UK then are far from unique, with British trends actually forming part of much larger Europe-wide social trends.

Divorce rates are obviously not a direct index of marital unhappiness. For one thing, rates of divorce do not include people who are separated but not legally divorced. Moreover, people who are unhappily married may choose to stay together – because they believe in the sanctity of marriage, or worry about the financial or



¹ For both partners.

² Includes annulments. Data for 1950 to 1970 for Great Britain only. Divorces was permitted in Northern Ireland from 1969.

³ For one or both partners.

⁴ Data for 2005 are provisional. Final figures are likely to be higher.

Figure 9.1 Marriages and divorces in the UK (thousands)

Source: HMSO Social Trends (2007), 18

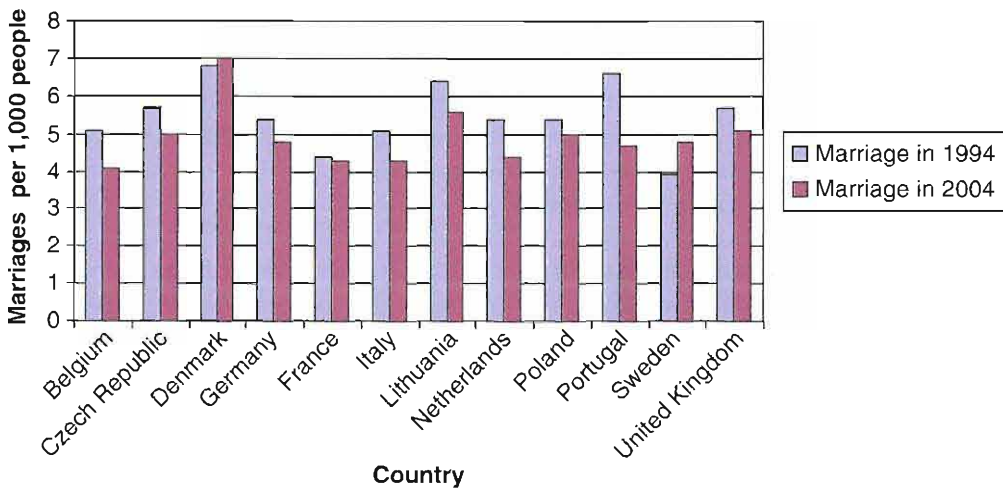


Figure 9.2 European marriage rates, 1994 and 2004 (selected countries)

Source: Adapted from the Eurostat Yearbook 2006–07

emotional consequences of a break-up, or wish to remain with one another to give their children a 'family' home.

Why is divorce becoming more common? Several factors are involved, to do with wider social changes. Except for a very small

proportion of wealthy people, marriage today no longer has much connection with the desire to perpetuate property and status from generation to generation. As women become more economically independent, marriage is less of a necessary economic

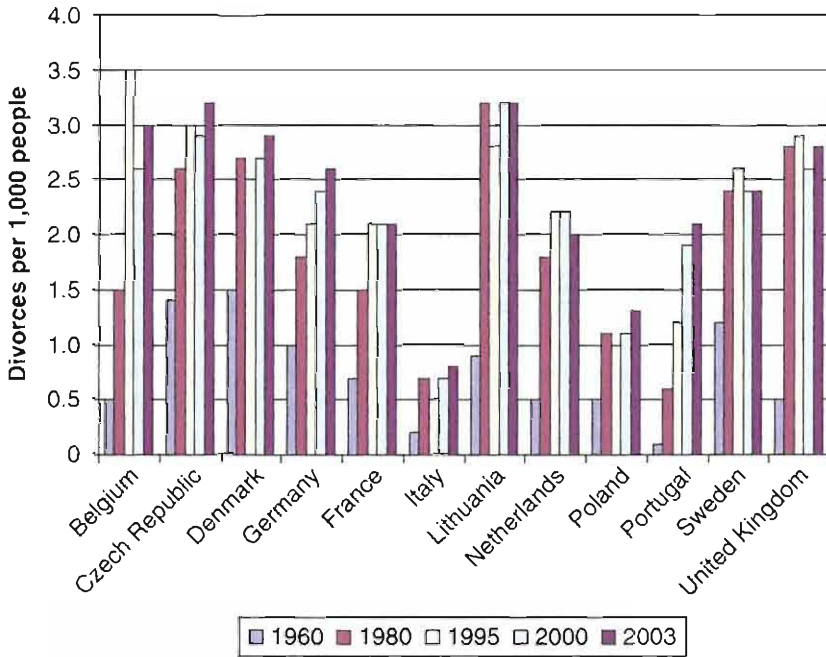


Figure 9.3 Divorce rates in Europe, 1960–2004 (selected countries)

Source: Eurostat Yearbook 2006–07

partnership than it used to be. Greater overall prosperity means that it is easier to establish a separate household, if there is marital disaffection, than used to be the case. The fact that little stigma now attaches to divorce is in some part the result of these developments, but also adds momentum to them. A further important factor is the growing tendency to evaluate marriage in terms of the levels of personal satisfaction it offers. Rising rates of divorce do not seem to indicate a deep dissatisfaction with

marriage as such, but an increased determination to make it a rewarding and satisfying relationship.

Lone-parent households

Lone-parent households have become increasingly common in the developed countries over recent decades, though the pattern is quite varied. Lone parents make up a relatively low percentage of households with dependent children in Greece (6.7 per cent), Spain (7.1 per cent) and Portugal (8.4 per cent), with much higher proportions in Belgium (13.7 per cent), Denmark (18.8 per cent) and Sweden (22 per cent). The USA and New Zealand have even higher proportions of lone parents, at 31 and 29 per cent respectively, but Japan has just 8 per cent (Institute for Child and Family Policy 2004).

The UK currently has the highest proportion of lone-parent families in Europe, increasing from 7 per cent in 1971 to 24 per cent in 2006 (HMSO 2007: 16). It is important

THINKING CRITICALLY

Reflecting on the experience of your family and friends, what reasons do people give for getting divorced? Do such reasons support the thesis that high rates of divorce do not mean that people are rejecting marriage? What sociological evidence is there that marriage remains a highly valued social institution?

9.1 Diane Vaughan on 'uncoupling': the experience of breaking up

It is extremely difficult to draw up a balance sheet of the social advantages and costs of high levels of divorce. More tolerant attitudes mean that couples can terminate an unrewarding relationship without incurring social ostracism. On the other hand, the break-up of a marriage is almost always emotionally stressful for both the couple and their children, and may create financial hardship for one or both parties.

In *Uncoupling: The Turning Points in Intimate Relationships* (1990), Diane Vaughan analysed the relationships between partners during the course of separation or divorce. She carried out a series of interviews with more than 100 recently separated or divorced people (mainly from middle-class backgrounds) to chart the transition from living together to living apart. The notion of uncoupling refers to the break-up of a long-term intimate relationship. She found that in many cases, before the physical parting, there had been a social separation – at least one of the partners developed a new pattern of life, becoming interested in new pursuits and making new friends in contexts in which the other was not present. This usually meant keeping secrets from the other – especially, of course, when a relationship with a lover was involved.

According to Vaughan's research, uncoupling is often unintentional at first. One individual – whom she called the initiator – becomes less satisfied with the relationship than the other, and creates a 'territory' independent of the activities in which the couple engages together. Today, some 90 per

cent of initiators are women. For some time before this, the initiator may have been trying unsuccessfully to change the partner, to get him or her to behave in more acceptable ways, foster shared interests and so forth. At some point, the initiator feels that the attempt has failed and that the relationship is fundamentally flawed. From then onwards, he or she becomes preoccupied with the ways in which the relationship or the partner is defective. Vaughan suggests this is the opposite of the process of 'falling in love' at the beginning of a relationship, when an individual focuses on the attractive features of the other, ignoring those that might be less acceptable.

Initiators seriously considering a break notably discuss their relationship extensively with others, 'comparing notes'. In doing so, they weigh the costs and benefits of separation. Can I survive on my own? How will friends and parents react? Will the children suffer? Will I be financially solvent? Having thought about these and other problems, some decide to try again to make the relationship work. For those who proceed with a separation, these discussions and enquiries help make the break less intimidating, building confidence that they are doing the right thing. Most initiators become convinced that a responsibility for their own self-development takes priority over commitment to the other.

Of course, uncoupling is not always entirely led by one individual. The other partner may also have decided that the relationship cannot be saved. In some situations, an abrupt reversal of roles occurs. The person who previously wanted to save the relationship becomes determined to end it, whilst the erstwhile initiator wishes to carry on.

to note that lone parenthood with dependent children is an overwhelmingly female category in the UK (table 9.3) and everywhere else. On average, they are among the poorest groups in contemporary societies. Many lone parents, whether they have ever been married or not, still face social disapproval as well as economic insecurity. Earlier

and more judgemental terms such as 'deserted wives', 'fatherless families' and 'broken homes' are tending to disappear, however.

The category of lone-parent household is an internally diverse one. For instance, more than half of widowed mothers are owner-occupiers, but the vast majority of

Table 9.3 UK households, 1971–2006: by type of household and family (%)

	1971	1981	1991	2001	2006
One person					
Under state pension age	6	8	11	14	14
Over state pension age	12	14	16	15	14
One-family households					
Couple ¹					
No children	27	26	28	29	28
1–2 dependent children ²	26	25	20	19	18
3 or more dependent children ²	9	6	5	4	4
Non-dependent children only	8	8	8	6	7
Lone parent ¹					
Dependent children ²	3	5	6	7	7
Non-dependent children only	4	4	4	3	3
Two or more unrelated adults	4	5	3	3	3
Multi-family households	1	1	1	1	1
All households (=100%) (=millions)	18.6	20.2	22.4	23.8	24.2

1 Other individuals who were not family members may also be included

2 May also include non-dependent children

Source: HMSO Social Trends 37 (2007), 14

never-married lone mothers live in rented accommodation. Lone parenthood tends to be a changing state, and its boundaries are rather blurred: there are multiple paths both entering into and exiting from lone parenthood. In the case of a person whose spouse dies, the break is obviously clear-cut – although even here a person might have been living on his or her own in practical terms if the partner was in hospital for some while before they died. About 60 per cent of lone-parent households today, however, are brought about by separation or divorce.

Amongst the lone-parent families in the UK, the fastest growing category is that of single, never-married mothers. By the late 1990s, they constituted 9 per cent of the total number of families with dependent children. Of these, it is difficult to know how many have deliberately opted to raise children alone. Most people do not wish to

be lone parents. The ongoing *Millennium Cohort Study*, which is currently following the lives of children born in the first few years of this century, has found that younger women are more likely to become solo mothers, and that the more educated the woman, the more likely she is to have a baby within marriage. The research also revealed that for 85 per cent of solo mothers, their pregnancy was unplanned, in contrast to 52 per cent of cohabiting couples and 18 per cent of married women. For the majority of unmarried or never-married mothers, there is also a high correlation between the rate of births outside marriage and indicators of poverty and social deprivation. As we saw earlier, these influences are very important in explaining the high proportion of lone-parent households among families of West Indian background in the UK. However, a growing minority of women are now

Table 9.4 All families: by type and presence of children, 2004, UK (%)

	With dependent children	With non-dependent children only	With no children	All
Married	38	13	49	100
Cohabiting couple	38	4	58	100
Lone mother	73	27	–	100
Lone father	50	50	–	100
All families	43	14	42	100

Notes:

Family: a married/cohabiting couple with or without child(ren), or a lone parent with child(ren)

Dependent children: aged under 16, or aged 16–18 in full-time education and never married.

Non-dependent children: never married children aged 16 and over who have no children and are living with their parent(s) (excludes children aged 16–18 in full-time education). There is no age limit.

Source: ONS 2005b

choosing to have a child or children without the support of a spouse or partner. ‘Single mothers by choice’ is an apt description of some lone parents, normally those who possess sufficient resources to manage satisfactorily as a single-parent household.

In *Family Policy, Family Changes*, Patricia Morgan (1999) suggested a direct link between differential levels of welfare support for lone parents and the diverse proportions of lone-parent families across Europe. In particular, she argues that the main reason why Sweden and the UK have the largest proportions of lone-parent families compared with, say, Italy, is because Italian family allowances have been very low and the primary source of support for young people has been the family. Morgan argues that, in states where lone parenting is not subsidized, it is less prevalent.

However, this may be too simplistic. Crow and Hardey (1992) argue that the great diversity of ‘pathways’ into and out of lone-parent families means that they do not as a whole constitute a uniform or cohesive group. Although lone-parent families may

share certain material and social disadvantages in common, they have little collective identity. The plurality of routes means that, for the purposes of social policy, the boundaries of lone parenthood are difficult to define and the needs are difficult to target.

Fathering and the ‘absent father’

Recent political debates on the role of fathers have been dominated by the idea of the ‘absent father’, especially during the period from the late 1930s up to the 1970s. During the Second World War, many fathers, because of war service, only rarely saw their children. In the period following the war, in a high proportion of families women were not in the paid labour force and stayed at home to look after the children. The father was the main breadwinner and, consequently, was out at work all day; he would see his children only in the evenings and at weekends.

With rising divorce rates in more recent years, and the increasing number of lone-parent households, the theme of the **absent father** has come to mean something quite different. It has come to refer to fathers who, as a result of separation or divorce, have

only infrequent contact with their children or who lose touch with them altogether. In both Britain and the United States, which have among the highest divorce rates in the world, this situation has provoked intense debate, with some proclaiming the 'death of the dad'.

One outcome of high divorce rates has been the emergence of organizations lobbying for the rights of fathers. In the UK, Netherlands and the USA, the pressure group Fathers 4 Justice (F4J) has gained a high profile as a result of well-publicized stunts, protest marches and direct action carried out by activists. In May 2004, F4J activists threw a condom filled with purple flour at the British Prime Minister in the House of Commons and a few months later one campaigner scaled the walls of Buckingham Palace dressed as the comic-book hero, Batman – 'every father is a superhero to his children'. The group claims that the law, which aims to serve 'the best interests' of the child, is actually biased in favour of the mother when couples split up, by making it difficult for fathers to stay in contact with their children.

Writing from contrasting perspectives, sociologists and commentators have seized on the increasing proportion of fatherless families as the key to a whole diversity of social problems, from rising crime to mushrooming welfare costs for child support. Some have argued that children will never become effective members of a social group unless they are exposed to constant examples of negotiation, cooperation and compromise between adults in their immediate environment (Dennis and Erdos 1992). Boys who grow up without a father will struggle to be successful parents themselves, according to such arguments.

American authors have figured prominently in the debate and have had a great deal of influence over discussions of the issue in Europe, but especially in the UK. In *Fatherless America* (1995), David Blankenhorn argues that societies with high divorce rates are facing not just the loss of fathers

but the very erosion of the idea of fatherhood – with lethal social consequences, because many children are growing up now without an authority figure to turn to in times of need. Marriage and fatherhood in all societies up to the present provided a means of channelling men's sexual and aggressive energies. Without them, these energies are likely to be expressed in criminality and violence. As one reviewer of Blankenhorn's book put it: 'better to have a dad who comes home from a nasty job to drink beer in front of the television than no dad at all' (*The Economist* 1995).

Yet, is it? The issue of absent fathers overlaps with that of the more general question of the effects of divorce on children – and there the implications of the available evidence are far from clear. Some scholars have suggested that the key question is not whether the father is present, but how engaged he is in family life and parenting. In other words, the make-up of the household may not be as important as the quality of care, attention and support that children receive from its members. Since the 1980s, issues of good parenting and, in particular, good 'fathering' have become more prominent in political debates and academic research (Hobson 2002).

As women move into paid employment in increasingly larger numbers, men's contribution to domestic tasks and childcare does not seem to be increasing at the same pace. For example, one American study (Yeung et al. 2002) found that on weekdays, neither the earnings of a working mother nor her work hours had any effect on her involvement in childcare; for fathers, on the other hand, both earnings and working hours *did* significantly affect time spent on childcare. This suggests that assumptions of women as primary care-givers remain strong even in dual-earner families. In Europe, two campaigns by the Equal Opportunities Commission have sought ways to promote 'active fatherhood', including increasing paternity-leave entitlement, promoting family-friendly work-



Across European countries, provisions for paternity leave vary greatly.

places and changing the long-hours culture of many European countries, such as the UK and Greece.

European provision for fathers is very diverse. In Sweden, both parents are entitled to 450 days of paid leave at the birth or adoption of a child, 13 months at 80 per cent of salary for most parents and the rest at a lower rate, and employees are entitled to go back to their previous job or a similar one when they do return. However, in Greece, Italy and Spain, fathers do not normally take parental leave. In Spain parental leave is unpaid; in Italy it is not a parent's right to take leave; and in Greece, such leave is not guaranteed in companies with fewer than 50 employees (Flouri 2005). These three countries also have the lowest female labour market participation in the European Union, at around 40 per cent. The USA only

introduced maternity leave in 1993; Australia has no provision for paid maternity or paternity leave and New Zealand introduced paid maternity leave as late as 2002, but still has no provision for paid paternity leave.

Nevertheless, in Sweden, the most generous provider for fathers, it is still mothers who take 85 per cent of all parental leave, an overwhelming majority. Also, many Swedish fathers are reluctant to take their 'papa leave' entitlement for fear of losing out to colleagues for promotion or upsetting employers; in addition, women's wages lag behind those of men and just 2 out of 282 listed companies have female chief executives. We have to be cautious when drawing conclusions about particular national situations, as the introduction of particular policies does not necessarily mean that they

will be taken advantage of by the social groups they target.

A comparative analysis of European data (Lamb 2002) showed a wide variety of fathers' involvement in childcare. In Swedish dual-earning families, fathers spent, on average, 10.5 hours per workday and 7.5 hours per non-workday with their infants (more than the mothers in such families), the highest such figure in any European country. Earlier studies found that US fathers spent between 15–20 minutes and 3 hours with infants on workdays, while Israeli fathers spent 2.75 hours. German and Italian fathers spend less time with their infants than do fathers in the UK, Israel or Ireland. What can we conclude from such a diverse body of evidence? It seems that there is a growing interest in fathering, and parenting more generally, in the light of wider concerns about youth crime and the effects of 'bad' parenting or the absence of a 'father figure' in the lives of young men. Such interest and concerns have led to new policies aimed at increasing fathers' engagement in childcare and domestic life. However, even where such policies have been introduced, wider social and economic factors and long-standing gendered assumptions about male and female roles continue to play a strong part in determining the extent to which government policy can shape the dynamics of family life. This means that families and households need to be studied in relation to broader social changes and transformations.

Changing attitudes to family life

There seem to be substantial class differences affecting reactions to the changing character of family life and the existence of high levels of divorce. In *Families on the Fault Line* (1994), Lillian Rubin interviewed the members of 32 working-class families in depth. She concluded that, compared to middle-class families, working-class parents tend to be more traditional. The

norms that many middle-class parents have accepted, such as the open expression of pre-marital sex, are more widely disapproved of by working-class people, even where they are not particularly religious. In working-class households, there tends therefore to be more of a conflict between the generations.

The young people in Rubin's study agree that their attitudes towards sexual behaviour, marriage and gender divisions are distinct from those of their parents. But they insist that they are not just concerned with pleasure-seeking. They simply hold to different values from those of the older generation.

Rubin found the young women she interviewed to be much more ambivalent about marriage than were their parents' generation. They were keenly aware of the imperfections of men and spoke of exploring the options available and of living life more fully and openly than was possible for their mothers. The generational shift in men's attitudes was not as great.

Rubin's research was carried out in the United States, but her findings accord closely with those of researchers in European countries. Helen Wilkinson and Geoff Mulgan carried out two large-scale studies of men and women aged between 18 and 34 in the UK (Wilkinson 1994; Wilkinson and Mulgan 1995). They found major changes happening in the outlook of young women in particular; and that the values of this age group contrasted in a general way with those of the older generations in Britain.

Among young women, there is 'a desire for autonomy and self-fulfilment, through work as much as family' and 'the valuing of risk, excitement and change'. In these terms, there is a growing convergence between the traditional values of men and the newer values of women. The values of the younger generation, Wilkinson and Mulgan suggest, have been shaped by their inheritance of freedoms largely unavailable to earlier generations – freedom for women to work and control their own reproduction, freedom of mobility for

9.2 Carol Smart and Bren Neale's *Family Fragments*?

Between 1994 and 1996, Carol Smart and Bren Neale carried out two rounds of interviews with a group of 60 parents from West Yorkshire who had either separated or divorced after the passage of the 1989 Children Act. This Act altered the situation facing parents and children on divorce by abolishing the old notions of 'custody' and 'access' so that parents would no longer feel that they had to fight over their children. The Act meant that the legal relationship between children and their parents was not changed by divorce; it also encouraged parents to share childrearing and required judges and others to listen more to the views of children. Smart and Neale were interested to know how patterns of parenting were initially formed after divorce and how they changed over time. In their investigation, they compared parents' expectations about post-divorce parenting at the point of separation with the 'reality' of their circumstances one year later.

Smart and Neale found that parenting after divorce involved a process of constant adjustment that many parents had not anticipated and were ill-prepared for. Parenting skills which worked as part of a two-parent team were not necessarily successful in a lone-parent household. Parents were forced to re-evaluate continuously their approaches to parenting, not only in terms of 'big decisions' affecting their children, but also in regard to the everyday aspects of childrearing that were now occurring across two households instead of one. Following a divorce, parents faced two opposing demands – their own needs for separation and distance from their former spouse, and the need to remain connected as part of co-parenting responsibilities.

Smart and Neale found that the lived experience of post-divorce parenting was extremely fluid and changed over time. When interviewed a year after their separation, many parents were able to look back at the initial stages of lone parenting and assess the parenting decisions they had made. They often re-evaluated their behaviour and actions in the light of their changing understandings.



"Thanks to separations, divorces and remarriages, I've got 20 grandparents."

For example, many parents were worried about the harm that their children would suffer as a result of the divorce, but were unsure how to transform their fears and sense of guilt into constructive action. This led some parents to hold on too tightly to their children or to treat them like 'adult' confidants. In other cases it led to alienation, distance and the loss of meaningful connections.

In the media and certain political contexts, according to the authors, there is an implicit – and sometimes explicit – assumption that, after divorce, adults abandon morality and begin to act selfishly and in their own interests. All of a sudden, flexibility, generosity, compromise and sensitivity disappear; the moral framework in which decisions about family and welfare were previously made gets discarded. Smart and Neale's interviews with divorced parents led them to reject this argument. They claim that parents do operate within a moral framework when parenting, but that it is perhaps best understood as a morality of care rather than an unambiguous moral reasoning based on set principles or beliefs. Smart and Neale argue that, as parents care for their children, so decisions emerge about 'the proper thing to do'. These decisions are highly contextual; parents must weigh

[cont'd . . .]

a large number of considerations, including the effects of the decision on the children, whether it is the appropriate time to act and what harmful implications it might have on the co-parenting relationship. Consider the following from a lone mother whose ex-husband requested custody of their children:

I said, 'Look, if you really, really feel that you can look after these kids on a full-time basis, don't you think you ought to give yourself a weekend with them and then just see how it feels and then maybe after a weekend maybe progress to say you're having them for a full week and see how you cope with them.' He just absolutely hit the roof because he's got this thing in his head that he'd be baby-sitting for me, so he said 'No.' I said, 'Look, in that case I'm not even prepared to discuss it with you because I feel you just don't know how hard it is, you haven't had the children on a full-time basis for three years, I do feel that you're just out of it a little. [I feel you should have them] in a normal everyday routine, bringing them to school, picking them up from school, cooking, cleaning, washing and

ironing for them, helping them with their homework, if they're sick, nursing them. And then we will rediscuss, reassess the situation.' (Smart and Neale 1999)

Here the mother was trying to determine the 'right thing to do' while balancing multiple factors. In the context of a difficult relationship with her former spouse and the need to defend the progress she had made in her own self-development, she was still attempting to work constructively with him in the interests of the children.

Smart and Neale conclude that divorce unleashes changes in circumstances which can rarely be 'put straight' once and for all. Successful post-divorce parenting demands constant negotiation and communication. While the 1989 Children's Act has added necessary flexibility to contemporary post-divorce parenting arrangements, its emphasis on the welfare of the child may overlook the crucial role played by the quality of the relationship between divorced parents.

both sexes and freedom to define their own style of life. Such freedoms lead to greater openness, generosity and tolerance; but they can also produce a narrow, selfish individualism and a lack of trust in others. Of those in the sample, 29 per cent of women and 51 per cent of men wanted to 'delay having children as long as possible'. Of women in the 16–24 age group, 75 per cent believed that single parents can bring up children as well as a couple can. The study found that marriage was losing its appeal for both women and men in this age group.

New partnerships, step-families and kin relations

Remarriage

Remarriage can involve various circumstances. Some remarried couples are in

their early 20s, neither of them bringing a child to the new relationship. Couples that remarry in their late 20s, their 30s or early 40s might each take one or more children from the first marriage to live with them. Those who remarry at later ages might have adult children who never live in the new homes that the parents establish. There may also be children within the new marriage itself. Either partner of the new couple may previously have been single, divorced or widowed, adding up to eight possible combinations. Generalizations about remarriage therefore have to be made with considerable caution, although some general points are worth making.

In 1900 about nine-tenths of all marriages in the United Kingdom were first marriages. Most remarriages involved at least one widowed person. With the rise in the divorce rate, the level of remarriage also began to

climb, and an increasing proportion of remarriages began to involve divorced people. In 1971, 20 per cent of UK marriages were remarriages (for at least one partner); by 2001 that number was more than 40 per cent (as figure 9.1 above shows).

Odd though it might seem, the best way to maximize the chances of getting married, for both sexes, is to have been married before! People who have been married and divorced are more likely to marry again than single people in comparable age groups are to marry for the first time. At all age levels, divorced men are more likely to remarry than divorced women: three in every four divorced women, but five in every six divorced men, remarry. In statistical terms, at least, remarriages are less successful than first marriages. Rates of divorce from second marriages are higher than those from first marriages.

This does not show that second marriages are doomed to fail. People who have been divorced may have higher expectations of marriage than those who have not. Hence they may be more ready to dissolve a new marriage than those only married once. It is possible that the second marriages which endure might be more satisfying, on average, than first marriages.

Step-families

The term 'step-family' refers to a family in which at least one of the adults has children from a previous marriage or relationship. Sociologists often refer to such groups as **reconstituted families**. There are clearly joys and benefits associated with reconstituted families and with the growth of extended families which results. But certain difficulties also tend to arise. In the first place, there is usually a biological parent living elsewhere whose influence over the child or children is likely to remain powerful.

Second, cooperative relations between divorced individuals are often strained when one or both remarries. Take the case of a woman with two children who marries a man who also has two children, and they all live together. If the 'outside' parents insist

that children visit them at the same times as before, the major tensions involved in melding such a newly established family together will be exacerbated. For example, it may prove impossible ever to have the new family together at weekends.

Third, reconstituted families merge children from different backgrounds, who may have varying expectations of appropriate behaviour within the family. Since most step-children 'belong' to two households, the likelihood of clashes in habits and outlook is considerable. Here is a step-mother describing her experience, after the problems she faced led to separation:

There's a lot of guilt. You cannot do what you would normally do with your own child, so you feel guilty, but if you do have a normal reaction and get angry, you feel guilty about that, too. You are always so afraid you will be unfair. Her [step-daughter's] father and I did not agree and he would say I nagged if I disciplined her. The more he did nothing to structure her, the more I seemed to nag. . . . I wanted to provide something for her, to be an element of her life which was missing, but perhaps I am not flexible enough. (Smith 1990)

There are few established norms which define the relationship between step-parent and step-child. Should a child call a new step-parent by name, or is 'Dad' or 'Mum' more appropriate? Should the step-parent discipline the children as a natural parent would? How should a step-parent treat the new spouse of his or her previous partner when collecting the children?

Reconstituted families are developing types of kinship connection, which are quite recent additions to modern Western societies; the difficulties created by remarriage after divorce are also new. Members of these families are developing their own ways of adjusting to the relatively uncharted circumstances in which they find themselves. Some authors today speak of **binuclear families**, meaning that the two households which form after a divorce still comprise one family system where there are children involved.

THINKING CRITICALLY

From your own experience, have step-families become equally acceptable in modern societies? What new problems, issues and opportunities can you think of that might arise for the children growing up within step-families? How might governments tackle the new problems facing step-families?

Kinship relations

As family structures become more fluid and diverse, with high levels of divorce, remarriage and the creation of step-families, sociologists are increasingly interested in understanding what is happening to the relationships between family members. What does it now mean to be a brother or a sister, for example? What ties exist amongst siblings and how do they perceive their obli-

gations towards each other and to parents, grandparents and other family members? Indeed, who counts as kin anyway?

In an early study of kinship in the UK, Raymond Firth (1956) made a distinction between 'effective' and 'non-effective' kin, based on the extent of regular contact between family members. Effective kin are those with whom we have active social relationships; non-effective kin are those with whom we do not have regular contact, but who form part of the extended family group. For example, we may be in contact with sisters and brothers almost every day, but only speak to, or come into contact with, certain cousins or uncles and aunts at annual events such as birthdays. Although it is easy to see the distinction between effective and non-effective kin, it remains the case that all such relationships still fall within conventional family groups assumed to share biological forms of kinship.

9.3 Bean-pole families

Julia Brannen (2003) argues that the UK has entered an age of the 'bean-pole family'. She suggests that the family household is just one part of a network of kin relations that, increasingly, consists of several generations. This is largely because people are living longer. She notes that at the age of 50, three-fifths of the UK population have at least one parent still alive, and just over a third are grandparents. There is also a rise in the number of four-generation families – families that include great-grandchildren.

As the 'vertical' links between generations of the family are strengthened by increasing life expectancy, so the 'horizontal' links within generations are weakening, as divorce rates rise, fertility rates fall and people have fewer children. Brannen therefore characterizes contemporary families as long and thin 'bean-pole structures' (see figure 9.4).

Brannen found that grandparents are increasingly providing intergenerational services, particularly informal childcare for

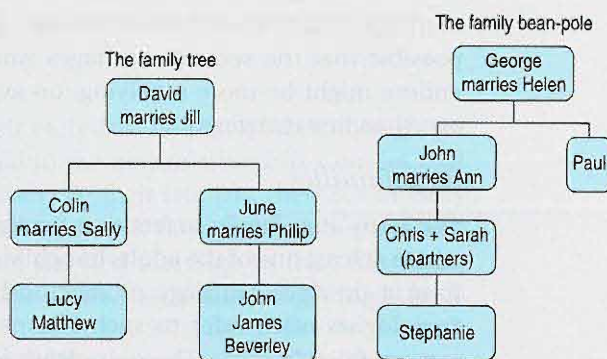


Figure 9.4 The family tree and the family bean-pole

Source: Brannen 2003

their grandchildren. Demand for intergenerational support is particularly high amongst single-parent families, where older generations can also often provide emotional support in times of need, such as during a divorce. In turn, the 'pivot generation', sandwiched between older and younger generations, will often become a carer for their parents (as they become elderly), their children and perhaps even grandchildren.

However, it is not uncommon for people to describe some non-family members in kinship terms. For example, some close friends may come to be described and known as 'uncle' or 'aunt', despite the fact that they have no other link to the family group than friendship. Anthropologists refer to such relationships as 'fictive kin'. An awareness of these different categories of kinship blurs the boundary between family and non-family members, showing that what people perceive to be 'the family' is, in part, socially constructed. As a result, in recent years, kin relations have come to be discussed in terms of the wider concept of 'relatedness', which allows cross-cultural comparisons to be made without imposing the Western idea (and ideal) of what constitutes a 'normal' type of kinship (Carsten 2000). This shifts the focus of research from the sociologist's categorization of kin relations onto people's own sense of what it means to 'be related' to others and the significance they attribute to their relationships. However, such studies tend to exist alongside existing research on family and kinship.

One significant piece of recent research on kin relations is Melanie Mauthner's (2005) study of changing forms of 'sistering' – that is, of how women behave as sisters. Mauthner's qualitative study interviewed 37 women from 19 sets of sisters. She identified four 'discourses of sistering' that shaped the women's narratives. 'Best friendship' is a discourse which identifies the sibling relationship as a very intimate one that tends to be closer – both in reality and as an ideal – than other friendships. This comes close to the common-sense idea of the biological closeness of siblings. 'Companionship' is a type of relationship that is less actively engaged than best friendships. 'Close' companionship is less intense but still very close. 'Distant' companionship represents those sibling relations characterized by underlying tensions and problems, leaving sisters' attitudes towards them somewhat ambivalent. Two other discourses – 'posi-

tioned' and 'shifting positions' – describe the dynamics of power in sibling relations. Positioned relations are largely shaped by fairly fixed roles defined by families, including older sisters who assume responsibility for younger ones or those who become 'mother substitutes' when required. By contrast, 'shifting positions' applies to the more fluid and egalitarian relations where the exercise of power is negotiated rather than assumed. Mauthner concludes that the practices of sistering are quite varied and are likely to change over the life-course, as the dynamics of power shifts within relationships. Therefore we cannot assume that sibling relations are shaped by fixed biological and familial relations, even though the attitudes and ideals of many women (and men) may be influenced by society-wide discourses suggesting that women are the primary care-givers. In short, sistering implies an active and ongoing attempt to (re)create sibling relations, compared to sisterhood, which can be seen as implying universal role expectations.

In the face of such rich and often confusing familial transformations, perhaps the most appropriate conclusion to be drawn is a simple one: although marriages are broken up by divorce, families on the whole are not. Especially where children are involved, many ties persist despite the reconstructed family connections brought into being through remarriage.

Alternatives to traditional marriage and family life

Cohabitation

Cohabitation – when two people live together in a sexual relationship without being married – has become increasingly widespread in many Western societies. If, previously, marriage was the defining basis of a union between two people, it can no longer be regarded as such. Today it may be more appropriate to speak of coupling and uncoupling, as we do when discussing the

Table 9.5 Marital status of European Union men and women 25–34 years, 2000–1

Country	Ever-married	Never-partnered	Unmarried currently cohabiting	Unmarried previously cohabited	Number in sample
Sweden	28	13	39	20	891
Denmark	37	14	32	17	957
France	39	15	31	15	1,094
Finland	43	17	30	11	860
Austria	52	13	22	13	1,013
Netherlands	47	23	22	8	954
East Germany	46	17	21	15	718
Great Britain	57	16	18	16	992
Luxembourg	65	11	17	9	512
West Germany	50	19	15	6	905
Ireland	45	32	15	7	913
Belgium	59	20	15	6	964
Spain	44	41	11	4	984
Greece	56	29	10	5	929
Italy	34	55	8	4	964
Portugal	61	32	5	2	753
Total	47	23	19	10	14,730

Source: Kiernan 2004: 37

experience of divorce above. A growing number of couples in committed long-term relationships choose not to marry, but to reside together and raise children together (see table 9.5). It is also the case that many older people choose to cohabit following a divorce rather than or in advance of remarriage.

Across Europe until very recently, cohabitation was generally regarded as somewhat scandalous. In the UK, *The General Household Survey*, the main source of data on British household patterns, included a question on cohabitation for the first time only in 1979. Among young people in Britain and Europe, however, attitudes to cohabitation are changing rapidly. Presented with the statement that 'It is alright for a couple to live together without intending to get

married', 88 per cent of British people aged between 18 and 24 now agree, whereas only 40 per cent of respondents aged 65 and over agreed (HMSO 2004). In recent decades, the number of unmarried men and women sharing a household has gone up sharply. Only 4 per cent of UK women born in the 1920s cohabited and 19 per cent of those born in the 1940s did so. But among women born in the 1960s, the percentage is nearly half. By 2001–2, the proportion of cohabiting unmarried women under the age of 60 was 28 per cent; for men the figure was 25 per cent (*ibid.*). The prevalence of cohabitation was highest for women aged between 25 and 29 and for men aged between 30 and 34. Although cohabitation has become increasingly popular, research suggests that marriage is still more stable. Unmarried

couples who live together are three to four times more likely to split up than those who are married.

Cohabitation in many countries seems, for the most part, to be an experimental stage before marriage, although the length of cohabitation prior to marriage is increasing and more and more couples are choosing it as an alternative to marriage. In 2001, for example, 39 per cent of younger adults aged 25–34 in Sweden were unmarried and cohabiting, 32 per cent in Denmark, 31 per cent in France and 30 per cent in Finland (see table 9.5). Young adults often find themselves living together because they drift into it, rather than make calculated plans to do so. Two people who are already having a sexual relationship spend more and more time together, eventually giving up one or other of their individual homes. Young people living together almost always anticipate getting married at some date, but not necessarily to their current partners. Only a minority of such couples pool their finances.

In a 1999 study carried out by researchers at the University of Nottingham, UK, sociologists interviewed a sample of married and cohabiting couples with children aged 11 or under, as well as a sample of their parents who were still married. They were interested in the differences in commitment between older married persons and couples in the younger generation. The researchers found that the younger married and cohabiting couples had more in common with each other than with their parents. While the older generation saw marriage in terms of obligations and duties, the younger generation emphasized freely given commitments. The main difference between the younger respondents was that some of them preferred to have their commitment recognized publicly through marriage (Dyer 1999).

Gay and lesbian partnerships

Many homosexual men and women now live in stable relationships as couples. But because most countries still do not sanction

marriage between homosexuals, relationships between gay men and between lesbians have been grounded in personal commitment and mutual trust rather than in law. The term 'families of choice' has sometimes been applied to gay partnerships to reflect the positive and creative forms of everyday life that homosexual couples are increasingly able to pursue together. Many traditional features of heterosexual partnerships – such as mutual support, care and responsibility in illness, the joining of finances, and so forth – are becoming integrated into gay and lesbian families in ways that were not possible earlier.

A very significant recent trend in Western European countries, which has long been campaigned for by lesbian and gay movements, is the introduction of registered or **civil partnerships** for homosexual couples (see figure 9.5).



Lesbian and gay social movements are discussed in chapter 22, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

Civil partnerships are legally recognized unions between two people of the same sex, though technically they are not 'marriages' in the religious sense. Nonetheless, couples who become 'partnered' generally have the same legal rights as married couples on a range of matters. For example, civil partners can expect equal treatment on financial matters such as inheritance, pensions and child maintenance. They also have rights as 'next of kin', which previously were denied them, and immigration rules take account of civil partnerships in the same way as marriages.

Denmark was first to grant same-sex partners the same rights as married couples in 1989, followed in 1996 by Norway, Sweden and Iceland, and in 2000 by Finland. The Netherlands introduced full civil marriage rights in 2001. Belgium and Spain introduced gay marriage rights in 2003 and 2005 respectively, while in Germany and France, the law gives same-sex couples more limited rights. In Britain, new legislation

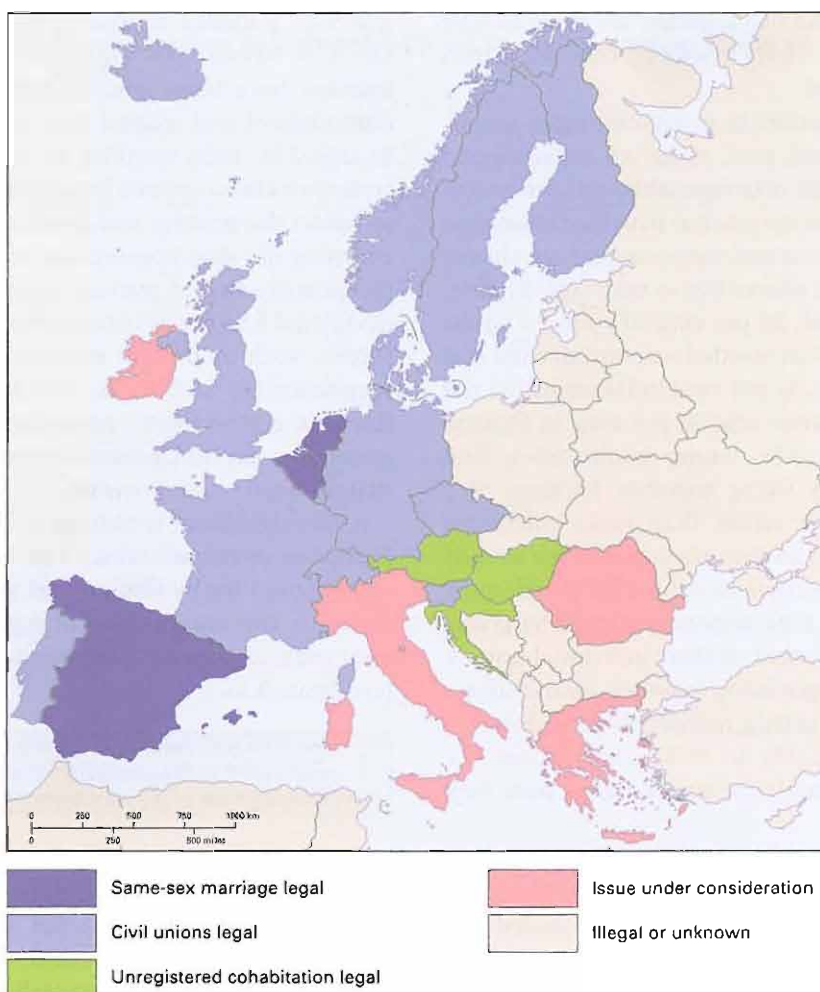
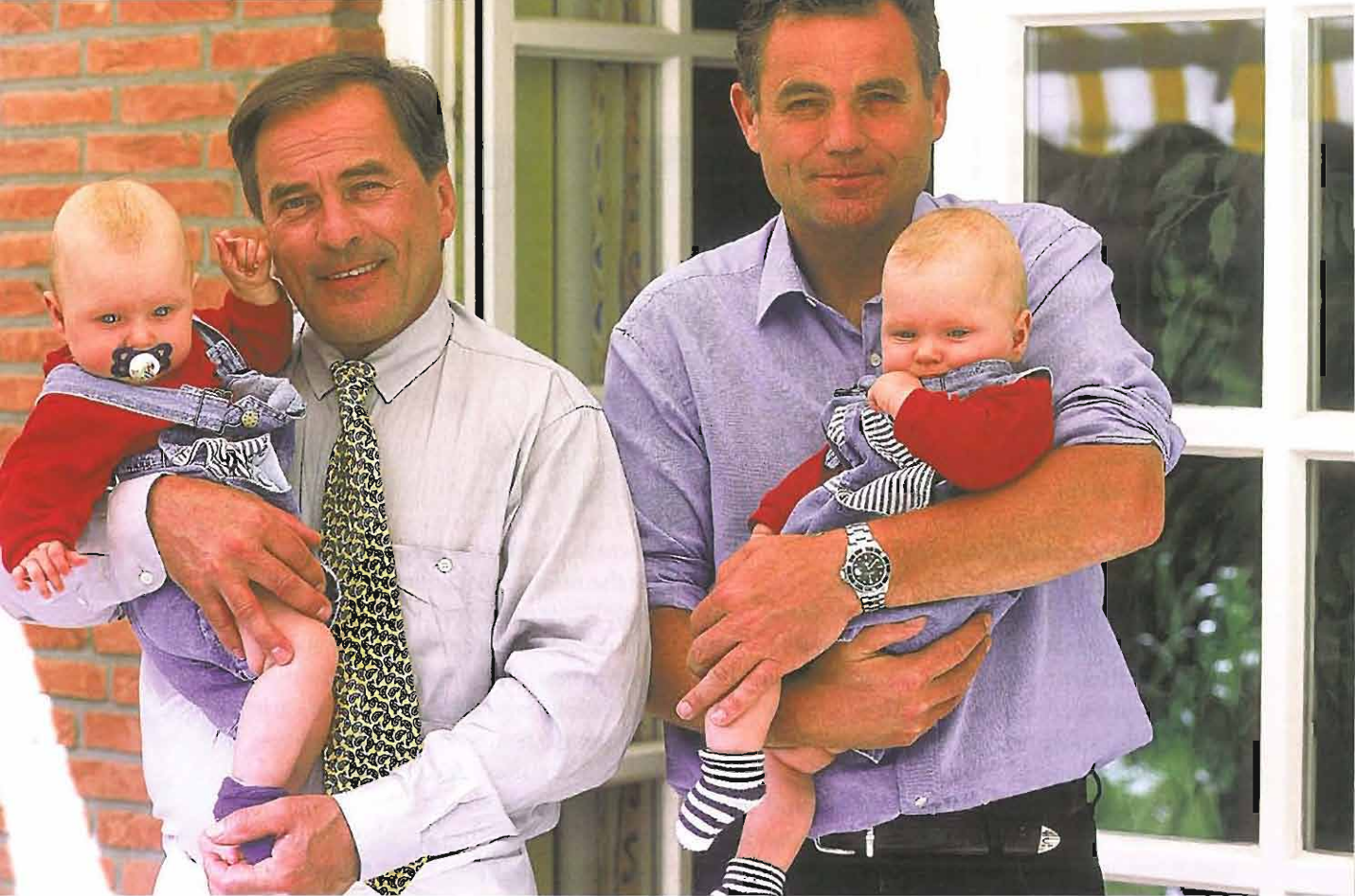


Figure 9.5 Status of same-sex partnerships in Europe, 2005

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Same_sex_marriage_map_Europe_detailed.svg

came into force in December 2005, giving same-sex couples in civil partnerships similar rights to married couples. Elsewhere, Argentina (2003), New Zealand (2004) and Canada (2005) have sanctioned same-sex relationships, and in Eastern Europe, both Slovenia and the Czech Republic introduced recognized partnerships in 2006. This trend looks likely to continue and spread, despite opposition from some religious groups, which see legal recognition of same-sex partnerships as legitimizing 'immoral' relationships. Such opposition is particularly strong in many parts of the USA.

Since the 1980s there has been a growing academic interest in gay and lesbian partnerships. Sociologists have seen homosexual relationships as displaying forms of intimacy and equality quite different from those common in heterosexual couples. Because gays and lesbians have been excluded from the institution of marriage, and because traditional gender roles are not easily applicable to same-sex couples, homosexual partnerships must be constructed and negotiated outside the norms and guidelines that govern many heterosexual unions. Some have suggested



Same-sex relationships have been sanctioned across much of the world, but the right of gay parents to adopt and bring up children is a more controversial issue.

that the AIDS epidemic has been an important factor in the development of a distinctive culture of care and commitment among homosexual partners.

Weeks et al. (2004) point to three significant patterns within gay and lesbian partnerships. First, there is more opportunity for equality between partners because they are not guided by the cultural and social assumptions that underpin heterosexual relationships. Gay and lesbian couples may choose to shape their relationships deliberately so as to avoid the types of inequalities and power imbalances that are characteristic of many heterosexual couples. Second, homosexual partners negotiate the parameters and inner workings of their relationships. If heterosexual couples are influenced by socially embedded gender roles, same-sex couples face fewer expectations about

who should do what within the relationship. For example, if women tend to do more of the housework and childcare in heterosexual marriages, there are no such expectations within homosexual partnerships. Everything becomes a matter for negotiation; this may result in a more equal sharing of responsibilities. Third, gay and lesbian partnerships demonstrate a particular form of commitment that lacks an institutional backing. Mutual trust, the willingness to work at difficulties and a shared responsibility for 'emotional labour' seem to be the hallmarks of homosexual partnerships (Weeks et al. 1999). It will be interesting for sociologists to observe how the new civil partnerships and gay marriage rights affect such commitment and mutual trust in the future.

A relaxation of previously intolerant attitudes towards homosexuality has been

accompanied by a growing willingness by the courts to allocate custody of children to mothers living in lesbian relationships. Techniques of artificial insemination mean that lesbians may have children and become parents without any heterosexual contacts. While virtually every homosexual family with children in Britain involves two women, for a period in the late 1960s and early 1970s social welfare agencies in several cities in the USA placed homeless gay teenage boys in the custody of gay male couples. The practice was discontinued, largely because of adverse public reaction.

A number of recent legal victories for homosexual couples indicate that their rights are gradually becoming enshrined in law. In Britain, a landmark 1999 ruling declared that a homosexual couple in a stable relationship could be defined as a family. This classification of homosexual partners as 'members of the family' will affect legal categories such as immigration, social security, taxation, inheritance and child support.



New legal rights of homosexual couples are discussed further in chapter 14, 'Sexuality and Gender'.

In 1999 a US court upheld the paternal rights of a gay male couple to be named jointly on the birth certificate of their children born to a surrogate mother. One of the men who brought the case said: 'We are celebrating a legal victory. The nuclear family as we know it is evolving. The emphasis should not be on it being a father and a mother but on loving, nurturing parents, whether that be a single mother or a gay couple living in a committed relationship' (Hartley-Brewer 1999).

Staying single

Recent trends in European household composition raise the question: are we becoming a community of singles? For instance, the proportion of one-person households in the UK increased from 18 per cent in 1971 to 29 per cent in 2003 (HMSO

Table 9.6 Average age at marriage: England and Wales, 1971–2001

	First marriage	
	Males	Females
1971	24.6	22.6
1981	25.4	23.1
1991	27.5	25.5
2001	30.6	28.4

Source: HMSO Social Trends 34 (2004), 32

2004). Several factors have combined to increase the numbers of people living alone in modern Western societies. One is a trend towards later marriages – in 2001 people in the UK were marrying on average about six years later than was the case in the early 1970s (as table 9.6 shows) and by 2005 was 32 years old for men and 29 for women. Another, as we have seen, is the rising rate of divorce. Yet another is the growing number of older people in the population whose partners have died (discussed in chapter 6). Nearly half of the one-person households in the UK are one-pensioner-only households.

Being single means different things at different periods of the **life-course**. A larger proportion of people in their 20s are unmarried than used to be the case. By their mid-30s, however, only a small minority of men and women have never been married. The majority of single people aged 30–50 are divorced and 'in between' marriages. Most single people over 50 are widowed.



The concept of the life-course is discussed in chapter 8, 'The Life-Course'.

More than ever before, young people are leaving home simply to start an independent life rather than to get married (which had been one of the most common paths out of the home in the past). Hence it seems that the trend of 'staying single' or living on one's own may be part of the societal trend towards valuing independence at the expense of family life. Still, while independ-

ence or 'staying single' may be an increasingly common path out of the parental home, most people do eventually marry.

Theoretical perspectives on families and relationships

The study of the family and family life has been taken up by sociologists of contrasting theoretical persuasions. Many of the perspectives adopted even a few decades ago now seem much less convincing in the light of recent research and important changes in the social world. Nevertheless, it is valuable to trace briefly the evolution of sociological thinking before turning to contemporary approaches to the study of the family.

Functionalism

The functionalist perspective sees society as a set of social institutions that perform specific functions to ensure continuity and consensus. According to this perspective, the family performs important tasks that contribute to society's basic needs and helps to perpetuate social order. Sociologists working in the functionalist tradition have regarded the nuclear family as fulfilling certain specialized roles in modern societies. With the advent of industrialization, the family became less important as a unit of economic production and more focused on reproduction, childrearing and socialization.

Feminist approaches

For many people, the family provides a vital source of solace and comfort, love and companionship. Yet as we saw above, it can also be a locus for exploitation, loneliness and profound inequality. Feminism has had a great impact on sociology by challenging the vision of the family as a harmonious and egalitarian realm. During the 1970s and

1980s, feminist perspectives dominated most debates and research on the family. If previously the sociology of the family had focused on family structures, the historical development of the nuclear and extended family and the importance of kinship ties, feminism succeeded in directing attention inside families to examine the experiences of women in the domestic sphere. Many feminist writers have questioned the vision that the family is a cooperative unit based on common interests and mutual support. They have sought to show that the presence of unequal power relationships within the family means that certain family members tend to benefit more than others.

Feminist writings have emphasized a broad spectrum of topics, but three main themes are of particular importance. One of the central concerns – which we will explore in greater depth in chapter 20, 'Work and Economic Life' – is the *domestic division of labour*: the way in which tasks are allocated between members of a household. Among feminists there are differing opinions about the historical emergence of this division. Socialist feminists see it as an outcome of industrial capitalism, while others claim that it is linked to patriarchy, and thus predates the industrialization process. There is reason to believe that a domestic division of labour existed prior to industrialization, but it seems clear that capitalist production brought about a much sharper distinction between the domestic and work realms. This process resulted in the crystallization of 'male spheres' and 'female spheres' and power relationships which are felt to this day. Until recently, the **male breadwinner** model has been widespread in most industrialized societies.

Feminist sociologists have undertaken studies on the way domestic tasks, such as childcare and housework, are shared between men and women. They have investigated the validity of claims such as that of the 'symmetrical family' (Young and Willmott 1973) – the belief that, over time, families are becoming more egalitarian in

Classic Studies 9.2 Talcott Parsons and the functions of the family

The research problem

Why is the family such an enduring feature within human societies? Do families do things that other social institutions just cannot do? Is the family really necessary for a well-ordered society? These questions have been part of ongoing debates within sociology from the discipline's earliest days, but the answers are still the subject of heated debate.

Parsons's explanation

According to the American functionalist sociologist Talcott Parsons, the family's two main functions are *primary socialization* and *personality stabilization* (Parsons and Bales 1956). **Primary socialization** is the process by which children learn the cultural norms of the society into which they are born. Because this happens during the early years of childhood, the family is the most important arena for the development of the human personality.

Personality stabilization refers to the role that the family plays in assisting adult family members emotionally. Marriage between adult men and women is the arrangement through which adult personalities are supported and kept healthy. In industrial society, the role of the family in stabilizing adult personalities is said to be critical. This is because the nuclear family is often distanced from its extended kin and is unable to draw on larger kinship ties as families could do before industrialization.

Parsons regarded the nuclear family as the unit best equipped to handle the demands of industrial society. In the 'conventional family', one adult can work outside the home, while the second adult cares for the home and children. In practical terms, this specialization of roles within the nuclear family involved the husband adopting the 'instrumental' role as breadwinner, and the wife assuming the 'affective', emotional role in domestic settings.

Critical points

In our present age, Parsons's view of the family comes across as inadequate and outdated. Functionalist theories of the family have come under heavy criticism for justifying the domestic division of labour between men and women as something natural and unproblematic. We can also criticize functionalist arguments for over-emphasizing the role of the family and neglecting the role that other social institutions, such as government, media and schools, play in socializing children. Parsons also had little to say about variations in family forms that do not correspond to the model of the nuclear family. Families that did not conform to the white, suburban, middle-class 'ideal' could then be seen as deviant.

Finally, the 'dark side' of family life is arguably underplayed in functionalist accounts and therefore not given the significance it deserves.

Contemporary significance

Parsons's functionalist theory of the family is undoubtedly out of favour today, and it is true to say that it must be seen as a partial account of the role of families within societies. Yet it does have historical significance. The immediate post-war years *did* see women returning to their traditional domestic roles and men reassuming positions as sole breadwinners, which was much closer to Parsons's account. Social policy in the UK and USA has also relied on some variant of functionalist theory of the family and its role in tackling social problems. We should also remember that a central tenet of functionalist theory is that, as societies change, social institutions must also change if they are to survive, albeit in new forms. It is possible to see the contemporary diversity of family forms (and marriage) as evidence of this adaptation of a key social institution – the family – to a rapidly changing social life. If so, then it may be too early to dismiss completely Parsons's functionalist analysis just yet.

the distribution of roles and responsibilities. Findings have shown that women continue to bear the main responsibility for domestic tasks and enjoy less leisure time

than men, despite the fact that more women are working in paid employment outside the home than ever before (Hochschild 1989; Gershuny 1994; Sullivan 1997). Pursuing a

related theme, some sociologists have examined the contrasting realms of paid and unpaid work, focusing on the contribution that women's unpaid domestic labour makes to the overall economy (Oakley 1974). Others have investigated the way in which resources are distributed among family members and the patterns of access to and control over household finances (Pahl 1989).

Second, feminists have drawn attention to the *unequal power relationships* that exist within many families. One topic that has received increased attention as a result of this is the phenomenon of domestic violence. 'Wife battering', marital rape, incest and the sexual abuse of children have all received more public attention as a result of feminists' claims that the violent and abusive sides of family life have long been ignored in both academic contexts and legal and policy circles. Feminist sociologists have sought to understand how the family serves as an arena for gender oppression and even physical abuse.

The study of *caring activities* is a third area where feminists have made important contributions. This is a broad realm which encompasses a variety of processes, from attending to a family member who is ill to looking after an elderly relative over a long period of time. Sometimes caring means simply being attuned to someone else's psychological well-being – several feminist writers have been interested in 'emotion work' within relationships. Not only do women tend to shoulder concrete tasks such as cleaning and childcare, but they also invest large amounts of emotional labour in maintaining personal relationships (Duncombe and Marsden 1993). While caring activities are grounded in love and deep emotion, they are also a form of work which demands an ability to listen, perceive, negotiate and act creatively.

Theorizing the transformation of love and intimacy

Theoretical and empirical studies conducted from a feminist perspective during the last few decades have generated increased interest in the family and intimate relationships in sociology. Terms such as the 'second shift' – referring to women's dual roles at work and at home – have also entered society's everyday vocabulary. But because they often focused on specific issues within the domestic realm, feminist studies of the family did not always reflect larger trends and influences taking place outside the home.

In the past decade, an important body of sociological work on the family has emerged, which draws on feminist perspectives, but is not strictly informed by them. Of primary concern are the larger transformations which are taking place in family forms – the formation and dissolution of families and households, and the evolving expectations within individuals' personal relationships. The rise in divorce and lone parenting, the emergence of 'reconstituted families' and gay families, and the popularity of cohabitation are all subjects of concern. These transformations cannot be understood apart from the larger changes occurring in the contemporary world.

The transformation of intimacy

In my own work, particularly *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1993), I looked at how intimate relationships are changing in modern societies. The introduction to this chapter shows that marriage in pre-modern society was not generally based on sexual attraction or romantic love; instead, it was more often linked to the economic context in which to create a family or to enable the inheritance of property. For the peasantry, a life characterized by unremitting hard labour was unlikely to be conducive to sexual passion – although opportunities for men to engage in extramarital liaisons were numerous.

Romantic love, as distinct from the more or less universal compulsions of passionate love, developed in the late eighteenth century. Despite its promise of an equal relationship based on mutual attraction, romantic love has in practice tended to lead to the dominance of men over women (Evans 2002). For many men, the tensions between the respectability of romantic love and the compulsions of passionate love were dealt with by separating the comfort of the wife and home from the sexuality of the mistress or prostitute. The double standard here was that a woman should remain a virgin until the right man arrives – whereas no such norm applied to the men.

I argue that the most recent phase of modernity has seen another transformation in the nature of intimate relationships in the development of **plastic sexuality**. For people in modern societies there is a much greater choice over when, how often and with whom they have sex than ever before (there is a wider discussion of sexuality in chapter 14, 'Sexuality and Gender'). With plastic sexuality, sex can be untied from reproduction. This is partly due to improved methods of contraception, which have largely freed women from the fear of repetitive pregnancies and childbirths, but the development of a sense of the self that could be actively chosen (a social reflexivity) has also contributed to the emergence of plastic sexuality.

The emergence of plastic sexuality brings with it a change in the nature of love. I argued that the ideals of romantic love are fragmenting and being replaced by **confluent love**. Confluent love is active and contingent. It jars with the forever, one-and-only qualities of romantic love. The emergence of confluent love goes some way towards explaining the rise of separation and divorce discussed earlier in this chapter. Romantic love meant that once people had married they were usually stuck with one another, no matter how the relationship developed. Now people have more choice: whereas divorce was previously difficult or impossible to obtain, married people are now no longer

bound to stay together if the relationship does not work.

Rather than basing relationships on romantic passion, people are increasingly pursuing the ideal of the **pure relationship**, in which couples remain because they *choose* to do so. The pure relationship is held together by the acceptance of each partner that, 'until further notice', each gains sufficient benefits from the relationship to make its continuance worthwhile. Love is based upon emotional intimacy that generates trust. Love develops depending on how much each partner is prepared to reveal concerns and needs and to be vulnerable to the other. There is a diversity of forms of pure relationship. Some same-sex relationships, because of their open and negotiated status, come closer to the ideal of pure relationships than do married heterosexual ones.

Some critics have argued that the instability of the pure relationship, which was thought of as a relationship between adults, contrasts with the complexities of family practices which also include children, and neglects the different experiences which men and women tend to have when a (heterosexual) relationship ends. By focusing on relationships between adults, critics have noted, the idea of a pure relationship reflects the marginalization of children and childhood in sociological thought (Smart and Neale 1999). Perhaps the thesis of the pure relationship does not give enough attention to issues of space and time required for its construction. For example, such relationships may still involve home-building and looking after children, both of which can be seen as practical 'joint projects' that also contribute significantly to the maintenance of intimate relationships (Jamieson 1998).



The sociology of childhood is discussed in chapter 8, 'The Life-Course'.

The 'normal chaos' of love

In *The Normal Chaos of Love* (1995), Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim exam-



Modern relationships often involve dual-income families where mothers are in full-time work. This has led to the re-emergence of some institutions which might be considered 'old-fashioned', such as schools for professional nannies.

ine the tumultuous nature of personal relationships, marriages and family patterns against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world. The traditions, rules and guidelines which used to govern personal relationships no longer apply, they argue, and individuals are now confronted with an endless series of choices as part of constructing, adjusting, improving or dissolving the unions they form with others. The fact that marriages are now entered into voluntarily, rather than for economic purposes or at the urging of family, brings both freedoms and new strains. In fact, the authors conclude, they demand a great deal of hard work and effort.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim see our age as one filled with colliding interests between family, work, love and the freedom to pursue individual goals. This collision is felt acutely within personal relationships, particularly

when there are two 'labour market biographies' to juggle instead of one, as more women pursue a career. Previous gendered work patterns are less fixed than they once were; both men and women now place emphasis on their professional and personal needs. Relationships in the modern age are not just about relationships; they are also about work, politics, economics, professions and inequality. It is therefore not surprising that antagonisms between men and women are rising. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim claim that the 'battle between the sexes' is the 'central drama of our times', as evidenced in the growth of the marriage-counselling industry, family courts, marital self-help groups and divorce rates. Even though marriage and family life seem to be more 'flimsy' than ever before, they remain very important to people.

Divorce is more common, but rates of remarriage are high. The birth rate may be declining, but there is a huge demand for fertility treatment. Fewer people choose to get married, but the desire to live with someone as part of a couple holds steady. How do we explain such competing tendencies?

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's answer is: love. They claim that today's 'battle of the sexes' is the clearest possible indication of people's 'hunger for love'. People marry for the sake of love, divorce for the sake of love and engage in an endless cycle of hoping, regretting and trying again. While, on the one hand, the tensions between men and women are high, there remains a deep hope and faith in the possibility of finding true love and fulfilment. This may appear too simple an answer for the complexities of our current age, but Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that it is precisely because our world is so overwhelming, impersonal, abstract and rapidly changing that love has become increasingly important. Love is the only place where people can truly find themselves and connect with others:

Love is a search for oneself, a craving to really get in contact with me and you, sharing bodies, sharing thoughts, encountering one another with nothing held back, making confessions and being forgiven, understanding, confirming and supporting what was and what is, longing for a home and trust to counteract the doubts and anxieties modern life generates. If nothing seems certain or safe, if even breathing is risky in a polluted world, then people chase after the misleading dreams of love until they suddenly turn into nightmares. (1995: 175–6)

Critics have attacked Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's exclusive focus on heterosexuality – the battle between the sexes is the 'central drama of our times' – which, critics say, marginalizes homosexual relationships (Smart and Neale 1999). The thesis can also be criticized for its reliance on the notion of 'individualization', which plays down or

fails to acknowledge the importance of social class and community in structuring opportunities and shaping personal relationships – by no means do all women enjoy the kinds of lifetime careers outlined by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, for instance.

THINKING CRITICALLY

To what extent do you think love is capable of holding together the institution of the family? What problems could arise within families when couples place such a high value on love to hold their own relationship together?

Liquid love?

In *Liquid Love* (2003), Zygmunt Bauman argues that, today, relationships are 'the hottest talk of the town and ostensibly the sole game worth playing, despite their notorious risks'. His book is about the 'frailty of human bonds', the feeling of insecurity that this frailty leads to and our responses to it. Bauman writes that the hero of his book is 'the man without bonds' (of, for example, family, class, religion or marriage) or at least the man without fixed, unbreakable ties. Those ties that Bauman's hero does have are loosely knotted, so that they can be released again, with little delay if the circumstances change. To Bauman, the circumstances will change often – he uses the metaphor 'liquid' to describe modern society, which he sees as characterized by constant change and a lack of lasting bonds.

Bauman argues that, in a world of rampant 'individualization', relationships are a mixed blessing; they are filled with conflicting desires, which pull in different ways. On the one hand, there is the desire for freedom, for loose bonds that we can escape from if we so choose and for individualism. On the other, there is the desire for greater security that is gained by tightening the bonds between our partners and ourselves. As it is, Bauman argues, we swing back and forth between the two polarities of security and freedom. Often we run to

experts – therapists or columnists, for example – for advice on how we can combine the two. To Bauman, this is attempting ‘to have the cake and eat it, to cream off the sweet delights of relationship while omitting its better and tougher bits’. The result is a society of ‘semi-detached couples’ in ‘top pocket relationships’. By the phrase ‘top pocket relationships’, Bauman means something that can be pulled out when needed, but pushed deep inside the pocket the moment it is not.

One response to the ‘frailty of human bonds’ is to replace quality in our relationships for quantity. It is not the depth of our relationships, but the number of contacts that we have which becomes important to us. That is partly why, Bauman argues, we are always talking on mobile phones and sending text messages to one another, and even typing them in truncated sentences to increase the speed at which we can send them. It is not the message itself that is important, but the constant circulation of messages, without which we feel excluded. Bauman notes that people now speak more of connections and networks and less of relationships. To be in a relationship means to be mutually engaged; networks suggest moments of being in touch. In a network, connections can be made on demand and broken at will. What really symbolizes the liquid modern relationship for Bauman is computer-dating. He cites an interview with a 28-year-old man who notes the one decisive advantage of electronic relations: ‘You can always press delete.’

Bauman’s ideas are certainly suggestive, but critics see their empirical basis as very weak, leaving them rather speculative, rather than grounded in sociological research. For example, too much is perhaps made of magazines and the short-term impact on social relationships of new technologies such as mobile phones and computers. Like Giddens and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, Bauman is often accused of being too pessimistic about the contemporary world, especially the transforma-

tion of intimate relationships he identifies. But is his assessment realistic? Carol Smart (2007) thinks not. Indeed, she takes issue with all the theories in the ‘Recent perspectives’ section above, arguing that they all tend to exaggerate the extent of individualization, family fragmentation and the apparent decline of relationship commitment. Instead, Smart suggests that *personal life* (rather than ‘the family’ or ‘the individual’) in modern societies is characterized by strong social and emotional bonds alongside the sharing of memories and experience.

She suggests that the concept of personal life encompasses people’s pursuit of a ‘life project’ (as described in the work of Beck and Giddens, for example), but always relates such individual projects to the wider familial and social context within which they make sense. Smart (2007) argues that Beck’s work, for instance, often gives the impression that individuals have been ‘cut free’ from social structures: a very unrealistic notion. Instead, she argues, ‘meaning-constitutive traditions’ are important here, as well as such structural factors as social class, ethnicity and gender. Smart attributes particular importance to collective memories, transmitted across generations as well as the way that people are embedded within social structures and ‘imagined communities’.

Studying personal life alerts sociologists to something that Smart sees missing in the theories discussed above – namely, *connectedness*. By this, Smart means all the ways in which people maintain their social relationships and associations in different times and contexts, along with the memories, feelings and experiences of being connected to others. She argues that studying connectedness rather than fragmentation allows macrosociological theories to reconnect with the large amount of empirical research on families and relationships and thus get closer to – and understand better – people’s real-life experiences.



The relationship networks emerging within 'liquid modernity' can be sustained 'virtually' via electronic forms of communication.

Clearly, these debates and the view we take of recent social change cover some of the big social and political questions of recent times, but what do they mean for the debate about the decline, or otherwise, of family values?

Conclusion: the debate about family values

'The family is collapsing!' cry the advocates of family values, surveying the changes of the past few decades – a more liberal and open attitude towards sexuality, steeply climbing divorce rates and a general seeking for personal happiness at the expense of older conceptions of family duty. We must

recover a moral sense of family life, they argue. We must reinstate the traditional family, which was much more stable and ordered than the tangled web of relationships in which most of us find ourselves now (O'Neill 2002).

These arguments are heard not only in Europe and the United States; changes affecting the personal and emotional spheres go far beyond the borders of any particular country. We find the same issues almost everywhere, differing only in degree and according to the cultural context in which they take place. In China, for example, the state is considering making divorce more difficult to obtain. In the late 1960s, very liberal marriage laws were passed. Marriage is a working contract that can be

dissolved 'when husband and wife both desire it'. Even if one partner objects, divorce can be granted when 'mutual affection' has gone from the marriage. Only a two-week wait is required, after which they both pay a few pounds and are henceforth independent. The Chinese divorce rate is still low compared with Western countries, but it is rising rapidly – as is true in the other developing Asian societies. In Chinese cities, not only divorce, but also cohabitation is becoming more frequent. In the vast Chinese countryside, by contrast, everything is different. Marriage and the family are much more traditional – in spite of the official policy of limiting childbirth through a mixture of incentives and punishment. Marriage is an arrangement between two families, fixed by the parents rather than the individuals concerned. A recent study in the province of Gansu, which has only a low level of economic development, found that 60 per cent of marriages are still arranged by parents. As a Chinese saying has it: 'Meet once, nod your head and marry.' There is a twist in the story in modernizing China. Many of those currently divorcing in the urban centres were married in the traditional manner in the country.

In China, there is much talk of protecting the 'traditional' family. In many Western countries, the debate is even more intense and divisive. Defenders of the traditional family argue that the emphasis on relationships comes at the expense of the family as a basic institution of society. Many of these critics now speak of the breakdown of the family. If such a breakdown is occurring, it is extremely significant. The family is the meeting point of a range of trends affecting society as a whole – increasing equality between the sexes, the widespread entry of women into the labour force, changes in sexual behaviour and expectations, the changing relationship between home and work. Among all the changes going on today, none is more important than those happening in our personal lives – in sexuality, emotional life, marriage and the family.

There is a global revolution going on in how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connections with others. It is a revolution advancing unevenly in different parts of the world, with much resistance.

'Rubbish!' others reply. The family is not collapsing; it is merely diversifying. They argue that we should actively encourage a variety of family forms and sexual life, rather than supposing that everyone has to be compressed into the same mould (Hite 1994).

THINKING CRITICALLY

Using the theories and evidence from this chapter, evaluate the thesis that traditional 'family values' are being eroded. If they are, should we see this as a negative or progressive development for society as a whole? If they are not, then how can we explain why so many people believe they are?

Which side is right? We should probably be critical of both views. A return to the traditional family is not a possibility. This is not only because, as we saw above, the traditional family as it is usually thought of never existed, or because there were too many oppressive facets to families in the past to make them a model for today. It is also because the social changes that have transformed earlier forms of marriage and the family are mostly irreversible. Women will not return in large numbers to a domestic situation from which they have painfully managed to extricate themselves. Sexual partnerships and marriage today, for better or worse, cannot be like they used to be. Emotional communication – more precisely, the active creation and sustaining of relationships – has become central to modern lives in the personal and family domain.

What will be the result? The divorce rate may have levelled off from its previous steep increase, but it is not dropping. All measures of divorce are to some extent estimates, but

on the basis of past trends, we can guess that some 60 per cent of all marriages contracted now might end in divorce within ten years.

Divorce, as we have seen, is not always a reflection of unhappiness. People who may in former times have felt constrained to remain in miserable marriages can make a fresh start. But there can be no doubt that the trends affecting sexuality, marriage and the family create deep anxieties for some people at the same time as they generate new possibilities for satisfaction and self-fulfilment for others.

Those who argue that the great diversity in family forms that exists today is to be welcomed, as freeing us from the limitations and sufferings of the past, surely have a certain amount of right on their side. Men and women can remain single if they wish, without having to face the social disapproval that once came from being a bachelor or, even more, a spinster. Couples in

live-in relationships no longer face social rejection by their more 'respectable' married friends. Gay couples can set up house together and bring up children without facing the same level of hostility they would have in the past.

These things having been said, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that we stand at a crossroads. Will the future bring about the further decay of long-term marriages or partnerships? Will we more and more inhabit an emotional and sexual landscape scarred by bitterness and violence? None can say for certain. But such a sociological analysis of marriage and the family as we have just concluded strongly suggests that we will not resolve our problems by looking to the past. We must try to reconcile the individual freedoms most of us have come to value in our personal lives with the need to form stable and lasting relations with other people.

Summary points

1. *Kinship, family and marriage* are closely related terms of key significance for sociology and anthropology. Kinship comprises either genetic ties or ties initiated by marriage. A family is a group of kin having responsibility for the upbringing of children. Marriage is a bond between two people living together in a socially approved sexual relationship.
2. A *nuclear family* is a household in which a married couple (or single parent) live together with their own or adopted children. Where kin other than a married couple and children live in the same household, or are involved in close and continuous relationships, we speak of an *extended family*. During the twentieth century, the predominance of the traditional nuclear family in most industrialized societies has given way to a greater diversity of family forms.
3. In Western societies, marriage – and therefore the family – is associated with *monogamy*. Many other cultures tolerate or encourage *polygamy*, in which an individual may be married to two or more spouses at the same time.
4. There is considerable diversity in family forms among ethnic minority groups. In Britain for example, families of South Asian and African-Caribbean origin differ from the dominant family types.
5. Divorce rates have been rising since 1945 and the number of first marriages has declined. As a result, a growing proportion of the population live in *lone-parent households*.
6. Rates of remarriage are quite high. Remarriage can lead to the formation of a *reconstituted family* – one in which at least one of the adults has children from a previous marriage or relationship.
7. *Cohabitation* (where a couple lives together in a sexual relationship outside marriage) has become more widespread in many industrial countries. Gay men and lesbians are increasingly able to live together as couples, as attitudes to homosexuality become more relaxed. In some instances, homosexual couples have gained the legal right to be defined as a family.

8. Family life is not always happy and harmonious; sexual abuse and domestic violence sometimes occur within it. Most sexual abuse of children and domestic violence is carried out by males, and seems to connect with other types of violent behaviour in which some men are involved.
9. Marriage has ceased to be the condition for regular sexual experience – for either sex – and is no longer the basis of economic activity. However, marriage and the family remain firmly established institutions, while undergoing major stresses and strains.

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Further reading

For newcomers to sociology, a good place to begin reading on families and relationships is with Liz Steel and Warren Kidd's *The Family* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), which is a genuinely introductory textbook with lots of guidance. A similar approach is taken by David M. Newman and Liz Grauerholz in their *Sociology of Families*, 2nd edn (London: Sage, 2002), though this is a much larger and more comprehensive book.

From here, it is worth trying something a little more sophisticated, such as Graham Allan and Graham Crow's *Families, Households and Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), which is an excellent account of recent debates in the light of evidence, mainly from the UK. A wider European perspective on changing family forms and policy responses is available in Linda Hantrais's *Family Policy Matters: Responding to Family Change in Europe* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2004).

Sociological theories of the family can be approached via James M. White and David M.

Klein's *Family Theories*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Sage, 2007), which also includes perspectives from other disciplines. Then a very comprehensive series of essays covering many of the key issues in this field is Graham Allan's edited collection in *The Sociology of the Family: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

Finally, you may want to explore more recent arguments suggesting that changing family forms will need new ways of theorizing. If so, then you could look at Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim's *Reinventing the Family: In Search of Lifestyles* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002); and Linda McKie and Sarah Cunningham-Burley's edited collection, *Families in Society: Boundaries and Relationships* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2005), which explores families, not as 'things' or 'entities', but rather as 'relationship processes'. Finally, Carol Smart's *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) outlines her thesis of connectedness in people's personal lives.

Internet links

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) is a research centre founded in 2001, based at the University of Edinburgh, UK, focusing on families:
www.cfr.ac.uk/index.htm

The Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) is a think-tank founded by Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph in 1974 to champion a smaller state and foster the family, enterprise and individualism:
www.cps.org.uk/

Civitas – Institute for the Study of Civil Society – was founded in 2000 to promote social cohesion through 'a better division of responsibilities between government and civil society':
www.civitas.org.uk/

Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth and Family Policies is based at Columbia University, New York; it provides cross-national information on family policies in the industrialized societies:
www.childpolicyintl.org/

The Morgan Centre for the Study of Relationships and Personal Life is a research centre founded in 2005 at the University of Manchester, UK; its research is based on the concept of 'personal life':
www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgancentre/



CHAPTER 10

Health, Illness and Disability

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Look at the two photographs above. The images of a sunken face and an emaciated body are almost identical. The young African girl on the left is dying from a simple lack of food. The young woman on the right is a British teenager, dying because, in a society with a superabundance of food, she chose not to eat or to eat so sparingly that her life was endangered.

The social dynamics involved in each case are utterly different. Starvation from lack of food is caused by factors outside people's control and affects only the very poor. The British teenager, living in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, is suffering from anorexia, an illness with no known physical origin. Obsessed with the ideal of achieving a slim body, she has eventually given up

eating altogether. Anorexia and other eating disorders are illnesses of the affluent, not of those who have little or no food. They are unknown in the developing countries where food is scarce.

The sociology of the body

Throughout much of human history, a few people – saints or mystics, for example – have deliberately chosen to starve themselves for religious reasons. Anorexia, on the other hand, has no specific connection to religious beliefs, and estimates suggest that some 90 per cent of sufferers are women (Lask and Bryant-Waugh 2000). It is an illness of the body, and thus we might think that we would

have to look to biological or physical factors to explain it. But health and illness, like other topics we have studied, are also affected by social and cultural influences, such as the pressure to achieve a slim body.

Although it is an illness that expresses itself in physical symptoms, anorexia is closely related to the idea of being on a diet, which in turn is connected with changing views of physical attractiveness, particularly of women, in modern society. In most pre-modern societies, the ideal female shape was a fleshy one. Thinness was not regarded as desirable at all and – partly because it was associated with lack of food and therefore with poverty – the social status of ‘thin’ was low. Even in Europe in the 1600s and 1700s, the ideal female shape was well proportioned. Anyone who has seen paintings of the period, such as those by Rubens (shown in the photograph), will have noticed how curvaceous (even plump) the women depicted in them are. A contemporary example of the high cultural value traditionally attached to plumpness in some cultures can be seen in the BBC report in ‘Global Society 10.1’.

The notion of slimness as the desirable feminine shape originated among some middle-class groups in the late nineteenth century, but it has become generalized as an ideal for most women only recently.

Anorexia thus has its origins in the changing body image of women in the recent history of modern societies. It was first identified as a disorder in France in 1874, but it remained obscure until the past 30 or 40 years (Brown and Jasper 1993). Since then, it has become increasingly common among young women. So has bulimia – bingeing on food, followed by self-induced vomiting. Anorexia and bulimia are often found together in the same individual. Someone may become extremely thin through a starvation diet and then enter a phase of eating enormous amounts and purging in order to maintain a normal weight, followed by a period of again becoming very thin.

Anorexia and other eating disorders are no longer obscure forms of illness confined



This painting by Rubens, completed around 1613, depicts Venus, the goddess of love and beauty

Global Society 10.1 Mauritania's 'wife-fattening' farms

Obesity is so revered among Mauritania's white Moor Arab population that the young girls are sometimes force-fed to obtain a weight the government has described as "life-threatening".

A generation ago, over a third of women in the country were force-fed as children – Mauritania is one of the few African countries where, on average, girls receive more food than boys. Now only around one in 10 girls are treated this way. The treatment has its roots in fat being seen as a sign of wealth – if a girl was thin she was considered poor, and would not be respected.

But in rural Mauritania you still see the rotund women that the country is famous for. They walk slowly, dainty hands on the end of dimpled arms, pinching multicoloured swathes of fabric together to keep the biting sand from their faces.

"I make them eat lots of dates, lots and lots of couscous and other fattening food," Fatematou, a voluminous woman in her sixties who runs a kind of "fat farm" in the northern desert town of Atar, told BBC World Service's *The World Today* programme.

Although she had no clients when I met her, she said she was soon expecting to take charge of some seven-year-olds. "I make them eat and eat and eat. And then drink lots and lots of water,"

she explained. "I make them do this all morning. Then they have a rest. In the afternoon we start again. We do this three times a day – the morning, the afternoon and the evening."

Punishment

She said the girls could end up weighing between 60 to 100 kilograms, "with lots of layers of fat." Fatematou said that it was rare for a girl to refuse to eat, and that if they did, she was helped by the child's parents. "They punish the girls and in the end the girls eat," she said. "If a girl refuses we start nicely, saying 'come on, come on' sweetly, until she agrees to eat."

Fatematou admitted that sometimes the girls cried at the treatment. "Of course they cry – they scream," she said. "We grab them and we force them to eat. If they cry a lot we leave them sometimes for a day or two and then we come back to start again. They get used to it in the end." She argued that in the end the girls were grateful. "When they are small they don't understand, but when they grow up they are fat and beautiful," she said.

"They are proud and show off their good size to make men dribble. Don't you think that's good?"

Change

However, the view that a fat girl is more desirable is now becoming

seen as old-fashioned. A study by the Mauritanian ministry of health has found that force-feeding is dying out. Now only 11% of young girls are force fed. "That's not how people think now," Leila – a woman in the ancient desert town of Chinguetti, who herself was fattened as a child – told *The World Today*. "Traditionally a fat wife was a symbol of wealth. Now we've got another vision, another criteria for beauty. Young people in Mauritania today, we're not interested in being fat as a symbol of beauty. Today to be beautiful is to be natural, just to eat normally."

Some men are also much less keen on having a fat wife – a reflection of changes in Mauritanian society. "We're fed up of fat women here," said 19-year-old shop owner Yusuf. "Always fat women! Now we want thin women. In Mauritania if a woman really wants to get married I think she should stay thin. If she gets fat it's not good."

"Some girls have asked me whether they should get fat or stay thin. I tell them if you want to find a man, a European or a Mauritanian, stay thin, it's better for you. But some blokes still like them fat."

Source: Extract from Pascale Harter, BBC World Service, 26 January 2004
© bbc.co.uk/news.

to the wealthiest modern societies. Eating disorders have been increasing in the Middle East, the Far East, South America and Africa (Nasser et al. 2001). A recent review of international research found that, since 1990, problems of eating disorders had been identified in Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, China, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Hong Kong, India, Turkey, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (Nasser 2006). In the UK, prevalence rates (the number of cases at any specific time) amongst young adult women have been estimated at around 1–2 per cent for anorexia nervosa and between 1 and 3 per cent for bulimia nervosa. Based on these rates, a best estimate for the total number of British people with a diagnosed or undiagnosed eating disorder is some 1.15 million (Eating Disorders Association 2007).

Nor is obsession with slenderness – and the resulting eating disorders – limited to women in Europe and the United States. As Western images of feminine beauty have spread to the rest of the world, so too have their associated illnesses. Eating disorders were first documented in Japan in the 1960s, a consequence of that country's rapid economic growth and incorporation into the global economy. Anorexia is now found among 1 per cent of young Japanese women, roughly the same percentage as that found in the United States. During the 1980s and 1990s, eating problems surfaced among young, primarily affluent women in Hong Kong and Singapore, as well as in urban areas in Taiwan, China, the Philippines, India and Pakistan (Efron 1997). In a study reported by Medscape's *General Medicine* (Makino et al. 2004), the prevalence of bulimia nervosa in female subjects in Western countries ranged from 0.3 to 7.3 per cent, compared to 0.46 to 3.2 per cent in the non-Western world. Lee (2001) argues that the spread of eating disorders is rooted in the expanding transnational 'culture of modernity'.

Once again, something that may seem to be a purely personal trouble – difficulties with food and despair over one's appearance – turns out to be a public issue. If we

include not just life-threatening forms of anorexia but also obsessive concern with dieting and bodily appearance, eating disorders are now part of the lives of millions of people; today they are found in all the industrial countries and are spreading to the developing world too.

THINKING CRITICALLY

From your knowledge of gender roles and status, why do you think eating disorders seem to affect more women than men? Given that women have achieved more equality with men than in previous generations, is this likely to lead to more eating disorder amongst *young men*? What measures could governments take to stem the increase in eating disorders?

The rapid growth of eating disorders is astonishing, and brings home clearly the influence of social factors on our health and capacity for social interaction. The field known as the **sociology of the body** investigates the ways in which our bodies are affected by these social influences. As human beings, we obviously all possess a body, but this is not something we just have and it is not something physical that exists outside of society. Our bodies are deeply affected by our social experiences, as well as by the norms and values of the groups to which we belong.

One major theme in this chapter is the increasing separation of the body from 'nature' – from our surrounding environment and our biological rhythms. Our bodies are being invaded by the influence of science and **technology**, ranging from machines to diets, and this is creating new dilemmas. The increasing prevalence of forms of plastic surgery, for example, has introduced new options but has also generated intense social controversies. We shall look at one such controversy – plastic surgery for people with facial disfigurements – later in the chapter.

The term 'technology' should not be



In the relatively wealthy countries, a bewildering array of foods from around the world is now available in every supermarket.

understood in too narrow a way here. In its most basic sense, it refers to material technologies such as those involved in modern medicine – for example, the scanning machine that allows a doctor to chart a baby's development prior to birth. But we must take account of what Michel Foucault (1988) called 'social technologies' affecting the body. By this phrase, he means that the body is increasingly something we have to 'create' rather than simply accept. A social technology is any kind of regular intervention we make into the functioning of our bodies in order to alter them in specific ways. An example is dieting, so central to anorexia.

In what follows, we will first analyse why eating disorders have become so common. From there, we will study the wider social dimensions of health. Then we turn to the sociology of disability, and look, in particu-

lar, at the social and cultural construction of disablement.

The sociology of health and illness

To understand why eating disorders have become so commonplace in current times, we should think back to the theme of social change analysed elsewhere in the book. Anorexia actually reflects certain kinds of social change, including the impact of globalization.

The rise of eating disorders in Western societies coincides directly with the globalization of food production, which has increased greatly in the past three or four decades. The invention of new modes of refrigeration plus the use of container trans-

portation have allowed food to be stored for long periods and to be delivered from one side of the world to the other. Since the 1950s, supermarkets have stocked foods from all over the world (for those who can afford it – now the majority of the population in Western societies). Most of them are available all the time, not just, as was true previously, when they are in season locally.

Over the past decade or so, many people in developed countries have begun to think more carefully about their diet. This does not mean that everyone is desperately trying to get thin. Rather, when all foods are available more or less all the time, we must decide what to eat – in other words, construct a diet, where 'diet' means the foods we habitually consume. To construct our diet, we have to decide what to eat in relation to the many sorts of new medical information with which science now bombards us – for instance, that cholesterol levels are a factor in causing heart disease. The development of genetically modified (GM) foods presents yet another dilemma for people; in the USA, GM foods are routinely consumed, but in most of Europe, consumers have been anxious about their 'non-natural' (that is, 'man-made') status. Conversely, the recent trend towards organically grown food shows a willingness to 'buy natural' (at least, for those who can afford to do so).

In a society where food is abundant and relatively cheap, we are able for the first time to design our bodies in relation to our lifestyle habits (such as jogging, bicycling, swimming and yoga) and what we eat. Eating disorders have their origins in the opportunities, but also the profound strains and tensions, that this situation produces.

Why do eating disorders affect women in particular and young women most acutely? To begin with, it should be pointed out that not all those suffering from eating disorders are women; globally, around 10 per cent are men (Nasser 2006). But men do not suffer from anorexia or bulimia as often as women, partly because widely held social norms stress the importance of physical attractive-

ness more for women than for men and partly because desirable body images of men differ from those of women. Drawing on the diaries of American girls over the last two centuries, Joan Jacobs Brumberg (1997) argues that nowadays, when adolescent girls in the USA ask themselves the questions 'Who am I?' and 'Who do I want to be?', the answer, far more than it was a century ago, is likely to revolve around the body. Brumberg argues that 'commercial interests' increasingly play on the body angst of young girls. She concludes that the body is now so central to American girls' sense of self that it has become their central project.

Anorexia and other eating disorders reflect the current situation in which women play a much larger part in the wider society than they used to but are still judged as much by their appearance as by their attainments. Eating disorders are rooted in feelings of shame about the body. The individual feels herself to be inadequate and imperfect, and her anxieties about how others perceive her become focused through her feelings about her body. Ideals of slimness at that point become obsessive – shedding weight becomes the means of making everything all right in her world. Once she starts to diet and exercise compulsively, she can become locked into a pattern of refusing food altogether or of vomiting up what she has eaten. If the pattern is not broken (and some forms of psychotherapy and medical treatment have proved effective here), the sufferer can actually starve herself to death.

The spread of eating disorders reflects the influence of science and technology on our ways of life today: calorie-counting has only been possible with the advance of technology. But the impact of technology is always conditioned by social factors. We have much more autonomy over the body than ever before, a situation that creates new possibilities of a positive kind as well as new anxieties and problems. What is happening is part of what sociologists call the **socialization of nature**. This phrase refers to the fact that phenomena that used to be 'natural', or

given in nature, have now become social – they depend on our own social decisions.

Sociological perspectives on medicine

The rise of the biomedical model of health

Like many of the ideas we explore in this book, ‘health’ and ‘illness’ are terms that are culturally and socially defined. Cultures differ in what they consider to be healthy and normal. All cultures have known concepts of physical health and illness, but most of what we now recognize as medicine is a consequence of developments in Western society over the past three centuries. In pre-modern cultures, the family was the main institution coping with sickness or affliction. There have always been individuals who specialized as healers, using a mixture of physical and magical remedies, and many of these traditional systems of treatment survive today in non-Western cultures throughout the world. A large number of them belong to the category of alternative medicines discussed below.

For approximately 200 years now, the dominant Western ideas about medicine have been expressed in the **biomedical model** of health. This understanding of health and illness developed along with the growth of modern societies. In fact, it can be seen as one of the main features of such societies. Its emergence was closely linked to the triumph of science and reason over traditional or religious-based explanations of the world (see the discussion of Max Weber and rationalization in chapter 1). Before looking at the biomedical model in more depth, let us briefly consider the social and historical context in which it arose.

Public health

We mentioned above how members of traditional societies relied largely on folk remedies, treatments and healing techniques which were passed down from

generation to generation. Illnesses were frequently regarded in magical or religious terms and were attributed to the presence of evil spirits or ‘sin’. For peasants and average town-dwellers, there was no outside authority that was concerned with their health in the way that states and public health systems are today. Health was a private matter, not a public concern.

The rise of both the nation-state and industrialization brought about drastic changes in this situation, however. The emergence of nation-states with defined territories produced a shift in attitudes towards local people, who were no longer simply inhabitants of the land, but were a population falling under the rule of a central authority. The human population was seen as a resource to be monitored and regulated as part of the process of maximizing national wealth and power. The state began to take a heightened interest in the health of its population, as the well-being of its members affected the nation's productivity, level of prosperity, defensive capabilities and rate of growth. The study of **demography** – the size, composition and dynamics of human populations – assumed much greater importance. The Census was introduced in order to record and monitor changes occurring in the population. Statistics of all sorts were collected and calculated: birth rates, mortality rates, average ages of marriage and childbearing, suicide rates, life expectancy, diet, common illnesses, causes of death and so forth.

Michel Foucault (1926–84) made an influential contribution to our understanding of the rise of modern medicine by drawing attention to the regulation and disciplining of bodies by European states (1973). He argued that sexuality and sexual behaviour were of central importance to this process. Sex was both the way in which the population could reproduce and grow, and a potential threat to its health and well-being. Sexuality not linked to reproduction was something to be repressed and controlled. This monitoring of sexuality by the state

occurred in part through the collection of data about marriage, sexual behaviour, legitimacy and illegitimacy, the use of contraception and abortions. This surveillance went hand in hand with the promotion of strong public norms about sexual morality and acceptable sexual activity. For example, sexual 'perversions' such as homosexuality, masturbation and sex outside marriage were all labelled and condemned.

See chapter 14, 'Sexuality and Gender', for a discussion of different forms of sexuality.

The idea of public health took shape in an attempt to eradicate **pathologies** from the population – the 'social body'. The state began to assume responsibility for improving the conditions in which the population lived. Sanitation and water systems were developed to protect against disease. Roads were paved and attention was devoted to housing. Regulations were gradually imposed on slaughterhouses and facilities for food processing. Burial practices were monitored to ensure that they did not pose a health threat to the population. A whole series of institutions, such as prisons, asylums, workhouses, schools and hospitals emerged as part of the move towards monitoring, controlling and reforming the people.

The biomedical model

Medical practices were closely intertwined with the social changes described above. The application of science to medical diagnosis and cure was the major feature of the development of modern healthcare systems. Disease came to be defined objectively, in terms of identifiable objective 'signs' located in the body, as opposed to symptoms experienced by the patient. Formal medical care by trained 'experts' became the accepted way of treating both physical and mental illnesses. Medicine became a tool of reform for behaviours or conditions perceived as 'deviant' – from crime to homosexuality to mental illness.

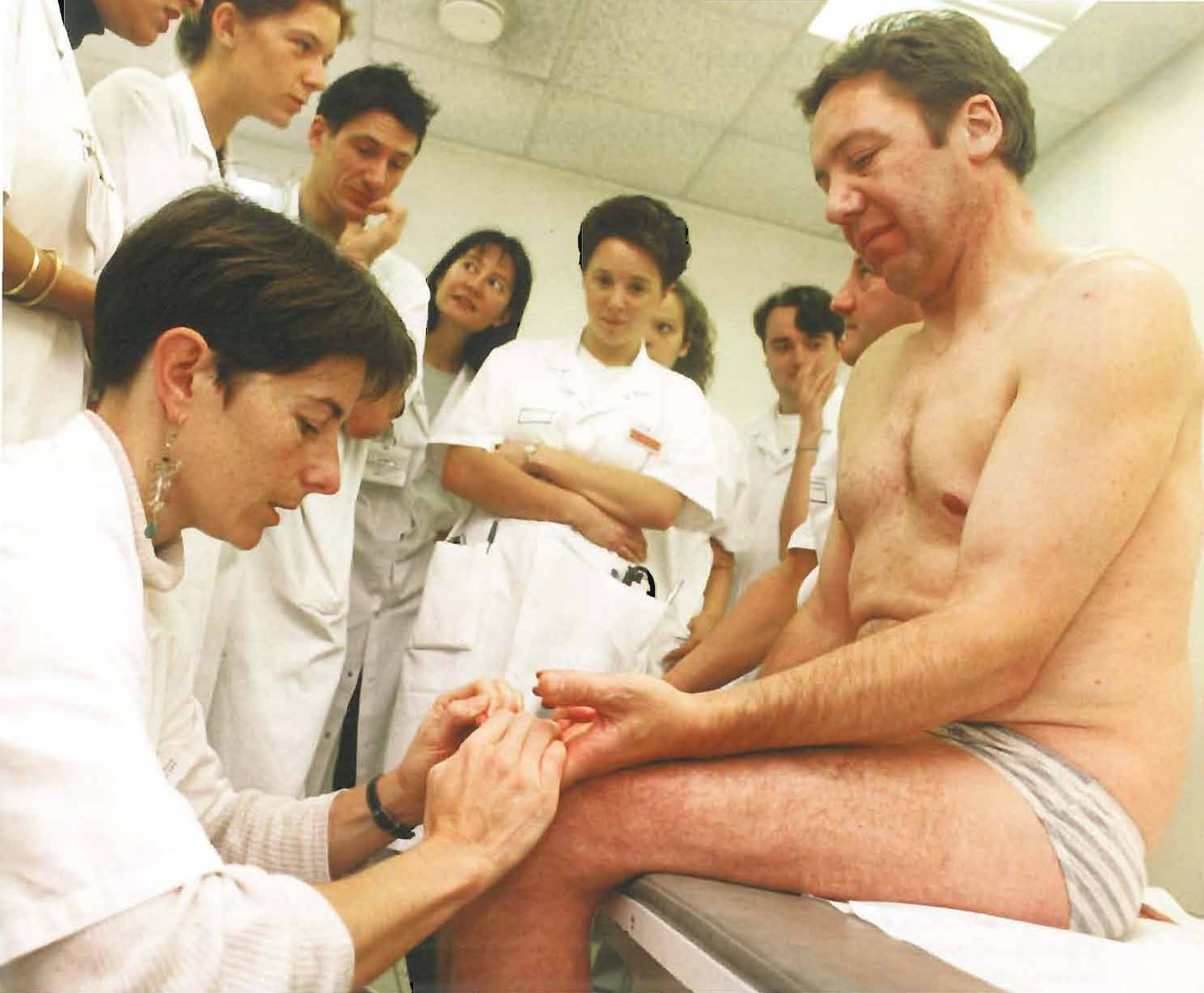
There are three main assumptions on which the biomedical model of health is predicated. First, disease is viewed as a breakdown within the human body that diverts it from its 'normal' state of being. The germ theory of disease, developed in the late 1800s, holds that there is a specific identifiable agent behind every disease. In order to restore the body to health, the cause of the disease must be isolated and treated.

Second, the mind and body can be treated separately. The patient represents a sick body – a pathology – rather than a whole individual. The emphasis is on curing the disease, rather than on the individual's well-being. The biomedical model holds that the sick body can be manipulated, investigated and treated in isolation, without considering other factors. Medical specialists adopt a 'medical gaze', a detached approach in viewing and treating the sick patient. The treatment is to be carried out in a neutral, value-free manner, with information collected and compiled, in clinical terms, in a patient's official file.

Third, trained medical specialists are considered the only experts in the treatment of disease. The medical profession as a body adheres to a recognized code of ethics and is made up of accredited individuals who have successfully completed long-term training. There is no room for self-taught healers or 'non-scientific' medical practices. The hospital represents the appropriate environment in which to treat serious illnesses; these treatments often rely on some combination of technology, medication or surgery. The main assumptions and critiques of the biomedical model are summarized in table 10.1.

Criticisms of the biomedical model

Over the past few decades, the biomedical model of illness described above has been the object of growing criticism. First, some scholars have claimed that the effectiveness of scientific medicine is 'overrated'. In spite of the prestige that modern medicine



According to the biomedical model of health, to the medical profession patients represent only 'sick bodies'.

has acquired, improvements in overall health can be attributed far more to social and environmental changes than to medical skill. Effective sanitation, better nutrition and improved sewerage and hygiene were more influential, particularly in reducing the infant mortality rates and deaths of young children (McKeown 1979). Drugs, advances in surgery, and antibiotics did not significantly decrease death rates until well into the twentieth century. Antibiotics used to treat bacterial infections first became available in the 1930s and 1940s,

while immunizations (against diseases such as polio) were developed later. Ivan Illich (1975) has even suggested that modern medicine has done more harm than good because of iatrogenesis, or 'self-caused' disease. Illich argued that there are three types: clinical, social and cultural iatrogenesis. Clinical iatrogenesis is where medical treatment makes the patient worse or creates new conditions. Social iatrogenesis is where medicine expands into more and more areas, creating an artificial demand for its services. Social iatrogenesis,

Table 10.1 Assumptions and critiques of the biomedical model

Assumptions	Critiques
Disease is a breakdown of the human body caused by a specific biological agent.	Disease is socially constructed, not something that can be revealed through 'scientific truth'.
The patient is a passive being whose 'sick body' can be treated separately from his or her mind.	The patient's opinions and experience of illness is crucial to the treatment. The patient is an active, 'whole' being whose overall well-being – not just physical health – is important.
Medical specialists possess 'expert knowledge' and offer the only valid treatment of disease.	Medical experts are not the only source of knowledge about health and illness. Alternative forms of knowledge are equally valid.
The appropriate arena for treatment is the hospital, where medical technology is concentrated and best employed.	Healing does not need to take place in a hospital. Treatments utilizing technology, medication and surgery are not necessarily superior.

Illich argued, leads to cultural iatrogenesis, where the ability to cope with the challenges of everyday life is progressively reduced by medical explanations and alternatives. To critics like Illich, the scope of modern medicine should be dramatically reduced.

Second, modern medicine has been accused of discounting the opinions and experiences of the patients it seeks to treat. Because medicine is supposedly based on objective, scientific understandings of the causes and cures of specific physical ailments, there is little perceived need to listen to the individual interpretations that patients give to their conditions. Each patient is a 'sick body' to be treated and cured. Critics argue, however, that effective treatment can only take place when the patient is treated as a thinking, capable being with their own valid understandings and interpretations.

Third, critics argue that scientific medicine posits itself as superior to any alternative form of medicine or healing. A belief has been perpetuated that anything that is 'unscientific' is necessarily inferior. As we have already seen, the assertion that modern medicine is somehow a more valid form of knowledge is being undermined by the growing popularity of alternative forms

of medicine, such as homeopathy and acupuncture. In many industrialized societies over the last decade, there has been a surge of interest in the potential of **alternative medicine**.

THINKING CRITICALLY

List as many of the health successes of biomedicine as you can think of. Do these provide solid evidence for the belief that scientific medicine is superior to all other types of medicine? What types of health problems has biomedicine not been very effective in tackling? Why do you think this is the case?

THINKING CRITICALLY

Have you ever tried complementary or alternative therapies? What led you to do so? How do the assumptions that underlie the biomedical model of health differ from those found in alternative medicines? Why has there been such a rise in alternative medicines and treatments in recent years?

The number of alternative medical practitioners is expanding, as are the forms of

10.1 Alternative medicine

Earlier in her life Jan Mason enjoyed vibrant health. But when she began experiencing extreme tiredness and depression, she found that her regular doctor was unable to provide her with much relief:

Before, I was a very fit person. I could swim, play squash, run, and suddenly I just keeled over. I went to the doctor but nobody could tell me what it was. My GP said it was glandular fever and gave me antibiotics which gave me terrible thrush. Then he kept saying that he did not know what it was either. . . . I went through all the tests. I was really very poorly. It went on for six months. I was still ill and they still did not know what it was. (Quoted in Sharma 1992: 37)

Jan's doctor suggested that she try anti-depressants, concluding that she was suffering from the effects of stress. Jan knew that anti-depressants were not the answer for her, even though she acknowledged that her undiagnosed condition had become a great stress in her life. After listening to a radio programme, she suspected that her lethargy might be a result of post-viral fatigue syndrome. On the advice of a friend, she sought out the assistance of a homeopath – an alternative medical practitioner who assesses the state of the whole body and then, using minuscule doses of substances, treats 'like with like', on the assumption that the symptoms of a



Fire-cupping, a method of applying acupuncture in traditional Chinese medicine, is just one of many alternative or complementary therapies, many of which challenge the conventional biomedical model.

disease are part of a body's self-healing process. On finding a homeopath whose approach she was comfortable with, Jan was pleased with the treatment she received (Sharma 1992).

Jan is one of a growing number of people who are incorporating non-orthodox medical practices into their health routines. It has been estimated that as many as one in four Britons have consulted an alternative practitioner. The profile of the typical individual who seeks out alternative forms of healing is female, young to middle-aged, and middle class.

healing that are available. From herbal remedies to acupuncture, from reflexology and chiropractic to light therapy treatments, modern society is witnessing an explosion of healthcare alternatives which lie outside, or overlap with, the 'official' medical system.

Industrialized countries have some of the most well-developed, well-resourced medical facilities in the world. Why, then, are a growing number of people choosing to abandon the healthcare system for 'unscientific' treatments such as aromatherapy and hypnotherapy? First, it is important to stress

that not everyone who uses alternative medicine does so as a substitute for orthodox treatment (although some alternative approaches, such as homeopathy, reject the basis of orthodox medicine entirely). Many people combine elements of both approaches. For this reason, some scholars prefer to call non-orthodox techniques *complementary* medicine rather than alternative medicine (Saks 1992). Some complementary therapies, such as acupuncture, have become part of many mainstream healthcare systems, and are offered alongside biomedical diagnosis and treatment.

There are a number of reasons why individuals might seek the services of a complementary or alternative practitioner. Some people perceive orthodox medicine as deficient, or incapable of relieving chronic, nagging pains or symptoms of stress and anxiety (as in Jan's case in 'Using your sociological imagination 10.1'). Others are dissatisfied with the way modern healthcare systems function – long waiting lists, referrals through chains of specialists, financial restrictions and so forth. Connected to this are concerns about the harmful side-effects of medication and the intrusiveness of surgery – both techniques favoured by modern healthcare systems. The asymmetrical power relationship between doctors and patients is at the heart of some people's choice to avail themselves of alternative medicine. They feel that the role of the 'passive patient' does not grant them enough input into their own treatment and healing. Finally, some individuals profess religious or philosophical objections to orthodox medicine, which tends to treat the mind and body separately. They believe that the spiritual and psychological dimensions of health and illness are often not taken into account in the practice of orthodox medicine.

The growth of alternative medicine presents a number of interesting questions for sociologists to consider. First and foremost, it is a fascinating reflection of the transformations occurring within modern societies. We are living in an age where more and more information is available – from a variety of sources – to draw on in making choices about our lives. Healthcare is no exception in this regard. Individuals are increasingly becoming 'health consumers' – adopting an active stance towards their own health and well-being. Not only are we able to make choices about the type of practitioners to consult, but we are also demanding more involvement in our own care and treatment. In this way, the growth of alternative medicine is linked to the expansion of the self-help movement,

which involves support groups, learning circles and self-help books. People are now more likely than ever before to seize control of their lives and actively reshape them, rather than to rely on the instructions or opinions of others.

Another issue of interest to sociologists relates to the changing nature of health and illness in the late modern period. Many of the conditions and illnesses for which individuals seek alternative medical treatment seem to be products of the modern age itself. Insomnia, anxiety, stress, depression, fatigue and chronic pain (caused by arthritis, cancer and other diseases) are all on the rise in industrialized societies. While these conditions have long existed, they appear to be causing greater distress and disruption to people's health than ever before. Recent surveys have revealed that stress has now surpassed the common cold as the biggest cause of absence from work. The World Health Organization (2001) says that depression is the leading cause of disability globally, and by 2020 it is forecast to be the second leading contributor to the global burden of disease. Ironically, it seems that these consequences of living in the modern world are ones which orthodox medicine has great difficulty in addressing. While alternative medicine is unlikely to overtake 'official' healthcare altogether, indications are that its role will continue to grow.

Fourth, some sociologists have argued that the medical profession wields enormous power in defining what does and does not constitute illness. It is able to use its position as the arbiter of 'scientific truth' to bring more and more realms of human life under medical control. Some of the strongest criticisms along these lines have come from women who argue that the processes of pregnancy and childbirth have been appropriated and 'medicalized' by modern medicine. Rather than remaining in the hands of women – with the help of midwives in the home – childbirth now occurs in hospitals under the direction of predominantly male specialists. Pregnancy,

10.2 The medicalization of hyperactivity



In the past 15 years, the number of prescriptions written for the drug Ritalin has grown exponentially. In the United States, some 2 million prescriptions per month are written for ADHD drugs (mainly Ritalin) for children. Between 3 and 5 per cent of America's children live with ADHD. In Britain, 361,832 prescriptions for Ritalin and similar drugs were issued in 2005, most of them for children with diagnosed ADHD (*Guardian*, 11 February 2006). What is Ritalin and why should sociologists be concerned with it?

Ritalin is a drug prescribed to children and adolescents with Attention-Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), a psychological disorder which, according to many physicians and psychiatrists, accounts for children's

inattentiveness, difficulty in concentrating and inability to learn in school. Ritalin has been described as 'the magic pill'. It helps children to focus, it calms them down and it helps them to learn more effectively. Children who were once disruptive and problematic in the classroom become 'angelic' students, say some teachers, once they begin taking Ritalin.

Critics of Ritalin, however, argue that the drug is far from the harmless 'magic pill' which it is often made out to be. Despite the fact that it has been prescribed in growing quantities in the USA and UK over recent years, no comprehensive research has been carried out on its possible long-term effects on children's brains and bodies. Perhaps more worrying is the claim that Ritalin has become a convenient 'solution' to what is in fact not even a physical problem. Opponents of Ritalin argue that the 'symptoms' of ADHD are in fact reflections of the growing pressure and stress on modern children – an increasingly fast pace of life, the overwhelming effect of information technology, lack of exercise, high-sugar diets and the fraying of family life. Through the use of Ritalin, it is claimed, the medical profession has succeeded in 'medicalizing' child hyperactivity and inattentiveness, rather than drawing attention to the social causes of the observed symptoms.

a common and natural phenomenon, is treated as an 'illness' laden with risks and danger. Feminists argue that women have lost control over this process, as their opinions and knowledge are deemed irrelevant by the 'experts' who now oversee reproductive processes (Oakley 1984). Similar concerns about the medicalization of 'normal' conditions have been raised in relation to hyperactivity in children (see 'Using your sociological imagination 10.2'), unhappiness or mild depression (commonly regulated with the help of medications like Prozac), and tiredness (frequently labelled Chronic Fatigue Syndrome). Many of the assumptions of the biomedical model are

being increasingly questioned, as the world in which it developed changes.

Fifth, critics have argued that the assumptions underlying the biomedical model of health have lent themselves to gross political manipulation, in particular through **eugenics**, the attempt to genetically 'improve' the human race through 'good breeding'. Scientific and medical 'experts' in Nazi Germany took these policies to their most extreme, by claiming that they had identified a racially superior, light-skinned 'Aryan' race. Their eugenic programmes led to the genocide of millions of people who belonged to groups the Nazis saw as biologically inferior, such as Jews and

gypsies, as well as the systematic murder of more than 250,000 disabled people (Burleigh 1994).

Although Nazi Germany made by far the most murderous use of eugenic policies, it should be remembered that in the twentieth century these techniques – often described as ‘population policies’ – were also used in several other European countries and the USA against particular sections of the population, notably the disabled. These policies mostly took the form of the compulsory sterilization of ‘feeble-minded’ women. Racism led to black women being grossly over-represented among the 60,000 people forcibly sterilized in several US states between 1907 and 1960. In Scandinavia, political leaders and geneticists adopted policies for compulsory sterilization because they were concerned that the emerging welfare state would encourage the ‘unfit’ to reproduce and would therefore reduce the quality of the ‘national stock’. In Sweden alone, 63,000 people, 90 per cent of them women, were sterilized between 1934 and 1975. Norway, a much smaller country, sterilized 48,000 people in the same period. British and Dutch medical experts and policy-makers, by contrast, adopted voluntary sterilization, together with the mass institutionalization and segregation of the ‘feeble-minded’ (Rose 2003).

Today, the rapid development of medical technology is raising new and difficult questions for critics of the biomedical model. A great deal of scientific endeavour is now being devoted to the expansion of genetic engineering, which makes it possible to intervene in the genetic make-up of the foetus so as to influence its subsequent development. The debate about genetic engineering is often polarized between critics, who see it as fatally corrupted by the history of eugenics in the twentieth century discussed above, and supporters who argue it is separate from these events (Kerr and Shakespeare 2002). According to its supporters, genetic engineering will create enormous opportunities. It is possible, for

example, to identify the genetic factors that make some people vulnerable to certain diseases. Genetic reprogramming will ensure that these illnesses are no longer passed on from generation to generation. In 2004 a group of people in the UK with a particular form of inherited bowel cancer were granted the right by the government’s Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority to select embryos free from genes that might trigger the disease in future generations. The decision means that only those embryos free of the gene that could cause the cancer will be implanted into the mother’s womb. Without the screening process, infants would have a 50 per cent chance of inheriting the disease (*The Times*, 1 November 2004). The selection of embryos was previously approved only for childhood or untreatable disorders such as cystic fibrosis and Huntington’s disease (*The Times*, 6 November 2004). On the other hand, the ruling by the Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority deepens the controversy over ‘designer babies’. It sets a precedent that will allow doctors to ‘cherry-pick’ embryos for a much wider range of traits than at present. It is now scientifically possible, for example, to ‘design’ bodies before birth in terms of colour of skin, hair and eyes, weight and so forth.

Several of the criticisms of the biomedical model, discussed above, apply also to the genetic-engineering debate. Many of those with concerns about the biomedical model will question the role of medical experts in exerting their authority over the technology. Will there be unintended consequences of medical intervention? What role will parents-to-be have in making decisions about the selection of embryos? Is this another case of (traditionally male) medical experts giving authoritative medical advice to (obviously female) future mothers? What safeguards should be present to prevent sexism, racism or disablism in embryo selection? And how are these categories defined? Genetic engineering is unlikely to be cheap. Will this mean that those who can

afford to pay will be able to programme out from their children any traits they see as socially undesirable? What will happen to the children of more deprived groups, who will continue to be born naturally? Some sociologists have argued that differential access to genetic engineering might lead to the emergence of a 'biological underclass'. Those who do not have the physical advantages genetic engineering can bring might be subject to prejudice and discrimination by those who do enjoy these advantages. They might have difficulty finding employment and life or health insurance (Duster 1990). For sociologists, the rapid pace in which new medical technologies are advancing raises an increasing number of new and difficult questions.

Medicine and health in a changing world

There is a growing realization that it is not only medical experts who possess knowledge and understanding about health and illness. All of us are in a position to interpret and shape our own well-being through our understanding of our bodies, and through choices in our everyday lives about diet, exercise, consumption patterns and general lifestyle. These new directions in popular thinking about health, along with the other criticisms of modern medicine outlined above, are contributing to some profound transformations within health-care systems in modern societies (see figure 10.1). They also explain the rise in alternative or complementary medicine, discussed above.

Yet other factors are relevant here as well: the nature and the scale of disease itself have both been changing. In earlier times, the major illnesses were infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, malaria and polio. They often took on epidemic proportions and could threaten a whole population. In industrialized countries today, such acute infectious diseases have become a minor cause of death; some of them have

been substantially eradicated. The most common causes of death in industrialized countries are now non-infectious chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes or circulatory diseases. This shift is referred to as the 'health transition'. Whereas in pre-modern societies the highest rates of death were among infants and young children, today death rates rise with increasing age. Because people are living longer and suffering predominantly from chronic degenerative diseases, there is the need for a new approach to health and caring. There is also increased emphasis on 'lifestyle choices' – such as smoking, exercise and diet – which are seen to influence the onset of many chronic illnesses.

HIV and AIDS in global perspective

A powerful reminder that the general shift from acute to chronic conditions is not, however, absolute came in the early 1980s, with the emergence of a deadly new epidemic – AIDS – which rapidly became a pandemic (a global epidemic), killing millions of adults and young people alike. A person is often said to have 'acquired immunodeficiency syndrome' (AIDS) when the number of immune cells in the body falls below a designated minimum required to fight off infections. Once this point is reached, they are likely to be affected by opportunistic infections which their body is then unable to fight off, leading to very serious, life-threatening diseases such as pneumonia, tuberculosis and skin cancers. AIDS is the result of damage caused by previous infection with a virus known as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). There is still no cure for either HIV infection or AIDS, nor is there a vaccine to prevent infection in the first place.

Transmission of HIV occurs in four main ways:

- from unprotected penetrative sex with an infected person;

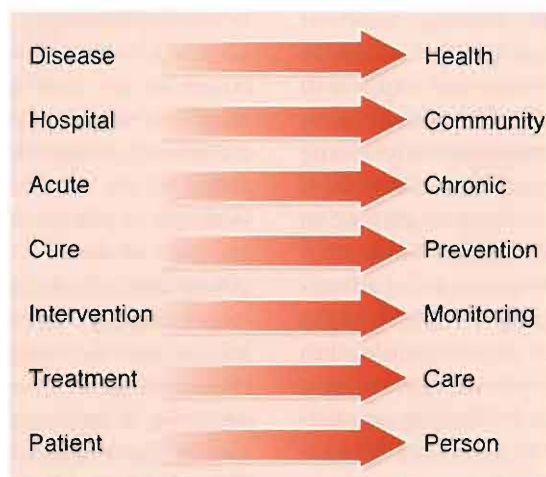


Figure 10.1 Contemporary transformations in health and medicine

Source: Nettleton 2006

- from injection or transfusion of contaminated blood or blood products such as skin grafts or organ transplants from infected people;
- from infected mothers to their babies either during pregnancy, at birth or through breastfeeding;
- sharing unsterilized injection equipment used by an infected person.

The United Nations estimates that some 25 million people died of AIDS-related conditions between 1981 and 2005, making this one of the deadliest pandemics in human history (UNAIDS 2006; see also figure 10.2). The HIV incidence rate is thought to have peaked in the late-1990s, but the number of people living with HIV is rising, partly a result of the effectiveness of anti-retroviral drugs treatments in delaying the onset of AIDS. However, these drugs are expensive and though many people with HIV in the developed world have access to them, this has not been the case in poorer countries, where AIDS has become a major cause of death.

A 2006 UN report estimated that 38.6 million people were living with HIV around the world in 2005, the highest prevalence rates being in Southern Africa, where some epidemics were still expanding (see 'Global

society 10.2' for a report on AIDS/HIV in South Africa). There was also some evidence of a resurgent epidemic in the USA, where the disease was first identified in 1981, indicating that there is a long way to go before HIV across the world can be said to be 'under control'.

What then are the sociological lessons to be learned from the emergence of AIDS? First, the links made between particular lifestyles and risk of infection initially led to the stigmatizing of gay men. Erving Goffman (1963) argued that **stigma** is a relationship of devaluation in which one individual is disqualified from full social acceptance. Stigma can take many forms – for example, physical (such as visible impairments), biographical (such as the possession of a criminal record) or contextual (for example, 'hanging out with the wrong crowd'). Stigmas are rarely based on valid understandings. They spring from stereotypes or perceptions, which may be false, or only partially correct. Stigmatization often appears in the medical context. Goffman argued that inherent in the process of stigmatization is social control. Stigmatizing groups is one way in which society controls their behaviour. In some cases, the stigma is never removed and the person is never fully accepted into society.

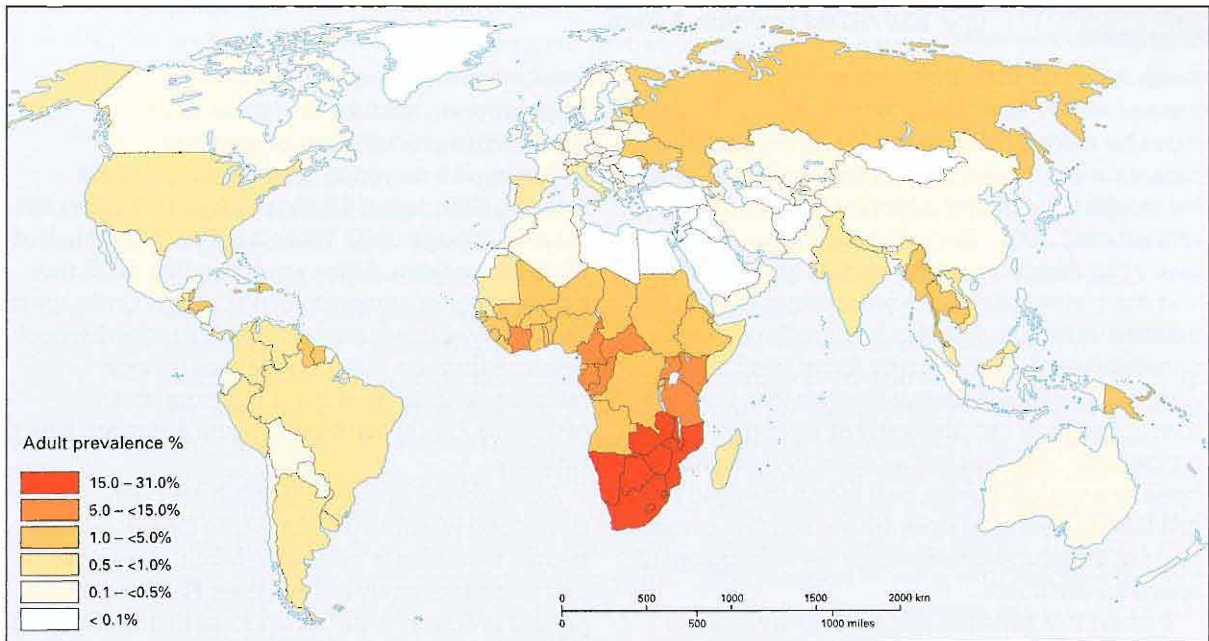


Figure 10.2 A global view of adult HIV infection by prevalence rates, 2005

Source: UNAIDS 2006

This was true of early AIDS patients and continues in some countries.

Sarah Nettleton (2006) notes that because AIDS was first found amongst gay men in the USA, it was originally called GRID – Gay Related Immune Deficiency – and it was suggested that a ‘fast lane’ gay lifestyle actually *caused* the disease, which was often referred to in the media as a ‘gay plague’. Nettleton points out that research findings discredited such beliefs and that it is not being part of a particular social group that is especially risky, but specific *practices*, such as injecting with non-sterilized needles or having unprotected penetrative sex. Nevertheless, epidemiological interpretations of gay men as part of ‘high-risk groups’ tended to reinforce the division between such groups and the ‘heterosexual general public’, thus lulling the latter into a false and very dangerous sense of security.

Second, AIDS raises important issues in relation to social inequalities. For example, in many countries, heterosexual norms of masculinity tend to reject the use of

condoms, favouring unprotected sex as a way of ‘being a man’. The consequences of such widespread social norms could hardly be more serious for heterosexual women. As noted above, the gross global inequalities between the developed and developing worlds are also emphasized by the AIDS pandemic, with HIV-infected people in the relatively rich countries having a much greater chance of survival than those in poorer ones. Attempts to make anti-retroviral drugs more widely available in developing countries have had some success in recent years, though the disparity in healthcare provision remains starkly unequal. Global inequality here literally is a matter of life and death.

See chapter 13, ‘Global Inequality’, for a wider discussion of these issues.

Third, the concept of ‘risk’ has become a central one in social scientific debates on lifestyles, health and medicine since the

Global Society 10.2 HIV/AIDS in South Africa

South Africa is currently experiencing one of the most severe AIDS epidemics in the world. Although it can be hard to collect reliable figures, various data sources suggest that 5.7 million people were living with HIV in South Africa by the end of 2007, and almost 1,000 AIDS deaths were occurring every day. Almost one in five adults are infected and this has serious consequences not only for the infected individual, but also for their family and communities. A recent survey found that South Africans spent more time at funerals than they did having their hair cut, shopping or having barbecues. Less than half as many people had been to a wedding in the past month than had been to a funeral. Mortality rates are so high that in some parts of the country, cemeteries are running out of space for the dead.

Beyond this personal and community level of suffering, the AIDS epidemic has also had a significant effect on the country's general social and economic development. South Africa fell 35 places in the Human Development Index (a worldwide measurement that ranks countries from the most developed down to the least developed) between 1990 and 2003, a period during which the prevalence of HIV saw a dramatic increase. The average life expectancy is 54 years, an estimated 10 years lower than it would otherwise be without the AIDS epidemic. Economically, the crisis is a huge drain on national resources: in 2006 a leading

researcher estimated that HIV-positive patients would soon account for 60-70% of medical expenditure in South African hospitals.

The impact on young people is particularly marked. Over half of 15-year-olds are not expected to reach the age of 60. While it is thought that half of all deaths in South Africa are caused by AIDS, this figure is higher amongst young people. Quite apart from many children not being able to attend school because they are ill or need to care for sick relatives, schools have fewer teachers, as an estimated 21% of teachers in South Africa are living with HIV.

Antiretroviral drug treatments have been developed which make it possible for HIV-positive people to remain in good health from day to day and to lead relatively normal lives. However, few people in South Africa have access to this treatment hence the devastation AIDS is causing in South Africa. Such a serious crisis affecting a whole nation is due to a number of different factors such as poverty, social instability and a lack of sufficient government action. People trying to alleviate the problem continue to debate which is the most serious issue in order to most effectively combat the epidemic.

For more information, see the AVERT website (<http://www.avert.org/>).

late twentieth century, and the emergence of AIDS has certainly been instrumental in the creation of a more 'risk-aware' population. As discussed in chapter 5, 'The Environment', Ulrich Beck (1999) has even suggested that we are moving into a 'world risk society'; if this is the case, then one global risk that no one can ignore today is that of HIV infection.

Whether the contemporary transformations in healthcare discussed in this section will result in a new 'health paradigm' to replace the biomedical model, as some scholars have suggested, is unclear. But it is certain that we are witnessing a period of significant and rapid reform in modern

medicine and in people's attitudes towards it.

Sociological perspectives on health and illness

One of the main concerns of sociologists is to examine the experience of illness. Sociologists ask how illness, such as anorexia discussed above, is experienced and interpreted by the sick person and by those with whom she comes into contact. If you have ever been ill, even for a short period of time, you will know that patterns in everyday life are temporarily modified and your interactions with others become transformed. This

is because the 'normal' functioning of the body is a vital, but often unnoticed, part of our lives. We depend on our bodies to operate as they should; our very sense of self is predicated on the expectation that our bodies will facilitate, not impede, our social interactions and daily activities.

Illness has both personal and public dimensions. When we become ill, not only do we experience pain, discomfort, confusion and other challenges, but others are affected as well. People in close contact with us may extend sympathy, care and support. They may struggle to make sense of the fact of our illness or to find ways to incorporate it into the patterns of their own lives. Others with whom we come into contact may also react to illness; these reactions in turn help to shape our own interpretations and can pose challenges to our sense of self.

Two ways of understanding the experience of illness have been particularly influential in sociological thought. The first, associated with the functionalist school, sets forth the norms of behaviour which individuals are thought to adopt when sick. The second view, favoured by symbolic interactionists, is a broader attempt to reveal the interpretations which are ascribed to illness and how these meanings influence people's actions and behaviour.



For more on functionalist theory see chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', and chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives in Sociology'.

Functionalist accounts of sick roles and social systems have been influential in shaping sociological studies of health and illness, but we shall now turn to some of the ways that sociologists of the symbolic interactionist school have attempted to understand the *experience* of illness.

Illness as 'lived experience'

Symbolic interactionists are interested in the ways people interpret the social world

and the meanings they ascribe to it. Many sociologists have applied this approach to the realm of health and illness in order to understand how people experience being ill or perceive the illness of others. How do people react and adjust to news about a serious illness? How does illness shape individuals' daily lives? How does living with a chronic illness affect an individual's self-identity?

As we saw in the discussion of ageing in chapter 8, people in industrialized societies are now living longer, but suffering later in life from chronic illnesses. Medicine is able to relieve the pain and discomfort associated with some of these conditions, but a growing number of people are faced with the prospect of living with illness over a long period of time. Sociologists are concerned with how illness in such cases becomes incorporated in an individual's personal 'biography'.

One theme that sociologists have explored is how chronically ill individuals learn to cope with the practical and emotional implications of their illness. Certain illnesses demand regular treatments or maintenance which can affect people's daily routines. Dialysis, insulin injections or taking large numbers of pills all demand that individuals adjust their schedules in response to illness. Other illnesses can have unpredictable effects on the body, such as the sudden loss of bowel or bladder control, or violent nausea. Individuals suffering from such conditions are forced to develop strategies for managing their illness in day-to-day life. These include both practical considerations – such as always noting the location of the toilet when in an unfamiliar place – as well as skills for managing interpersonal relations, both intimate and commonplace. Although the symptoms of the illness can be embarrassing and disruptive, people develop coping strategies to live life as normally as possible (Kelly 1992).

At the same time, the experience of illness can pose challenges to and bring about transformations in people's sense of self.

Classic Studies 10.1 Talcott Parsons on society's 'sick role'

The research problem

Have you ever been ill? When you were feeling unwell, how did other people react to you? Were they sympathetic? Did they try to help you get well again? Did you feel they expected you to get better too quickly? The American functionalist theorist, Talcott Parsons (1952), argued that illness has a clear social as well as an individual dimension. People are not only individually sick; they also have to learn what society expects of them when they are sick, and if they fail to conform to the behavioural norms surrounding illness, they may be stigmatized as engaging in deviant behaviour. Why is this?

Parsons's explanation

Parsons argued that there exists a **sick role** – a concept he used to describe the patterns of behaviour which the sick person adopts in order to minimize the disruptive impact of illness to society. Functionalism holds that society usually operates in a smooth and consensual manner. Illness is therefore potentially dysfunctional as it could disrupt the smooth functioning of society. A sick person, for example, might not be able to perform all of his or her normal responsibilities or might be less reliable and efficient than usual. Because sick people are not able to carry out their normal roles, the lives of people around them are disrupted: work tasks go unfinished causing stress for co-workers, responsibilities at home are not fulfilled, and so on.

According to Parsons, people *learn* the sick role through socialization and enact it – with the cooperation of others – when they fall ill. There are three pillars of the sick role:

- 1 The sick person is not personally responsible for being sick. Illness is seen as the result of physical causes beyond the individual's control. The onset of illness is unrelated to the individual's behaviour or actions.
- 2 The sick person is entitled to certain rights and privileges, including a withdrawal from normal responsibilities. Since they bear no responsibility for the illness, they are exempted from certain duties, roles and behaviours which otherwise apply. For example, the sick person might be 'released'



"We're running a little behind, so I'd like each of you to ask yourself, 'Am I really that sick, or would I just be wasting the doctor's valuable time?'"

© The New Yorker Collection 2001, David Sipress from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.

from normal duties around the home.

Behaviour that is not as polite or thoughtful as usual might be excused. The sick person gains the right to stay in bed or to take time off from work.

- 3 The sick person must work to regain health by consulting a medical expert and agreeing to become a 'patient', so the sick role is a temporary and 'conditional' one, which is contingent on the sick person actively trying to get well. In order to occupy the sick role, people must receive the sanction of a medical professional who legitimates the person's claim of illness. Confirmation of illness via expert opinion allows those surrounding the sick person to accept the validity of his or her claims. The patient is expected to cooperate in his or her own recovery by following 'doctor's orders'. But a sick person who refuses to consult a doctor, or who does not heed the advice of a medical authority, puts his or her sick role status in jeopardy.

Parsons's sick role has been refined by later sociologists, who suggest that all illnesses are not 'the same' as far as the sick role is concerned. They argue that the experience of the sick role varies with type of illness, since people's reactions to a sick person are influenced by the severity of the illness and their perception of it. Thus, the added rights and privileges which are part of the sick role may not be uniformly experienced. Freidson (1970) identified three versions of the sick role which

correspond with different types and degrees of illness.

The *conditional* sick role applies to people suffering from a temporary condition from which they can recover. The sick person is expected to 'get well' and receives some rights and privileges according to the severity of the illness. For example, someone suffering from bronchitis would reap more benefits than the sufferer of a common cold. The *unconditionally legitimate* sick role refers to individuals who are suffering from incurable illnesses. Because the sick person cannot 'do' anything to get well, he or she is automatically entitled to occupy the sick role long term. The unconditionally legitimate role might apply to individuals suffering from alopecia (total hair loss) or severe acne (in both cases there are no special privileges, but, rather, an acknowledgement that the individual is not responsible for the illness), or from cancer or Parkinson's disease, which result in important privileges and the right to abandon many or most duties.

The final sick role is the *illegitimate role*, which occurs when an individual suffers from a disease or condition that is stigmatized by others. In such cases, there is a sense that the individual might somehow bear responsibility for the illness; additional rights and privileges are not necessarily granted. Alcoholism, smoking-related illness and obesity are possible examples of stigmatized illnesses, which affect a sufferer's right to assume the sick role.

Critical points

Parsons's notion of the sick role has been very influential. It reveals clearly how the sick person is an integral part of a larger social context. But there are a number of important criticisms which can be levelled against it.

Some writers have argued that the sick role 'formula' is unable to capture the *experience* of illness. Others point out that it cannot be applied universally. For example, it does not account for instances when doctors and patients disagree about a diagnosis, or have opposing interests. Furthermore, taking on the sick role is not always a straightforward process. Some individuals suffer for years from chronic pain or from symptoms that are repeatedly

misdiagnosed. They are denied the sick role until a clear diagnosis of their condition is made. In other cases, social factors such as race, class and gender can affect whether, and how readily, the sick role is granted. In sum, the sick role cannot be divorced from the social, cultural and economic influences which surround it and the realities of life and illness are more complex than the sick role suggests.

The increasing emphasis on lifestyle and health in our modern age means that individuals are seen as bearing ever greater responsibility for their own well-being. This contradicts the first premise of the sick role – that individuals are not to blame for their illness. Moreover, in modern societies the shift away from acute infectious disease towards chronic illness has made the sick role less applicable. Whereas the sick role might be useful in understanding acute illness, it is less useful in the case of chronic illness: there is no one formula for chronically ill or disabled people to follow. Living with illness is experienced and interpreted in a multiplicity of ways by sick people – and by those who surround them.

Contemporary significance

Nonetheless, the concept of a 'sick role' remains valuable as it allows us to link individual illness to wider healthcare systems. Bryan S. Turner (1995) argues that most societies *do* develop sick roles – learned norms that promote particular types of behaviour in relation to the control of illness – but that these differ. In many Western societies, for example, an individualized sick role exists, which means that hospital stays for non-life-threatening conditions are generally quite short, visiting hours are limited and the number of visitors strictly controlled. However, in Japan, a more communal sick role is the norm. Patients tend to stay in hospital longer after their medical treatment is completed and the average hospital stay is much longer than in Western societies. Hospital visits are also more informal, with family and friends often eating together and staying for longer periods. Turner suggests that we can still learn much about the social bases of health from such a comparative sociology of sick roles.



Winner of the 'Miss HIV Stigma-Free Beauty Pageant', 2007, held in Botswana, Africa. The competition aims to tackle negative stigmatization of HIV-positive women and put debates about HIV on the public agenda.

These develop both through the actual reactions of others to the illness, and through imagined or perceived reactions. For the chronically ill or disabled, social interactions which are routine for many people become tinged with risk or uncertainty. The shared understandings that underpin standard everyday interactions are not always present when illness or disability is a factor, and interpretations of common situations may differ substantially. An ill person may be in need of assistance but not want to appear dependent, for example. An individual may feel sympathy for someone who has been diagnosed with an illness, but be unsure whether to address the subject directly. The changed context of social interactions can precipitate transformations in self-identity.

Some sociologists have investigated how chronically ill individuals manage their

illnesses within the overall context of their lives (Jobling 1988; Williams 1993). Illness can place enormous demands on people's time, energy, strength and emotional reserves. Corbin and Strauss (1985) studied the regimes of health which the chronically ill develop in order to organize their daily lives. They identified three types of 'work' contained in people's everyday strategies. Illness work refers to those activities involved in managing their condition, such as treating pain, doing diagnostic tests or undergoing physical therapy. Everyday work pertains to the management of daily life – maintaining relationships with others, running the household affairs and pursuing professional or personal interests. Biographical work involves those activities that the ill person does as part of building or reconstructing their personal narrative. In other

words, it is the process of incorporating the illness into one's life, making sense of it and developing ways of explaining it to others. Such a process can help people restore meaning and order to their lives after coming to terms with the knowledge of chronic illness. From studying how illness affects the individual, we now turn to examine patterns of illness and health within society, and discuss how health outcomes differ between social groups.

The social basis of health

The twentieth century witnessed a significant overall rise in life expectancy for the industrialized countries and a general rise in life expectancy for the world's population to 67 years by 2007 (World Bank 2007a). Of course, such blunt averages hide some major inequalities between the developed and developing countries (see chapter 8, 'The Life-Course'). In the industrialized world, diseases such as polio, scarlet fever and tuberculosis have virtually been eradicated. Compared to other parts of the world, standards of health and well-being are relatively high. Many of these advances in public health have been attributed to the power of modern medicine. There is a commonly held assumption that medical research has been – and will continue to be – successful in uncovering the biological causes of disease and in developing effective treatments to control them. As medical knowledge and expertise grow, the argument runs, we can expect to see sustained and steady improvements in public health.

Although this approach to health and disease has been extremely influential, it is somewhat unsatisfactory for sociologists. This is because it ignores the important role of social and environmental influences on patterns of health and illness. The improvements in overall public health over the past century cannot conceal the fact that health and illness are not distributed evenly throughout the population. Research has

shown that certain groups of people tend to enjoy much better health than others. These health inequalities appear to be tied to larger socio-economic patterns.

Sociologists and specialists in social **epidemiology** – scientists who study the distribution and incidence of disease and illness within the population – have attempted to explain the link between health and variables such as social class, gender, race, age and geography. While most scholars acknowledge the correlation between health and social inequalities, there is no agreement about the nature of the connection or about how health inequalities should be addressed. One of the main areas of debate concentrates on the relative importance of individual variables (such as lifestyle, behaviour, diet and cultural patterns) versus environmental or structural factors (such as income distribution and poverty). In this section we will look at variations in health patterns according to social class, gender and ethnicity and review some of the competing explanations for their persistence.

Class and health

Research on health and class has revealed a clear relationship between patterns of mortality and morbidity (illness) and an individual's social class. In fact, Cockerham argues: 'Social class or socioeconomic status (SES) is the strongest predictor of health, disease causation, and longevity in medical sociology' (2007: 75). In the UK, an influential nationwide study – the Black Report (DHSS 1980) – was important in publicizing the extent of class-based health inequalities, which many people found shocking in a wealthy country like Britain. Although there was a trend towards better health in society as a whole, significant disparities existed between classes, affecting health indicators from birth weight to blood pressure to risk of chronic illness. Individuals from higher socio-economic positions are on average healthier, taller and stronger, and live longer

Table 10.2 Infant deaths per 1,000 live births, by socio-economic classification (based on father's occupation at death registration), England and Wales, 2005

	Rates ¹				Infant
	Stillbirth	Perinatal	Neonatal	Post-neonatal	
All ²	5.3	7.8	3.4	1.4	4.8
Inside marriage					
All ³	5.0	7.4	3.0	1.3	4.3
1.1 Large employers and higher managerial	3.1	4.7	2.0	0.7	2.7
1.2 Higher professional	4.6	6.6	2.7	1.1	3.8
2 Lower managerial and professional	4.3	6.4	2.6	0.8	3.4
3 Intermediate	5.7	8.6	3.5	1.4	5.0
4 Small employers and own-account workers	4.3	6.2	2.6	1.2	3.9
5 Lower supervisory and technical	4.3	6.2	2.3	1.1	3.4
6 Semi-routine	6.3	9.3	4.2	1.9	6.1
7 Routine	6.9	10.1	4.1	1.7	5.8
Other ⁴	9.3	13.0	5.1	2.6	7.7
Outside marriage joint registration					
All ³					
1.1 Large employers and higher managerial	5.7	8.6	3.9	1.6	5.5
1.2 Higher professional	4.2	5.7	2.3	0.8	3.1
2 Lower managerial and professional	4.7	7.1	3.0	0.7	3.6
3 Intermediate	4.4	6.8	3.1	0.8	3.1
4 Small employers and own-account workers	5.1	7.7	3.6	1.8	5.4
5 Lower supervisory and technical	4.1	6.0	2.9	1.4	4.3
6 Semi-routine	4.9	7.4	3.3	1.0	4.3
7 Routine	6.7	10.6	5.0	1.9	6.8
Other ⁴	7.4	10.7	4.4	1.8	6.2

¹ Stillbirths and perinatal deaths per 1,000 live births and stillbirths. Neonatal, postneonatal and infant deaths per 1,000 live births.

² Inside marriage and outside marriage/joint registration only, including cases where father's occupation was not stated.

³ Includes cases where father's occupation was not stated.

⁴ Students; occupations inadequately described; occupations not classifiable for other reasons; never worked and long-term unemployed.

Source: Adapted from *Health Statistics Quarterly* 32, 2005

than those lower down the social scale. An updated survey in 1990 then confirmed the earlier findings. Differences are greatest in respect to infant mortality (children dying in the first year of life) and child death, but

poorer people are at greater risk of dying at all ages than more affluent people.

Some of the main class-based inequalities in health have been summarized by Browne and Bottrill (1999). They include:

- 1 Unskilled manual workers in the lowest occupational class are twice as likely to die before retirement age than professional white-collar workers in the top occupational class.
- 2 More than twice as many babies are still-born or die within the first week of life in unskilled families than in higher managerial families. The difference is even more pronounced amongst families of the long-term unemployed (see figure 10.3).
- 3 An individual born into the highest occupational class (professional white-collar workers) is likely to live on average seven years longer than someone born into the lowest occupational class (unskilled manual workers).
- 4 Some 90 per cent of the major causes of death are more common in the two lowest occupational classes than the three higher occupational classes (see figure 10.4 for instances).
- 5 Working-class people visit their doctors more often and for a wider range of ailments than people in professional occupations; long-standing illness is 50 per cent higher among unskilled manual workers than among professionals.
- 6 Class-based health inequalities are even more pronounced among the long-term unemployed; people in work tend to live longer than those who are without work.

Studies conducted in other industrialized countries have confirmed that there is a clear class gradient to health. Some scholars have found that the relative health inequality between the richest and poorest members of society is widening. Yet despite a growing amount of research aimed at revealing the link between health inequality and social class, scholars have not been entirely successful in locating the actual mechanisms that connect the two. Several competing explanations have been advanced for the causes behind the correlation.

The Black Report concentrated most heavily on *materialist* explanations of health inequality. Materialist or environ-

mental explanations see the cause of health inequalities in large social structures, such as poverty, wealth and income distribution, unemployment, housing, pollution and poor working conditions. The patterns in health inequalities between classes are seen as the result of material deprivation. Reducing inequalities in health can only be done by addressing the root causes of social inequalities in general. While not discounting the possible validity of other arguments, the Black Report stressed the need for a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy and for improvements in education to combat health inequalities.

The Conservative government (1979–90) was dismissive of the findings of the Black Report, arguing that it advocated an unrealistic level of public expenditure. The government was more inclined to focus on cultural and behavioural explanations for health inequalities, emphasizing the importance of individual lifestyles on health. It argued that lower social classes tend to engage in certain activities – such as smoking, poor diet and higher consumption of alcohol – which are detrimental to good health. This argument sees individuals as bearing primary responsibility for poor health, as many lifestyle choices are freely made. Some proponents of this approach claim that such behaviours are embedded within the social class context, rather than under the exclusive control of individuals. Nevertheless, they also identify lifestyle and consumption patterns as the main causes of poor health. Subsequent governments have continued to place emphasis on public health campaigns to influence individuals' lifestyle choices. Anti-smoking initiatives and healthy eating and exercise programmes are examples of such efforts to shape public behaviour. Campaigns like these exhort individuals to take responsibility for their own well-being and they pay less attention to the way social position can constrain people's choices and possibilities. For example, fresh fruit and vegetables, which are central to a good diet, are much more expensive than many foods that are

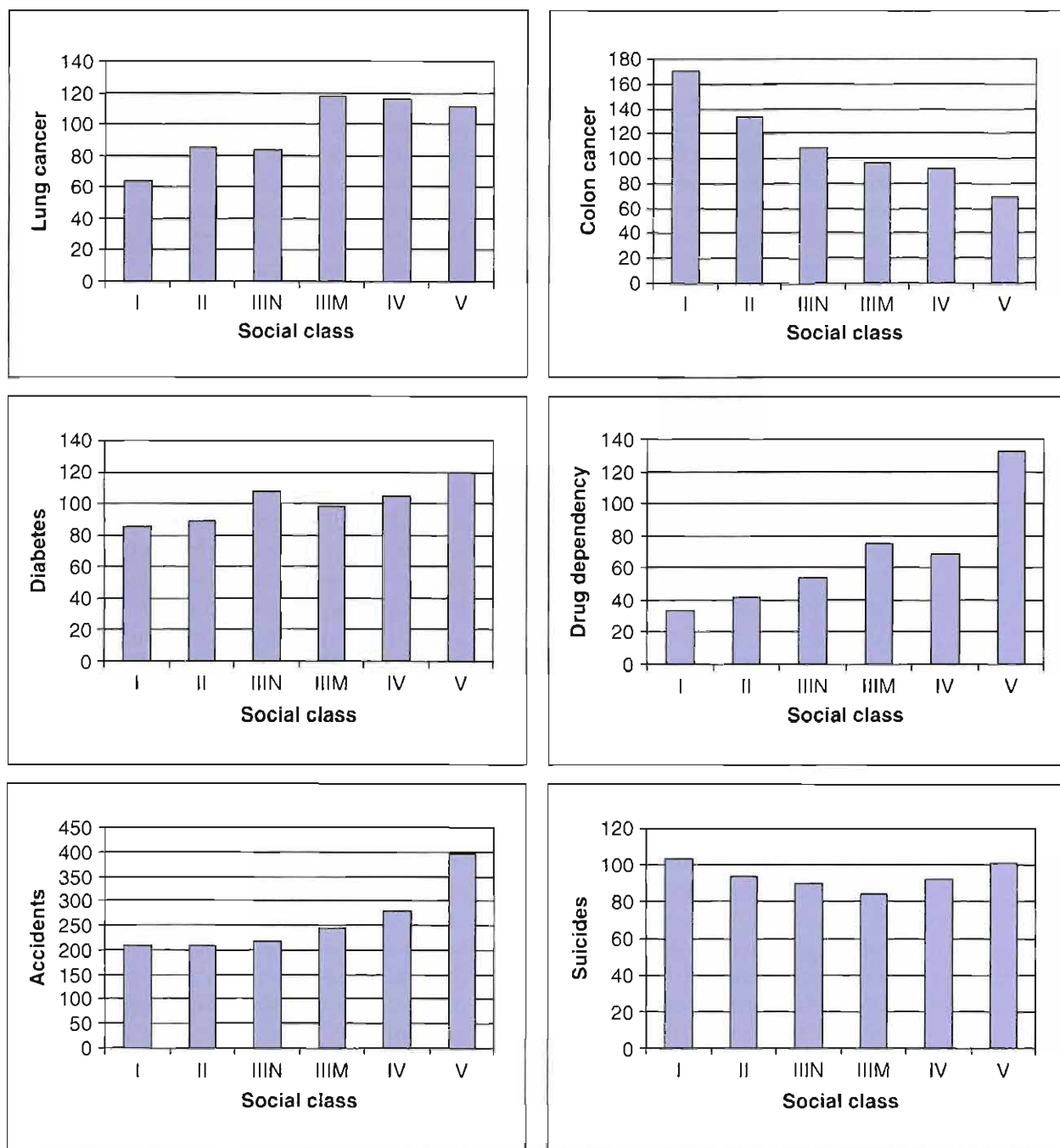


Figure 10.3 UK male mortality by cause of death and social class, selected causes, 1997–2000

Source: White et al. 2003



Poor diet is just one of the factors associated with ill health amongst Britain's most deprived people.

high in fat and cholesterol. The highest consumption of healthy food is, unsurprisingly, among high-income groups.

The 1997 Labour government acknowledged both cultural and material influences on people's health, and commissioned its own report, chaired by Sir Donald Acheson. The Acheson Report (1998) confirmed that for many aspects of health, inequality has generally worsened in the past few decades. Drawing from such evidence, the government's White Paper, *Our Healthier Nation* (1999) emphasized the many diverse influences – social, economic, environmental and cultural – which work together to produce ill health (some of these are illustrated in figure 10.4). It also proposed a set

of initiatives linking health with, for example, unemployment, substandard housing and education, to address not only the symptoms of poor health, but its causes as well. In practice, it remains less expensive, and therefore easier, for governments to concentrate on health promotion and persuasion of individuals than to introduce systematic programmes to tackle major social-structural problems such as unemployment and poor housing.

Gender and health

Disparities in health between men and women have also been noted in many research studies. For example, women

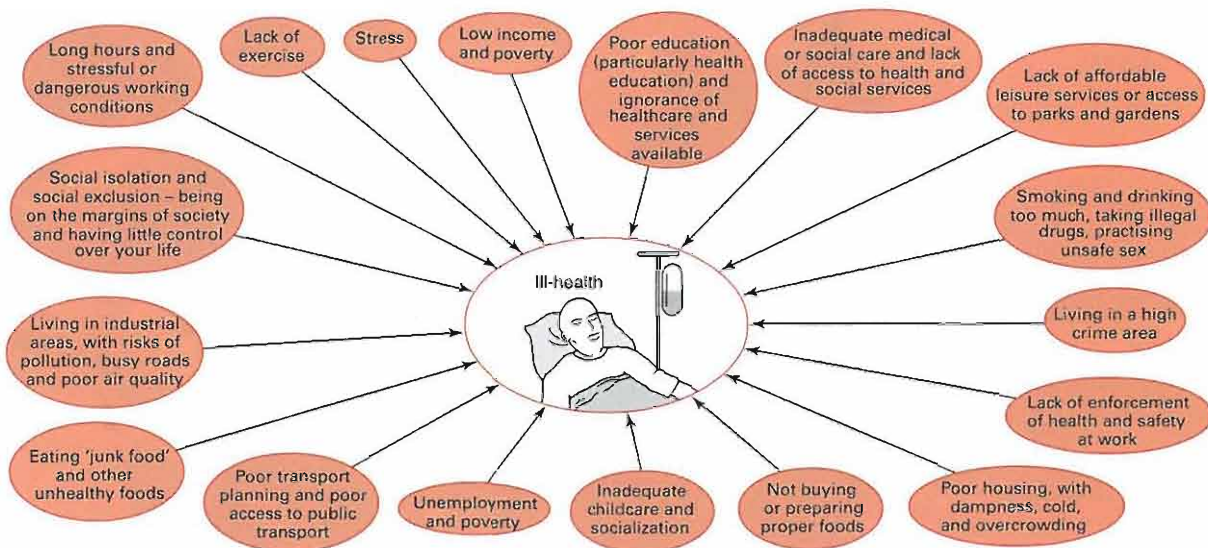


Figure 10.4 Cultural and material influences on health

Source: Browne 2005: 410

generally enjoy a longer life expectancy than men in almost every country in the world (UNDP 2004), while causes of death and patterns of illness show some differences between men and women. In the developed world, although heart disease affects men more than women, it is still the most frequent killer of both men and women under the age of 65. Men, however, suffer from higher rates of death as a result of accidents and violence and are also more prone to drug and alcohol dependency.

Material circumstances appear to influence women's health status, but this has traditionally been a difficult factor to gauge. Many studies have tended to classify women according to the social class of their husbands, thereby producing a distorted picture of women's health (see chapter 11, 'Stratification and Social Class'). We do know, however, that women are more likely to seek medical attention and have higher rates of self-reported illness than men. The gendered pattern is different in South Asian countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, though, where

the life expectancy differential is greatly reduced (Arber and Thomas 2005). Explanatory factors here include conflict and wars, nutritional deficiencies, disadvantages related to lower social status and limited access to medical services for women (Cockerham 2007).

Women in industrialized countries report twice as much anxiety and depression as men. According to some observers, the multiple roles which women tend to perform – domestic work, childcare, professional responsibilities – may increase the stress on women and contribute to higher rates of illness. Lesley Doyal (1995) suggested that patterns of women's health and sickness may best be explained in relation to the main areas of activities which constitute their lives. Women's lives are inherently different from men's in terms of the roles and tasks that are commonly performed – domestic work, sexual reproduction, childbearing and mothering, regulating fertility through birth control, and so forth. (Although it could be argued that this is decreasingly true as more women enter the workplace.) According to Doyal, 'it is the

cumulative effects of these various labours that are the major determinants of women's states of health'. Therefore, any analysis of women's health should consider the interaction between social, psychological and biological influences.

Heather Graham has studied the effects of stress on the health of white working-class women. She has highlighted the fact that women at the lower socio-economic end of the spectrum have less access to support networks in times of life crisis than do middle-class women. Working-class women, she notes, tend to encounter life crises (such as job loss, divorce, eviction from housing or the death of a child) more often than other groups, but generally have weaker coping skills and fewer outlets for anxiety. Not only is the resulting stress harmful both physically and psychologically, but some of the coping strategies which are turned to – such as smoking – are also damaging. Graham argues that smoking is a way of reducing tension when personal and material resources are stretched to breaking point. Thus it occupies a paradoxical position in women's lives – increasing the health risk for women and their children, while simultaneously allowing them to cope under difficult circumstances (Graham 1987, 1994).

Ann Oakley and her colleagues (1994) have studied the role of social support in the health of socially disadvantaged women and children in four English cities. She argues that the relationship between stress and health applies both to major life crises and smaller problems, and that it is felt particularly acutely in the lives of working-class people. Oakley notes that social support – such as counselling services, hotlines or home visits – can act as a 'buffer' against the negative health consequences of stress commonly experienced by women. Other studies have shown that social support is an important factor that can help people in adjusting to disease and illness and that women are more likely to form and maintain self-help communities, recently

including female communities in cyberspace, such as mothers' forums (Ell 1996; Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005). Conversely, researchers have found that men are not as vigilant about their own health and tend to ignore health problems for longer. Young men also engage in more risk-taking behaviour, such as speeding, drug-taking, early-age sexual activity, getting drunk and so on, than do women (Lupton 1999).

Ethnicity and health

Although health in industrial societies is ethnically patterned, our understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and health is partial at best. An increasing number of sociological studies are being conducted in this area, but the evidence remains inconclusive. In some cases, trends that have been attributed to membership of an ethnic group may have ignored other factors, such as class or gender, which may also be highly significant.

Nevertheless, the incidence of certain illnesses is higher among individuals from African-Caribbean and Asian backgrounds. Mortality from liver cancer, tuberculosis and diabetes are higher among these populations than among whites. African-Caribbeans suffer from higher-than-average rates of hypertension and sickle-cell anaemia (an inherited disorder affecting red blood cells), while people from the Indian subcontinent experience higher mortality from heart disease.

Some scholars have turned to cultural and behavioural accounts to explain ethnic health patterning. In a similar way to cultural explanations of class-based health inequalities, emphasis is placed on individual and group lifestyles which are seen to result in poorer health. These are often seen as linked to religious or cultural beliefs, such as dietary and cooking habits or consanguinity (the practice of intermarriage within families at the level of second cousins). Critics argue that cultural explanations fail to

identify the real problems facing ethnic minorities in the industrialized societies: namely, the structural inequalities and the racism and discrimination encountered in healthcare systems.

Social-structural explanations for ethnic patterning in health in many European societies focus on the social context in which African-Caribbeans and Asians live. African-Caribbeans and Asians frequently experience multiple disadvantages which can be harmful to their health. These might include poor or overcrowded housing conditions, high rates of unemployment and over-representation in hazardous, low-paying occupations. Such material factors are then compounded by the effects of racism, either experienced directly in the form of violence, threats or discrimination, or in 'institutionalized' forms. In short: 'Ultimately, what makes race important in a causal sense for health is its close association with class circumstances. Subtract affluence or lack thereof from considerations of race and the causal strength of race in health and disease is severely minimized' (Cockerham 2007: 143).

Nonetheless, **institutional racism** has been noted in the provision of healthcare (Alexander 1999). Ethnic groups may experience unequal or problematic access to health services. Language barriers can present difficulties if information cannot be relayed effectively; culturally specific understandings of illness and treatment are often not considered by professionals within the health service. The National Health Service has been criticized for not requiring more awareness of cultural and religious beliefs among its staff and for paying less attention to diseases that occur predominantly in the non-white population.



Institutional racism is discussed in detail in chapter 15, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

There is no consensus on the connection between ethnicity and health inequalities. Indeed, much research still remains to be

done. Yet it is clear that the question of ethnicity and health inequalities must be considered in relation to larger social, economic and political factors which affect the experience of ethnic minority groups in the developed societies.

Health and social cohesion

In trying to unravel the causes of health inequalities, a growing number of sociologists are turning their attention to the role of social support and social cohesion in promoting good health. As you may recall from our discussion of Durkheim in chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', social solidarity is one of the most important concepts in sociology. Durkheim saw the degree and type of solidarity within a culture as one of its most critical features. In his study of suicide, for example, he found that individuals and groups that were well integrated into society were less likely to take their own lives than others.

In several articles, and in his book *Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality* (1996), Richard Wilkinson argues that the healthiest societies in the world are not the richest countries, but those in which income is distributed most evenly and levels of social integration are highest. High levels of national wealth, according to Wilkinson, do not necessarily translate into better health for the population. In surveying empirical data from countries around the world, he notes a clear relationship between mortality rates and patterns of income distribution. Inhabitants of countries such as Japan and Sweden, which are regarded as some of the most egalitarian societies in the world, enjoy better levels of health on average than do citizens of countries where the gap between the rich and the poor is more pronounced, such as the United States.

In Wilkinson's view, the widening gap in income distribution undermines social cohesion and makes it more difficult for people to manage risks and challenges. Heightened social isolation and the failure to

cope with stress are reflected in health indicators. Wilkinson argues that social factors – the strength of social contacts, ties within communities, availability of social support, a sense of security – are the main determinants of the relative health of a society.

Wilkinson's thesis has provoked energetic responses. Some claim that his work should become required reading for policy-makers and politicians. They agree that too much emphasis has been placed on market relations and the drive towards prosperity. This approach has failed many members of society, they argue; it is time to consider more humane and socially responsible policies to support those who are disadvantaged. Others criticize Wilkinson's study on methodological grounds and argue that he has failed to show a clear causal relationship between income inequality and poor health (Judge 1995). Illness, critics contend, could be caused by any number of other mediating factors. They argue that the empirical evidence for Wilkinson's claims remains suggestive at best and that the thesis is not confirmed within all developed societies. Recent evidence also shows that the same pattern does not hold within developing countries either. Evidence against the 'Wilkinson thesis' seems to be mounting, and it has been described as, 'a doctrine in search of data' (Eberstadt and Satel 2004) rather than an accurate hypothesis based on the evidence.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Examine figure 10.3 above. Using your sociological imagination, how might the differences in male disease prevalence across social class groups be explained? Would a concerted attempt to tackle poverty help to reduce such inequalities?

Earlier in this chapter we examined some of the assumptions that have historically provided the foundations for the orthodox, biomedical model of health. Many of these

assumptions were also found in the way that disability has conventionally been understood in the developed countries. Similarly, the recent trends we discussed above as a reaction to the biomedical model of health – such as scepticism that the medical expert always knows best and the moves to take greater account of the opinions and experiences of patients – have formed part of a more recent rejection of this conventional understanding of disability. It is to a discussion of some of the issues surrounding disability that we now turn.

The sociology of disability

The poet Simon Brisenden neatly summarizes the sense of exclusion that many disabled people feel from orthodox medicine and medical practitioners in his book *Poems for Perfect People*, in which he asked: 'The man who cut your skin / and delved within / has he got any scars?' Brisenden was one of many disabled people whose work has led to a re-evaluation of the conventional understanding of disability in the UK and a number of other countries. Much of this discussion is taking place in the field of **disability studies**. In this section, we examine the dominant understanding of disability by discussing what has become known as the 'individual model'. We then turn to look at how this model has been challenged, notably by disabled people themselves, through the development of a 'social model' of disability, and offer a brief evaluation of this challenge. Lastly, we look briefly at the level and background of impairments globally. We begin, however, by discussing the language of disability.

Sociologists argue that our awareness and understanding of social issues is, at least partly, shaped by the words we use. In recent decades a critique of the terms which people have historically drawn upon to discuss disability has become increasingly important to those writing in this area. The word 'handicapped', for example, has

largely fallen out of use because it was thought to be associated with 'cap in hand' – i.e., charity and begging. Other terms, originally used to describe certain impairments, are rejected because they are now used mainly as insults – terms such as 'spastic' or 'cripple' are examples. Some metaphors, which are still in everyday use, like 'turning a blind eye' or 'a deaf ear', have been criticized because they imply a sense of exclusion. As we shall see, even the way in which we understand the term 'disability' is subject to much debate.

The individual model of disability

Historically, in Western societies, an **individual model of disability** has been dominant. This model contends that individual limitations are the main cause of the problems experienced by disabled people. In the individual model of disability, bodily 'abnormality' is seen as causing some degree of 'disability' or functional limitation – an individual 'suffering' from quadriplegia is incapable of walking, for example. This functional limitation is seen as the basis for a wider classification of an individual as 'an invalid'. Underpinning the individual model is a 'personal tragedy approach' to disability. The disabled individual is regarded as an unfortunate victim of a chance event. Medical specialists play a central role in the individual model because it is their job to offer curative and rehabilitative diagnoses to the 'problems' suffered by the disabled individual. For this reason, the individual model is often described as the 'medical model'. It is the power of the medical expert over disabled people's lives that Simon Brisenden attacked in the poem that started this section. In recent decades, this individual model of disability has been increasingly questioned, as we find below.

The social model of disability

An important early challenge to the individual model of disability was a collection

edited by Paul Hunt entitled, *Stigma: The Experience of Disability* (1966). Hunt argued that 'the problem of disability lies not only in the impairment of function and its effects on us individually, but also, more importantly, in the area of our relationship with "normal" people'. Hunt was a leading activist in the early years of the disability movement in Britain and became a founding member of the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). In its manifesto, *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (1976), UPIAS developed a radical alternative to the individual model by arguing that there was a crucial distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability':

- *Impairment*: Lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body.
- *Disability*: The disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organization, which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.

UPIAS largely accepted the definition of physical 'impairment' as a biomedical property of individuals (although they subsequently extended it to include non-physical, sensory and intellectual forms of impairment). 'Disability', however, was defined in social terms. This challenged conventional understandings of the term. Disability was no longer understood as the problem of an individual, but in terms of the social barriers that people with impairments faced in participating fully in society. Mike Oliver turns the assumptions in the individual model of disability around by rewriting the questions that the UK Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) used to assess 'disability' in the 1980s. Oliver (1983) was the first theorist to make the distinction between the individual and the **social model of disability** explicit (these distinctions are summarized in table 10.3).

Table 10.3 Two models of disability

Individual model	Social model
Personal tragedy model	Social oppression theory
Personal problem	Social problem
Individual treatment	Social action
Medicalization	Self-help
Professional dominance	Individual and collective responsibility
Expertise	Experience
Individual identity	Collective identity
Prejudice	Discrimination
Care	Rights
Control	Choice
Policy	Politics
Individual adjustment	Social change

Source: Adapted from Oliver 1996: 34

The social model of disability was given further academic credibility by the work of Vic Finkelstein (1980, 1981), Colin Barnes (1991) and Oliver himself (1990, 1996).

Social model theorists need to give an explanation of why the social, cultural or historical barriers against disabled people have developed. Some advocates of the social model, influenced by Marx, have argued that a materialist understanding of disability is needed (see chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?' for more on materialism). Oliver (1996), for example, argues that, historically, barriers were erected against disabled people's full participation in society during the Industrial Revolution, when they were excluded from the labour market as the first capitalist factories began to base employment on individual waged labour. As this historical process developed, Oliver argues, 'so many [disabled people] were unable to keep or retain jobs that they became a social problem for the capitalist state whose initial response to all social problems was harsh deterrence and institutionalization'. Even today, disabled people's presence in the workforce is still relatively small.

Evaluation of the social model

The social model has been enormously influential in shaping the way that we think about disability today. Although it originated in the UK, it has gained global influence, and has been described as 'the big idea' of the British disability movement (Hasler 1993). In focusing on the removal of social barriers to full participation, the social model allows disabled people to focus on a political strategy. This has led some to argue that, in accepting this model, disabled people have formed 'a new social movement' (Oliver and Zarb 1989).

» New social movements are discussed further in chapter 22, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

In replacing the individual model, which identifies the 'invalidity' of the individual as the cause of disability, with a model in which disability is the result of oppression, the social model has been seen as 'liberating' by some disabled people (Beresford and Wallcraft 1997).

Since the late 1980s, however, several lines of criticism have been developed



Disabled protesters campaigning for their rights.

against the social model. First, it is argued that it neglects the often painful or uncomfortable experiences of impairment, which are central to many disabled people's lives. Shakespeare and Watson argue: 'We are not just disabled people, we are also people with impairments, and to pretend otherwise is to ignore a major part of our biographies' (2002: 11). Against this accusation, defenders of the social model have claimed that rather than denying everyday experiences of impairment, the social model merely seeks to focus attention on the social barriers to full participation in society that are raised against disabled people.

Second, many people accept that they have impairments, but do not wish to be labelled as 'disabled'. In a recent survey of people claiming government benefits for disability, fewer than half chose to define themselves as disabled. Many people

rejected the term because they saw their health problems related to illness rather than disability or because they did not think that they were ill enough to be so categorized (Department for Work and Pensions 2002). However, Barnes (2003) has pointed out that in a society where disability is too often still associated with abnormality, it is not surprising that some people with impairments chose to reject the label 'disabled'.

Lastly, medical sociologists in particular tend to reject the social model by arguing that the division between impairment and disability, on which it rests, is false. These critics argue that the social model separates impairment, which is defined biomedically, from disability, which is defined socially. Medical sociologists have tended to argue that both disability and impairment are socially structured and are closely interre-

10.3 Applying the social model to assumptions in the OPCS questions

OPCS question

'Can you tell what is wrong with you?'

'What complaint causes you difficulty in holding, gripping or turning things?'

'Are your difficulties in understanding mainly due to a hearing problem?'

'Do you have a scar, blemish or deformity which limits your daily activities?'

'Have you attended a special school because of a long-term health problem or disability?'

'Does your health problem/disability prevent you from going out as often or as far as you would like?'

'Does your health problem/disability make it difficult for you to travel by bus?'

'Does your health problem/disability affect your work in any way at present?'

'Does your health problem/disability mean that you need to live with relatives or someone else who can help or look after you?'

'Does your present accommodation have any adaptations because of your health problem/disability?'

Source: Oliver 1990

Oliver's question

'Can you tell me what is wrong with society?'

'What defects in the design of everyday equipment like jars, bottles and tins causes you difficulty in holding them?'

'Are your difficulties in understanding people mainly due to their inability to communicate with you?'

'Do other people's reactions to any scar, blemish or deformity you may have limit your daily activities?'

'Have you attended a special school because of your education authority's policy of sending people with your health problem/disability to such places?'

What is it about the local environment that makes it difficult for you to get about in your neighbourhood?'

Are there any transport or financial problems which prevent you from going out as often or as far as you would like?'

'Do you have problems at work because of the physical environment or the attitudes of others?'

'Are community services so poor that you need to rely on relatives or someone else to provide you with the right level of personal assistance?'

'Did the poor design of your house mean that you had to have it adapted to suit your needs?'

lated. Shakespeare and Watson argue that the division between impairment and disability collapses when one asks, 'Where does impairment end and disability start?' In some cases the division is straightforward – a failure to design suitable wheelchair access in a building clearly creates a socially constructed disabling barrier to wheelchair users. However, there are many more cases where it is impossible to remove all the sources of disability because they are not caused by oppressive conditions in society.

Medical sociologists critical of the social model might argue that to be impaired by constant pain or by significant intellectual limitations, for example, disables the individual from full participation in society in a way that cannot be removed by social change. These critics would argue that a full account of disability must take into account disability caused by impairments and not just those caused by society.

Supporters of the social model have argued that this last claim is based on a



Is this paralympic swimmer disabled?

blurring of the distinction between disability and impairment, which they argue is rooted in the biomedical model of thinking that underlies the individual model of disability. They respond that the social model certainly does not deny that an impairment can be the cause of pain or that there are things that an individual might not be able to do solely because of a particular impairment. Indeed, Carol Thomas (1999, 2002), an advocate of the social model of disability, uses the phrase 'impairment effects' to take into account the ensuing psycho-emotional implications of impairment for disabled people.

Given the contested nature of the term 'disability' and the variety of impairments linked to disability, an account of the numbers of disabled people in the world is difficult. However, it is to these issues that we turn below.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Are people with facial disfigurements 'disabled'? Does Vicky's story ('Using your sociological imagination 10.2') tell us anything about the distinction between impairment and disability, or not? What do Vicky's experiences tell us about the social model of disability and its implications for society as a whole?

Disability, law and public policy

As the social model of disability initially emerged in the UK, we shall begin by outlining the way that British legislation has changed, in part as a result of the campaigning activities of the disabled people's movement

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was passed in 1995, giving disabled people

10.4 'Why I want you to look me in the face'



Instead of people looking away, gasping or shuddering, Vicky Lucas wants them to know that her face is integral to who she is. And, as she explains, she likes who she is.

I have a rare genetic disorder called Cherubism, which affects my face. I was diagnosed when I was about 4 years old. I was too young to remember what happened, but visiting hospitals became a regular part of my life.

Although it was only when I was about 6 that my face started to really change shape, I don't remember a time when I didn't look different.

Growing up with a facial disfigurement wasn't easy. When puberty kicked in, it included all the usual developments with a little bit extra – my face became very large and my eyes were more affected too.

Double take

My teenage years were difficult. People would sometimes stare or do a double take. Some people would be downright nasty and call me names.

Even when people said 'Oh you poor thing!' their pity also hurt me and that hurt would stay

with me for a long time. I became very withdrawn, afraid of how I might be treated if I went out.

But over time, I gradually started to develop my self-esteem and self-confidence and I started to feel that I shouldn't waste my life just because of other people's attitudes towards me.

At the age of 16 I went to college and studied subjects such as film, media studies and photography. I started to research the representation of disfigured people in the media.

When I looked at how people with facial disfigurements are portrayed in films, well, no wonder people don't know how to react to us! Freddy Krueger in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, the Joker in *Batman*, the various scarred villains in gangster films – the list is endless.

Bad assumption

With stereotypes like that, it's hardly surprising that people assume that if you have a facial difference, there must be something 'different' or 'bad' about you in the inside too.

This was a huge turning point for me because I realized that facial disfigurement was not just a medical issue, but a social issue as well.

I realized that the reason why I was so unhappy was not because of my face, but the way some people would react to it. I decided that it wasn't my face that I wanted to change, but social attitudes. I'm not against plastic surgery. It's just that my personal choice is to not have it.

Now, at the age of 24, I'm used to seeing my face reflected back at me in the mirror and I'm okay with it. Though I could quite happily do without the headaches and double vision. I also dislike being physically unable to wink, but I've overcome this particular disability by doing a nice line in fluttering and blinking.

But my face is integral to who I am. The way people treat me and the way I've had to learn to live my life has created the person I am today.

Lack of imagination

I love the good genuine friends my face has brought me and I appreciate the way it's made me want to be a better person. I also have a boyfriend who thinks I look like a cat. I'm not quite sure if I agree with him, but I'm certainly not complaining!

[cont'd . . .]

Now, whenever a person says I'm ugly, I just pity them for their lack of imagination. For every person who calls me fat chin, I think 'Nah! It's just that you've got a really small weak one. Talk about chin envy!'

For every naturally curious stare I get, I give a friendly smile. And if they don't smile back within my 10-second time limit, I give them a very effective scowl.

Last week, walking in the street with my boyfriend, a man walked towards me and went 'Urghhhhhoooooh!'

Confrontation

It wasn't so much a word as a strange guttural sound, and the kind that only funny-looking people could understand the subtext to. I was so angry that I confronted him.

I won't go into details of what I did but let's just say it's probably the last time he ever gives a

strange guttural sound to a funny looking woman in the street ever again.

Two minutes later, as we were walking home, a homeless man came up to me asking for change. He asked me how I was. 'Fine'. I said and I told him what had just happened. There was a short pause. Then he smiled and said 'I hope you hurt him!' We all laughed.

It's funny how some strangers can be so cruel and hurtful, and yet others, the ones you'd least expect, the ones you would usually ignore and think nothing of, can be so warm and kind.

That pretty much sums up my life. I go from experiencing the worst in people to the very best, and often within the same five minutes! It makes my life more challenging, but also very interesting. I wouldn't want to change that for the world.

Source: *BBC News Magazine*, 6 August 2003
© bbc.co.uk/news

certain legal protections from discrimination in several areas, including employment and access to goods and services. Further legislation was introduced in 1999 that led to the creation of the Disability Rights Commission (DRC), set up to work towards 'the elimination of discrimination against disabled people', and a new DDA was introduced in 2005, covering more areas and activities. The 1995 DDA defined a disabled person as 'anyone with a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect upon their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities'. This definition of disability includes, for example, people with mental health problems as well as people with facial disfigurements, and it avoids the common misconception that disability mainly concerns mobility impairments or is largely congenital. In fact, around 77 per cent of disabled people became disabled after the age of 16 (Employers' Forum on Disability 2003) and the percentage of the population who are disabled continues to increase with age (see figure 10.5).

Under the DDA definition, in 2003–4 more than 10 million people in the UK (over 10 per

cent of the population) were disabled, of whom 6.8 million (one in five of the total working population) were of working age. Of this latter group, only 3.4 million people (50 per cent) were employed, compared with 81 per cent of non-disabled people (Disability Rights Commission 2005) and just 17 per cent of people with learning disabilities were in paid work. The DRC says that around 1 million disabled people without a job want to work. People with impairments linked to disability still belong to one of the most disadvantaged groups in the UK. They are more likely to be out of work than the able-bodied, and those people who have impairments linked to disability who are in employment tend to earn less. In 2005, the DRC reported that the average gross hourly pay of disabled employees was 10 per cent less than that of non-disabled employees – £9.36 per hour compared to £10.39 per hour. Yet disability-related expenditure by governments is high compared to many other areas of spending – the UK government spent more than £19 billion a year on incapacity and disability benefits in 2002 (BBC, 9 April 2002). The wealthiest countries spend at

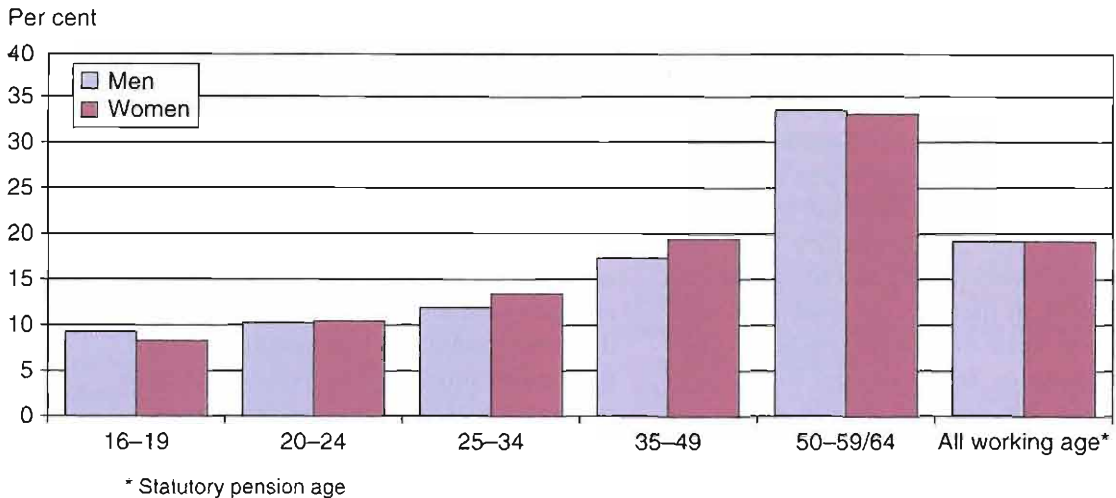


Figure 10.5 Disabled people in the UK 2001, by age (% of age group)

Source: Smith and Twomey 2002: 417

least twice as much on disability-related programmes as they do on unemployment compensation (OECD 2005).

Disability around the world

It is estimated that 10 per cent of the world population, some 650 million people, are disabled, 80 per cent of whom live in developing countries such as India and China (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006). The main cause of disability in developed countries is 'chronic disease and long-term impairments', while in developing countries the main causes are poverty, inadequate sanitation, poor diet and bad housing. Injuries, such as broken bones, will often result in long-term impairment in developing countries, which would not occur if treatment and rehabilitation facilities had been available, as they generally are in the developed world. Iron-deficiency, 'anaemia' and chronic infections of the pelvis (sometimes caused by female circumcision) are major causes of impairment that lead to disability in women in many developing countries. It is estimated that around 250,000 children lose their sight each year because their diet lacks Vitamin A, which is

found in green vegetables, and that up to half of the world's impairment could be preventable by improving policies to confront poverty, malnutrition, sanitation, drinking water and employment conditions to reduce accidents (Charlton 1998). War and its aftermath (such as uncleared landmines) comprise another major cause of impairments. Furthermore, in poorer countries disabled children are far less likely to receive the same level of education as other children, which exacerbates their poverty later in life. From the evidence, we can see that poverty in the developing world creates impairments and shapes disability in ways that are very different from the experience in the West.

In 2006, the UN noted that only a minority of countries – 45 – had already introduced legislation aimed at protecting the rights of disabled people. In a majority of countries, therefore, disabled people did not have equal rights with the rest of the population. For example, UNESCO says that around 90 per cent of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school and the global literacy rate for adults with disabilities is as low as 3 per cent, and just 1 per cent for women with disabilities (UNDP 1998). In India, a country with anti-

discrimination laws, of some 70 million people with disabilities, only about 100,000 have succeeded in obtaining employment in industry and in 2004 just 35 per cent of working-age people with disabilities in the USA were working, compared to 78 per cent of the non-disabled population (UN 2006).

Clearly, anti-discriminatory laws and policies are very patchy and uneven across the world; in many cases disabled people continue to be denied citizenship in their own countries. In an attempt to 'level up' provision for disabled people across the world, the UN launched the first human rights treaty of the twenty-first century: the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention aims to contribute towards a global 'paradigm shift' in attitudes towards disabled people. On the opening day for signatures – 30 March 2007 – some 99 countries signed the new Convention, though the government of the USA said it would not be doing so as it already had extensive provision for disabled people; as we saw above, however, this has not yet guaranteed equal rights in employment. The Convention commits

national governments to 'develop and carry out policies, laws and administrative measures for securing the rights recognized in the Convention and to abolish laws, regulations, customs and practices that constitute discrimination'. It also guarantees that disabled people can enjoy a right to life on an equal basis with others, ensures the equal rights and advancement of women and girls with disabilities and protects children with disabilities. In addition, it sets out, for the first time, a global policy agenda to promote equal rights for disabled people.

The very different experiences of impairment and disability encountered by people around the world illustrate a wider idea reflected in this chapter: that our experience of our own bodies and our interactions with others – whether able-bodied or disabled, sick or healthy – are shaped by the changing social contexts in which we find ourselves. In order to develop a sociological perspective on illness, health and disability, we need to examine the social and technological changes that shape our understanding of these aspects of human life.

Summary points

1. Western medicine is based on the biomedical model of health – that disease can be defined in objective terms and that the sick body can be restored to health through scientifically based medical treatment. The biomedical model emerged with modern societies and was linked to the rise of demographics – the study of the size, composition and dynamics of human populations, and a growing state interest in public health. Modern healthcare systems were greatly influenced by the application of science to medical diagnosis and cure.
2. The biomedical model has come under increasing criticism. It has been argued that scientific medicine is not as effective as it is made out to be, that medical professionals do not value the opinions of the patients being treated, and that the medical profession considers itself superior to alternative forms of healing.
3. Sociologists are interested in the *experience* of illness – how being sick, chronically ill or disabled is experienced by the sick person and those nearby. The idea of the *sick role*, developed by Talcott Parsons, suggests that a sick person adopts certain forms of behaviour in order to minimize the disruptive impact of illness. A sick individual is granted certain privileges, such as the right to withdraw from normal responsibilities, but in return must work actively to regain health by agreeing to follow medical advice.
4. Symbolic interactionists have investigated how people cope with disease and chronic illness in their daily lives. The experience of illness can provoke changes in self-identity and daily routines. This sociological dimension of the body is becoming increasingly relevant for many societies;

people are living longer than ever before and tend to suffer more from chronic debilitating conditions than from acute illnesses.

5. The emergence of HIV/AIDS – a deadly pandemic of world-historical significance – showed that modern scientific medicine has not conquered fatal diseases and epidemics once and for all. Many millions of people around the world have died from AIDS-related diseases and there is still no cure or vaccine for HIV or AIDS. The pandemic also contributed to a growing risk-awareness amongst populations and provoked much sociological research into the social inequalities of health and illness across the world.
6. Sociological research reveals close connections between illness and inequality. Within industrial countries, poorer groups have a shorter average life expectancy and are more susceptible to disease than more affluent strata. Richer countries also have higher average life expectancies than poorer ones. Some researchers argue that class-based health inequalities can be explained by cultural and behavioural factors, such as diet and lifestyle. Others place emphasis on structural influences, such as unemployment, sub-standard housing and poor working conditions.
7. Patterns of health and illness have gender and racial dimensions as well. On average, women tend to live longer than men in almost every country of the world, yet they

experience a higher incidence of illness than men. Certain illnesses are more common among ethnic minority groups than among the white population. Genetic explanations have been advanced to account for gender and racial differences in health, yet these alone cannot explain the inequalities. While there may be some biological basis to certain health conditions, overall patterns of health and illness must also take into account social factors and differences in material conditions between groups.

8. The individual model of disability holds personal limitations to be the main cause of the problems experienced by disabled people. In the individual model, bodily 'abnormality' is seen as causing some degree of 'disability' or functional limitation. Underpinning the individual model is a 'personal tragedy approach' to disability.
9. The social model of disability locates the causes of disability within society, rather than the individual. It is not the individual's limitations that cause disability, but the barriers that society places in the way of full participation for disabled people.
10. Disabled people make up one of the most socially disadvantaged groups in the developed countries, though the majority of people with impairments actually live in the developing world. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) aims to promote equal rights for disabled people globally.

Further reading

The sociology of health and illness is a very large and long-established field, so it is best to start with a shorter introduction. Mike Bury's *Health and Illness* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005) is very good, as is Anne-Marie Barry and Chris Yuill's *Understanding Health: A Sociological Introduction*, 2nd edn (London: Sage, 2007), though there are many more.

From here, you can then try something that covers key debates and evidence in more detail. For example, Sarah Nettleton's *The Sociology of Health and Illness*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Polity, 2006) or Ellen Annandale's *The Sociology of Health and Medicine: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998) are both engagingly written and well argued.

Critical reviews of sociology's recent engagement with the body can be found in Chris Shilling's *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2003) and Alexandra Howson's *The Body in Society: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004). For disability studies in sociology, see Colin Barnes, Geof Mercer and Tom Shakespeare's *Exploring Disability: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999) and Carol Thomas's *Sociologies of Disability and Illness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

If you need a Reference work covering the sociology of health and illness, then Jonathan Gabe, Mike Bury and Mary Ann Elston's *Key Concepts in Medical Sociology* (London: Sage, 2004) should be helpful.

Internet links

European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies:

www.euro.who.int/observatory

Centre for International Public Health Policy:

www.health.ed.ac.uk/CIPHP/

The World Health Organization:

www.who.int/en/

Wellcome Library on the History and

Understanding of Medicine, UK:

<http://library.wellcome.ac.uk/>

The Disability Archive at the University of Leeds, UK:

www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/archiveuk/

The European Disability Forum:

www.edf-feph.org/en/welcome.htm

The Disability Rights Commission, UK:

www.drc-gb.org/

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:

www.un.org/disabilities/convention/

CHAPTER 11

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Stratification and Social Class

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Have you ever bought an Indian meal in a supermarket? If you have, there's a strong chance that it was made by Noon Products. The company specializes in supplying Indian food to the big supermarket chains and has an annual turnover of around £90 million. In 2005 it was taken over by Irish food company, Kerry Group. Company founder, Sir Gulam Noon, was estimated to have amassed a fortune of £65 million, according to the 2006 *Sunday Times Rich List*.

Gulam Noon was born in India. His family owned a sweet shop in Bombay: 'Royal Sweets'. They were not particularly well off, but managed to get by until their father's death when Gulam was 7. After that it was a struggle, and, as a young teenager, Gulam would combine school with work in the shop. Having

completed school, he joined the family business full time. He soon changed the way the business was marketed, expanded the shop and built a factory. His ambitions, however, were not limited to 'Royal Sweets', and other ventures quickly followed, including printing and construction ventures.

Not satisfied with his successes in India, Gulam looked to England to further his experience. He established 'Royal Sweets' in Southall, London, and brought chefs with him from India to get the business going. Within the year there were nine shops, built around the Asian communities of London and Leicester. Today, the 'Royal Sweets' chain has 40 shops and an annual turnover of £9 million.

Other commercial ventures followed the success of 'Royal Sweets', and in 1989 Noon Products was established. Gulam spotted a niche in the market: 'All the pre-packaged Indian ready meals available from the supermarkets were insipid and frankly unacceptable. I thought I could do better.' The business began with just 11 employees, but soon they were selling authentic Indian foods to the frozen food company Birds Eye, and then to the supermarket chains Waitrose and Sainsbury's.

There are now more than 100 different Noon dishes, produced in three plants, operated by 1,100 employees. Between 250,000 and 300,000 meals are made every day. The produce range has been expanded from Indian food to include Thai and Mexican dishes, amongst others. In 2002 Gulam was knighted for his services to the food industry. Reflecting on what has inspired him during his life, Sir Gulam concludes: 'I'm a self-made man and a quick learner! Nothing comes easily, you've just got to work at it.'

Few of us can expect the kind of wealth that Sir Gulam now possesses. But his rags-to-riches life history raises interesting questions for sociologists. Is it just an isolated incident, or is his story being repeated elsewhere? How much chance does someone from a poor background have of reaching the top of the economic ladder? For every

Gulam Noon in our society, how many people have to work in his businesses, and are they paid their 'fair share' for the success of the company? The issues of wealth and poverty raised by Sir Gulam's life story lead us to broader questions. Why do economic inequalities exist in contemporary societies? What social factors will influence your economic position in society? Are your chances any different if you are a woman? How does the globalization of the economy affect your life chances? These are just a few of the sorts of question that sociologists ask and try to answer, and they are the focus of this chapter.

The study of inequalities in society is one of the most important areas of sociology, because our material resources determine a great deal about our lives. Here, we begin by looking at what sociologists mean when they talk about stratification and class. We then look at some of the most influential theories of class, and attempts to measure it, in sociological thought, after which we take a more detailed look at social class in Western society today. We close with a discussion of social mobility and conclude by briefly considering the continuing importance of social class in helping us to understand the world around us.

Systems of stratification

Sociologists use the concept of **social stratification** to describe inequalities that exist between individuals and groups within human societies. Often we think of stratification in terms of assets or property, but it can also occur because of other attributes, such as gender, age, religious affiliation or military rank.

Individuals and groups enjoy differential (unequal) access to rewards based on their position within the stratification scheme. Thus, stratification can most simply be defined as structured inequalities between different groupings of people. It is useful to think of stratification as rather like the



Access to benefits and rewards in society is affected by factors such as gender and ethnicity, both of which are forms of stratification.

geological layering of rock in the earth's surface. Societies can be seen as consisting of 'strata' in a hierarchy, with the more favoured at the top and the less privileged nearer the bottom.

All socially stratified systems share three basic characteristics:

- 1 The rankings apply to social categories of people who share a common characteristic without necessarily interacting or identifying with one another. For example, women may be ranked differently from men or wealthy people differently from the poor. This does not mean that individuals from a particular category cannot change their rank; however, it does mean that the category continues to exist even if individuals move out of it and into another category.
- 2 People's life experiences and opportunities depend heavily on how their social category is ranked. Being male or female, black or white, upper class or working class makes a big difference in terms of your life chances – often as big a difference as personal effort or good fortune (such as winning a lottery).
- 3 The ranks of different social categories tend to change very slowly over time. In the industrialized societies, for example, only recently have women as a whole begun to achieve equality with men.

» Gender inequalities are discussed more fully in chapter 14, 'Sexuality and Gender'.

As discussed in chapter 4, stratified societies have changed throughout human

history. In the earliest human societies, which were based on hunting and gathering, there was very little social stratification – mainly because there was very little by way of wealth or other resources to be divided up. The development of agriculture produced considerably more wealth and, as a result, a great increase in stratification. Social stratification in agricultural societies increasingly came to resemble a pyramid, with a large number of people at the bottom and a successively smaller number of people as you move towards the top. Today, industrial and post-industrial societies are extremely complex; their stratification is more likely to resemble a teardrop, with a large number of people in the middle and lower-middle ranks (the so-called middle class), a slightly smaller number of people at the bottom, and very few people as one moves towards the top.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Should we assume that stratification is 'natural' and therefore inevitable? If not, how might we explain the persistence of stratification in human societies? In what ways could stratification systems be functional for society as a whole?

Historically, four basic systems of stratification can be distinguished: slavery, caste, estates and class. These are sometimes found in conjunction with one another: slavery, for instance, existed alongside classes in ancient Greece and Rome, and in the Southern United States before the Civil War of the 1860s.

Slavery

Slavery is an extreme form of inequality, in which certain people are owned as property by others. The legal conditions of slave-ownership have varied considerably among different societies. Sometimes slaves were deprived of almost all rights by law – as was the case on Southern plantations in the

United States – while in other societies, their position was more akin to that of servants. For example, in the ancient Greek city-state of Athens, some slaves occupied positions of great responsibility. They were excluded from political positions and from the military, but were accepted in most other types of occupation. Some were literate and worked as government administrators; many were trained in craft skills. Even so, not all slaves could count on such good luck. For the less fortunate, their days began and ended in hard labour in the mines.

Throughout history, slaves have often fought back against their subjection; the slave rebellions in the American South before the Civil War are one example. Because of such resistance, systems of slave labour have tended to be unstable. High productivity could only be achieved through constant supervision and brutal punishment. Slave-labour systems eventually broke down, partly because of the struggles they provoked and partly because economic or other incentives motivate people to produce more effectively than does direct compulsion. Slavery is simply not economically efficient. Moreover, from about the eighteenth century on, many people in Europe and America came to see slavery as morally wrong. Today, slavery is illegal in every country of the world, but it still exists in some places. Recent research has documented that people are taken by force and held against their will. From enslaved brick-makers in Pakistan to sex slaves in Thailand and domestic slaves in relatively wealthy countries like the UK and France, slavery remains a significant human rights violation in the world today and against many people's assumption, seems to be increasing rather than diminishing (Bales 1999).

Caste

A **caste** system is a social system in which one's social position is given for a lifetime. In caste societies, therefore, all individuals must remain at the social level of their birth



The caste system in India is more than 2,000 years old, but as a form of social organization it has seen significant changes since independence in 1947.

throughout life. Everyone's social status is based on personal characteristics – such as perceived race or ethnicity (often based on such physical characteristics as skin colour), parental religion or parental caste – that are accidents of birth and are therefore believed to be unchangeable. A person is born into a caste and remains there for life. In a sense, caste societies can be seen as a special type of class society, in which class position is ascribed at birth (Sharma 1999). They have typically been found in agricultural societies that have not yet developed industrial capitalist economies, such as rural India or South Africa prior to the end of white rule in 1992.

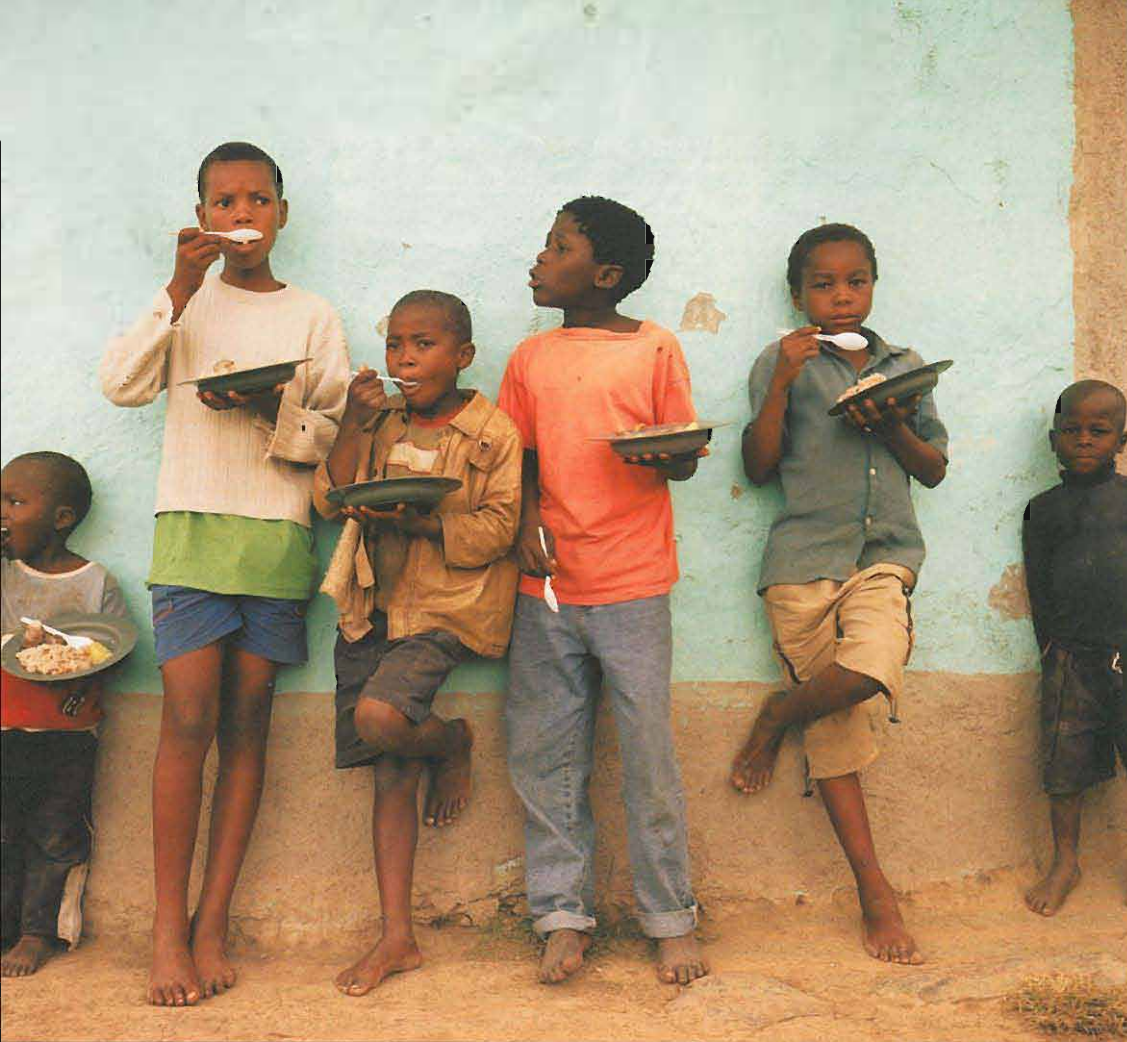
Prior to modern times, caste systems were found throughout the world. In Europe, for example, Jews were frequently treated as a separate caste, forced to live in restricted neighbourhoods and barred from intermarrying (and in some instances even

interacting) with non-Jews. The term 'ghetto' is said to derive from the Venetian word for 'foundry', the site of one of Europe's first official Jewish ghettos, established by the government of Venice in 1516. The term eventually came to refer to those sections of European towns where Jews were legally compelled to live, long before it was used to describe minority neighbourhoods in US cities, with their caste-like qualities of racial and ethnic segregation.

In caste systems, intimate contact with members of other castes is strongly discouraged. Such 'purity' of a caste is often maintained by rules of **endogamy**, marriage within one's social group as required by custom or law.

Caste in India and South Africa

The few remaining caste systems in the world are being seriously challenged by globalization. The Indian caste system, for



Apartheid may be a thing of the past, but the wealth gap between white and black South Africans is still very apparent. These boys live in the rural and impoverished district of Lusikisiki, South Africa.

example, reflects Hindu religious beliefs and is more than 2,000 years old. According to Hindu beliefs, there are four major castes, each roughly associated with broad occupational groupings. The four castes consist of the *Brahmins* (scholars and spiritual leaders) on top, followed by the *Ksyatriyas* (soldiers and rulers), the *Vaisyas* (farmers and merchants) and the *Shudras* (labourers and artisans). Beneath the four castes are those known as the 'untouchables' or *Dalits* ('oppressed people'), who – as their name suggests – are to be avoided at all costs. Untouchables are limited to the worst jobs in society, such as removing human waste, and they often resort to begging and searching in

garbage for their food. In traditional areas of India, some members of higher castes still regard physical contact with untouchables to be so contaminating that a mere touch requires cleansing rituals. India made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of caste in 1949, but aspects of the system remain in full force today, particularly in rural areas.

As India's modern capitalist economy brings people of different castes together, whether it is in the same workplace, aeroplane or restaurant, it is increasingly difficult to maintain the rigid barriers required to sustain the caste system. As more and more of India is influenced by globalization, it seems reasonable to

assume that its caste system will weaken still further.

Before its abolition in 1992, the South African caste system, termed **apartheid**, rigidly separated black Africans, Indians, 'coloureds' (people of mixed races) and Asians from whites. In this case, caste was based entirely on race. Whites, who made up only 15 per cent of the total population, controlled virtually all the country's wealth, owned most of the usable land, ran the principal businesses and industries and had a monopoly on political power, since blacks lacked the right to vote. Blacks – who made up three-quarters of the population – were segregated into impoverished *bantustans* ('homelands') and were allowed out only to work for the white minority.

Apartheid, widespread discrimination and oppression created intense conflict between the white minority and the black, mixed-race and Asian majority. Decades of often violent struggle against apartheid finally proved successful in the 1990s. The most powerful black organization, the African National Congress (ANC), mobilized an economically devastating global boycott of South African businesses, forcing South Africa's white leaders to dismantle apartheid, which was abolished by popular vote among South African whites in 1992. In 1994, in the country's first ever multiracial elections, the black majority won control of the government, and Nelson Mandela – the black leader of the ANC, who had spent 27 years imprisoned by the white government – was elected president.

Estates

Estates were part of European feudalism, but also existed in many other traditional civilizations. The feudal estates consisted of strata with differing obligations and rights towards each other, some of these differences being established in law. In Europe, the highest estate was composed of the *aristocracy* and gentry. The *clergy* formed another estate, having lower status but possessing

various distinctive privileges. Those in what came to be called the 'third estate' were the *commoners* – serfs, free peasants, merchants and artisans. In contrast to castes, a certain degree of intermarriage and mobility was tolerated between the estates. Commoners might be knighted, for example, in payment for special services given to the monarch; merchants could sometimes purchase titles. A remnant of the system persists in Britain, where hereditary titles are still recognized (though since 1999 peers are no longer automatically entitled to vote in the House of Lords), and business leaders, civil servants and others may be honoured with a knighthood for their services.

Estates have tended to develop in the past wherever there was a traditional aristocracy based on noble birth. In feudal systems, such as in medieval Europe, estates were closely bound up with the manorial community: they formed a local, rather than a national, system of stratification. In more centralized traditional empires, such as China or Japan, they were organized on a more national basis. Sometimes the differences between the estates were justified by religious beliefs, although rarely in as strict a way as in the Hindu caste system.

Class

Class systems differ in many respects from slavery, castes or estates. We can define a class as a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources, which strongly influence the type of lifestyle they are able to lead. Ownership of wealth and occupation, are the chief bases of class differences. Classes differ from earlier forms of stratification in four main respects:

- 1 *Class systems are fluid.* Unlike the other types of strata, classes are not established by legal or religious provisions. The boundaries between classes are never clear-cut. There are no formal restrictions on intermarriage between people from different classes.

- 2 *Class positions are in some part achieved.* An individual's class is not simply given at birth, as is the case in the other types of stratification systems. Social mobility – movement upward and downward in the class structure – is more common than in the other types.
- 3 *Class is economically based.* Classes depend on economic differences between groups of individuals – inequalities in the possession of material resources. In the other types of stratification systems, non-economic factors (such as race in the former South African caste system) are generally most important.
- 4 *Class systems are large-scale and impersonal.* In the other types of stratification systems, inequalities are expressed primarily in personal relationships of duty or obligation – between slave and master or lower- and higher-caste individuals. Class systems, by contrast, operate mainly through large-scale, impersonal associations. For instance, one major basis of class differences is in inequalities of pay and working conditions.

Will caste give way to class?

There is some evidence that globalization may hasten the end of legally sanctioned caste systems throughout the world. Most official caste systems have already given way to class-based ones in industrial capitalist societies; South Africa, mentioned earlier, is the most prominent recent example (Berger 1986). Modern industrial production requires that people move about freely, work at whatever jobs they are suited or able to do, and change jobs frequently according to economic conditions. The rigid restrictions found in caste systems interfere with this necessary freedom. Furthermore, as the world increasingly becomes a single economic unit, caste-like relationships will become increasingly vulnerable to economic pressures. Nonetheless, elements of caste persist even in post-industrial societies. For

example, some Asian immigrants to the West seek to arrange traditional marriages for their children along caste lines.

The next section looks at sociological theories, which seek to explain the persistence of social stratification in human societies. Most sociologists who have addressed this question have been strongly influenced by the social class systems of the modern world and the discussion below reflects this.

THINKING CRITICALLY

What evidence is there from around the world that, in time, social class is likely to become the dominant form of stratification in all the countries of the world? Given what we know about other forms of stratification, on balance, would this be a positive or negative development?

Theories of class and stratification

The theories developed by Karl Marx and Max Weber form the basis of most sociological analyses of class and stratification.

Scholars working in the Marxist tradition have further developed the ideas Marx himself set out and others have tried to elaborate on Weber's concepts. We shall begin by examining the theories set forth by Marx and Weber before analysing the more recent neo-Marxist ideas of American sociologist, Erik Olin Wright.

Chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', contains an introduction to Marx and Weber's basic ideas and theoretical perspectives.

Karl Marx's theory of class conflict

Most of Marx's works were concerned with stratification and, above all, with social class, yet surprisingly he failed to provide a systematic analysis of the concept of class. The manuscript Marx was working on at the time of his death (subsequently published as

Classic Studies 11.1 Karl Marx and the theory of class conflict

The research problem

Industrialization in Europe in the nineteenth century transformed societies, arguably, for the better. But it also led to protests and revolutionary movements. Why did workers oppose industrialization? Later, as industrial societies developed in the twentieth century, strikes and militant workers' activity continually occurred. Again, why have workers protested even as societies became more wealthy? Karl Marx (1818–83) spent most of his adult life investigating modern class-based societies in an attempt to understand how they worked, and his crucial argument was that industrial societies were rooted in capitalist economic relations. Marx was not just a detached academic observer though; he was also a key figure in communist political debates and an activist in workers' movements. For Marx, industrial capitalism, for all its progressive elements, was founded in an exploitative system of class relations that led to the oppression of the majority of working people.

Marx's explanation

For Marx, a social class is a group of people who stand in a common relationship to the means of production – the means by which they gain a livelihood. Before the rise of modern industry, the means of production consisted primarily of land and the instruments used to tend crops or pastoral animals. In pre-industrial societies, therefore, the two main classes consisted of those who owned the land (aristocrats, gentry or slave-holders) and those actively engaged in producing from it (serfs, slaves and free peasantry). In modern industrial societies, factories, offices, machinery and the wealth or capital needed to buy them have become more important. The two main classes consist of those who own these new means of production – industrialists or capitalists – and those who earn their living by selling their labour to them – the working class or, in the now somewhat archaic term Marx sometimes favoured, the **proletariat**.

According to Marx, the relationship between classes is an exploitative one. In feudal societies,

exploitation often took the form of the direct transfer of produce from the peasantry to the aristocracy. Serfs were compelled to give a certain proportion of their production to their aristocratic master, or had to work for a number of days each month in his fields to produce crops to be consumed by him and his retinue. In modern capitalist societies, the source of exploitation is less obvious, and Marx devoted much attention to trying to clarify its nature. In the course of the working day, Marx reasoned, workers produce more than is actually needed by employers to repay the cost of hiring them. This surplus value is the source of profit, which capitalists are able to put to their own use. A group of workers in a clothing factory, say, might be able to produce 100 suits a day. Selling 75 per cent of the suits provides enough income for the manufacturer to pay the workers' wages and for the cost of plant and equipment. Income from the sale of the remainder of the garments is taken as profit.

Marx was struck by the inequalities created by the capitalist system. Although in earlier times aristocrats lived a life of luxury, completely different from that of the peasantry, agrarian societies were relatively poor. Even if there had been no aristocracy, standards of living would inevitably have been meagre. With the development of modern industry, however, wealth is produced on a scale far beyond anything seen before, but workers have little access to the wealth that their labour creates. They remain relatively poor, while the wealth accumulated by the propertied class grows. Marx used the term **pauperization** to describe the process by which the working class grows increasingly impoverished in relation to the capitalist class. Even if workers become more affluent in absolute terms, the gap separating them from the capitalist class continues to stretch ever wider.

These inequalities between the capitalist and the working class were not strictly economic in nature. Marx noted how the development of modern factories and the mechanization of production means that work frequently becomes dull and oppressive in the extreme. The labour

that is the source of our wealth is often both physically wearing and mentally tedious – as in the case of a factory hand whose job consists of routine tasks undertaken day in, day out, in an unchanging environment.

Critical points

Sociological debates on Marx's ideas have been more or less continuous for the past 150 years, and it is quite impossible to do justice to them here. Instead, we can point to several major themes in Marxist criticism. Firstly, Marx's characterization of capitalist society as splitting into 'two main camps' – owners and workers – has been seen as too simple. Even within the working class, there are divisions between skilled and unskilled workers, which work to prevent a clear convergence of class interests. Such divisions have endured and become more complex, with gender and ethnicity also becoming factors leading to internal competition and conflicts. As a result, critics argue, concerted action by the whole of the working class is very unlikely.

Second, Marx's forecast of a communist revolution led by the industrial working class in the advanced societies has not materialized and this calls into question his analysis of the dynamics of capitalism. Some contemporary Marxists continue to see capitalism as a doomed system, which will collapse at some point in the future, but critics (some of them former Marxists) see little evidence of this. Indeed, the majority of the working class have become increasingly

affluent property-owners with more of a stake in the capitalist system than ever.

Finally, although Marx saw class-consciousness arising from the increasingly shared experiences of the working class, many critics of Marxism today have found that people identify less rather than more with their social class position. Instead, there are multiple sources of people's social identities, and class identification is not the most important for many people. Without a developing class-consciousness, there can be no concerted class action and, hence, no communist revolution. Again, critics see the long-term social trends moving away from Marx's theoretical predictions.

Contemporary significance

Marx's influence on the world has been enormous, and even though his major predictions have not been proved correct, the analysis of capitalism that he pioneered continues to inform our understanding of globalization processes. Indeed, it can be argued that the widespread acknowledgement of rapid globalization in the social sciences may give fresh impetus to Marxist studies, particularly with the recent emergence of international anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements.



See chapter 22, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements', for a discussion of anti-globalization movements.

part of his major work, *Capital*) breaks off just at the point where he posed the question 'What constitutes a class?'. Marx's concept of class has thus to be reconstructed from the body of his writings as a whole. Since the various passages in which he discussed class are not always fully consistent, there have been many disputes between scholars about 'what Marx really meant'. Nevertheless, his main ideas are fairly clear and are discussed in 'Classic Studies 11.1'.

Max Weber: class, status and party

Weber's approach to stratification was built on the analysis developed by Marx, but he modified and elaborated on it. Like Marx, Weber regarded society as characterized by conflicts over power and resources. Yet where Marx saw polarized class relations and economic issues at the heart of all social conflict, Weber developed a more complex,

multidimensional view of society. Social stratification is not simply a matter of class, according to Weber, but is shaped by two further aspects: **status** and **party**. These three overlapping elements of stratification produce an enormous number of possible positions within society, rather than the more rigid bipolar model proposed by Marx.

Although Weber accepted Marx's view that class is founded on objectively given economic conditions, he saw a greater variety of economic factors as important in class-formation than were recognized by Marx. According to Weber, class divisions derive not only from control or lack of control of the means of production, but from economic differences that have nothing directly to do with property. Such resources include especially the skills and credentials, or qualifications, which affect the types of work people are able to obtain. Weber argued that an individual's *market position* strongly influences his or her overall life chances. Those in managerial or professional occupations earn more and have more favourable conditions of work, for example, than people in blue-collar jobs. The qualifications they possess, such as degrees, diplomas and the skills they have acquired, make them more 'marketable' than others without such qualifications. At a lower level, among blue-collar workers, skilled craftsmen are able to secure higher wages than the semi- or unskilled.

Status in Weber's theory refers to differences between social groups in the social honour or prestige they are accorded by others. In traditional societies, status was often determined on the basis of the first-hand knowledge of a person gained through multiple interactions in different contexts over a period of years. Yet as societies grew more complex, it became impossible for status always to be accorded in this way. Instead, according to Weber, status came to be expressed through people's *styles of life*. Markers and symbols of status – such as housing, dress, manner of speech and occupation – all help to shape an individual's

social standing in the eyes of others. People sharing the same status form a community in which there is a sense of shared identity.

While Marx argued that status distinctions are the result of class divisions in society, Weber argued that status often varies independently of class divisions. Possession of wealth normally tends to confer high status, but there are many exceptions. The term 'genteel poverty' refers to one example. In Britain, for example, individuals from aristocratic families continue to enjoy considerable social esteem even when their fortunes have been lost. Conversely, 'new money' is often looked on with some scorn by the well-established wealthy.

In modern societies, Weber pointed out, party formation is an important aspect of *power*, and can influence stratification independently of class and status. Party defines a group of individuals who work together because they have common backgrounds, aims or interests. Often a party works in an organized fashion towards a specific goal which is in the interest of the party membership. Marx tended to explain both status differences and party organization in terms of class. Neither, in fact, can be reduced to class divisions, Weber argued, even though each is influenced by them; both can in turn influence the economic circumstances of individuals and groups, thereby affecting class. Parties may appeal to concerns cutting across class differences; for example, parties may be based on religious affiliation or nationalist ideals. A Marxist might attempt to explain the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland in class terms, since more Catholics than Protestants are in working-class jobs. A follower of Weber would argue that such an explanation is ineffective, because many Protestants are also from working-class backgrounds. The parties to which people are affiliated express religious as well as class differences.

Weber's writings on stratification are important, because they show that other

dimensions of stratification besides class strongly influence people's lives. While Marx saw social class as the key social division, Weber drew attention to the complex interplay of class, status and party as separate aspects of social stratification creating a more flexible basis for empirical analyses of stratification.

Erik Olin Wright's theory of class

The American sociologist Erik Olin Wright has developed an influential theory of class which combines aspects of both Marx's and Weber's approaches (Wright 1978, 1985, 1997). According to Wright, there are three dimensions of *control over economic resources* in modern capitalist production, and these allow us to identify the major classes that exist:

- control over investments or money capital;
- control over the physical means of production (land or factories and offices);
- control over labour power.

Those who belong to the capitalist class have control over each of these dimensions in the production system. Members of the working class have control over none of them. In between these two main classes, however, are the groups whose position is more ambiguous – the managers and white-collar workers mentioned above. These people are in what Wright calls *contradictory class locations*, because they are able to influence some aspects of production, but are denied control over others. White-collar and professional employees, for example, have to contract their labour power to employers in order to make a living in the same way as manual workers do. But at the same time they have a greater degree of control over the work setting than most people in blue-collar jobs. Wright terms the class position of such workers 'contradictory', because they are neither capitalists nor manual workers, yet

they share certain common features with each.

A large segment of the population – 85 to 90 per cent, according to Wright (1997) – falls into the category of those who are forced to sell their labour because they do not control the means of production. Yet within this population there is a great deal of diversity, ranging from the traditional manual working class to white-collar workers. In order to differentiate class locations within this large population, Wright takes two factors into account: the relationship to authority and the possession of skills or expertise. First, Wright argues that many middle-class workers, such as managers and supervisors, enjoy relationships towards authority that are more privileged than those of the working class. Such individuals are called on by capitalists to assist in controlling the working class – for example, by monitoring an employee's work or by conducting personnel reviews and evaluations – and are rewarded for their 'loyalty' by earning higher wages and receiving regular promotions. Yet, at the same time, these individuals remain under the control of the capitalist owners. In other words, they are both exploiters and exploited.

The second factor which differentiates class locations within the middle classes is the possession of skills and expertise. According to Wright, middle-class employees possessing skills which are in demand in the labour market are able to exercise a specific form of power in the capitalist system. Given that their expertise is in short supply, they are able to earn a higher wage. The lucrative positions available to information technology specialists in the emerging knowledge economy illustrate this point. Moreover, Wright argues, because employees with knowledge and skills are more difficult to monitor and control, employers are obliged to secure their loyalty and cooperation by rewarding them accordingly.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Are Marx and Weber's theories of class at odds with each other or complementary? Explain your answer fully. What does Wright's introduction of the idea of 'contradictory class locations' add to our understanding of class relationships?

Measuring class

Both theoretical and empirical studies have investigated the link between class standing and other dimensions of social life, such as voting patterns, educational attainment and physical health. Yet, as we have seen, the concept of class is far from clear-cut. Both in academic circles and in common usage, the term 'class' is understood and used in a wide variety of ways. How, then, can sociologists and researchers measure such an imprecise concept for the purpose of empirical studies?

When an abstract concept such as class is transformed into a measurable variable in a study, we say that the concept has been *operationalized*. This means that it has been defined clearly and concretely enough to be tested through empirical research. Sociologists have operationalized class through a variety of schemes which attempt to map the class structure of society. Such schemes provide a theoretical framework by which individuals are allocated to social class categories.

A common feature of most class schemes is that they are based on the occupational structure. Sociologists have seen class divisions as corresponding generally with material and social inequalities that are linked to types of employment. The development of capitalism and industrialism has been marked by a growing division of labour and an increasingly complicated occupational structure. Although no longer as true as it once was, occupation is one of the most critical factors in an individual's social standing, life chances and level of material comfort.

Social scientists have used occupation extensively as an indicator of social class because of the finding that individuals in the same occupation tend to experience similar degrees of social advantage or disadvantage, maintain comparable lifestyles, and share similar opportunities in life.

Class schemes based on the occupational structure take a number of different forms. Some schemes are largely descriptive in nature – they reflect the shape of the occupational and class structure in society without addressing the relations between social classes. Such models have been favoured by scholars who see stratification as unproblematic and part of the natural social order, such as those working in the functionalist tradition.



Functionalism was introduced in chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', and chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives in Sociology'.

Other schemes are more theoretically informed – often drawing on the ideas of Marx or Weber – and concern themselves with explaining the relations between classes in society. 'Relational' class schemes tend to be favoured by sociologists working within conflict paradigms in order to demonstrate the divisions and tensions within society. Erik Olin Wright's theory of class, discussed above, is an example of a relational class scheme, because it seeks to depict the processes of class exploitation from a Marxist perspective. John Goldthorpe's influential work is an example of a relational scheme originally rooted in Weberian ideas of class (see 'Classic Studies 11.2').

Evaluating Goldthorpe's class scheme

As 'Classic Studies 11.2' notes, Goldthorpe's class scheme has been used widely in empirical research. It has been useful in highlighting class-based inequalities, such as those related to health and education, as well as reflecting class-based dimensions in

Classic Studies 11.2 John H. Goldthorpe on social class and occupations

The research problem

What is the connection between the jobs we do – our occupations – and our social class position? Is class simply the same thing as occupation? Do we then move *between* classes when we move occupations? If we retrain, move into higher education or become unemployed, does our class position change as well? As sociologists, how can we best carry out research into social class?

Some sociologists have been dissatisfied with descriptive class schemes, claiming that they merely reflect social and material inequalities between classes rather than seeking to explain the class processes which give birth to them. With such concerns in mind, British sociologist John Goldthorpe created a scheme for use in empirical research on social mobility. The Goldthorpe class scheme was designed not as a hierarchy, but as a representation of the 'relational' nature of the contemporary class structure.

Goldthorpe's explanation

Goldthorpe's ideas have been highly influential. Although he now underplays any explicit theoretical influence on his scheme (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993), other sociologists have often pointed to the Goldthorpe classification as an example of a neo-Weberian class scheme. This is because Goldthorpe's original scheme identified class locations on the basis of two main factors: market situation and work situation. An individual's market situation concerns his or her level of pay, job security and prospects for advancement; it emphasizes material rewards and general life chances. The work situation, by contrast, focuses on questions of control, power and authority within the occupation. An individual's work situation is concerned with the degree of autonomy in the workplace and the overall relations of control affecting an employee.

Goldthorpe devised his scheme by evaluating occupations on the basis of their relative market and work situations. In the 1980s and '90s, Goldthorpe's comparative research encompassed a project on social mobility known as the CASMIN project (Comparative Analysis of

Social Mobility in Industrial Societies). The results of this project are significant, as the resulting classification was incorporated into the UK Office of National Statistics' own Socio-Economic Classification (ONS-SEC) and is intended to be the basis for a European-wide scheme (Crompton 2008). The Goldthorpe/CASMIN and UK ONS-SEC schemes are shown in table 11.1, alongside the more commonly used sociological terms (on the right-hand side).

Originally encompassing eleven class locations, reduced to eight in the CASMIN research, Goldthorpe's scheme remains more detailed than many others. Yet in common usage, class locations are still compressed into just three main class strata: a 'service' class (classes I and II), an 'intermediate class' (classes III and IV) and a 'working class' (classes V, VI and VII). Goldthorpe also acknowledges the presence of an elite class of property-holders at the very top of the scheme, but argues that it is such a small segment of society that it is not meaningful as a category in empirical studies.

In his more recent writings, Goldthorpe (2000) has emphasized employment relations within his scheme, rather than the notion of 'work situation' described above. By doing this, he draws attention to different types of employment contract. A labour contract supposes an exchange of wages and effort which is specifically defined and delimited, while a service contract has a 'prospective' element, such as the possibility of salary growth or promotion. According to Goldthorpe, the working class is characterized by labour contracts and the service class by service contracts; the intermediate class locations experience intermediate types of employment relations.

Critical points

An extended evaluation of Goldthorpe's work follows, but here we can note two major criticisms. Although his scheme is clearly a useful one for empirical researchers, it is not so clear that it can tell us much about the position of those social groups, such as students, that fall

outside social class boundaries. It has also come under fire for underplaying the significance of the gross disparities in wealth within capitalist societies. In a sense, such criticisms are a reflection of the long-standing debate between Marxist and Weberian scholars on social class and its importance.

Contemporary significance

Goldthorpe's work has been at the centre of debates on social class and occupations for some time. In spite of some highly pertinent

criticisms, his class scheme has been constantly updated and refined, while remaining within the broadly Weberian tradition of sociology. With the latest version about to become the standard class scheme across the European Union, it would seem that Goldthorpe's ideas are likely to become more rather than less influential in the future.

Table 11.1 Goldthorpe/CASMIN and UK ONS-SEC social class schemes alongside more commonly used sociological categories.

Goldthorpe/CASMIN schema	National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification	Common descriptive term
I Professional, administrative and managerial employees, higher grade	1 Higher managerial and professional occupations	Salarial (or service class)
II Professional, administrative and managerial employees, lower grade; technicians, higher grade	2 Lower managerial and professional occupations	
IIIa Routine non-manual employees, higher grade	3 Intermediate occupations	Intermediate white collar
IV Small employers and self-employed workers	4 Employers in small organizations, own account workers	Independents (or petty bourgeoisie)
V Supervisors of manual workers; technicians, lower grade	5 Lower supervisory and lower technical occupations	Intermediate blue-collar
VI Skilled manual workers	6 Semi-routine occupations	Working class
IIIb Routine non-manual workers, lower grade	7 Routine occupations	
VII Semi- and unskilled manual workers		

Source: Goldthorpe and McKnight 2004, in Nunn et al. 2007. From Morgan et al. *Mobility and Inequality: Frontiers of Research in Sociology and Economics*. Copyright © 2006 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University. All rights reserved. Used with permission of Stanford University Press, www.sup.org

voting patterns, political outlooks and general social attitudes. Yet it is important to note several significant limitations to schemes such as Goldthorpe's, which should caution us against applying them uncritically.

Occupational class schemes are difficult to apply to the *economically inactive*, such as the unemployed, students, pensioners and children. Unemployed and retired individuals are often classified on the basis of their previous work activity, although this



Where do unemployed people and jobseekers fit into a social class scheme?

can be problematic in the case of the long-term unemployed or people with sporadic work histories. Students can sometimes be classified according to their discipline, but this is more likely to be successful in cases where the field of study correlates closely to a specific occupation (such as engineering or medicine).

Class schemes based on occupational distinctions are also unable to reflect the importance of *property-ownership and wealth* to social class. Occupational titles alone are not sufficient indicators of an individual's wealth and overall assets. This is particularly true among the richest members of society, including entrepreneurs, financiers and the 'old rich', whose occupational titles of 'director' or 'executive' place them in the same category as many professionals of much more limited means. In other words, class schemes derived from

occupational categories do not accurately reflect the enormous concentration of wealth among the 'economic elite'. By classifying such individuals alongside other upper-class professionals, the occupational class schemes dilute the relative weight of property relations in social stratification.

John Westergaard is one sociologist who has disputed Goldthorpe's view that because the rich are so few in number they can be excluded from schemes detailing class structure. As Westergaard (1995: 127) argues:

It is the intense concentration of power and privilege in so few hands that makes these people top. Their socio-structural weight overall, immensely disproportionate to their small numbers, makes the society they top a class society, whatever may be the pattern of divisions beneath them.

11.1 The death of class?

In recent years there has been a vigorous debate within sociology about the usefulness of 'class'. Some sociologists, such as Ray Pahl, have even questioned whether it is still a useful concept in attempting to understand contemporary societies. Australian academics Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters have been prominent amongst those who argue that class is no longer the key to understanding contemporary societies. In their book, *The Death of Class* (1996), they argue that contemporary societies have undergone profound social changes and are no longer to be accurately seen as 'class societies'.

A time of social change

Pakulski and Waters argue that industrial societies are now undergoing a period of tremendous social change. We are witnessing a period in which the political, social and economic importance of class are in decline. Industrial societies have changed from being organized class societies to a new stage, which Pakulski and Waters call 'status conventionalism'. They use this term to indicate that inequalities, although they remain, are the result of differences in status (prestige) and in the lifestyle and consumption patterns favoured by such status groups. Class is no longer an important factor in a person's identity, and the class communities exemplified by Young and Willmott's study of Bethnal Green (1973) are a thing of the past. These changes in turn mean that attempts to explain political and social behaviour by reference to class are also out of date. Class, it seems, is well and truly dead.

Property-ownership

One of the reasons for this huge shift is that there have been important changes in property-ownership. Property-ownership, it is claimed, is now less restricted. This means that there is both more competition amongst firms, since there are more of them, and less opportunity for a dominant capitalist or managerial class to reproduce and pass on its own privilege to the next generation of



Is status-based consumption now the main form of stratification in modern societies, rather than social class position?

capitalists. Inequality, however, remains, and, where it does arise, is the result of the failure of groups to achieve a high status, not their class position (their position in a division of labour).

Increase in consumer power

These changes have been accompanied by an increase in consumer power. In ever more competitive and diverse markets, firms have to be much more sensitive in heeding the wishes of consumers. There has thus been a shift in the balance of power in advanced industrial societies. What marks out the underprivileged in contemporary society – what Pakulski and Waters refer to as an 'ascriptively disprivileged underclass' – is their inability to engage in 'status

consumption', which is to say, their inability to buy cars, clothes, houses, holidays and other consumer goods.

For Pakulski and Waters, contemporary societies are stratified, but this stratification is achieved through cultural consumption, not class position in the division of labour. It is all a matter of style, taste and status (prestige), not of location in the division of labour.

Processes of globalization

The shift from organized class society to status conventionalism is explained as being the result of processes of globalization, changes in the economy, technology and politics. Pakulski and Waters argue that globalization has led to a new international division of labour, in which the 'first world' is increasingly post-industrial – there are simply fewer of the sort of manual working-class occupations which characterized the previous era of 'organized class society'. At the same time, in a globalized world, nation-states are less self-contained and are less able to govern either their population or market forces than they once were. Stratification and inequality still exist, but they do so more on a global than a national basis; we see more significant inequalities between different nations than we do within a nation-state.

The political and social implications

These changes have had profound political and social implications. As mentioned above, collective class-based communities have collapsed. In the case of the UK this has occurred as old industries,

such as coal-mining, have 'down-sized' and populations have shifted to the more affluent urbanized areas in the south. Greater geographical mobility has led to changes in family structure – single-person households are on the increase in the UK. Pakulski and Waters argue that, in the context of greater geographical mobility, the importance of the family as a site of class reproduction (as in Young and Willmott) is now very much in decline.

Nothing but a theory?

John Scott and Lydia Morris argue for a need to make distinctions between the class positions of individuals – their location in a division of labour – and the collective phenomena of social class through which people express a sense of belonging to a group and have a shared sense of identity and values. This last sense of class (a more subjective and collective sense) may or may not exist in a society at a particular time – it will depend on many social, economic and political factors.

It is this last aspect of class that appears to have diminished in recent years. This does not mean that status and the cultural aspects of stratification are now so dominant that the economic aspects of class are of no significance; indeed, mobility studies and inequalities of wealth indicate the opposite. Class is not dead – it is just becoming that bit more complex!

Source: Adapted from Abbott 2001

As we have seen, there are a number of complexities involved in devising class schemes that can reliably 'map' the class structure of society. Even within a relatively 'stable' occupational structure, measuring and mapping social class is fraught with difficulty. Yet the rapid economic transformations occurring in industrial societies have made the measurement of class even more problematic, and have even led some to question the usefulness of class as a concept. New categories of occupations are

emerging, there has been a general shift away from industrial production towards service and knowledge work, and an enormous number of women have entered the workforce in recent decades. Occupational class schemes are not necessarily well suited to capturing the dynamic processes of class-formation, mobility and change that are provoked by such social transformations.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Reflecting on your own life experience, to what extent do you feel your identity has been shaped by your family's social class background? What evidence can you point to which suggests that patterns of *consumption* may be becoming more significant in the creation of social divisions?

Contemporary class divisions in the developed world

The question of the upper class

Who is right, Westergaard or Goldthorpe? Is there still a distinctive upper class in the developed societies, founded on ownership of wealth and property? Or should we be talking more of a wider service class, as Goldthorpe suggests? Although Goldthorpe recognizes that a small elite upper class does exist, this is seen as so small that it becomes difficult to build into representative social surveys. On the other hand, for those who argue that an elite upper class is still significant enough to be the focus of research, this is not the same class as the landed aristocracy of estates systems. Instead, it is a capitalist elite whose wealth and power is derived from profit-making in global markets. One way of approaching these issues is to look at how far wealth and income are concentrated in the hands of a few.

Reliable information about the distribution of wealth is difficult to obtain. Some countries keep more accurate statistics than others, but there is always a considerable amount of guesswork involved. The affluent do not usually publicize the full range of their assets; it has often been remarked that we know far more about the poor than we do about the wealthy. What is certain is that wealth is indeed concentrated in the hands of a small minority. In Britain for example, the top 1 per cent own some 21 per cent of

all marketable wealth. The most wealthy 10 per cent of the population has consistently owned 50 per cent or more of the total marketable wealth in the country, while the least wealthy half of the population owns less than 10 per cent of the total wealth (see table 11.2).

Ownership of stocks and bonds is more unequal than holdings of wealth as a whole. The top 1 per cent in the UK own some 75 per cent of privately held corporate shares; the top 5 per cent own over 90 per cent of the total. But there has also been more change in this respect. Around 25 per cent of the population own shares, which compares with 14 per cent in 1986 – many people bought shares for the first time during the privatization programme of the Conservative government that came to power in 1979. The increase is even more dramatic when looked at over a longer period, for in 1979 only 5 per cent of the population held shares. Most of these holdings are small (worth less than £1,000 at 1991 prices), and institutional share-ownership – shares held by companies in other firms – is growing faster than individual share-ownership.

Historically, it has been very difficult to arrive at an overall picture of global wealth distribution because of the problems of data-gathering in some countries. However, a recent study by the Helsinki-based World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University (UNU-WIDER 2007) covers all the countries of the world and takes in household wealth, shares and other financial assets, as well as land and buildings, making it the most comprehensive global survey of personal wealth ever undertaken. The Helsinki survey found that the richest 2 per cent of the global population own more than half of global household wealth. It also found that while the richest 10 per cent of adults owned 85 per cent of global wealth, the bottom 50 per cent owned just 1 per cent. Clearly, when compared with a single developed country like the UK, the global pattern of wealth distribution is even more unequal,

Table 11.2 UK distribution of wealth, 1976–2003

United Kingdom	Percentages							
Marketable wealth								
Percentage of wealth owned by:								
	1976	1986	1996	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Most wealthy 1%	21	18	20	23	23	22	24	21
Most wealthy 5%	38	36	40	43	44	42	45	40
Most wealthy 10%	50	50	52	55	56	54	57	53
Most wealthy 25%	71	73	74	75	75	72	75	72
Most wealthy 50%	92	90	93	94	95	94	94	93
Total marketable wealth (£ billion)								
	280	955	2,092	2,861	3,131	3,477	3,588	3,783
Marketable wealth less value of dwellings								
Percentage of wealth owned by:								
	1976	1986	1996	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Most wealthy 1%	29	25	26	34	33	34	37	34
Most wealthy 5%	47	46	49	59	59	58	62	58
Most wealthy 10%	57	58	63	72	73	72	74	71
Most wealthy 25%	73	75	81	87	89	88	87	85
Most wealthy 50%	88	89	94	97	98	98	98	99

Source: National Statistics 2006d

reflecting the gross disparity in wealth and power between the industrialized countries and those in the developing world.

'The rich' do not constitute a homogeneous group. Nor do they form a static category: individuals follow varying trajectories into and out of wealth. Some rich people were born into families of 'old money' – an expression which refers to long-standing wealth that has been passed down through generations. Other affluent individuals are 'self-made', having successfully built up wealth from more humble beginnings. Profiles of the richest members of society vary enormously. Next to members of long-standing affluent families are music and film celebrities, athletes and representatives of the 'new elite' who have made millions through the development and promotion of

computers, telecommunications and the Internet. Like poverty, wealth must be regarded in the context of life-cycles. Some individuals become wealthy very quickly, only to lose much or all of it; others may experience a gradual growth or decline in assets over time.

While it is difficult to collect precise information about the assets and lives of the rich, it is possible to trace broad shifts in the composition of the wealthiest segment of society. Some noteworthy trends have arisen in recent years, which we can observe from UK data. First, 'self-made millionaires', like Sir Gulam Noon, whom we discussed at the start of this chapter, appear to be making up a greater proportion of the wealthiest individuals. More than 75 per cent of the 1,000 richest Britons in 2007

made their own wealth rather than inheriting it. Second, a small but growing number of women are entering the ranks of the rich. In 1989, only six women were represented among the wealthiest Britons; by 2007 that number had risen to 92. Third, in recent years many of the wealthiest members of society are quite young – in their 20s or 30s. In 2000, there were 17 Britons under the age of 30 who were worth more than £30 million. Fourth, ethnic minorities, particularly those of Asian origin, have been increasing their presence among the super-rich (*Sunday Times Rich List* 2007). Finally, many of the richest people in Britain – including the richest, Roman Abramovich – were not born in the country, but decided to make it their place of residence for a variety of reasons, including the relatively low rates of tax for the super-rich

Although the composition of the rich is certainly changing, the view that there is no longer a distinguishable upper class is questionable. John Scott (1991) has argued that the upper class today has changed shape but retains its distinctive position. He points to three particular groups that together form a constellation of interests in controlling – and profiting from – big business. Senior executives in large corporations may not own their companies, but they are often able to accumulate shareholdings, and these connect them both to old-style industrial entrepreneurs and to ‘finance capitalists’. Finance capitalists, a category that includes the people who run the insurance companies, banks, investment funds and other organizations that are large institutional shareholders, are, in Scott’s view, amongst the core of the upper class today. For example, in 2007 one City of London banker took £58.6 million in earnings in less than a year and a half. The Bank of England’s deputy governor noted that the situation in private equity and hedge funds was similar to that in English premiership football, where individual pay is set according to a world market, not simply a national one (Crompton 2008: 145).

Policies encouraging entrepreneurship during the 1980s and the information technology boom of the 1990s have led to a new wave of entry into the upper class of people who have made a fortune from business and technological advances. At the same time, the growth of corporate shareholding among middle-class households has broadened the profile of corporate ownership. Yet the concentration of power and wealth in the upper class remains intact. While corporate-ownership patterns may be more diffuse than in earlier times, it is still a small minority who benefit substantially from shareholding.

We can conclude from this that we need a concept both of the upper class and the service class. The upper class consists of a small minority of individuals who have both wealth and power, and who are able to transmit their privileges to their children. This class can be roughly identified as the top 1 per cent of wealth-holders. Below them is the **service class**, made up, as Goldthorpe says, of professionals, managers and top administrators. They make up some 25 per cent of the population. Those whom Goldthorpe calls the ‘intermediate class’ are perhaps more simply called the **middle class**. Let us look in more detail at this class.

The growing middle class

The ‘middle class’ covers a broad spectrum of people working in many different occupations, from employees in the service industry to school teachers to medical professionals. Some authors prefer to speak of the ‘middle classes’ so as to draw attention to the diversity of occupations, class and status situations, and life chances that characterize its members. According to most observers, the middle class now encompasses the majority of the population in Britain and most other industrialized countries. This is because the proportion of white-collar jobs has risen markedly relative to blue-collar ones over the course of the century.

See chapter 20, 'Work and Economic Life', for more on the rise of white-collar jobs.

Members of the middle class, by merit of their educational credentials or technical qualifications, occupy positions that provide them with greater material and cultural advantages than those enjoyed by manual workers. Unlike the working class, members of the middle class can sell their mental *and* their physical labour power in order to earn a living. While this distinction is useful in forming a rough division between the middle and working classes, the dynamic nature of the occupational structure and the possibility of upward and downward social mobility make it difficult to define the boundaries of the middle class with great precision.

The middle class is not internally cohesive and is unlikely to become so, given the diversity of its members and their differing interests (Butler and Savage 1995). It is true that the middle class is not as homogeneous as the working class; nor do its members share a common social background or cultural outlook, as is largely the case with the top layers of the upper class. The 'loose' composition of the middle class is not a new phenomenon, however; it has been an abiding feature of the middle class since its emergence in the early nineteenth century.

Professional, managerial and administrative occupations have been among the fastest growing sectors of the middle class. There are several reasons why this is so. The first is related to the importance of large-scale organizations in modern societies.

See chapter 18, 'Organizations and Networks', for more on the nature of organizations.

The spread of bureaucracies has created opportunities and a demand for employees to work within institutional settings. Individuals such as doctors and lawyers, who might have been self-employed in earlier times, now tend to work in institutional environments. Second, the growth of

professionals is a reflection of the expanding number of people who work in sectors of the economy where the government plays a major role. The creation of the welfare state led to an enormous growth in many professions involved in carrying out its mandate, such as social workers, teachers and healthcare professionals. Finally, with the deepening of economic and industrial development, there has been an ever-growing demand for the services of experts in the fields of law, finance, accounting, technology and information systems. In this sense, professions can be seen as both a product of the modern era and a central contributor to its evolution and expansion.

Professionals, managers and higher-level administrators gain their position largely from their possession of credentials – degrees, diplomas and other qualifications. As a whole, they enjoy relatively secure and remunerative careers, and their separation from people in more routine non-manual jobs has probably grown more pronounced in recent years. Some authors have seen professionals and other higher white-collar groups as forming a specific class – the 'professional/managerial class' (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979). The degree of division between them and white-collar workers, however, does not seem either deep or clear-cut enough to make such a position defensible.


Other authors have examined the ways in which white-collar professionals join together to maximize their own interests and to secure high levels of material reward and prestige. The case of the medical profession illustrates this point clearly (Parry and Parry 1976). Some groups within the medical profession, such as doctors, have successfully organized themselves to protect their standing in society and to ensure a high level of material reward. Three main dimensions of *professionalism* have enabled this to happen: entry into the profession is restricted to those who meet a strict set of defined criteria (qualifications); a professional association monitors and

disciplines the conduct and performance of its members; and it is generally accepted that only members of the profession are qualified to practise medicine. Through such channels, self-governing professional associations are able to exclude unwanted individuals from the profession and to enhance the market position of their own members.

The changing working class

Marx forecast that the working class – people working in manufacturing as blue-collar labour – would become progressively larger and larger. That was the basis for his view that the working class would create the momentum for a revolutionary transformation of society. In fact, the working class has become smaller and smaller. Only about a quarter of a century ago, some 40 per cent of the working population was in blue-collar work. Now, in the developed countries, this figure stands at only about 18 per cent, and the proportion is still falling. Moreover, the conditions under which working-class people are living, and the styles of life they are following, are changing.

The industrialized countries have significant numbers of poor people. However, the majority of individuals working in blue-collar occupations no longer live in poverty. As was mentioned earlier, the income of manual workers has increased considerably since the turn of the century. This rising standard of living is expressed in the increased availability of consumer goods to all classes. About half of blue-collar workers now own their own homes. Cars, washing machines, televisions and telephones are owned by a very high proportion of households.

 We examine this issue more closely in chapter 12, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

The phenomenon of working-class affluence suggests yet another possible route towards a more 'middle-class society'.

Perhaps as blue-collar workers grow more prosperous, they become middle class. This idea came to be known as the **embourgeoisement thesis** – simply, the process through which more people become 'bourgeois' or middle class. In the 1950s, when the thesis was first advanced, its supporters argued that many blue-collar workers earning middle-class wages would adopt middle-class values, outlooks and lifestyles as well. There was a seemingly strong argument that progress within industrial society was having a powerful effect on the shape of social stratification.

In the 1960s, John Goldthorpe and his colleagues in the UK carried out what came to be a very well-known study in order to test the embourgeoisement hypothesis. In undertaking the study, they argued that if the thesis was correct, affluent blue-collar employees should be virtually indistinguishable from white-collar employees in terms of their attitudes to work, lifestyle and politics. Based on interviews with workers in the car and chemical industries in Luton, the research was published in three volumes. It is often referred to as the *Affluent Worker* study (Goldthorpe 1968–9). A total of 229 manual workers were studied, together with 54 white-collar workers for purposes of comparison. Many of the blue-collar workers had migrated to the area in search of well-paid jobs; compared to most other manual workers, they were in fact highly paid and earned more than most lower-level white-collar workers.

Goldthorpe and his colleagues focused on three dimensions of working-class attitudes and found very little support for the embourgeoisement thesis. In terms of economic outlooks and attitudes to work, the authors agreed that many workers had acquired a middle-class standard of living on the basis of their income and ownership of consumer goods. Yet this relative affluence was attained through positions characterized by poor benefits, low chances for promotion and little intrinsic job satisfaction. The authors of the study found that

affluent workers had an instrumental orientation to their work: they saw it as a means to an end: the end of gaining good wages. Their work was mostly repetitive and uninteresting, and they had little direct commitment to it.

Despite levels of affluence comparable to those of white-collar employees, the workers in the study did not associate with white-collar workers in their leisure time, and did not aspire to rise up the class ladder. Goldthorpe and his colleagues found that most socializing was done at home with immediate family members or kin, or with other working-class neighbours. There was little indication that the workers were moving towards middle-class norms and values. In terms of political outlooks, the authors found that there was a negative correlation between working-class affluence and support for the Conservative Party. Supporters of the embourgeoisement thesis had predicted that growing affluence among the working class would weaken traditional support for the Labour Party.

The results of the study, in the eyes of its authors, were clear-cut: the embourgeoisement thesis was false. These workers were not in the process of becoming more middle class. However, Goldthorpe and his colleagues did concede the possibility of some convergence between the lower-middle class and upper-working class on certain points. Affluent workers shared with their white-collar counterparts similar patterns of economic consumption, a privatized home-centred outlook and support for instrumental collectivism (collective action through unions to improve wages and conditions) at the workplace.

No strictly comparable research has been carried out in the intervening years, and it is not clear how far, if the conclusions reached by Goldthorpe et al. were valid at the time, they remain true now. It is generally agreed that the old, traditional working-class communities have tended to become fragmented, or have broken down altogether, with the decline of manufacturing industry

and the impact of consumerism. Just how far such fragmentation has proceeded, however, remains open to dispute.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Look again at the section on the upper class. Does the existence of a very small upper class support Marx's theory of class or Weber's? Explain your answer fully. Explain how it is theoretically possible for the working class to become generally more affluent, when at the same time, social inequality is increasing.

Is there an underclass?

The term 'underclass' is often used to describe the segment of the population located at the very bottom of the class structure. Members of the underclass have living standards that are significantly lower than the majority of people in society. It is a group characterized by multiple disadvantages. Many are among the long-term unemployed, or drift in and out of jobs. Some are homeless, or have no permanent place in which to live. Members of the underclass may spend long periods of time dependent on state welfare benefits. The underclass is frequently described as 'marginalized' or 'excluded' from the way of life that is maintained by the bulk of the population.

The underclass is often associated with underprivileged ethnic minority groups. Much of the debate about the underclass originated in the United States, where the preponderance of poor blacks living in inner-city areas prompted talk of a 'black underclass' (Wilson 1978; Murray 1984, 1990; Lister 1996). This is not simply an American phenomenon, however. In Britain, blacks and Asians are disproportionately represented in the underclass. In some European countries, migrant workers who found jobs in times of greater prosperity 20 or so years ago now make up a large part of this sector. This is true, for instance,

of Algerians in France and Turkish immigrants in Germany.

The term 'underclass' is a contested one at the centre of a furious sociological debate. Although the term has now entered everyday speech, many scholars and commentators are wary of using it at all. It is a concept that encompasses a broad spectrum of meanings, some of which are seen as politically charged and negative in connotation. Many researchers in Europe prefer the notion of 'social exclusion', which is a broader concept than that of underclass, and has the advantage that it emphasizes social processes – mechanisms of exclusion – rather than simply individual positions, though, again, not all agree. Some discussions of social exclusion have tended to underplay the central sociological significance of structural social inequalities and thus risk 'blaming the victims' by focusing on the 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behaviour of the unemployed, economic migrants and other socially excluded groups (MacGregor 2003).



Social exclusion is discussed in detail in chapter 12, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

The concept of an underclass has a long history. Marx wrote of a 'lumpenproletariat' composed of individuals located persistently outside the dominant forms of economic production and exchange. In later years, the notion was applied to the 'dangerous classes' of paupers, thieves and vagabonds who refused to work and instead survived on the margins of society as 'social parasites'. In more recent years, the idea of an underclass that is dependent on welfare benefits and bereft of initiative has been similarly influential.

Background to the underclass debate

Recent debates over the underclass have been prompted by several important works published by American sociologists about the position of poor blacks living in inner-city areas. In *The Declining Significance of*

Race (1978), drawing on research in Chicago, William Julius Wilson argued that a substantial black middle class – white-collar workers and professionals – had emerged over the previous three or four decades in the United States. Not all African-Americans still live in city ghettos, and those who remain are kept there, Wilson maintained, not so much by active discrimination as by economic factors – in other words, by class rather than by race. The old racist barriers are disappearing; blacks are stuck in the ghetto as a result of economic disadvantages.

Charles Murray agreed about the existence of a black underclass in most big cities. According to him (1984), however, African-Americans find themselves at the bottom of society as a result of the very welfare policies designed to help improve their position. This is a reiteration of the 'culture of poverty' thesis, according to which, it is argued, people become dependent on welfare handouts and then have little incentive to find jobs, build solid communities or make stable marriages.

In response to Murray's claims, in the 1990s Wilson repeated and extended his previous arguments, again using research carried out in Chicago. The movement of many whites from the cities to the suburbs, the decline of urban industries and other urban economic problems, he suggested, led to high rates of joblessness among African-American men. Wilson explained the forms of social disintegration to which Murray pointed, including the high proportion of unmarried black mothers, in terms of the shrinking of the available pool of 'marriageable' (employed) men. In more recent work, Wilson examined the role of such social processes in creating spatially concentrated pockets of urban deprivation populated by a so-called 'ghetto poor'. Members of the ghetto poor – predominantly African-American and Hispanic – experience multiple deprivations, from low educational qualifications and standards of health to high levels of criminal victimization. They



Does the American theory of an underclass make sense in the context of European societies? Consider these Muslims outside a mosque in Whitechapel in East London: is it race, class or something else that keeps them living there?

are also disadvantaged by a weak urban infrastructure – including inadequate public transportation, community facilities and educational institutions – which further reduces their chances of integrating into society socially, politically and economically (Wilson 1999).

This focus on spatial aspects of the underclass debate have been mirrored in the UK with Lydia Morris's (1993, 1995) research into the emergence of long-term unemployment in the wake of the decline of heavy industries in the North-East of England, which once were major sources of employment. Nevertheless, she concluded that, 'there is no direct evidence in my study of a distinctive culture of the "underclass"' (1993: 410). What she did find was that even the long-term unemployed (out of a job for more than a year) were actively seeking work and had not adopted an anti-work culture,

though they lacked the wider social contacts that many employed respondents had. This research again moves away from exploring individual motivations in isolation from the wider social processes that create the circumstances that shape employment opportunities (Crompton 2008). The study was restricted to a region that lacks significant ethnic minority populations however, and its findings cannot easily be generalized to other parts of the country.

Duncan Gallie also argues that there is little basis for the idea of an underclass with a distinct culture. In his analysis of data from the Social Change and Economic Life Initiative, Gallie (1994) argues that there is little difference between working-class individuals and the long-term unemployed in terms of their political outlooks or work histories. For example, he found that people who have been unemployed for long

periods of time were more committed to the concept of work than those who were employed.

The underclass, the EU and migration

Much debate on the underclass in the United States centres around its ethnic dimension. Increasingly, this is now the case in Europe as well; the tendencies towards economic division and social exclusion now characteristic of America seem to be hardening both in Britain and other countries in Western Europe. The underclass is closely linked to questions of race, ethnicity and migration. In cities such

as London, Manchester, Rotterdam, Frankfurt, Paris and Naples, there are neighbourhoods marked by severe economic deprivation. Hamburg is Europe's richest city, as measured by average personal income, and has the highest proportion of millionaires in Germany; it also has the highest proportion of people on welfare and unemployment – 40 per cent above the national average.

The majority of poor and unemployed people in West European countries are native to their countries, but there are also many first- and second-generation immigrants in poverty and trapped in deteriorating city

Global Society 11.1 The creation of a 'Muslim underclass' in Germany?

'Berlin integration plan attacked'

Demonstrators from the large Turkish community in Germany have protested in Berlin outside a summit on integration convened by Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Four Turkish groups are boycotting the meeting, saying a new immigration bill treats Turkish-origin people and other immigrants as 'second-class citizens'. The forum will examine ways to improve community relations, including teaching German in nursery schools.

About 15 million people with immigrant backgrounds are living in Germany. The BBC's Tristana Moore in Berlin says the situation of Germany's 3.2 million Muslims, most of whom are of Turkish origin, has generated some anxiety, with fears that a lack of job prospects and the language divide risk creating an embittered Muslim underclass. Ministers have long been concerned that ghettos are springing up in German cities, she reports.

New rules

Chancellor Merkel has invited members of the Muslim community and other immigrant groups to the conference. But several Turkish community groups want the government to change the controversial immigration bill. It stipulates that an immigrant who wants to bring a spouse to



Will tighter rules on immigration in some European countries help to create a new underclass?

Germany has to prove the partner can earn a living and has some knowledge of German.

The new rules do not apply to German nationals who have foreign partners.

The government has ruled out making any changes to the new bill, which has already been approved by both houses of parliament. The Turkish-German groups boycotting the forum have threatened to take the matter to the constitutional court.

Source: BBC News, 12 July 2007, bbc.co.uk/news

neighbourhoods. Sizeable populations of Turks in Germany, Algerians in France and Albanians in Italy, for example, have grown up in each of these countries. Migrants in search of a better standard of living are often relegated to casual jobs that offer low wages and few career prospects (for example, see the article in 'Global Society 11.1'). Furthermore, migrants' earnings are frequently sent home in order to support family members who have remained behind. The standard of living for recent immigrants can be precariously low.

In cases where family members attempt to join a migrant illegally so that the family can be reunited, the potential for exclusion and marginalization is particularly high. Ineligible for state welfare benefits, migrants lacking official status are unable to draw on support from the state in order to maintain a minimum standard of living. Such individuals are extremely vulnerable, trapped in highly constrained conditions with few channels of recourse in the event of crisis or misfortune.

THINKING CRITICALLY

What would be the consequences for the European Union if an underclass consisting of large numbers of immigrants develops within European societies? What are the main differences between the concept of an 'underclass' and that of 'social exclusion' (refer to chapter 12 if necessary)? Which concept best describes the situation of the poorest sections of society?

Evaluation

How can we make sense of these contrasting approaches to the underclass? Does sociological research support the idea of a distinct class of disadvantaged people who are united by similar life chances?

The idea of the underclass was introduced from the United States and continues to make the most sense there. In the

USA, extremes of rich and poor are more marked than in Western Europe. Particularly where economic and social deprivation converge with racial divisions, groups of the underprivileged tend to find themselves locked out of the wider society. While the concept of the underclass in these circumstances appears useful, in the European countries its use is more questionable. There is not the same level of separation between those who live in conditions of marked deprivation and the rest of society.

However, even in the USA, recent studies have suggested that, although the urban poor comprise an immobile stratum, accounts of a 'defeated and disconnected underclass' are exaggerated. Thus, more recent studies of fast-food workers and homeless street traders have argued that the separations between the urban poor and the rest of society are not as great as scholars of the underclass think (Duneier 1999; Newman 2000).

Class and lifestyles

In analysing class location, sociologists have traditionally relied on conventional indicators of class location such as market position, relations to the means of production and occupation. Some recent authors, however, argue that we should evaluate individuals' class location not only, or even mainly, in terms of economics and employment, but also in relation to cultural factors such as lifestyle and consumption patterns. According to this approach, our current age is one in which 'symbols' and markers related to consumption are playing an ever greater role in daily life. Individual identities are structured to a greater extent around lifestyle choices – such as how to dress, what to eat, how to care for one's body and where to relax – and less around more traditional class indicators such as employment.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) supported the view that lifestyle choices are an important indicator

of class. He argued that *economic capital* – which consists of material goods such as property, wealth and income – was important, but he argued that it only provided a partial understanding of class. Bourdieu's conception of social class is extremely broad (see Crompton 1993). He identifies four forms of 'capital' that characterize class position, of which economic capital is only one: the others are cultural, social and symbolic (Bourdieu 1986).

See chapter 19, 'Education', for a discussion of Bourdieu's theoretical scheme.

Bourdieu argues that individuals increasingly distinguish themselves from others, not according to economic factors, but on the basis of *cultural capital* – which includes education, appreciation of the arts, consumption and leisure pursuits. People are aided in the process of accumulating cultural capital by the proliferation of 'need merchants' selling goods and services – either symbolic or actual – for consumption within the capitalist system. Advertisers, marketers, fashion designers, style consultants, interior designers, personal trainers, therapists, web designers and many others are all involved in influencing cultural tastes and promoting lifestyle choices among an ever-widening community of consumers.

Also important in Bourdieu's analysis of class is *social capital* – one's networks of friends and contacts. Bourdieu defined social capital as the resources that individuals or groups gain 'by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (1992). The concept of social capital has become an important tool in contemporary sociology, and Bourdieu's discussion of the concept marked an important step in the current proliferation of the idea, though social capital forms only one aspect of Bourdieu's broader theoretical scheme.

Last, Bourdieu argues that *symbolic capital* – which includes possession of a good

reputation – is a final important indication of social class. The idea of symbolic capital is similar to that of social status.

Each type of capital in Bourdieu's account is related and, to an extent, being in possession of one can help in the pursuit of the others. For example, a businessman who makes a large amount of money (economic capital) might not have particularly fine tastes in the arts, but can pay for his children to attend private schools where these pursuits are encouraged (and so his children gain cultural capital). The businessman's money might lead him to make new contacts with senior people in the business world, and his children will meet the children of other wealthy families, so he, and they, will gain social capital. Similarly someone with a large group of well-connected friends (social capital) might be quickly promoted to a senior position in her company, where she does well, and gains in economic and symbolic capital.

Other scholars have agreed with Bourdieu that class divisions can be linked to distinctive lifestyle and consumption patterns. Thus, speaking of groupings within the middle class, Savage et al. (1992) identify three sectors based on cultural tastes and 'assets'. Professionals in public service, who are high in cultural capital and low in economic capital, tend to pursue healthy, active lifestyles involving exercise, low alcohol consumption and participation in cultural and community activities. Managers and bureaucrats, by contrast, are typified by 'indistinctive' patterns of consumption, which involve average or low levels of exercise, little engagement with cultural activities, and a preference for traditional styles in home furnishings and fashion. The third grouping, the 'postmoderns', pursue a lifestyle that is lacking in any defining principle and may contain elements not traditionally enjoyed alongside each other. Thus, horse-riding and an interest in classical literature may be accompanied by a fascination with extreme sports like rock-climbing and a love of raves and Ecstasy.

More recently, Brigitte LeRoux and colleagues (2007) have argued that although the concept of social exclusion cannot usefully illuminate cultural divisions, since it is based on a pretty blunt distinction between a large mainstream population and a smaller one consisting of marginalized minorities, social class is still central to the organization of cultural tastes and practices. Nonetheless, it is the conception of class used which matters most in attempts to understand cultural practices as structuring forces within society. As LeRoux et al. argue in relation to the UK:

Our findings suggest that class boundaries are being redrawn through the increasing interplay between economic and cultural capital. Those members of the 'service class' who do not typically possess graduate level credentials, especially those in lower managerial positions, are more similar to the intermediate classes than they are to the other sections of the professional middle class. Boundaries are also being re-drawn within the working class, where lower supervisory and technical occupations have been downgraded so that they have become similar to those in semi-routine and routine positions. (2007: 22)

In general terms, it would be difficult to dispute that stratification within classes, as well as between classes, has come to depend not only on occupational differences but also on differences in consumption and lifestyle. This is borne out by looking at trends in society as a whole. The rapid expansion of the service economy and the entertainment and leisure industry, for example, reflect an increasing emphasis on consumption within industrialized countries. Modern societies have become consumer societies, geared to the acquisition of material goods. In some respects a consumer society is a 'mass society', where class differences are to a degree overridden; thus people from different class backgrounds may all watch similar television programmes or shop for clothing in the same high street shops. Yet class differences

can also become intensified through variations in lifestyle and 'taste' (Bourdieu 1986).

While bearing these shifts in mind, however, it is impossible to ignore the critical role played by economic factors in the reproduction of social inequalities. For the most part, individuals experiencing extreme social and material deprivations are not doing so as part of a lifestyle choice. Rather, their circumstances are constrained by factors relating to the economic and occupational structure (Crompton 2008).

Gender and stratification

For many years, research on stratification was 'gender-blind' – it was written as though women did not exist, or as though, for purposes of analysing divisions of power, wealth and prestige, women were unimportant and uninteresting. Yet gender itself is one of the most profound examples of stratification. There are no societies in which men do not, in some aspects of social life, have more wealth, status and influence than women.

THINKING CRITICALLY

The study described in 'Using your sociological imagination 11.2' concludes that although the women involved saw class as marginally important to them, actually, it fundamentally shaped their lives. Given the obvious gap between the women's own understanding and that of the sociologist, is this a case of sociologists treating 'ordinary people' as 'cultural dopes' (Garfinkel 1963)? How could the sociologist in this study go about validating her research findings?

One of the main problems posed by the study of gender and stratification in modern societies sounds simple, but turns out to be difficult to resolve. This is the question of how far we can understand gender inequalities in modern times mainly in terms of class divisions. Inequalities of gender are

11.2 'Disidentifying' with the working class?

Bourdieu's work on class and status distinctions has been highly influential, and many sociologists have drawn on it in their own studies of social class. One notable example is the British sociologist Beverley Skeggs, who used Bourdieu's account of class and culture to examine the formation of class and gender in her study of women in the north-west of England.

Over a 12-year period, Skeggs (1997) followed the lives of 83 working-class women who had all enrolled, at one point, in a course for carers at a local further education college. Following Bourdieu's terminology, Skeggs found that the women she studied possessed low economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. They were poorly paid, had limited success in formal education and few relationships that they could draw on with people in powerful positions; they also possessed low status in the eyes of higher social classes. Skeggs claims that the lack of various forms of capital amongst the group of women in her study reflects the wider lack of positive identities for working-class women in the UK. Working-class men, by contrast, do not have the same difficulty gaining a positive identity and Skeggs suggests that this has often been provided through participation in the trade union movement. For women, therefore, to be called 'working class', is to be labelled dirty, valueless and potentially dangerous.

It is this theoretical background, Skeggs argues, that explains why the women in her study were so reluctant to describe themselves as working class. They were well aware of cultural jibes aimed at working-class women about 'white stilettos', 'Sharons' and 'Traceys'. In interviews, Skeggs found that the women tended to 'disidentify' with a perception of themselves as working class. When discussing sexuality for example, the women were keen to avoid the accusation that they were 'tarty' and thus devaluing the limited capital that they did possess as young, marriageable women. It was important amongst the group that they were sexually desirable and that they could 'get a man' if they so wanted. Weddings and marriage offered the chance of respectability and responsibility. The choice to pursue a course in caring emphasized these concerns: training to be a carer taught the women good parenting and offered the possibility of respectable paid work over unemployment after qualification.

Although the group of women tried to disidentify with a view of themselves as working class, and often saw class as of marginal importance in their own lives, Skeggs argues that it is actually fundamental to the way that they lived, and their attempts to distance themselves from a working-class identity made it even more so. Skeggs's account of the lives of a group of women in the north-west of England shows how class is closely interlinked with other forms of identity – in this case, gender.

more deep-rooted historically than class systems; men have superior standing to women even in hunter-gatherer societies, where there are no classes. Yet class divisions are so marked in modern societies that there is no doubt that they 'overlap' substantially with gender inequalities. The material position of most women tends to reflect that of their fathers or husbands; hence, it can be argued that we have to explain gender inequalities mainly in class terms.

Determining women's class position

The view that class inequalities largely govern gender stratification was often an unstated assumption until quite recently. However, feminist critiques and the undeniable changes in women's economic role in many Western societies have broken this issue open for debate.

The 'conventional position' in class analysis was that the paid work of women is relatively insignificant compared to that of men, and that therefore women can be

regarded as being in the same class as their husbands (Goldthorpe 1983). According to Goldthorpe, whose own class scheme was originally predicated on this argument, this is not a view based on an ideology of sexism. On the contrary, it recognizes the subordinate position in which most women find themselves in the labour force. Women are more likely to have part-time jobs than men, and tend to have more intermittent experience of paid employment because they may withdraw for lengthy periods to bear and care for children.



See chapter 20, 'Work and Economic Life', for more about the differences between women and men's working patterns.

Since the majority of women have traditionally been in a position of economic dependence on their husbands, it follows that their class position is most often governed by the husband's class situation.

Goldthorpe's argument has been criticized in several ways. First, in a substantial proportion of households, the income of women is essential to maintaining the family's economic position and mode of life. In these circumstances women's paid employment in some part determines the class position of households. Second, a wife's occupation may sometimes set the standard of the position of the family as a whole. Even where a woman earns less than her husband, her working situation may still be the 'lead' factor in influencing the class of her husband. This could be the case, for instance, if the husband is an unskilled or semi-skilled blue-collar worker and the wife, say, the manager of a shop. Third, where 'cross-class' households exist – in which the work of the husband is in a different category from that of the wife – there may be some purposes for which it is more realistic to treat men and women, even within the same households, as being in different class positions. Fourth, the proportion of households in which women are the sole breadwinners is increasing. The growing numbers of lone mothers and

childless working women are testament to this fact. Such women are by definition the determining influence on the class positions of their own households, except in cases where alimony payments put a woman on the same economic level as her ex-husband (Stanworth 1984; Walby 1986).

Goldthorpe and others have defended the conventional position, yet some important changes have also been incorporated into his scheme. For research purposes, the partner of the higher class can be used to classify a household, whether that person be a man or a woman. Rather than classification based on the 'male breadwinner', household classification is now determined by the 'dominant breadwinner'. Furthermore, class III in Goldthorpe's scheme has been divided into two subcategories to reflect the preponderance of women in low-level white-collar work (see page 445). When the scheme is applied to women, class IIIb (non-manual workers in sales and services) is treated as class VII. This is seen as a more accurate representation of the position of unskilled and semi-skilled women in the labour market.

Beyond the household?

Developing the debate over the assignment of class positions, some authors have suggested that the class position of an individual should be determined without reference to the household. Social class, in other words, would be assessed from occupation independently for each individual, without specific reference to that person's domestic circumstances. This approach was taken, for example, in the work of Gordon Marshall and his colleagues in a study of the class system of the UK (Marshall 1988).

Such a perspective, however, also has its difficulties. It leaves on one side those who are not in paid employment, including not only full-time housewives, but also retired people and the unemployed. The latter two groups can be categorized in terms of the last occupations they held, but this can be problematic if they have not worked for some while. More-

over, it seems potentially very misleading to ignore the household altogether. Whether individuals are single or in a domestic partnership can make a large difference in the opportunities open to them.

The impact of women's employment on class divisions

The entry of women into paid employment has had a significant impact on household incomes. But this impact has been experienced unevenly and may be leading to an accentuation of class divisions between households. A growing number of women are moving into professional and managerial positions and earning high salaries. This is contributing to a polarization between high-income 'dual-earner households', on the one hand, and 'single-earner' or 'no-earner' households on the other.

Research has shown that high-earning women tend to have high-earning partners, and that the wives of men in professional and managerial occupations have higher earnings than other employed female partners. Marriage tends to produce partnerships where both individuals are relatively privileged or disadvantaged in terms of occupational attainment (Bonney 1992).

The impact of such dual-earner partnerships is heightened by the fact that the average childbearing age is rising, particularly among professional women. The growing number of dual-earner childless couples is helping to fuel the widening gap between the highest and lowest paid households.

Social mobility

In studying stratification, we have to consider not only the differences between economic positions or occupations, but also what happens to the individuals who occupy them. The term **social mobility** refers to the movement of individuals and groups between different socio-economic positions. **Vertical mobility** means movement up or down the socio-economic scale.

Those who gain in property, income or status are said to be *upwardly mobile* – like Sir Gulam Noon whose life history was summarized at the start of this chapter – while those who move in the opposite direction are *downwardly mobile*. In modern societies there is also a great deal of lateral mobility, which refers to geographical movement between neighbourhoods, towns or regions. Vertical and **lateral mobility** are often combined. For instance, someone working in a company in one city might be promoted to a higher position in a branch of the firm located in another town, or even in a different country.

There are two ways of studying social mobility. First, we can look at individuals' own careers – how far they move up or down the social scale in the course of their working lives. This is usually called **intragenerational mobility**. Alternatively, we can analyse how far children enter the same type of occupation as their parents or grandparents. Mobility across the generations is called **intergenerational mobility**.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Many people's image of nineteenth-century industrial societies is one of pollution, grimy factories, poor working conditions and mass poverty. In contrast, post-industrial societies are dominated by office-based work, middle-class occupations and information technologies. Explain how it is possible for inequality to be *increasing* in the post-industrial societies, which appear to provide much better working conditions for a majority of their population.

Comparative mobility studies

The amount of vertical mobility in a society is a major index of the degree of its 'openness', indicating how far talented individuals born into lower strata can move up the socio-economic ladder. In this respect,



A high level of social mobility in Britain during the twentieth century means that today's generation can afford luxuries that their grandparents would not have been able to.

social mobility is an important political issue, particularly in states committed to the liberal vision of equality of opportunity for all citizens. How 'open' are the industrialized countries in terms of social mobility?

Studies of social mobility have been carried on over a period of more than 50 years and frequently involve international comparisons. An important early study was conducted by Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan (1967) in America. Their investigation remains the most detailed investigation of social mobility yet carried out in any single country, though like most other studies of mobility, all the subjects were men, which reinforces the point made earlier about the lack of gender balance in this field. Blau and Duncan collected information on a national sample of 20,000 males. They concluded that there was

much vertical mobility in the United States, but that nearly all of this was between occupational positions quite close to one another. 'Long-range' mobility was found to be rare. Although downward movement did occur, both within the careers of individuals and intergenerationally, it was much less common than upward mobility. The reason for this is that white-collar and professional jobs have grown much more rapidly than blue-collar ones, a shift that created openings for sons of blue-collar workers to move into white-collar positions. Blau and Duncan emphasized the importance of education and training on an individual's chances for success. In their view, upward social mobility is generally characteristic of industrial societies as a whole and contributes to social stability and integration.

Perhaps the most celebrated interna-

Global Society 11.2 Is inequality declining in class-based societies?

There is some evidence that, at least until recently, the class systems in mature capitalist societies became increasingly open to movement between classes, thereby reducing the level of inequality. In 1955, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Simon Kuznets proposed a hypothesis that has since been called the Kuznets Curve: a formula showing that inequality increases during the early stages of capitalist development, then declines, and eventually stabilizes at a relatively low level (Kuznets 1955; see figure 11.1).

Studies of European countries, the United States and Canada suggested that inequality peaked in these places before the Second World War, declined through the 1950s and remained roughly the same through the 1970s (Berger 1986; Nielsen 1994). Lowered post-war inequality was due in part to economic expansion in industrial societies, which created opportunities for people at the bottom to move up, and also to government health insurance, welfare and other programmes which aimed at reducing inequality. However, Kuznets's prediction may well turn out to apply only to industrial societies. The emergence of

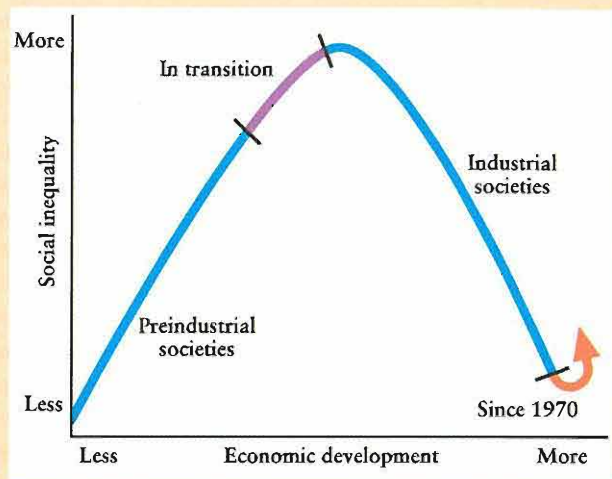


Figure 11.1 The Kuznets Curve

Source: Nielson 1994

post-industrial society has brought with it an increase in inequality in many developed nations since the 1970s (see chapter 12), which calls into question Kuznets's theory.

tional study of social mobility was that carried out by Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix (1959). They analysed data from nine industrialized societies – Britain, France, West Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, Denmark, Italy and the United States, concentrating on mobility of men from blue-collar to white-collar work. Contrary to their expectations, they discovered no evidence that the United States was more open than the European societies. Total vertical mobility across the blue-collar/white-collar line was 30 per cent in the United States, with the other societies varying between 27 and 31 per cent. Lipset and Bendix concluded that all the industrialized countries were experiencing similar changes in respect of the expansion of white-collar jobs. This led to an 'upward surge of mobility' of comparable dimen-

sions in all of them. Others have questioned their findings, arguing that significant differences between countries are found if more attention is given to downward mobility, and if long-range mobility is also brought into consideration (Heath 1981; Grusky and Hauser 1984).

Most studies of social mobility, such as the ones described here, have focused upon 'objective' dimensions of mobility – that is to say, how much mobility exists, in which directions and for what parts of the population. Gordon Marshall and David Firth (1999) took a different approach in their comparative study of social mobility, investigating people's 'subjective' feelings about changing class positions. The authors designed their research in response to what they term 'unsubstantiated speculation' among sociologists about the likely effects

of social mobility on individuals' sense of well-being. While some have argued that social mobility produces a sense of disequilibrium and isolation, others have taken a more optimistic view, suggesting that a gradual process of adaptation to a new class inevitably takes place.

Using survey data from ten countries – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Germany, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, the USA and the UK – Marshall and Firth examined whether class mobility was linked to a heightened sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with aspects of everyday life such as family, community, work, income and politics. On the whole, they found little evidence of an association between respondents' class experiences and their overall life satisfaction. This was as true for individuals who had moved from working-class origins to middle-class positions as it was for those who had been downwardly mobile.

Downward mobility

Although downward mobility is less common than upward mobility, it is still a widespread phenomenon. Downward intragenerational mobility is also common. Mobility of this type is quite often associated with psychological problems and anxieties, where individuals become unable to sustain the lifestyles to which they have become accustomed. Redundancy is another of the main sources of downward mobility. Middle-aged people who lose their jobs, for example, either find it hard to gain new employment at all, or can only obtain work at a lower level of income than before.

Thus far, there have been very few studies of downward mobility in the UK. It is probable, however, that downward mobility, in inter- and intragenerational terms, is on the increase in Britain as it is in the United States. In the USA there have been several studies of the phenomenon. Over the 1980s and early 1990s, for the first time since the Second World War, there was a general downturn in the average real earnings

(earnings after adjusting for inflation) of people in middle-level white-collar jobs in the USA. Thus, even if such jobs continue to expand relative to others, they may not support the lifestyle aspirations they once did.

Corporate restructuring and 'downsizing' are the main reasons why these changes are happening. In the face of increasing global competition, many companies have trimmed their workforces. White-collar as well as full-time blue-collar jobs have been lost, to be replaced by poorly paid, part-time occupations. Studies have shown that in the USA downward mobility is particularly common among divorced or separated women with children. Women who enjoyed a moderately comfortable middle-class way of life when they were married often find themselves living 'hand-to-mouth' after a divorce. In many cases, alimony payments are meagre or non-existent; women attempting to juggle work, childcare and domestic responsibilities find it difficult to make ends meet (Schwarz and Volgy 1992).

Social mobility in Britain

Overall levels of mobility have been extensively studied in Britain over the post-war period and there is a wealth of empirical evidence and research studies on the British case. For this reason, we will look at the UK evidence in this section, though, again, until very recently virtually all this research has concentrated on the experience of men.

One important early study was directed by David Glass (1954). Glass's work analysed intergenerational mobility for a longish period up to the 1950s. His findings correspond to those noted above in respect of international data (around 30 per cent mobility from blue-collar to white-collar jobs). Glass's research was in fact widely drawn on by those making international comparisons. On the whole, he concluded that Britain was not a particularly 'open' society. While a good deal of mobility

occurred, most of this was short range. Upward mobility was much more common than downward mobility, and was mostly concentrated at the middle levels of the class structure. People right at the bottom tended to stay there; almost 50 per cent of sons of workers in professional and managerial jobs were themselves in similar occupations. Glass also found a high degree of 'self-recruitment' of this sort into elite positions within society.

Another important piece of research, known as the Oxford Mobility Study, was carried out by John Goldthorpe and his colleagues, based on the findings from a 1972 survey (Goldthorpe et al. 1980). They sought to investigate how far patterns of social mobility had altered since the time of Glass's work, and concluded that the overall level of mobility of men was in fact higher than in the previous period, with rather more long-range movement being noted. The main reason for this, however, was once again not that the occupational system had become more egalitarian. Rather, the origin of the changes was the continued acceleration in the growth of higher white-collar jobs relative to blue-collar ones. The researchers found that two-thirds of the sons of unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers were themselves in manual occupations. About 30 per cent of professionals and managers were of working-class origins, while some 4 per cent of men in blue-collar work were from professional or managerial backgrounds.

Despite finding evidence of higher rates of absolute social mobility, the Oxford Mobility Study concluded that the relative chances for mobility among different segments of the population in Britain remained highly unequal, and that inequalities of opportunity remained squarely grounded within the class structure.

The original Oxford Mobility Study was updated on the basis of new material collected about ten years later (Goldthorpe and Payne 1986). The major findings of the earlier work were corroborated, but some

further developments were found. The chances of men from blue-collar backgrounds getting professional or managerial jobs, for example, had increased. Once again, this was traced to changes in the occupational structure, producing a reduction of blue-collar occupations relative to higher white-collar jobs.

Marshall et al. produced results in the 1980s which largely corroborated the findings of Goldthorpe and others. In the Essex Mobility Study, the authors found that about a third of people in higher white-collar or professional jobs were from blue-collar backgrounds. Findings such as these demonstrate a substantial amount of fluidity in British society: for many people, it is indeed possible to move up the social hierarchy, in terms of both intragenerational and intergenerational mobility. Yet the scales are still biased against women whose mobility chances are hampered by their over-representation in routine non-manual jobs. The fluid character of modern society derives mostly from its propensity to upgrade occupations. Marshall (1988: 138) and his co-workers concluded: 'More "room at the top" has not been accompanied by great equality in the opportunities to get there.' However, one should bear in mind a point made earlier: mobility is a long-term process, and if the society is becoming more 'open', the full effects will not be seen for a generation.

However, a study by Jo Blanden et al. (2002) at the London School of Economics found a reversal of this process. They compared intergenerational mobility in Britain between two groups, the first all born in March 1958 and the second in April 1970. Even though these groups are only 12 years different in age, the study documented a sharp fall in intergenerational mobility of economic status between them. It was found that the economic status of the group born in 1970 was much more strongly connected to the economic status of their parents than the group born in 1958. The authors suggested that one of the reasons

for the fall in intergenerational mobility from the earlier to the later groups was that the rise in education attainment from the late 1970s onwards benefited children of the wealthy more than children of the less well-off.

In a more recent article, Jackson and Goldthorpe (2007) studied intergenerational social class mobility in the UK by comparing previous and more recent datasets. They found no evidence that intergenerational mobility was falling in an absolute sense, with relative social mobility rates for both men and women remaining fairly constant, but with some indication of a decline in long-range mobility. However, they found a generally less favourable balance between downward and upward mobility emerging for men, which is the product of structural class change. They conclude that there can be no return to the rising rates of upward mobility experienced in the mid-twentieth century.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Is social mobility really important in modern societies? If intergenerational social mobility *has* fallen, does it matter? What social consequences are likely to follow from falling levels of social mobility? What can governments do to promote upward social mobility?

Gender and social mobility

Although so much research into social mobility has focused on men, in recent years more attention has begun to be paid to patterns of mobility among women. At a time when girls are 'outperforming' boys in school and females are outnumbering males in higher education, it is tempting to conclude that long-standing gender inequalities in society may be relaxing their hold. Has the occupational structure become more 'open' to women, or are their mobility chances still guided largely by family and social background?

See chapter 19, 'Education', for a more detailed discussion of higher education.

An important cohort study funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) published as, *Twenty-Something in the 1990s* (Bynner et al. 1997) traced the lives of 9,000 Britons born during the same week in 1970. In 1996, at the age of 26, it was found that for both men and women, family background and class of origin remained powerful influences. The study concluded that the young people who coped best with the transition to adulthood were those who had obtained a better education, postponed children and marriage, and had fathers in professional occupations. Individuals who had come from disadvantaged backgrounds had a greater tendency to remain there.

The study found that, on the whole, women today are experiencing much greater opportunity than their counterparts in the previous generation. Middle-class women have benefited the most from the shifts mentioned above: they were just as likely as their male peers to go to university and to move into well-paid jobs on graduation. This trend towards greater equality was also reflected in women's heightened confidence and sense of self-esteem, compared with a similar cohort of women born just twelve years earlier. As table 11.3 shows, women are now moving into some of the high-status positions in British society, as they are in many other developed countries, though not in particularly large numbers. One way of expressing this change is to suggest that the 'glass ceiling' for women has certainly been cracked, but as yet it has not been completely broken.

Women's chances of entering a good career are improving, but two major obstacles remain. Male managers and employers still discriminate against women applicants. They do so at least partly because of their belief that 'women are not really interested in careers' and they are likely to leave the workforce when they begin a family.

Table 11.3 Percentage of women in Britain's top jobs, 2006

Occupation/role	Female (%)	Occupation / role	Female (%)
MP (House of Commons)	20	High Court judge	7
MSP (Holyrood, Scottish Parliament)	37	FTSE 100 company chief executive officer	1
MEP (Strasbourg, European Parliament)	24	FTSE 100 company director	7
MWA (Cardiff, Welsh Assembly)	50	University professor	14
Local Authority councillor	30	Church of England bishop	0

Source: UK Economic and Social Research Council Factsheet on social mobility, accessed 11 January 2008: www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/facts/index24.aspx

Having children does indeed still have a very substantial effect on the career chances of women. This is less because they are uninterested in a career than because they are often effectively forced to choose between advancement at work and having children. Men are rarely willing to share full responsibility for domestic work and child-care. Although many more women than before are organizing their domestic lives in order to pursue a career, there are still major barriers in their way.

A meritocratic Britain?

Peter Saunders (1990, 1996) has been one of the most vocal critics of the British tradition of social mobility research encompassing studies such as those done by Glass and Goldthorpe. According to Saunders, Britain is a true meritocracy because rewards go naturally to those who are best able to 'perform' and achieve. In his view, ability and effort are the key factors in occupational success, not class background. Saunders uses empirical data from the National Child Development Study to show that children who are bright and hard-working will succeed regardless of the social advantages or disadvantages they may experience. In his estimation, Britain may be an unequal society, but it is a fair one. Such a conclusion may well be a widely held assumption amongst the populations of industrialized nations.

In response to such claims, Richard Breen and John Goldthorpe (1999) criticize Saunders on both theoretical and methodological grounds. They accuse Saunders of introducing biases into his analysis of the survey data, such as excluding respondents who were unemployed. Breen and Goldthorpe provide an alternative analysis of the same data used by Saunders and produce radically different findings, which substantiate their own argument that class barriers are important to social mobility. They conclude that individual merit is certainly a contributing factor in determining individuals' class positions, but that 'class of origin' remains a powerful influence. According to Breen and Goldthorpe, children from disadvantaged backgrounds must show more merit than those who are advantaged to acquire similar class positions.

A more recent international, comparative study of inequality and social mobility by Dan Andrews and Andrew Leigh (2007) also takes issue with Saunders's claims about 'fairness'. Their empirical survey used occupational data on men aged 25–54 in 16 countries around the world (excluding the UK), concentrating on the comparative earnings of fathers and their sons. Their main conclusion was: 'Sons who grew up in more unequal countries in the 1970s were less likely to have experienced social mobility by 1999.' In unequal societies around the world, there is less social

mobility and the movement from 'rags to riches' becomes much more difficult for those social groups who start from the lower positions. Thus, inequality seems to impede 'fair' outcomes (based on ability and effort) and in order to produce a genuine meritocracy, it will also be necessary to reduce inequalities.

Conclusion: the continuing significance of social class

Although the traditional hold of class is most certainly weakening in some ways, particularly in terms of people's identities, class divisions remain at the heart of core economic inequalities in modern societies. Social class continues to exert a great influence on our lives, and class membership is correlated with a variety of inequalities from life expectancy and overall physical health to access to education and well-paid jobs.

Inequalities between the poor and the more affluent have expanded in Britain over

the past three decades. Is growing class inequality a price that has to be paid to secure economic development? Since the 1980s, the pursuit of wealth has been seen as generating economic development because it is a motivating force encouraging innovation and drive. But today many argue that globalization and the deregulation of economic markets are leading to a widening of the gap between rich and poor and a 'hardening' of class inequalities.

Yet it is important to remember that our activities are never completely determined by class divisions: many people do experience social mobility. The entrepreneur Gulam Noon, whose life story we began this chapter with, provides a particularly vivid example of social mobility. The expansion of higher education, the growing accessibility of professional qualifications and the emergence of the Internet and the 'new economy' are all also presenting important new channels for upward mobility. Such developments are further eroding old class and stratification patterns and are contributing to a more fluid social order.

Summary points

1. Social stratification refers to the division of society into layers or strata. When we talk of social stratification, we draw attention to the unequal positions occupied by individuals in society. Analyses of stratification have traditionally been written from a male point of view. This is partly because of the assumption that gender inequalities reflect class differences; this assumption is highly questionable. Gender influences stratification in modern societies to some degree independently of class.
2. Four major types of stratification system can be identified: slavery, caste, estates and class. Whereas the first three depend on legal or religiously sanctioned inequalities, class divisions are not 'officially' recognized, but stem from economic factors affecting the material circumstances of people's lives.
3. The most prominent and influential theories of stratification are those developed by Marx and Weber. Marx placed primary emphasis on class, which he saw as an objectively given characteristic of the economic structure of society. He saw a fundamental split between the owners of capital and the workers who do not own capital. Weber accepted a similar view, but distinguished two other aspects of stratification – status and party. Status refers to the esteem or 'social honour' given to individuals or groups; party refers to the active mobilizing of groups to secure definite ends.
4. Occupation is frequently used as an indicator of social class. Individuals in the same occupation tend to experience similar life chances. Sociologists have traditionally used occupational class schemes to map the class structure of society. Class schemes are valuable for tracing broad class-based

inequalities and patterns, but are limited in other ways. For example, they are difficult to apply to the economically inactive and do not reflect the importance of property-ownership and wealth.

5. Most people in the developed societies are more affluent today than was the case several generations ago, yet wealth remains highly concentrated in a relatively small number of hands. The upper class consists of a small minority of people who have both wealth and power, and the chance of passing on their privileges to the next generation, though the rich are a diverse and changing group with a large number of 'self-made' millionaires.
6. The middle class is composed broadly of those working in white-collar occupations, such as teachers, medical professionals and employees in the service industries. In most industrialized countries, the middle class now encompasses the majority of the population, as professional, managerial and administrative occupations have grown. Members of the middle class generally possess educational credentials or technical qualifications which allow them to sell their mental as well as their physical labour in order to earn a living.
7. The working class is composed of those in blue-collar or manual occupations. The working class shrunk significantly during the twentieth century, with the decline in manufacturing industry, though members of the working class are more affluent than they were 100 years ago.
8. The underclass is said to be a segment of the population that lives in severely disadvantaged conditions at the margins of society. The idea of the underclass was first developed in the United States, and though the notion of the underclass has been applied elsewhere, the concept is perhaps more useful in the US context. Even in the USA, it is a highly controversial concept.
9. Some authors have argued that cultural factors, such as lifestyle and consumption patterns, are important influences on class position, with individual identities now more structured around lifestyle choices than they are around traditional class indicators such as occupation.
10. In the study of social mobility, a distinction is made between intragenerational and intergenerational mobility. The former refers to movement up or down the social scale within an individual's working life. The latter concerns movement across the generations. Social mobility is mostly of limited range. Most people remain close to the level of the families from which they came, although the expansion of white-collar jobs has provided the opportunity for considerable short-range upward mobility. As more women have entered paid employment the glass ceiling has been cracked and women have moved into high status positions, though not in equal numbers to men.

Further reading

A good place to take your studies further is with Wendy Bottero's *Stratification: Social Division and Inequality* (London: Routledge, 2004), which explores social stratification through examples of personal choices and lifestyles. Then, Rosemary Crompton's *Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Polity, 2008) is an excellent book written by an expert in the field, which does exactly what it says in the title.

Moving beyond introductions to current debates, Mike Savage's *Class Analysis and Social Transformation* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000) brings class debates into contact with recent theories of individualization (in the work of Beck and

Giddens), providing a fresh interpretation of the evidence. Similarly innovative is Fiona Devine, Mike Savage, John Scott and Rosemary Crompton's *Rethinking Class: Cultures, Identities and Lifestyles* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), which is an edited collection of chapters focusing on the connections between class analysis and culture.

Christine Zmroczek and Pat Mahony's *Women and Social Class: International Feminist Perspectives* (London: UCL Press, 1999) is a very good edited collection covering the experience of women and class across the world. Finally, Gordon Marshall's *Repositioning Class: Social Inequality in Industrial Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1997) uses evidence from a range of countries to evaluate theories of the 'death of class'.

Internet links

Social Inequality and Classes – many useful links from Sociosite at the University of Amsterdam:

www.sociosite.net/topics/inequality.php#CLASS

Explorations in Social Inequality – lots of resources, mainly American, based at Trinity University, San Antonio, USA:

www.trinity.edu/mkearl/strat.html

Marxists Internet Archive – exactly what it says; all things Marx and Marxism:

www.marxists.org/

The Progress on Nations 2000 Unicef Report – material on global inequalities:

www.unicef.org/pon00/

ESRC Society Today – Factsheets on inequality and social mobility in the UK:

www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/facts/index24.aspx



CHAPTER 12

Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare

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Lisa is a woman of 24 who works at a telephone call centre, providing information and customer service to people who want to make travel arrangements over the telephone. She works long hours, often late into the evening. The people who work alongside her at the call centre are all women. They sit in a large room in long rows, separated from one another by grey partitions. The women speak into telephone headsets while entering and retrieving information from the computer terminals in front of them.

Like many of her co-workers, Lisa is a lone mother. She supports her two small children on her low wages. Most months she receives a small amount from her ex-husband, but it never seems to be enough to cover everything the

children need and sometimes he misses payments. Lisa rarely manages to save money. Three mornings a week she takes on extra work as a cleaner at an office building near her flat. The money she is able to earn from this additional work allows her to pay most of her bills on time, to buy clothes for her children, repay a loan she took out to furnish her flat, and to cover the cost of childcare. Despite working extra hours, Lisa struggles each month to make ends meet. Her prime goal is to save up enough to move herself and her children to a safer, more desirable area.

On the evenings when Lisa works late at the call centre, she rushes from work to fetch her two children from her mother, who cares for them after the nursery closes each afternoon. Lisa is often late because the bus she takes to and from work does not arrive on time. If she is lucky, the children fall back to sleep as soon as she takes them home, but on many nights it is a struggle to get them to bed. By the time the children are asleep, Lisa is too exhausted to do anything but switch on the television. She has little time to shop for food or to cook proper meals, so she and the children eat a lot of frozen foods. She does most of her shopping at the nearest cheap supermarket, but the store is still a bus journey and a difficult walk away with heavy bags, and she is normally exhausted by the time she returns home. She knows that her children would all benefit from a more balanced diet, but there are no shops close by and, in any case, she cannot afford to buy many fresh products.

Lisa worries about spending too much time away from her children, but she does not see any way around her dilemma. After she and her husband divorced, she spent the first 18 months at home with the children, living solely on benefits provided by the government. Although she is struggling to cope with her present situation, she does not want to become dependent on welfare. She hopes that after some years of experience at the call centre, she might be able to rise into a more responsible and better-paid position.

Lisa is British and, as in most industrialized countries, the UK has an established welfare state, which tries to ensure that everyone has enough money to pay for their basic needs, and that no one is forced to live in conditions of absolute poverty. However, as we will see in this chapter, welfare states differ, both in the types of benefits they provide for their citizens and in their underlying philosophies – that is, in what they are trying to achieve. Some look to provide a basic ‘safety-net’, others aim for a wide range of services that are available ‘from the cradle to the grave’ and still others (such as the USA) have a minimal welfare state which links benefits to people’s commitment to work. This is reflected in state welfare expenditure, which is, for example, relatively high in Denmark, Sweden and France and relatively low in South Korea, the USA and Japan. In the UK, government provides extra money to Lisa and other people in a similar position, to help with costs like housing and childcare, and to supplement their incomes. Many national welfare states today continue to be concerned with the alleviation of poverty, though their methods for doing this are not the same. Similarly, welfare provision in some countries is much more comprehensive than in others. But why do people living in some of the richest societies in the world still live in poverty in the twenty-first century?

Many people who encounter someone like Lisa might make certain assumptions about her life. They might conclude that her poverty and low position in society are a result of her natural abilities or a consequence of her own personal upbringing. Others might blame Lisa for not working hard enough to overcome her difficult situation. How does sociology help us to judge which of these views is most accurate? It is the job of sociology to analyse our assumptions and to develop a broader view of our society that can make sense of the experiences of people like Lisa.

In 1994, Carol Walker analysed research into how people living on income support – a

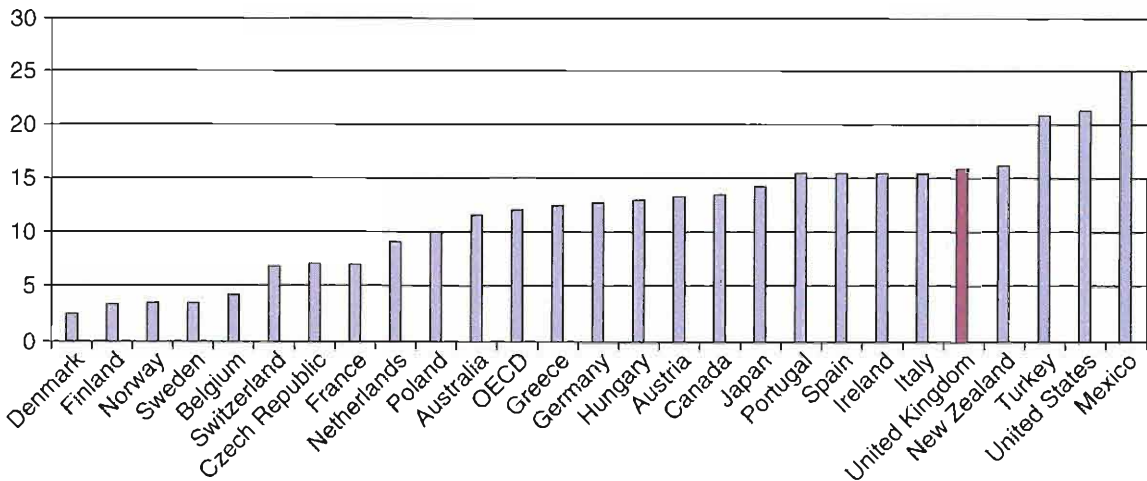


Figure 12.1 Percentage of children living in poverty, OECD countries, 2000

Source: Whiteford and Adema 2007

means-tested benefit for certain groups of people who cannot work full time and do not have enough money to live on – manage to organize their lives. She found a picture very different from that painted by those who argue that living on welfare is an easy option. Of unemployed respondents in one study, 80 per cent had experienced a deterioration in their living standards since living on welfare. For nearly all of them, life became much more of a struggle. Most said they were ‘just getting by’ or ‘getting into difficulties’. In spite of its importance, food is often treated as an item which can be cut back when money is short. For a minority, on the other hand, social assistance can bring improvements in living standards. For instance, when an unemployed person reaches the age of 60, he or she becomes a ‘pensioner claimant’ (Hernandez et al. 2006) and can claim benefits 30 per cent higher than previously obtained. Walker concludes: ‘Despite sensational newspaper headlines, living on social assistance is not an option most people would choose if they were offered a genuine alternative. Most find themselves in that position because of some traumatic event in their lives: loss of a job, loss of a partner or the onset of ill health’ (1994: 9).

Lisa and her children are just one example of the many households in the United Kingdom and other developed countries that exist in conditions of poverty. In 2000, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reported that, along with Italy, Spain, Portugal and the USA, the UK had one of the worst child poverty records in the developed world. The child poverty rate was above 15 per cent in all of these countries (see figure 12.1). Many people might be shocked to learn that wealthy countries like Britain have such a dubious distinction, as more affluent people often have little accurate knowledge about the extent of the poverty in their midst.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Before reading any further, take a few moments to reflect on Lisa’s story as described above. If a relative or friend were to ask you, ‘Why is Lisa poor?’, what answer would you give; what *social* and *individual* factors would form part of your explanation?

In this chapter, we examine the concept and experience of poverty more closely. We

Global Society 12.1 A universal measure of absolute poverty?

A commonly used measure of absolute or 'extreme' poverty today is the number of people who live on less than US\$1 per day. Figure 12.2 shows that, globally, this number has been decreasing since the 1990s in most parts of the world, including East and South Asia. Worldwide, the number of people living in extreme poverty fell from 1.5 billion in 1981 to around 1 billion by 2004. However, in sub-Saharan Africa the reduction has been much lower, and in

2004 more than 40 per cent of people were still trying to live on less than a dollar a day.

The stark contrast in extreme poverty levels between the developed and developing countries is clear from table 12.1, which shows that in the developed countries such as Sweden, Denmark, Britain, the USA, Australia and New Zealand, no one has to try and eke out a living on such a low level of income.

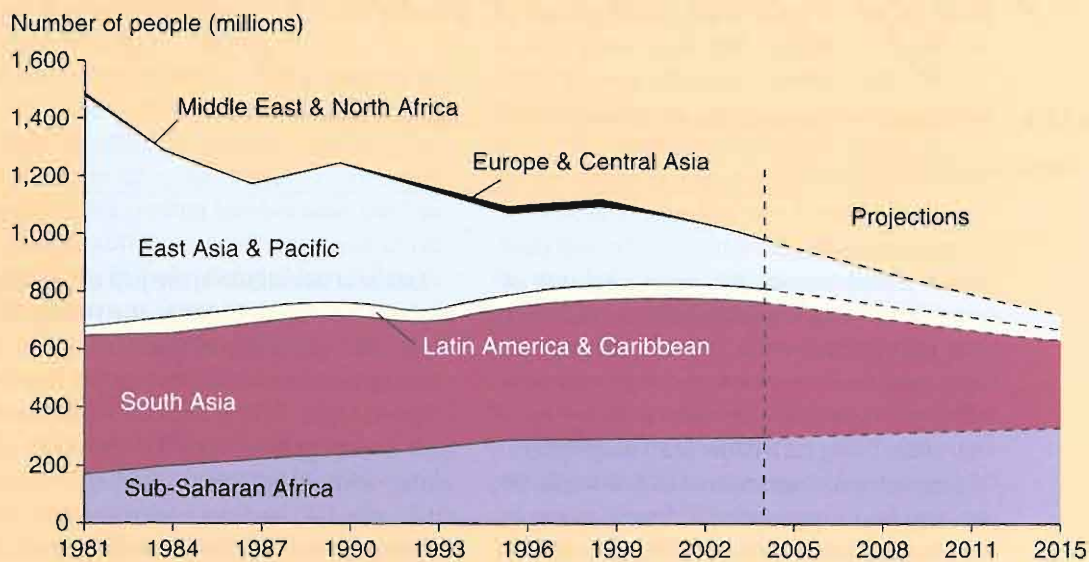


Figure 12.2 Number of people living on less than US\$1 per day, 1981–2004, with projections to 2015

Source: Global Monitoring Report 2007 by World Bank. © 2007 by World Bank. Reproduced with permission of World Bank in the format Textbook via Copyright Clearance Center.

also look at the wider concept of social exclusion. In the final section, we look at how the welfare state has grown in response to poverty, and we examine some of the recent attempts to reform it. This chapter focuses primarily on poverty in the UK and other industrialized countries; in the next chapter, 'Global Inequality', we look at issues of poverty and inequality in a global context.

Poverty

What is poverty?

What is poverty and how should it be defined? Sociologists and researchers have favoured two different approaches to poverty: **absolute poverty** and **relative poverty**. The concept of absolute poverty is grounded in the idea of subsistence – the basic conditions that must be met in order to sustain a physically healthy existence. People who lack these fundamental require-

Table 12.1 Measures of extreme poverty, 2007 (selected countries)

Country	Poverty (ratio living on US\$1 a day)	Share of revenue to the poorest quintile (%)
Australia	0	5.9
Bangladesh	36	9.1
Brazil	7.5	2.8
China	9.9	4.3
Czech Republic	0	10.3
Denmark	0	8.3
Egypt	3.1	8.6
France	0	7.2
Japan	0	10.6
Kenya	22.8	6
New Zealand	0	7.6
Mozambique	36.2	5.4
Namibia	34.9	1.4
Nigeria	70.8	5.1
Norway	0	9.6
Pakistan	17	9.3
Rwanda	60.3	5.3
Sweden	0	9.1
UK	0	6.1
USA	0	5.4

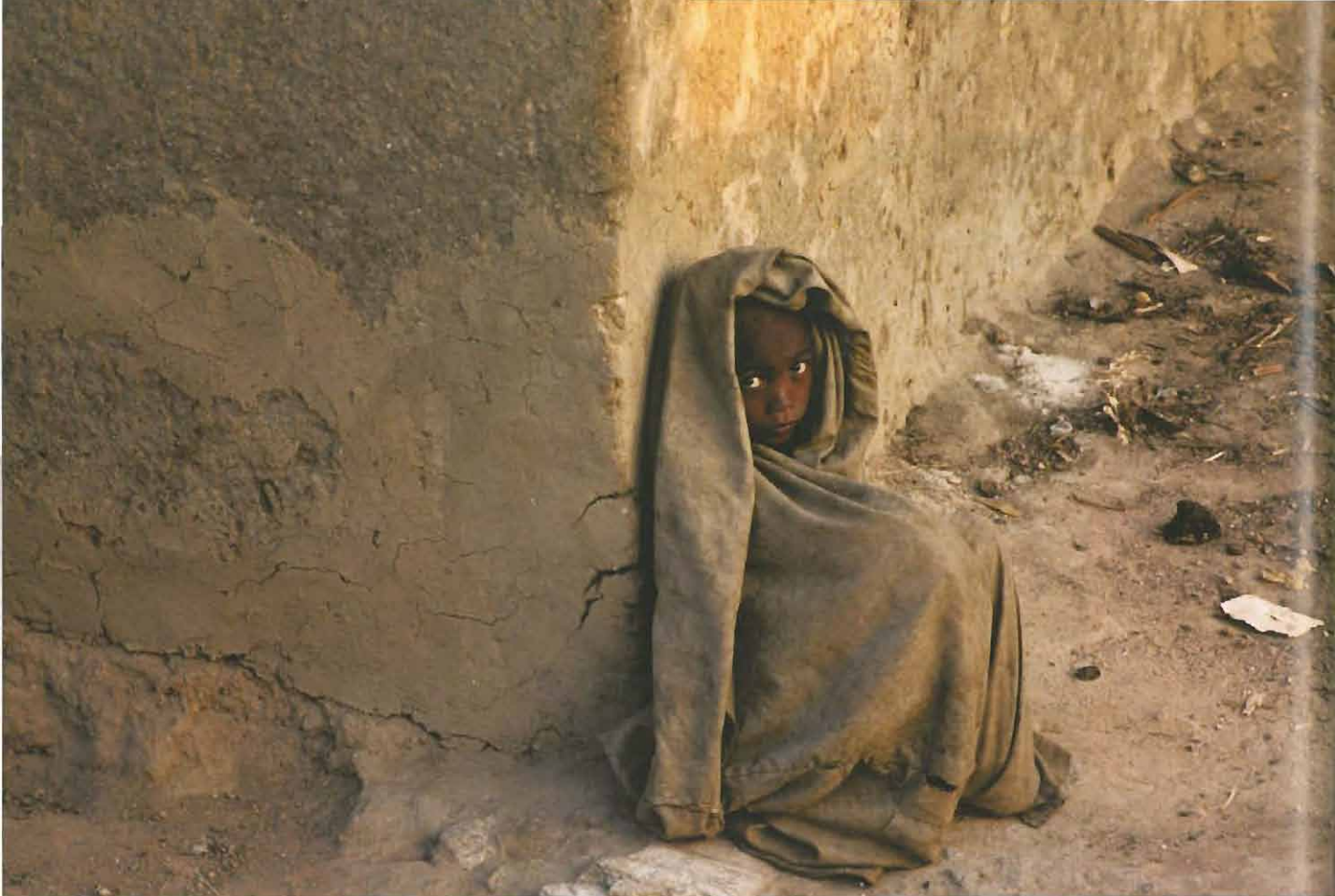
Source: Global Monitoring Report 2007 by World Bank © 2007 by World Bank. Reproduced with permission of World Bank in the format Textbook via Copyright Clearance Center.

ments for human existence – such as sufficient food, shelter and clothing – are said to live in poverty. The concept of absolute poverty is seen as universally applicable. It is held that standards for human subsistence are more or less the same for all people of an equivalent age and physique, regardless of where they live. Any individual, anywhere in the world, can be said to live in poverty if he or she falls below this universal standard.

As table 12.1 shows, many developing countries have large sections of their population living in extreme poverty, more than one-third in Bangladesh, Mozambique and Namibia, for example, and over 60 per cent in Rwanda and 70 per cent in Nigeria.

Clearly, material conditions of life in the developed countries are very different from those in developing countries. However, in terms of inequalities *within* individual countries, the share of national revenue which goes to the bottom fifth is often not so starkly different. For example, in Rwanda, some 5.3 per cent of national revenue goes to the poorest fifth of the population, whereas in the USA the figure is 5.4 per cent (table 12.1). As we will see in the next chapter, 'Global Inequalities', this reveals that chronic inequality still exists within the *developed* countries, in spite of their elimination of extreme poverty.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that many people in the developing world today



Who is poor? This child in a refugee camp . . .

still live and die in conditions of absolute or extreme poverty, whilst in the developed world, many people in relative poverty will suffer more illness and die earlier than those in wealthier social groups.

Not everyone accepts that it is possible to identify such a universal standard of absolute poverty however. It is more appropriate, they argue, to use the concept of relative poverty, which relates poverty to the overall standard of living that prevails in a particular society. Advocates of the concept of relative poverty hold that poverty is culturally defined and should not be measured according to some universal standard of deprivation. It is wrong to assume that human needs are everywhere identical – in fact, they differ both within and across societies. Things that are seen as essential in one society might be regarded as luxuries in another. For example, in most industrialized countries, running water,

flush toilets and the regular consumption of fruit and vegetables are regarded as basic necessities for a healthy life; people who live without them could be said to live in poverty. Yet in many developing societies, such items are not standard among the bulk of the population and it would not make sense to measure poverty according to their presence or absence. Critics of the concept of absolute poverty also point out that its definition has changed over time according to the existing knowledge that is available in particular periods (Howard et al. 2001). In short, therefore, even the definition of absolute poverty is relative.

One common technique used in attempts to measure absolute poverty is to determine a **poverty line**, based on the price of the basic goods needed for human survival in a particular society. Individuals or households whose income falls below the poverty line



... or these children from a dilapidated housing estate?

are said to live in poverty. Yet using a single criterion of poverty can be problematic, because such definitions fail to take into account variations in human needs within and between societies. It is much more expensive, for example, to live in some areas of a country than others; the cost of basic necessities will differ from region to region. As another example, individuals who are engaged in physical labour outdoors are likely to have greater nutritional needs than, say, office workers who spend their days sitting inside. A single criterion of poverty tends to mean that some individuals are assessed as above the poverty line when in fact their income does not even meet their basic subsistence needs.

The concept of relative poverty presents its own complexities, however. One of the main ones is the fact that, as societies develop, so understandings of relative

poverty must also change. As societies become more affluent, standards for relative poverty are gradually adjusted upwards. At one time, for example, refrigerators, central heating and telephones were considered to be luxury goods. Yet in most industrialized societies today, they are seen as necessities for leading a full and active life. Some critics have cautioned that the use of the concept of relative poverty tends to deflect attention away from the fact that even the least affluent members of society are now considerably better off than in earlier times. The question remains of whether 'true' poverty can be said to exist in those relatively wealthy societies, where consumer goods like televisions and washing machines now sit in practically every home. Defenders of relative conceptions of poverty point out that access to consumer goods is valueless if an individ-

ual or group is unable to access more basic goods, such as nutritious food and good healthcare.

To illustrate these debates, the next section examines some of the main methods that have been used to measure poverty in the UK.

Measuring poverty

Official measurements of poverty

In contrast to the position in many other countries, UK governments have not recognized or used an 'official poverty line', instead preferring to use a range of separate indicators. This has meant that researchers in the UK have had to rely on other statistical indicators, such as benefit provision, to measure poverty levels. From the mid-1960s onwards researchers followed Abel-Smith and Townsend (1965) in defining anyone with an income at or below the level of supplementary benefit as living 'in poverty'. Supplementary benefit was a means-tested cash benefit paid by the state to people whose income did not reach a level deemed appropriate by Parliament for subsistence. It was replaced in 1998 by income support.

However, since the 1980s there has existed a European Community standard which measures income inequality, whereby poverty is defined as the number of households living on or below 60 per cent (or in earlier measures 50 per cent) of median income – often referred to as 'Households Below Average Income' (HBAI). On this measure, 78 million people in the 25 countries of the EU, some 17 per cent of the population, were at risk of poverty in 2005. Around 14 million of these were 'working poor' – that is, people in work but whose incomes still fell below the EC poverty standard (Eurostat 2007).

The UK government adopted this measure in 1999, with the publication of *Opportunity for All*, setting out measures for tackling poverty and social exclusion. It is important

to note that this is a measure of relative poverty – as median income levels change, so does the real income poverty level. Under this measure, the number of people living in poverty increased dramatically throughout the 1980s, peaking in 1991/2, before falling back from the mid-1990s onwards. In 2005–6 the Department for Work and Pensions calculated that 10.4 million people were living in poverty according to this measure (see table 12.2), the same number as in 1994–5.

Other organizations use their own set of indicators. For instance, the New Policy Institute (NPI), with support from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, produces indicators for poverty and social exclusion for the UK as a whole, but also for Wales, Scotland, England and Northern Ireland separately. This allows for a deeper and more contextually reliable understanding of the extent and spread of poverty in different regions. The tenth NPI Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion Report in 2007 found that overall poverty levels in 2005–6 were no improvement on 2002–3 and that the child poverty level was still 500,000 higher than that set for 2004–5.

Poverty and relative deprivation

Some researchers argue that official measures, of the kind discussed above, do not give an accurate picture of poverty. Several important studies have been carried out that define poverty as deprivation. One pioneer of this approach is Peter Townsend, whose work since the late 1950s increased public awareness of poverty in the UK (see 'Classic Studies 12.1').

Building on Townsend's definition of poverty as deprivation, Joanna Mack and Stewart Lansley carried out two highly influential studies of relative poverty in Britain, the first in 1983 and a second in 1990 (published, respectively, in 1985 and 1992). For a television programme in 1983 called *Breadline Britain*, Mack and Lansley conducted an opinion poll to determine what people considered to be 'necessities' for an 'acceptable' standard of living. On the

Table 12.2 Number of individuals living below 60% of median income, 1994/5–2005/6, UK

Number of individuals (millions)	Before housing costs		All individuals
	Below median		
	50%	60%	
Contemporary income thresholds			
1994/95	5.4	10.4	55.3
1995/96	5.2	9.9	55.5
1996/97	5.9	10.8	55.6
1997/98	6.0	10.9	55.7
1998/99	6.1	11.2	57.5
1999/00	6.1	11.1	57.7
2000/01	6.1	10.7	57.9
2001/02	5.9	10.7	58.1
2002/03	5.9	10.6	58.3
2003/04	5.8	10.4	58.5
2004/05	5.6	10.0	58.8
2005/06	5.9	10.4	59.1
1998/99–2005/06	–0.2	–0.8	1.6
2004/05–2005/06	0.3	0.4	0.4

Source: Office for National Statistics 2007

basis of these responses, they created a list of 22 basic necessities that more than 50 per cent of respondents considered important for a normal life. They then defined poverty as the condition in which three or more items from that list were lacking.

By asking respondents themselves what they thought to be necessities, Mack and Lansley avoided the criticism directed against Townsend's original survey – namely, that his choice of items for the deprivation index was arbitrary. Mack and Lansley also included a question asking whether items which respondents lacked were a matter of personal choice or necessity. If the respondents answered that it was a matter of choice, then they were not classified as being deprived of that item.

The 1983 survey estimated that there were around 7.5 million people in the UK

living in poverty – around 14 per cent of the population. This was a far lower, but still substantial, figure than that arrived at in Townsend's study. Mack and Lansley then repeated the exercise in 1990 and found a significant *growth* in poverty during the 1980s, with the number of people living in poverty (defined in the 1990 study as a lack of three or more of 26 necessities) as high as 11 million. The number living in severe poverty (a lack of seven or more necessities) rose from 2.6 to 3.5 million.

Drawing on Mack and Lansley's earlier research and that of Peter Townsend (who also contributed to this study), David Gordon and his colleagues carried out a similar survey in 2000, the *Millennium Survey of Poverty and Social Exclusion* (known as the PSE survey). Gordon and his team used a questionnaire to determine

Classic Studies 12.1 Peter Townsend on poverty and deprivation**The research problem**

Sociologists can understand the extent of poverty in society by collating income statistics, but what is it like to experience poverty? What does poverty feel like and how does it affect people's daily lives? How are low incomes juggled to make ends meet and what do people have to go without to do this? Peter Townsend's studies have concentrated on just this issue of people's subjective experience and understanding of poverty, trying to ascertain exactly what poverty means in terms of deprivation. In his classic study, *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (1979), Townsend examined the responses to more than 2,000 questionnaires filled in by households across the UK during the late 1960s. Respondents provided detailed information about their lifestyles, including their living conditions,

eating habits, leisure and civic activities, as well as their income.

Townsend's explanation

From the information collected, Townsend selected 12 items which he found were relevant across the sample population rather than to particular social groups, and calculated the proportion of the population that were deprived of them (results can be seen in table 12.3). Townsend then gave each household a score on a deprivation index – the higher the score, the more deprived the household was. He then compared the position of households on the index to their total income, making allowances for factors such as the number of people in each household, whether the adults were working, the ages of the children and whether any members of the house were disabled. Townsend

Table 12.3 Townsend's deprivation index (1979)

Characteristics	% of the population
1 Has not had a holiday away from home in the past 12 months.	53.6
2 Adults only Has not had a relative or a friend to the home for a meal or snack in the past four weeks.	33.4
3 Adults only Has not been out in the past four weeks to a relative or friend for a meal or snack.	45.1
4 Children only (under 15). Has not had a friend to play or to tea in the past four weeks.	36.3
5 Children only. Did not have a party on last birthday.	56.6
6 Has not had an afternoon or evening out for entertainment in the past two weeks.	47.0
7 Does not have fresh meat (including meals out) as many as four days a week.	19.3
8 Has gone through one or more days in the past fortnight without a cooked meal.	7.0
9 Has not had a cooked breakfast most days of the week.	67.3
10 Household does not have a refrigerator.	45.1
11 Household does not usually have a Sunday joint (three in four times).	25.9
12 Household does not have sole use of four amenities (flush WC; sink or washbasin and cold water tap; fixed bath or shower and gas / electric cooker).	21.4

Source: "Townsend's Deprivation Index" from *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, by Peter Townsend (Penguin, 1979). Copyright © 1979 by Peter Townsend. Reprinted by permission of Penguin Books Ltd.

concluded that his survey had revealed a threshold for levels of income, below which social deprivation rose rapidly. It was these households which Townsend described as suffering from poverty and he calculated that they formed 22.9 per cent of the population, far higher than previous figures had suggested. Based on these findings, he concluded that government rates for means-tested benefits were more than 50 per cent too low, falling well short of the minimum need by a household to participate fully and meaningfully in society. Townsend's study showed that, as household income falls, so families withdraw from taking part in quite ordinary family-type activities: in short, they become 'socially excluded', a concept which is discussed later in the chapter.

Critical points

Although Townsend's approach was highly influential, it was also criticized by some commentators, and one particular criticism stands out. David Piachaud (1987), for example, argued that the items selected by Townsend for his deprivation index have something of an arbitrary quality. He argued: 'It is not clear what

they have to do with poverty, nor how they were selected.' Some of the categories seem to have more to do with social or cultural decisions than with poverty and deprivation. If someone chooses not to eat meat or a cooked breakfast, or decides not to socialize regularly or to holiday away from home, it is not immediately obvious that the person is suffering from poverty.

Contemporary significance

The cultural critique is an important one, but over the long term, Townsend's approach to the study of poverty and deprivation has retained its significance. Indeed, it has formed the basis for several significant sociological studies, which have tried to avoid the cultural criticism levelled against Townsend's original study. The attempt to construct a deprivation index based on specific factors remains valuable in our attempts fully to understand how poverty and deprivation are inextricably linked. Townsend's studies have also been instrumental in moving contemporary debates on poverty towards an appreciation of the underlying processes of social exclusion, which deny full citizenship to people in poverty.

what people considered 'necessities' for an acceptable standard of life in modern Britain. Based on the responses, they created a list of 35 items that more than 50 per cent of respondents considered necessary for a normal life (see table 12.4). Of these, 6 items – a TV, a fridge, beds and bedding for everyone, a washing machine, medicines prescribed by a doctor and a deep freezer/fridge freezer – did not add to the reliability or validity of the study and were dropped from the analysis. Gordon and his colleagues then set a threshold for deprivation, based on an enforced lack of *two or more* necessities combined with a low income.

The PSE survey found that 28 per cent of the sample lacked two or more necessities, although this included some 2 per cent whose incomes were high enough to

suggest they had now risen out of poverty, leaving 26 per cent of the survey population who could be classified as being in relative poverty (see table 12.5).

Because the PSE survey adopted a similar method to that of Mack and Lansley's two studies, the researchers were able to use their data to compare how the level of poverty in the UK had changed over time. Gordon et al. found that the number of households lacking three or more socially perceived necessities (set as the poverty threshold in Mack and Lansley's studies) increased substantially, from 14 per cent in 1983 to 21 per cent by 1990, rising to 24 per cent by 1999. Thus, although the British population as a whole had become much richer since the early 1980s, by 2000, in terms of a lack of necessities, there had also been a dramatic rise in poverty.

Table 12.4 Perception of adult necessities and how many people lack them (% of adult population)

	Items considered:		Items that respondents:	
	Necessary	Not necessary	Don't have, don't want	Don't have, can't afford
Beds and bedding for everyone	95	4	0.2	1
Heating to warm living areas of the home	94	5	0.4	1
Damp-free home	93	6	3	6
Visiting friends or family in hospital	92	7	8	3
Two meals a day	91	9	3	1
Medicines prescribed by doctor	90	9	5	1
Refrigerator	89	11	1	0.1
Fresh fruit and vegetables daily	86	13	7	4
Warm, waterproof coat	85	14	2	4
Replace or repair broken electrical goods	85	14	6	12
Visits to friends or family	84	15	3	2
Celebrations on special occasions such as Christmas	83	16	2	2
Money to keep home in a decent state of decoration	82	17	2	14
Visits to school, e.g. sports day	81	17	33	2
Attending weddings, funerals	80	19	3	3
Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent every other day	79	19	4	3
Insurance of contents of dwelling	79	20	5	8
Hobby or leisure activity	78	20	12	7
Washing machine	76	22	3	1
Collect children from school	75	23	36	2
Telephone	71	28	1	1
Appropriate clothes for job interviews	69	28	13	4
Deep freezer/fridge freezer	68	30	3	2
Carpets in living rooms and bedrooms	67	31	2	3
Regular savings (of £10 per month) for rainy days or retirement	66	32	7	25
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	64	34	4	5
Friends or family round for a meal	64	34	10	6
A small amount of money to spend on self weekly, not on family	59	39	3	13
Television	56	43	1	1
Roast joint/vegetarian equivalent once a week	56	41	11	3

Table 12.4 (continued)

	Items considered:		Items that respondents:	
	Necessary	Not necessary	Don't have, don't want	Don't have, can't afford
Presents for friends/family once a year	56	42	1	3
A holiday away from home once a year	55	43	14	18
Replace worn-out furniture	54	43	6	12
Dictionary	53	44	6	5
An outfit for social occasions	51	46	4	4

Source: From Poverty and Social Exclusion in Britain by David Gordon et al, published in 2000 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Reproduced by permission of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Table 12.5 Results of the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey 2000, UK

Poverty classifications	Percentage (to the nearest whole %)
Poor	26
Vulnerable to poverty	10
Risen out of poverty	2
Not poor	62

Source: Gordon et al. 2000: 18

In a 2006 study commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Guy Palmer and colleagues re-analysed some of the data from Gordon's PSE survey. Combining similar items from the 35 'essential items' scale, they found that the bulk of essential items were directly money-related. That is, the respondents simply did not have enough income to afford to have them (figure 12.3).

Drawing on a Family Resources Survey from 2004–5, the team was then able to compare low-income households with those on average incomes in relation to ten selected essential items (see figure 12.4). Again, significant proportions of low-income households reported that they could not afford these items. Almost 60 per cent could not make savings of £10 or more per month, over 50 per cent could not afford an annual holiday and one-third could not afford to insure their household contents. However, Palmer and his colleagues point out that a

significant minority of households on average incomes reported that they could not afford these items either. The report is therefore critical of the use of such subjectively defined measures, which, it argues, are of limited value in providing a reliable and valid measure of 'real' poverty. For example, if almost one-third of people on average incomes cannot afford to make 'savings of £10 per month or more' and one quarter cannot afford 'holidays away from home one week a year', does that mean that they are also living 'in poverty'? What is needed in addition is information about *why* households cannot afford such items, which would enable us to assess the extent to which the lack of each item is an example of 'enforced poverty' (caused by socio-economic circumstances) or the result of personal choice, where other things take priority.

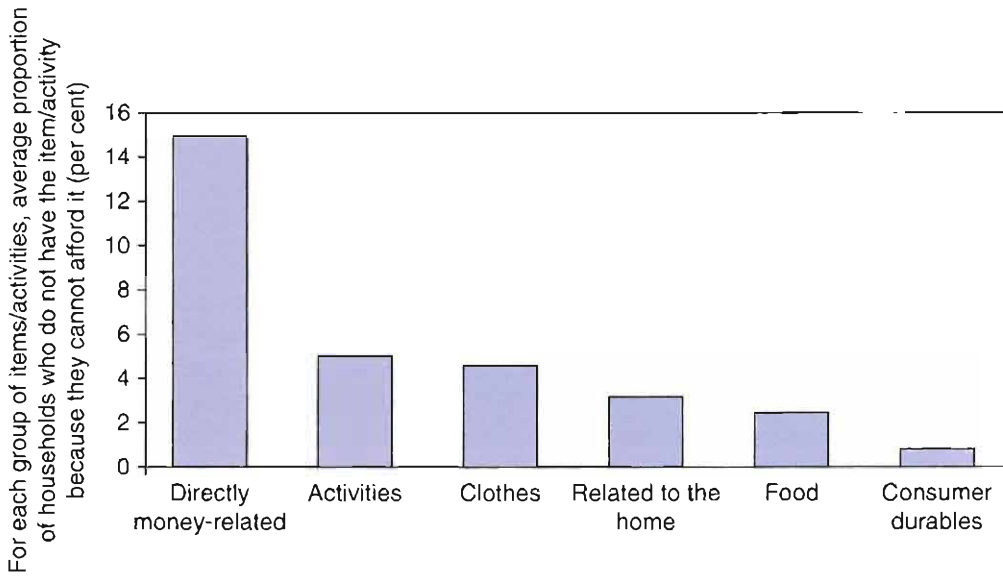


Figure 12.3 Essential items most commonly lacking, by category

Source: Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2006 by Guy Palmer, Tom MacInnes and Peter Kenway, published in 2006 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Reproduced by permission of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

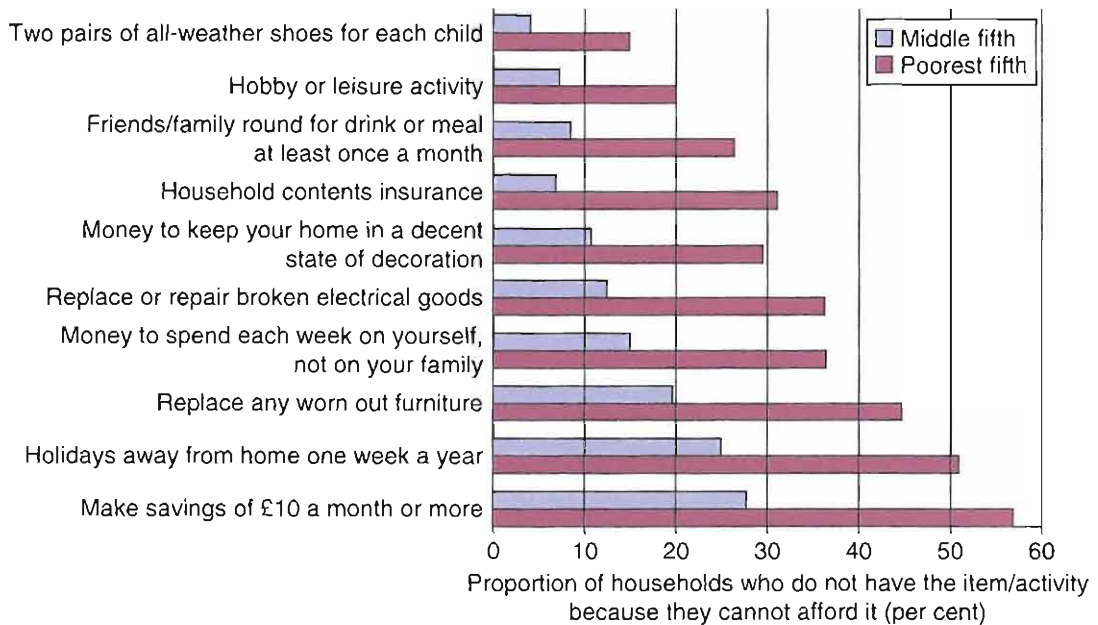


Figure 12.4 Percentage of UK households which cannot afford selected 'essential items', by average and low-income household

Source: Family Resources Survey 2004/05, Department for Work and Pensions, UK.

THINKING CRITICALLY

When society as a whole was becoming wealthier, why did poverty levels increase amongst some groups rather than decrease? Does the concept of 'relative poverty' accurately capture the real-life experiences of people living with disadvantage and deprivation? Can the experience of poverty in the relatively wealthy countries be directly compared with that in the developing world?

Who are the poor?

The face of poverty is diverse and ever changing, so it is difficult to present a profile of 'the poor'. What we do know is that people in some social groups are more likely to be poor than others, including children, older people, women and ethnic minorities. In particular, people who are disadvantaged or discriminated against in other aspects of life have an increased chance of being poor. For example, recent migrants from outside the European Union face higher poverty rates than indigenous European populations. In Belgium, more than half of non-EU citizens live in poverty, as do 45 per cent of those in France and Luxembourg. Not only are migrants more at risk of poverty, but they also face a higher risk of being exploited at work (Lelkes 2007). Although this section focuses primarily on the UK, these patterns are repeated to varying degrees across the developed societies of the world.

» Poverty and inequality in the developing societies is discussed in more detail in chapter 13, 'Global Inequality'.

Children

The proportion of children in the UK living in households with an income below 60 per cent of the national average more than doubled between 1979 and 1996/7, from 14 to 34 per cent, but after 1998 this figure fell to stand at around 27 per cent in 2004/5 (Department for Work and Pensions 2006).

In a variety of ways, children who live in poverty tend to have worse health than those who do not. They are more likely to have a low birth weight, to be injured (and killed) in a road accident (because they are more likely to be pedestrians and less likely to have access to a safe play area or garden), to suffer abuse and self-harm or to attempt suicide. Poorer children are also less likely to do well at school and are far more likely to become poor adults (Lister 2004).

As we will see later in the chapter, child poverty is proving to be much more resistant to the social policies of successive governments, with the latest forecasts strongly suggesting that the UK government has missed its own short-term target and is likely to miss the long-term one as well.

Women

As we see at several points throughout this chapter, women are more likely to be poor than men, although their poverty has often been masked behind studies that focused on 'male-headed households' (Ruspini 2000).

The PSE survey carried out by Gordon and his colleagues (2000) found that women comprised 58 per cent of those adults living in poverty. The causes of women's poverty are complex. One important element concerns the gendered division of labour both inside and outside the home. The burden of domestic labour and the responsibility of caring for children and relatives still fall disproportionately on women. This has an important effect on their ambitions and ability to work outside the home. It means that they are far more likely than men to be in part-time, rather than full-time, paid employment and they earn less as a result. Although more women are entering paid work in the UK than ever before, occupational segregation between 'a man's job' and 'women's work' in the labour force remains entrenched. Women are disproportionately represented in less well-paid industries, which has a negative effect on income from private pensions later in life (Flaherty et al. 2004).

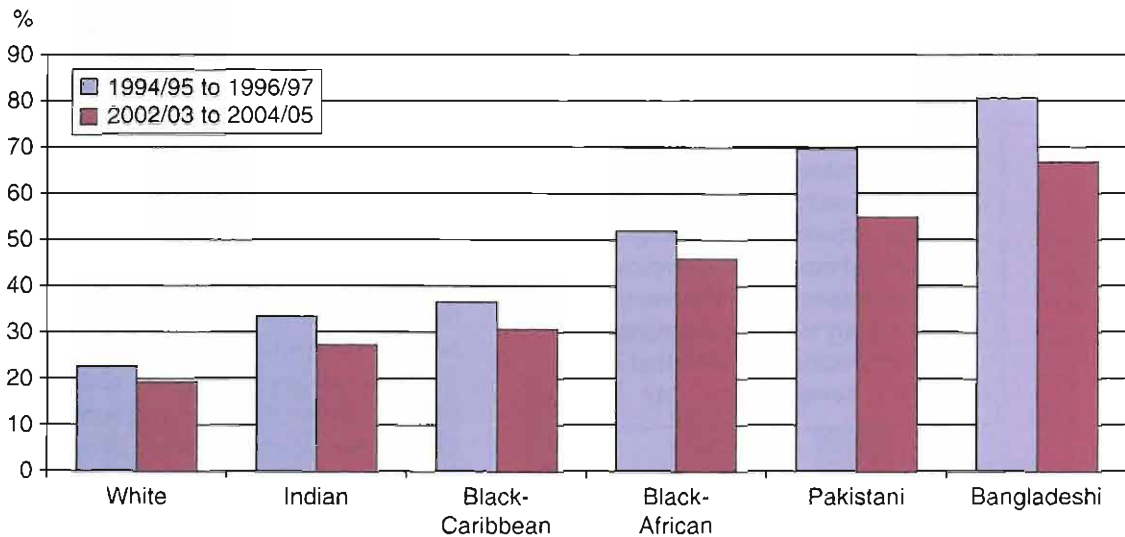


Figure 12.5 Proportion of each group in UK households below 60 per cent median income, after deducting housing costs

Source: From *Poverty Among Ethnic Groups: How and Why Does it Differ?* by Guy Palmer and Peter Kenway, published in 2007 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Reproduced by permission of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Ethnic minorities

Members of ethnic minority groups are also disproportionately represented among the poor. Pakistani and Bangladeshi people, in particular, are far more likely to have an income of less than 60 per cent of the average than individuals of other ethnicities, though income poverty has fallen across all ethnic groups at roughly the same rate over recent years (see figure 12.5). Part of the reason for such ethnic differences in income poverty levels can be found in the high unemployment and low employment rates for all ethnic minorities in the UK.

Employment rates differ substantially across ethnic minority groups. In 2006, Indian and Black Caribbean groups have relatively high employment rates of 70.2 and 67.8 per cent respectively, while Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups have the lowest employment rates among ethnic minorities; 44.2 and 40.2 per cent respectively. In the same year, the unemployment rate for African and Pakistani/Bangladeshi people, for example, was 11.2 per cent compared to an overall rate of 5.2 per cent,

and ethnic minorities are still twice as likely to be unemployed as white people (Ethnic Minority Employment Taskforce 2006). There is also a high degree of labour market segregation. Pakistani groups are heavily concentrated in the former heavy manufacturing and textile industry areas, such as Yorkshire and Birmingham – industries that fell into recession in the late 1970s and 1980s. Black Caribbean men are over-represented in manual occupations, particularly within the transport and communications industries. Chinese and Bangladeshis are particularly concentrated in the catering industry. There is some evidence to show that some occupational segregation has occurred because ethnic minorities perceive certain industries or employers as ‘white’, whereas some employers see ethnic minorities as ‘outside their recruitment pool’ (Performance and Innovation Unit 2002). Ethnic minorities in the UK are also more likely to have poorly paid jobs, struggle at school, live in deprived areas and in poor quality housing and to suffer health problems (Salway et al. 2007).