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Sociology for social work – an overview

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Key themes

- Social work and sociology have a great deal in common.
- Understanding service users requires an understanding of their social context.
- Our lives are shaped and greatly influenced by social and cultural processes.
- The sociological imagination provides a useful tool for understanding society.
- Much of what we encounter in our daily lives is not 'natural' but 'socially constructed'.
- Sociological theories assist in making sense of a very complex world.
- Different theories provide different insights into the same social phenomenon.

Keywords

sociology, social work, social construction, modernity, the Enlightenment, theory, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, feminism, symbolic interactionism, postmodernism

Introduction

Sociology and social work share many affinities, the most obvious one being that both are concerned with society. Sociology as an academic and as an applied discipline seeks to study society, exploring the deeper and inner





mechanisms of certain social phenomena and, more importantly, why they occur. Social work is also concerned with improving society, both for the community as a whole and for individuals who, for whatever reason, have not done so well in life. Both also share an interest in social inequalities: sociology in ascertaining the extent and causes of inequalities, and social work in dealing with the social effects of those inequalities.

This chapter outlines, first, why, sociology is vital for social workers. The simple reason is that sociology can reveal why and how so many of the problems and issues that social workers have to deal with in their daily working lives in regard to their service users occur in the first place. Having such knowledge greatly assists the social worker in working with service users, by identifying the deeper causes of their problems and informing how their needs could be more fully met. Importantly, the focus here is that problems are social and structural, not individual, in origin. Second, this chapter then turns to outlining what sociology is, defining what it seeks to do, and describing how sociology goes about scientifically investigating society. Here, theories and some of the main key concepts of sociology are visited and summarized.

Why is sociology important for social work?

In your social work practice you will spend a great deal of time working one to one with individual service users. As such, they will present you with a host of challenges, issues and problems that you will have to resolve and work through either with them or on their behalf. In professional–service user encounters, the reasons for a service user requiring social work services may appear to lie with that *individual* and the consequences of *their* actions. They perhaps have made certain, possibly questionable, decisions that have led them to act in such a way that has broken the law or caused themselves, or others, harm or problems. Focusing on such an individual interpretation of someone's problems is not surprising since it is just the service user and yourself speaking to each other in a small office, or in their home, for example. What sociology provides you with is the understanding that, for many people, the problems and challenges are not theirs in origin, but rather the causes of these issues are to be found in the *social background in which they live*. The service user may have made certain decisions but these may be in a context not defined or chosen by themselves, where certain options are or are not available to them. Sometimes in these decisions they may have violated certain social norms or laws, but in the context of their lives what they decided to do possessed a certain logic.

Or perhaps you may have a service user who because of ill-health, disability, sexuality or ethnicity experiences difficulties in their day-to-day life. They



may find themselves rejected by others, patronised in conversation, left unable to carry out day-to-day tasks, discriminated against in the job market, or verbally or physically abused in the street. Again, it may be individuals who behave 'badly', who utter the hurtful phrases and engage in prejudicial behaviours, but such actions and activity do not mean that discrimination and inequalities are the result of a few bad individuals. What is more important to understand is how such ideas come into existence in the first place and why such prejudicial and negative views continue to endure in our society.

ACTIVITY

Reflect on the central point in the above paragraphs. How much does the social context influence, limit or assist people in the decisions they make?

For the social worker the greatest insight and benefit that sociology offers is an understanding of the wider processes and deeper structures of society that frame and help shape the lives of their service users and that lie at the heart of the inequalities and oppression that social workers seek to overcome. After all, it is not possible to refer to someone, an individual, without reference to some of the structural aspects such as class, gender or ethnicity that are part of that person's identity. These particular social entities are crucially not the creation of individuals. People themselves do not just spontaneously conjure up ideas of class, gender or ethnicity. Rather society presents us with ideas about and ways of doing class, gender and ethnicity that have been developed and enacted long before we were born. These pre-existing ideas frame and form the social world which we inhabit. They provide the coordinates that indicate what we can do and cannot do, and, critically, enable or inhibit what we can do in life.

The following hypothetical case study may serve to illustrate the above points more clearly.

Let us take two individuals born on the same day but into quite different backgrounds and, for the sake of simplicity, say that they are of equal ability in terms of intelligence and furthermore both enjoy the same levels of good health. One, Alex, was brought up in a peripheral social housing estate that, when it was built in the 1960s, promised a bright future for all those who lived there. Brand new buildings, fully fitted with all the mod-cons of the time and inside toilets, were light years ahead of the run-down inner cities that the estate's planners sought to replace. Over the years, however, the

estate had gone into deep decline brought about by the steady running down of the local car industry and both a national and local lack of investment in social housing. When Alex was born in the 1980s crime and drug misuse were further hastening the decline of the estate. At school he was highly motivated but had begun to notice that no one from his estate seemed to land the dream jobs they had wished for when they were younger. In fact, no one can find work of any real substance. Sure, there was occasional part-time work but nothing that could help to build the foundations for a comfortable, secure, independent family life of your own. Even though work was hard to come by, he consciously avoided slipping into the dangerous drug use that appealed to many of his contemporaries and did his best by picking up whatever employment he could find. One Christmas, however, short of cash, he agreed to help a mate shift some 'second hand' goods in local pubs. It seemed a good idea at the time, not really hurting anyone, and resulting in a quick profit of fifty quid. A no-victim and financially rewarding outcome would have been the case had Alex's first customer not been a plain-clothes policeman. In the middle of a government-backed drive to crack down on petty-crime Alex found himself with a criminal record and a stint doing community service. Suddenly, his life seems even worse.

Our other individual, Alexander, also grew up outside the city, but in a more affluent suburb. Even though his family was not particularly well off he had a comfortable if uneventful childhood, most of which was spent doing quite well at school in the winter and going on holiday in the summer. Since his primary school grades were good his parents bit the financial bullet and decided that for his next level of education Alexander could attend a fee-paying private secondary school. Again, he did well and when he left to attend university he had not just a good raft of qualifications but also some good friends. University passed in what seemed like an instant, and Alexander gained a good First Class degree. It was his friends from school who proved highly useful on graduating. One of them knew of a finance company with which his brother worked that was seeking to recruit good graduates. Alexander applied, dazzled his prospective employers at the interview and secured the job. Suddenly, his life seemed even better.

The above vignette may appear clichéd in certain respects, but unfortunately it contains many truths about the times in which we live. The research of MacDonald et al. (2005), for example, has found that while people living in highly deprived neighbourhoods develop all sorts of interesting and ingenious methods of dealing with poverty (what they term doing 'poor work'), ultimately the combined effects of class and place serve to limit people's horizons as to what is possible and achievable in life. The highly influential work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984), on the other hand,

revealed the power of connections and networking for the social elite in both advancing and maintaining their privileged position in society.

The effects of social structure can operate in some instances quite obliquely. In the case study, as in real life, where one lives, the quality and type of housing one grows up in, are pretty much determined by class. Social structures can also at times operate in a more subtle and less direct manner. In the case study the various choices and options that were available to Alex and Alexander would have seemed quite normal to them and would go unnoticed, most of the time.

DEFINITION

In sociology **structure** or **social structure** refers to enduring patterns of interaction that exist in society. These structures, such as gender, ethnicity and class, in turn shape and mould people's behaviours and interactions with others. The ability of people to make up their own minds and decide on their own course of action is to be found in the concept of **agency**. There is much debate in sociology as to how much power social structures can exert over people and how much power individuals have to control their own lives as they wish.

It should not be read, however, that people are prisoners of some predetermined social 'fate'. Where we begin our lives is undoubtedly shaped by history and the circumstances into which we are born, but people can exert agency that can re-shape and transform their own lives, or even that of the wider society. There are numerous examples where that outcome is evident. What should be appreciated is that, yes, people can exercise free will and make their own decisions but *crucially* the context in which they attempt to do so can either inhibit (as in Alex's case) or enable (as in Alexander's case) the successful enactment of their wishes and desires. So, in theory then, one may be free to do what one wants or desires, but having the opportunities and resources to enable that to happen is quite a different story. Those resources, such as adequate housing, suitable education and being able to pursue a healthy existence, are unevenly distributed across society.

We examined class above, but gender and ethnicity can also play equally decisive roles in outlining the contours and possibilities of people's lives. One point with which to conclude our discussion of structure and its influences on people's lives is that, the research reveals that for the vast majority of people, one's class position, gender and ethnic heritage substantially condition what kind of life they can lead. So, for example:

- Researchers from the Brookings Institution identified that in the United States and United Kingdom it would take six generations given the current trends for family economic advantage bestowed by family background to be levelled out. Basically, if you come from a rich background chances are you will end up rich, with the reverse being true for those born into poorer backgrounds – if you are born poor chances are you will stay poor.
- The Fawcett Foundation has noted that women in the UK still earn on average 17% less per hour than men. Within employment women face both a ‘sticky floor’ and a ‘glass ceiling’: they are stuck in low-paid, insecure employment, while finding it difficult to obtain the promotions they can see their male colleagues achieving.
- People from ethnic minorities in the UK tend to do worse than the white population in both of the above studies. Overall, people from ethnic minorities will be found in the poorest sections of society, with women from ethnic minorities experiencing an even worse hourly pay gap.

ACTIVITY

Once again, reflect on the points raised above. This time reflect on your own life and circumstances. How much of your life has been shaped by society and social processes? Remember that these influences can be very subtle at times.

In addition to providing the social worker with insights into the inner workings of society, sociology can develop what are termed ‘transferable skills’. The workplace of today is highly complex and fluid, requiring a quite different skill-set from previous times. A lack of fixity and surety entails that pre-set procedures for dealing with situations do not always work or are even appropriate. Each situation has to be addressed on its own individual merits. To do so requires skills such as analysis, reasoning and reflection. Student social workers are required to ‘critically reflect on and take responsibility for their actions’ (SiSWE, 2005, p. 19) and, although written some time ago, Donald Schön’s (1983) work on ‘Reflection in Action’ and ‘Reflection on Action’ continues to provide social workers with an important practice model. The awareness of sociological concepts combined with the worker’s awareness of his or her own experience is an inherent part of the process of reflection.

Thinking Sociologically

In his key (1959) work *The Sociological Imagination*, Charles Wright-Mills, the highly influential American sociologist, expressed what we have been

discussing succinctly as ‘private troubles and public issues’: the way in which what we may experience as individual malady and unease (a private trouble) is inextricably bound up in society and the problems that society is facing as a whole (public issues). Even though published more than fifty years ago, his work stands the test of time, providing a succinct commentary on modern life with its ‘earthquakes of change’ and constant personal difficulty and challenge. His work also provides us with a useful approach to the ‘doing’ of sociology and how to begin thinking sociologically. Of prime importance here is to develop what he calls ‘the sociological imagination’. Such a mindset allows us to perceive and understand society in a novel, objective and more productive manner. It requires us perhaps to put aside our own subjective viewpoint of the world and shift between different foci and perspectives, in an attempt to grasp objectively what is going on and to see beyond the private and individual surface world and look at the deeper levels of social structure. As Wright-Mills ably summarized the same point:

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues. (1959, p. 5)

ACTIVITY

Why is it necessary to be objective and put aside one’s own experiences in studying society?

The sociological imagination in a variety of applications is encountered throughout this book. You will discover how sociology makes interesting and challenging claims as to how and why certain social phenomena, such as poverty, sexism and racism for example, come into being. The following key concepts are of use in easing that process. These are important ideas within sociology that can help to clarify and make sense of what can otherwise be quite baffling to comprehend.

Modernity

Being aware of history is vitally important. As highlighted before, social phenomena do not simply occur of their own accord; there is no ‘well, that’s how it is’, or ‘people are just like that’. Everything can be traced to a cause or a series of events that brought it into being. A historical perspective allows us to understand how ways of being and thinking came about, granting us an even deeper level of understanding of why the issues and challenges occurred in the first place. Modernity is our historical epoch, the name attached to the period in which we live. It refers to the society in which we live, the values we hold, the experiences we have, the ideas in our heads and, indeed, to all parts of our lives. As a historical epoch modernity was ushered in by the massive social, intellectual and technological transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, all occurring during the 1700s.

Living in modernity is characterized by the following trends and impulses:

- *Secular* – religion and sacral belief play very minor roles in modernity. Organized religion is in decline in many Western countries with religion no longer being the main way that people will take to explain or understand social and natural phenomena.
- *Rational* – following on from the above, rational logical science and scientific methods are the dominant mode of explanation of both society and the natural world in modernity. Also, life is highly regulated and organized.
- *Industrial* – technology and mass production create the goods that people use in the workplace and in the home.
- *Urban* – the majority of people around the globe live in urban and not rural environments. May 23rd, 2007 (Wimberley et al., 2007) was apparently the day the global urban–rural balance shifted in favour of urban dwelling.
- *The nation-state and citizenship* – people are not subjects of a king or clan chief living in a relatively small principality or fiefdom, for example, but are citizens of substantial nation-states.
- *Fast-changing* – modernity moves at a fast pace. Constant change is a feature of modernity, where traditions and settled ways of living are swept aside by the creation of new forms of interpersonal relationships and technologies.

As a point in history, modernity is unique and very different from previous historical times. Even though it is always inadvisable to indicate an exact date when a historical period begins, modernity can be said to have its roots somewhere in the mid-eighteenth century. That date may appear to be a long time ago, but in historical time it is very recent and really marks the beginning of contemporary history and a society that we would recognize. The early phases of modernity witnessed a dramatic shift

away from the previous historical period of feudalism, a historical period that would be quite unfamiliar to us now. The king or feudal lord dominated society, and the world was understood through religious narratives and doctrines. In fact, religion pervaded all aspects of life, infusing even the most ordinary of acts with religious meaning and ritual. A useful example can be found in the tradition of Plough Monday, held on the first day of work after the Christmas holidays. Work could not begin until the local priest blessed the peasants' ploughs and farming tools. Religion also functioned as the main mode of understanding both people and nature: everything was the result of God's will; divine will was the cause of planets moving, seasons turning and disasters taking place.

As an individual you would also notice other substantial differences in feudal times. For a start you would be a subject not a citizen. Such a status would severely limit the capacity you would have to exercise your free will and act in the way that you wanted. The idea of individuals possessing what we would now term human rights is very much part of modernity and a consequence of the Enlightenment. The French and American revolutions in the late 1700s exemplify the transition from people as subjects without rights to citizens with rights that were inalienable and to be supported by the state. The promise of a better, freer society in which individuals would be able to exercise greater control over their lives and enjoy greater equality was a prime reason why these revolutions enjoyed so much popular support. The French Revolution captured such a desire for a better world with its rallying call of 'liberty, equality and brotherhood'.

Much of social work is concerned with ensuring, if not advancing, the rights of various oppressed, discriminated against and marginalized groups in society. The fact that social workers have to advance an agenda of social justice indicates one further feature of modernity. Even though modernity is built upon highly egalitarian impulses, current society is far from being equal. The idea and notions of equality are there, often enshrined in laws, human rights charters and in the constitutions of nation-states, but unfortunately full equality is far from being fully realized. Various inequalities and examples of oppression are highlighted throughout this text in relation to gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and disability. In fact, one could claim that the majority of people in society experience some form of disadvantage

The reason for the endurance of inequality lies within the social structures and social processes that shape modernity. Throughout this text we shall explore and discuss how social structures and social processes such as class, gender and ethnicity create and maintain inequalities. The power of society and social structures, as we shall see, is an important point for social

workers to grasp; that the problems and issues they encounter in their everyday work are *social* and not individual in origin.

ACTIVITY

The comments on modernity stress the importance of possessing a historical perspective on what happens in society – what have you understood from the above and what is its relevance for social work?

Social Construction

The concept of social construction arises frequently throughout this book and, in itself, constitutes an important sociological insight into what we experience and encounter in society. At its simplest, social construction refers to an element of life that may seem perfectly ‘natural’ and as always having been that way, but actually turns out to be something that has emerged out of social, cultural and historical processes and events. Sociology understands that there is very little in society and in the way that people act and interact that can be attributed to processes and influences outside of society. Actions, perceptions, thoughts and even feelings are all in their own ways framed and shaped by the society in which we live.

An example may be useful to clarify the point being developed here. Childhood, on first inspection, may seem a fairly straightforward and easy-to-explain element of our lives. It is, after all, a special time imbued with images of innocence and naivety. When one takes a long-term historical view of childhood, what has actually constituted childhood has varied considerably over time and where one was in the world. In the early phases of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, for instance, childhood, especially a working-class childhood, was non-existent, or quite different from what we would recognize as childhood today. Children were regarded as economic resources, who were deemed capable of working twelve-hour days, often in quite dangerous and unhealthy circumstances. Their small fingers were useful, for example, for picking loose threads out of early cotton spinning machines while the machinery was working at high speeds. Working with these dangerous machines could, and quite often did, result in lost fingers and limbs. Modern ideas of protecting children from risk did not pertain at all. Indeed, if we turn our attention away from history and examine contemporary global childhoods, we can notice that for many children childhood is a period of work and economic activity. What we in the West

regard as 'childhood' must, therefore, be recognized as being specific to a particular time and place.

ACTIVITY

Besides childhood, can you identify and discuss other examples of everyday taken-for-granted phenomena that are socially constructed?

Inherent in the above discussion is the importance of social context and how what we accept as being 'natural' or 'normal' is related to the society in which we live. The next concept we explore illuminates the process by which people come to accept the norms and values of their particular society.

Socialization

Sociology rejects the view that people are born with a pre-set range of beliefs, behaviours or attitudes that explain all social action. What is striking about humanity is just how much variety there is both across and within different cultures and societies, in addition to notable differences between people across historical time. What would be considered as being perfectly reasonable behaviour in one context may seem utterly alien in another. So, for example, ideas about marriage, sexual behaviour and drinking alcohol will vary by country and culture. Drinking is a useful example. In the United Kingdom the drinking culture emphasizes what can be quite heavy consumption, often in loud bars and clubs, while in Mediterranean cultures drinking is often associated with family meals and moderate consumption, with the emphasis being on the social interaction rather than on drinking as much as possible.

The main point here is that there is nothing automatic about people's behaviour; there are no genes that will make humans act in a predetermined manner. If such processes were at work then we would expect to see much more consistency and similarity between humans across time and across all societies. A very positive message is contained here. By drawing attention to the fluidity or changeability of human behaviour this means that types of behaviour that are oppressive, harmful or negative are not fixed and can be transformed, hopefully for the better. People are, for example, not naturally racist or homophobic, nor are women naturally better at doing the housework than the men in their households.

Socialization is the concept that sociologists use to explain how a person learns to exist as someone within their given society. By indirect and direct

means, as we grow we are exposed to or instructed in what is expected of us and how we should behave by learning and absorbing the various norms and values of our society. So, for example, people will become aware of the norms regarding gender by perhaps observing what activities in the household their parents undertake, or by being directly told that playing with dolls is for girls and skateboarding is for boys.

It is not just in childhood that people are socialized. It is a process that continues throughout life. Think of the position you are occupying at the moment. As a social work student you are not simply being instructed in what it is to be a social worker, you are also being socialized into *being* a social worker. Almost subconsciously you will adopt values and ways of acting that may or may not be quite different from how you are now, changing both yourself and how you view others.

Theory

Theory is an important element within the sociological imagination. Trying to understand and make sense of what can be highly complex social situations can be extremely challenging. The vast array of information, data and research concerning what sociologists study is partly responsible for the complexity. For example, Figure 1.1 outlines the rise in poverty since 1979. On examination, the graph provides some very useful information. A clear rise in poverty from 1979 onwards is evident, as is the current number of people who are deemed to be in poverty using a certain measure. These statistics are in themselves highly fascinating, providing illuminating information about a contemporary social malaise. They do not, however, inform us about why that has occurred. Nor do they tell us why poverty exists in the first place. On the one hand statistics are ideal for informing us about something of the surface of the social world, about the various patterns and trends that exist, but on the other they are limited in explaining why these patterns and trends exist in the first place. This is where social theory comes in useful. Theory explains *why* certain events and trends occur and assist us in achieving a deeper level of understanding of those events and trends.

One point has to be made concerning sociology and theory. There is no single over-arching 'master theory' to which all sociologists will subscribe and refer to in their work. Sociology is a broad church, welcoming in a variety of voices and perspectives, most of which do not agree with each other. Reading through any sociology journal, such as *Sociology* or *The British Journal of Sociology*, reveals many divergent perspectives. The vigorous debates and disagreement generated in the aforementioned journals actually assist in

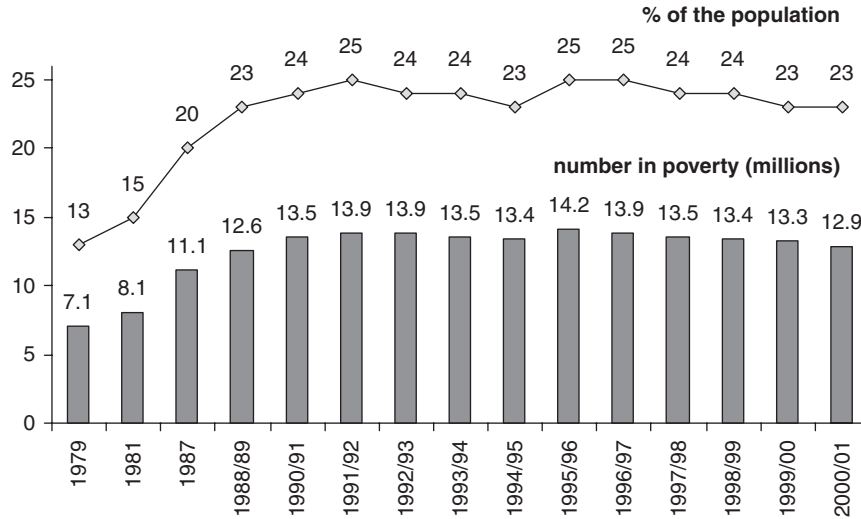


Figure 1.1 The number of households below 60 per cent median income (after housing costs and including self-employed); 1979–2000/01; UK

Source: Scottish Poverty Information Unit, 2002

stimulating further research and allow us to sharpen and to hone the conclusions and analyses that sociologists advance about contemporary society.

The main theories that sociologists rely on and that have been prominent within sociology are outlined next. The classic founding figures of sociology, Marx, Weber and Durkheim, are treated first before moving onto the more contemporary theories of symbolic interactionism, feminism and postmodernism.

ACTIVITY

Read the following theoretical perspectives and as you do so try to identify how they may assist you as a social worker.

Marx and Marxism

Strictly speaking, Karl Marx (1818–1883) was not a sociologist, and definitely not an academic sociologist with a chair and tenure in a university like Durkheim and Weber, who will be discussed next. He was a political activist and philosopher who dedicated his life both to attempting to understand

and to change what he regarded as the unjust and exploitative capitalist society he witnessed emerging in nineteenth-century Europe. In attempting to do so, his works contained many sociological insights into capitalist society. In particular, Marx devoted much of his time and energy to exploring how exploitation and inequalities were built into the structures of capitalist society and the emotional consequences of such inequalities for people in their everyday lives. Marx viewed capitalism overall as being deeply flawed, in that it can create so much unhappiness and misery in the world while simultaneously possessing the resources to end all social problems and to create a society that is free of want and deprivation.

Constant and enduring inequalities are core and defining features of capitalist societies. A particular form of class structure is responsible for generating and perpetuating inequality. It rests on the existence of two opposing classes. The ruling class (or bourgeoisie) are a small elite core in society who possess the capacity to exercise a great deal of power over the rest of society. The type of people Marx would be referring to here are not the land-owning heirs to the feudal lords nor members of the gentry, but rather people who own or run substantial companies, or organizations.

DEFINITIONS

The **ruling or executive class (bourgeoisie)** are the people who own or run large companies or organizations. Their class position allows them to exercise considerable power that possesses the ability to alter and change the lives both of people in their companies or organizations, and in the wider society. The **working class (proletariat)** are those who work for employers in order to have some form of socially relative standard of living. They have little individual power but much greater collective power.

The key criterion to be included in the ruling class is ownership of what Marx termed 'the means of production'. i.e., possessing the ability to control what happens in their company and organization, issuing instructions and making policy. This power can be considerable. An example here would be Sir Fred Goodwin, the former Chief Executive Officer of the Royal Bank of Scotland. He had the power to decide high-risk deals that ultimately affected the lives of millions of people during what has become known as the 'credit crunch'.

The working class (or proletariat) is basically everyone else. As a class the working class includes a wide range of people and does not merely refer to manual or unskilled labourers. These are people who work in the companies

and organizations mentioned above and who comply and follow the commands (albeit reluctantly) of the bourgeoisie. The reasons for this are to be found in another feature of capitalist society. Considerable compulsion exists to work for a wage as there are very few, if any, opportunities anywhere to have a reasonable standard of living by any other means. By taking up working for a wage or salary one effectively surrenders control over a considerable part of one's life.

ACTIVITY

How much control do people have in their workplace? Are there differences by occupation?

The inequalities that Marx concentrated on flow from the basic logic that, for the ruling class to continue to maintain their social position and the profitability of their companies or organizations, those who work for them must be paid at a much lower level, with as much labour as possible demanded of them during the working day. As Green (2001) has identified, for example, the working day for most people has steadily intensified since the 1970s.

Marx was also concerned with the emotional and psychological consequences of living in an unjust and unequal society. His theory of alienation talks to the pain and suffering that arises out of having little control over the day-to-day running of one's life, whether in the workplace or in the wider society. Instead of working, for example, being an activity that leads to self-fulfilment and self-realization, it results in tedium, depression, ill-health and frustration. These emotions in turn can lead individuals into engaging in acts that are harmful to themselves and others.

ACTIVITY

In what ways could Marx's theory of alienation assist us in understanding the circumstances of social work service users and service users?

Overall, Marx and Marxism identified that our society is one riven by power imbalances and inequalities. The cause of those disparities in wealth and power emerges from the existence of a class system that privileges one small elite core over a larger mass of people.

Durkheim and Functionalism

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was the first university-based sociologist. His life's work was devoted to establishing sociology as an independent discipline in its own right, and to raising it above being regarded as a mere derivative of the more established disciplines of social philosophy, economics and psychology. Durkheim's vision of the purpose of sociology was one that was deeply shaped by the tumultuous times (chiefly, the considerable political upheaval following the defeat of his native France in the 1870 Franco-Prussian war) in which he lived. As such, he was underpinned by one over-riding and highly practical aim: namely, to develop a specific set of scientific tools whose function and application were to maintain and regulate the healthy state of the 'social body' during the potentially traumatic period of transition from traditional life to modernity.

In his studies of society he observed that certain patterns of behaviour and ways of acting were replicated again-and-again and by different people. These patterns of behaviour also endured over time. Society for Durkheim was also therefore not just the sum total of the random actions of people, but was something rather more structured and organized. Society seemed to be comprised of phenomena that made society function and each phenomenon required the existence of other systemic parts for itself to exist.

As such, much of Durkheim's focus was on how society functioned. Indeed, his sociology and that of his followers was referred to as 'functionalism'. Society for Durkheim was akin to a human body where each organ would perform a particular role (more of which later) in keeping the overall organism alive. The heart, for example, pumps the blood, while the lungs supply oxygen and so on. In society each institution and each person also performs a role that enables society to function much in the same way that the heart, lungs and other organs keep the body alive. Key to the functionalist perspective is the concept of 'role'. A role requires either a person or institution to act in certain ways. So, for example, the 'student role' requires that a person attends lectures, diligently takes notes and studies late into the night, while the 'lecturer role' requires someone else to provide knowledge, in addition to guidance and support, to assist people with learning. With both people acting out their roles the social institution of education takes place.

ACTIVITY

From a functionalist perspective, outline what a social worker role would be and what a service user role would be.

The identification of such patterns allows for a study of society. So, if a heart may be a 'biological fact', which can be studied and examined by biologists, then being a student is a 'social fact', which is open to investigation by sociologists. Durkheim referred to these phenomena as 'social facts'. Social facts are those aspects of our own individual 'mental existence' that affect and shape us, but that at the same time are independent of our individual lives and thus cannot be said to 'belong to us'. The institution of the family, language, religious beliefs and professional careers (such as being a social worker) all stand as examples of social facts.

Overall, Durkheim stressed that society is, and should be, essentially stable and functional. Each of us fulfils a variety of social roles that can assist in the smooth running of society. The existence of these roles can be studied as if they are 'social facts', making the study of society, and hence sociology, possible.

Weber and Social Action Theory

Max Weber's (1864–1920) thought was grounded in the view that the study of social life must take as its starting point real individual social actors *first and foremost* and not 'objective' social structures, a notion he referred to as 'methodological individualism'. Such a view represents a very clear and influential departure from the types of impersonal and abstract 'structural' thinking which Durkheim and Marx favoured. In fact, Weber disliked the theories of Marx and Durkheim as for him, they overestimated or exaggerated the extent to which social structures are something that has an independent existence and reality outside of the people who create them. For Weber, focusing so greatly on social structure was a very mistaken understanding of society. Instead, he sought to understand the motives behind people's behaviour. To do so, different forms of action in which people engage were identified by Weber and he used them as ways of trying to work out why people act as they do. The main forms of action are summarized below:

1. *Instrumental rational action* – the actions and motives of an individual are based on cold, clear, hard-headed logic concerning the realization of precise goals or outcomes by the most effective and efficient means possible.
2. *Value-rational action* – as a form of action, value-relational action relates more to expressing social and cultural values than it does to the strict, cold, rational logic expressed in the first form of action. Hence, the rationality can only be understood as being rational by reference to a system of religious belief, for example. Most religious activity is not in itself inherently rational but can be seen to be rational in the context of the norms and culture of that religion. So, for example, one may

want a war to be avoided. Logically, it may make sense to write to an MP or to join an anti-war movement, but for a religiously motivated person it may make more sense to pray.

3. *Traditional action* – action is prompted here by the demands and impulses of tradition. Little thought or reflection is given to why one engages in a particular course of action beyond acknowledging that is how a particular action has always been done and so that is how it shall remain.
4. *Affectual action* – action is prompted by emotions with no recourse to any of the forms of action mentioned here. Cold logic, values or tradition are replaced by the immediate feelings (anger, sadness, love and so forth) that someone may be experiencing.

ACTIVITY

How may the above forms of action as put forward by Weber can help you as a social worker understand the motives and actions of a service user or service users?

Weber's criticisms about the tendency to prioritize the existence of society and social structures above the individual did not stop here. In what was arguably his most important contribution to sociology, the notion of *verstehen* (or 'understanding' when translated from the German), Weber argued that the proper study of social life comprised the interpretation of individual social actions and the beliefs and ideas that would motivate people to act in the ways they do. Indeed, it is essentially Weber's approach to studying social life that underpins what is referred to as 'action theory', which seeks to explore and understand the 'actions' of people in society.

ACTIVITY

Why is it important to have an understanding of what motivates people to act in certain ways and how they interpret the world around them?

Weber was also concerned with how the increasing emphasis in modernity on cold, hard logic and rational action created not a happy world but instead one of increasing rigidity and conformity. In effect, life in modernity becomes 'disenchanted', losing its vibrancy and spontaneity. The central metaphor Weber advanced to capture what he thought of modernity was that it was akin to an 'iron cage', all very structured and orderly, but at

the same time restrictive and constraining. Large and powerful bureaucracies exemplify the over-rational impulses of modernity that help to create the cold and unrewarding life to which Weber alludes. Many aspects of our contemporary lives are shaped by and dependent on such bureaucracies, whether they are found in the public or private sector. As a social worker you will be involved in the substantial bureaucracy of the welfare state, the various structures of which will at times be able to provide substantial resources that will drastically improve the lives of the people with whom you work. At other times its quite labyrinthine structures will frustrate and impede your attempts to do as you think best and will potentially alienate service users who may be overwhelmed by what can appear as a cold, uncaring and impersonal system.

Overall, Weber draws attention to the importance of understanding the actions, motives and interpretations of people in order to understand society. The various forms of action he identified provide a useful way of doing so. One form of action though, for Weber, could produce quite negative outcomes. The prominence of rational action in society can make all life just too ordered and too controlled, leading to it becoming disenchanted and restricted.

Feminism

There is one immediately noticeable feature concerning the theorists that we have reviewed so far: they are all men (in addition to all being white and all now dead!). During the 1960s and 1970s, and influenced by events taking place in the wider society, it became clear that sociology did not pay sufficient attention to gender issues. In response to the shortcomings of 'malestream' (that is male-biased mainstream) sociology, feminism, which was at that time more of a political movement as opposed to an academic concern, became part of the discipline, bringing with it a specific focus on the private sphere of everyday life, particularly the family, and, of course, the unequal power relations between men and women. The feminist perspective has therefore acted as an important challenge and corrective to malestream sociology. Feminists argued that male sociologists were often gender-blind in their approach and had a vested interest as men in not exploring gender inequalities since they were the beneficiaries of women being oppressed in the home and workplace.

The theory of patriarchy was one of the many significant contributions that feminism brought to sociology. The theory of patriarchy makes claims that all parts of society are organized and constructed for the benefit of men, who have greater resources of power and control in all fields over

women. British sociologist Sylvia Walby, in her earlier (1990) work, mapped out how patriarchy operated and endured in society. She noted that while the situation between men and women was in no way fixed, with no inevitability that women will always occupy a subordinate position compared to men in society, the various gains won by the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s had by no means fully realized gender equality. The reason for the incomplete realization of feminist goals was that patriarchy influenced many aspects and spheres of men and women's lives. Sources of male domination were also multiple and responsive to change, making it harder for a thorough transformation in gender relations to occur.

ACTIVITY

Feminism as both a movement and an academic pursuit has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s. Discuss whether or not you believe that women and men are now equal in both the public and private spheres of social life.

DEFINITION

The feminist concept of **patriarchy** refers to the male domination of society where all spheres and areas of social life are constructed for the benefit of men rather than women.

Walby identifies how patriarchy functions in the following spheres of life:

1. *Paid employment* – as indicated earlier in this chapter, women experience a much poorer working environment than men. On average, women are paid less than men and are clustered in low-paid service employment, and are more likely than men to find their chances of mobility impaired by being caught between the 'glass ceilings' and 'sticky floors' of the contemporary workplace.
2. *Household production* – men and the State benefit from many forms of unpaid labour that women perform in the household by running the family home, looking after children and being the prime carer for older, disabled and ill family members. The domestic division of labour remains in men's favour.
3. *Culture* – despite shifts in traditional cultural stereotypes concerning gender roles, women are culturally presented, particularly in relation to pornography and wider media representations, in a way that accords with dominant male desires and interests.

4. *Sexuality* – a double-standard exists where sexual activity and conduct that is acceptable for men is regarded as being unacceptable for women. This discriminatory contradiction is further reinforced by the presence of hegemonic sexuality that claims primacy over other forms (i.e. lesbian) of sexuality.
5. *Violence* – even though laws exist that seek to punish and limit male violence they are neither extensive nor effective enough to consistently challenge the enduring patterns of male violence that exist in society.
6. *State* – the State is not gender-neutral but perpetuates male dominance in society. While some redress to gender inequalities has been advanced by the State these measures do not go far enough, and, while opening up new opportunities for women in the public sphere, they do not adequately address the barriers and discrimination that women encounter.

Greater detail on gender issues can be found in Chapter 3.

Overall, feminism draws much-needed attention to the importance of gender relations and the power imbalances between men and women. From the work of Walby and others, patriarchy (male dominance) is seen to operate, sometimes quite subtly, on different levels throughout society, therefore making it hard to tackle and to bring about equality between the sexes.

Symbolic Interactionism

The above theories, especially those of Durkheim and Marx, all deal with large-scale observations of society and understandings of the deeper levels of society. Focusing on large-scale issues in sociology is termed ‘macro-sociology’ and is quite different from the ‘micro-sociology’ that focuses on the small-scale interactions between people and how people rehearse and present their identity to others. In effect, the micro-sociological approach is the reverse of the large-scale theories, by understanding society as emerging from the small, day-to-day interactions of individual people as opposed to emerging from large, impersonal social structures.

The ‘symbolic’ in symbolic interactionism refers to a wide variety of objects, actions and sounds, or symbols, which convey some form of meaning. Anything can count as a symbol so long as it refers to something else and conveys some form of meaning. Gestures, clothes, titles, actions, words and images are all examples. When people wear a certain item of clothing, to extend one of the above examples, they do so with the intention of communicating something about their identity and sense of who they are. Using clothes in a symbolic manner applies to everyone; the disaffected

youth who pulls on a hoodie is symbolically using clothing just as much as the mainstream businessman who presents himself in a smart designer suit. In many respects the use of costume and other props is not dissimilar to an actor portraying a character on a stage, and that is why symbolic interactionism is sometimes referred to as being 'dramaturgical', in that the social world is akin to a stage on which people act out who they are. This theatrical analogy provides a useful route into understanding symbolic interactionism. Essentially people in their everyday lives (or social actors to use the preferred symbolic interactionist term to denote people) perform who they are, or rather, perform who they would like to be.

ACTIVITY

Provide examples of symbols that you use to convey your sense of self. Remember that symbols can be any item, gesture or act that is meaningful both to yourself and to others.

A certain fragility and fluidity can be found in the daily presentation of self. For one leading proponent of the symbolic interactionist approach, Erving Goffman (1968), social actors have to be careful about the information and symbols they use to communicate their sense of self and identity. In some instances, for certain people an event or aspect of self in their past or present may result in them being excluded from full social acceptance. They may possess what Goffman terms a 'stigma' and therefore run the risk of becoming stigmatized. A stigma may be anything from a bodily difference to a criminal record, drug use, or any number of other ways of being that can be regarded as being socially problematic. Consequently people may have to devise what are sometimes quite elaborate techniques that will either obscure or hide what may potentially be causing them problems.

ACTIVITY

How could possessing a stigma affect a service user or service users? What steps could you take to support them?

More detail on stigma and social work is outlined in Chapter 9.

Overall, the symbolic interactionist approach assists in understanding the small-scale, everyday interactions of people and how people construct and present who they are to others. It also provides insights into how aspects of the self can be viewed negatively by society and the routines that someone may have to develop in order to be socially accepted.

Postmodernism

In the past twenty years or so the terms 'postmodern' and 'postmodernity' have established themselves as important, if not contested, concepts in trying to understand modern life. As has often been remarked, perhaps the best way to think about and define what is meant by the term 'postmodernity' is to think about it in direct relation to its predecessor, 'modernity'. Modernity, as we outlined earlier in this chapter, is the term used to denote the period in the West from the time of the Industrial Revolution onwards whereby society is characterized by increased 'rationality' – faith in scientific reason – 'social structural differentiation' – the division of society into complex and smaller parts – and social 'order' and 'certainty' – the highly predictable nature of Western societies, and the ordered 'roles' and 'identities' of the individuals therein. Postmodernity, then, is intended to denote a completely different type of society from that of its modern predecessor.

On this view, postmodern society is one that has moved beyond the boundaries of modern society, such that in place of the modern emphasis on 'stasis' postmodernists emphasize 'movement' and 'flux', in place of 'design' there is now 'chance', where there was 'determinacy' there is 'indeterminacy', and lastly, where there was certainty 'uncertainty' now prevails.

Several implications follow on from the postmodernist rejection of certainty. First, it means that the idea of a fixed, one-size-fits-all solution to social problems is to be rejected. The evidence is multiple of the failures of big-scale attempts to create a better society. The Holocaust and the brutalities of Soviet-era communism can be cited as examples. Instead, for postmodernists many viewpoints should be welcomed and respected, with no one perspective being privileged over another. All is equal. Second, by claiming that no ultimate truth exists, for postmodernists it is better to see ideas, in particular so-called expert ideas, concerning a social phenomenon as being a particular 'discourse', or a way of talking about something. Some discourses can be more dominant than others, however, and will maintain that dominance by excluding and dismissing other discourses. This is not because those discourses inherently contain 'the truth' but rather because they are advanced by powerful groups within society in order to protect their own position.

ACTIVITY

Postmodernists urge us to accept all viewpoints as being of equal merit. Can you identify instances where according the same validity to all perspectives could be highly positive and other times when it could be problematic?

One leading figure associated with postmodernism is Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Though he himself never liked being described as a postmodernist, many of his ideas and writings influenced other writers and academics who subscribed to postmodernism. One of his key ideas was in relation to power. Unlike Marxists, who see power as being exclusively held by the ruling class, and certain feminists, who identify power as being in the hands of men, Foucault claimed that power was diffused and spread out through society and that power was an entity that one could exercise and not just merely possess. So, for example, as a social worker you may not have as much power as other people in society but you will be able to exercise considerable power over service users. Your gate-keeping role to services and resources is one example of this power, where your decisions can have a substantial effect on the lives of your service users.

Overall, postmodernism makes us think about what is true and sceptical about taking the words of experts as being intrinsically true or correct, and reminds us of the validity of different viewpoints. How power is diffused throughout society is another lesson that postmodernists provide; power is not always held just by large bodies or organizations but rather can spread out throughout society, with people being able to exercise power in different contexts.

How to use this book

The power of society to shape, mould and influence our lives has been a central theme throughout this chapter. It is to the social and to society that we must look if we are to understand and comprehend fully the wider processes that frame and contextualize the problems of service users and minority groups. The discipline of sociology is the tool, the technique and the method that make the many complexities of society intelligible and open to investigation. The main processes and structures of society are dealt with next.

You will find each chapter is written by a number of authors. Every one represents a different and equally valid but complementary viewpoint and input into a particular issue. The objective is to present you with the *theory*, *application* and *experience* of an issue. So, each chapter begins with the *theory*, where a sociologist outlines and explains important sociological observations, theories and research. That opening in turn provides the basis for a social worker, who will discuss the practice aspects and relate how the *application* of sociology will inform that practice. All of which leads up to either a service user or a frontline practitioner discussing their *experiences*. All in all, you will be provided with a resource that will take you through not just the sociological theory but also how this makes a difference in a social work situation and to the lives of real people.