ESSENTIAL CONCEPTS IN

SOCIOLOGY

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Introduction

Social life is never static but is in a constant process of change. Over the last thirty years or so, shifting gender relations, increasing migration, multiculturalism, the Internet and social networks, global terrorism and political upheaval across the Middle East have transformed the modern world. Sociology, originally a product of the nineteenth century, cannot afford to stand still and has to move with the times or become irrelevant. Sociology today is theoretically diverse, covers a very wide range of subjects and draws on a broad array of research methods to make sense of societies. This is an inevitable outcome of attempts to understand and explain the increasingly globalizing social world we are entering, and it means that our familiar concepts need to be reassessed and new ones created.

Concept Development in Sociology

Some sociological concepts are very longstanding and have stood the test of time exceptionally well. Class, status, bureaucracy, capitalism, gender, poverty, family and power, for example, remain fundamental to the business of 'doing' sociology. Others have been developed much more recently. Globalization, postmodernity, reflexivity, environment, life course, restorative justice and the social model of disability – all are now part of the conceptual lexicon, representing something of the enormous changes in recent decades. All of this means that it becomes more difficult to grasp the overall shape of the discipline. The book makes a contribution to this task by introducing some of sociology's essential concepts, many of which act as signposts for particular developments in sociology over the last 150 years or so. Understanding these essential concepts, their origins and contemporary usage should help readers to see how the subject matter of sociology has developed over time.

Concept development in sociology is usually tied to theories and empirical studies which demand new concepts to make sense of their findings. Some concepts, such as status, class and risk, begin life in society and are lifted out of that context into sociology, where they are debated and refined, becoming more precise and useful in the process. Others, including alienation, moral panic and globalization, are specifically created by sociologists to help them study social phenomena but then slip into everyday life, where they influence people's perceptions of the world in which they live. This is quite unlike the situation in the natural sciences. Regardless of how many concepts from the natural sciences

are created, those concepts do not have the potential to change the behaviour of animals and plants. As Giddens has argued, this is an example of a 'one-way' process. In sociology, concepts, research findings and theories *do* make their way back into society at large, and people may alter their ideas and behaviour as a result. This means that sociological research is part of a continuous 'two-way' process between sociologists and the subjects they study.

This two-way process means that sociological concepts are inherently unstable and open to modification and change, not just within professional sociological discourse but in the social world itself. It also means that some, perhaps even a majority, of concepts are 'essentially contested'. That is, they are used in a variety of theoretical positions and there is no general agreement on their meaning. However, this probably overstates the level of variation and disagreement. In practice, the competing theories in sociology are relatively small in number and conceal the fact that there is more consistency and integration between them than might first appear.

Concepts developed within one theoretical perspective are very often used in others. The concept of alienation, for instance, was originally devised by Karl Marx, enabling him to understand better the nature of work in capitalist societies. Yet it was revived more than a century later, lifted out of its original Marxist theoretical frame and given a new lease of life by industrial sociologists to assess how workers *feel* about their working environment. In the process, the concept was modified, and, though some Marxists may object, the revised version has given us some very worthwhile insights into how different workplaces and management systems impact on the lives of workers.

The Essential Concepts

We did not set out to produce a comprehensive compendium of sociological concepts. Instead we wanted to select carefully about seventy concepts that have helped to shape, or are currently shaping, particular fields of inquiry. We have chosen some concepts that have stood the test of time – power, class, ideology, society and culture, for example. Concepts such as these have been in use over the entire course of sociology's history, yet they continue to stimulate debate and guide research projects today. Others, such as gender, consumerism, identity and life course, do not have such a long history, but their impact has been significant. Such concepts have not only stimulated large bodies of research but have also reshaped the older debates and forced us to reassess the value of earlier concepts. Finally we have included some very recent concepts, among them intersectionality, globalization, risk and restorative justice. It is our assessment that these have already generated some innovative research studies and are very likely to become embedded within their specialist fields as essential concepts.

The entries are longer than is usual for a typical 'key concepts' book. Our aim is to give more than just brief definitions that beg more questions than they answer. Instead we provide an extended discussion of each concept which sets it into

historical and theoretical context, explores its main meanings in use, introduces some relevant criticisms, and points readers to contemporary pieces of research and theorizing which they can read for themselves. This structure enables readers to link the history of sociology with its contemporary form through the development of its concepts. In addition many other concepts are discussed and briefly defined within the entries. 'Industrialization', for instance, also includes the related concepts of urbanization, post-industrialism and ecological modernization. Hence, readers are advised to use the Index as a guide to locating the many other concepts that are not in the Contents list.

We also accept that some of the concepts we have selected will be queried. Some sociologists will no doubt think we have missed out some crucial concept or included others that have become irrelevant. Such disagreements are quite normal in sociology, even over such fundamental things as what constitutes an 'essential' concept. This is mainly because of varied theoretical commitments and perspectives. As a community of scholars, sociologists are intensely disputatious but, even so, they do speak to and understand each other. One reason why they are able to understand each other is because of the shared conceptual heritage derived from numerous theories and explanatory frameworks that have waxed and waned over the years.

How to Use the Book

Entries are in ten major themes, internally listed alphabetically. As a quick reference guide, this makes finding entries in particular subject areas much simpler and quicker. The book is a standalone text that can be used by anyone looking to understand sociology's essential concepts. However, students who use our *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (2010) will appreciate that the matching structure across both books facilitates cross-referencing of concepts with associated readings by theme. Concepts are cross-referenced within the present text using the simple device of highlighting in **bold** the first use of other concepts within individual entries. We have also taken a few liberties with the concept of 'concept', as it were. For example, 'race' and ethnicity are covered in one rather than two entries because the two are generally discussed together, though the key differences between **'race'** and **ethnicity** are made clear in the discussion. We decided to do something similar with **structure/agency** and **qualitative/ quantitative** methods. Some entries may also be thought of as primarily theories or general perspectives rather than concepts. **Globalization**, for example, is both a concept and a theory of social change, while the **social model of disability** is a particular approach to the study of disability. These are included in order that the book is able to fulfil its purpose, which is to provide an accurate conceptual map of contemporary sociology.

1 Thinking Sociologically

Discourse

Working Definition

A way of talking and thinking about a subject that is united by common assumptions and serves to shape people's understanding of and actions towards that subject.

Origins of the Concept

The concept of discourse originates in linguistics – the study of language and its use. In this context, discourse refers to speech or written communication such as that involved in face-to-face conversation, public debates, online chatrooms, and so on. In linguistics, discourses are analysed in order to understand how communication operates and is organized. However, in the 1950s, the British philosopher J. L. Austin (1962) argued that written and spoken communications were not just neutral, passive statements but 'speech acts' which actively shaped the world as it is known. Michel Foucault connected the study of language to the mainstream sociological interest in **power** and its effects within **society**. From this starting point the concepts of discourse and 'discursive practices' became much more interesting to sociologists.

Meaning and Interpretation

Studies of language and communications focused mainly on the technical aspects such as the role of grammar and grammatical rules to construct meaning. However, from the late 1950s, discourse came to be understood as a type of action and, as such, an intervention in the world. Whether we discuss political groups as 'terrorists' or 'freedom fighters', or whether news reports focus on the causes of industrial strikes or the disruption it produces, influences the way we act. The notion of the 'speech act' altered the way that language and everyday conversation was viewed. What had previously appeared marginal soon became central to our understanding of social structures and power relations, as well as to studies of **culture** and the **mass media**. Sociologists were able to study the way language is used to frame political arguments, exclude certain ideas from debate and control the way people discuss issues.

Undoubtedly the most influential theory of discourse is that of Michel Foucault, who studied the history of mental illness (in his terms, 'madness'), crime, penal systems and medical institutions. Foucault ([1969] 2002) argued that a variety of discourses create frameworks which structure social life, through which power is exercised. In this way, discursive frameworks operate rather like paradigms, setting limits to what can be sensibly said about a particular subject as well as *how* it can be said. Discussions of crime, for example, are structured according to the dominant discourse of law and order, which makes conformity to the law and acceptance of policing a commonsense part of normal life. To suggest that mass policing should be opposed or that the law should be routinely disobeyed by the poor would be almost unintelligible. Because the crime discourse precedes people's entry into society, their behaviour and attitudes are partly shaped by it, as they imbibe the norms and values of society during **socialization**. In this way, discourses help to create people's very sense of **self** and personal **identity**. This is a useful reminder that people do not have total freedom to think, say and do whatever they want, as there are limits to human agency.

Foucault's concept of discourse goes even further, making discourse and discursive practices central to the study of power. He argued that knowledge and power are intimately connected rather than being opposed. Academic disciplines, such as criminology and psychiatry, which seek objective knowledge of criminal behaviour and mental illness respectively, also produce relations of power that shape the way that crime and mental illness are understood and acted upon. Psychiatric discourse creates its own boundary between sanity and madness, legitimizing specialized medical institutions for the isolation, treatment and cure of mental illness. Similarly, shifting discourses of crime do not just describe and explain criminal behaviour but help to bring into being new ways of defining and dealing with criminals (Foucault 1975).

Critical Points

The concept of discourse is undoubtedly thought-provoking and has generally been well received in sociology. But Foucault's central idea that discourses are disembodied and unconnected to a specific social base – such as a **social class** – is at odds with other research on power. Many studies of power see it as something to be gained and used for personal or group advantage, as in the patriarchal power that men hold and exercise over women or that ruling classes have over subordinate ones. The idea that power anonymously 'oils the wheels' of social relations seems to ignore the very real consequences of major inequalities of power. A further criticism is that the primary focus on language, speech and texts tends to give these too much importance. For some critics, this has produced a 'decorative sociology' that submerges social relations within the sphere of culture, avoiding difficult and genuinely sociological issues of shifting power balances (Rojek and Turner 2000). Not just discourses but real social relations and material culture are more significant in shaping social life.

Continuing Relevance

The central idea that discursive frameworks are a key part of social life remains a productive one which informs the study of many diverse subjects. For example, Lessa (2006) evaluated a UK government-funded agency working with teenage single parents using discourse analysis to understand the narrative accounts given by teenagers, their parents and carers. In contrast to the dominant discourse in society which presents single mothers as irresponsible, feckless welfare 'scroungers', this agency helped to generate an alternative discourse of teenage mothers as 'young parents' with a legitimate right to social support. This alternative discourse has had some success in garnering resources and shifting perceptions. What this study shows is that currently dominant discourses are rarely unopposed and can potentially be subverted, albeit in this case at a local level and in a very specific area of the welfare system. Discursive contestations of this kind are perhaps the norm rather than the exception.

At a much broader level are studies of global political discourses. Following the attacks on American targets in September 2001, a new discourse of a global 'war on terror' was launched by the American government. In this discursive framing, the attacks committed by terrorists were not just against America but 'against democracy' as such (Hodges and Nilep 2009: 3). This discourse then shaped public debate among a range of social actors who reacted to them, sought to explain them or tried to justify them. In doing so, the 'war on terror' discourse set the terms of an 'us and them' public discussion, which helped to create new identities, enemies and friends.

Although the language and rhetoric of war seems to have changed very little over time and across numerous wars, Machin (2009) argues that the visual representations of war – also a type of 'narrative' – *have* changed significantly. Using multimodal analysis (combining communicative sources such as text, images, body language, and so on) to study press images of the Iraq war presented in 2005–6, he shows that ongoing wars, such as that in Afghanistan, tend to be portrayed as highly professional 'peacekeeping' missions with soldiers carefully protecting vulnerable civilians, while 'enemy' casualties are excluded from view. Rather than documenting specific events, war photographs are increasingly used to structure page layouts representing general themes such as 'suffering', 'enemies', 'combat' or 'civilians'. In particular, Machin argues that cheaper images from commercial image banks are used more and more in generic, symbolic ways. Hence war photography can be seen as an important element in the new discursive framing of contemporary warfare.

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Globalization

Working Definition

The various processes through which geographically dispersed human populations are brought into closer and more immediate contact with one another, creating a single **community** of fate or global **society**.

Origins of the Concept

The idea of a worldwide human society can be traced back to discussions of the prospects for 'humanity' as a whole during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment period. Globalization can also be distilled from the nineteenth-century ideas of Marx on the expansive tendencies of **capitalism** and Durkheim on the geographical spread of the **division of labour**. However, the first dictionary entry for 'globalization' in the modern sense was in 1961, and only in the early 1980s was the term in regular use in economics (Kilminster 1998: 93). A significant forerunner of the globalization thesis in sociology is Immanuel Wallerstein's 'World Systems Theory' (1974, 1980, 1989). Wallerstein argued that the capitalist economic system operates at the transnational level, constituting a world system with a core of relatively rich countries, a periphery of the poorest societies, and a semi-periphery squeezed in between. However, contemporary debates stem from a perceived acceleration of globalization from the 1970s caused by the growth and **power** of multinational corporations, concerns about the decline of the **nation state**, the rise of supranational trading blocs, regional economic and political entities (such as the European Union), cheaper travel making foreign tourism and **migration** more widespread, and the advent of the Internet enabling rapid global communication. By the 1990s, the concept of globalization entered the sociological mainstream, impacting on all of the discipline's specialist fields.

Meaning and Interpretation

Although most sociologists could accept our working definition above, there are many disagreements on the underlying causes of globalization and whether it is a positive or negative development. Globalization alerts us to a *process* of change or perhaps a social trend towards worldwide interdependence. But this does not mean it will inevitably lead to a single, global **society**. Globalization

has economic, political and cultural dimensions (Waters 2001). For some, glo-balization is primarily economic, involving financial exchange, trade, global production and consumption, a global division of labour and a global financial system. *Economic globalization* fosters increased migration, altering patterns of movement and settlement, creating a more fluid form of human existence. For others, *cultural globalization* is more significant. Robertson (1995) devised the concept of *glocalization* – the mixing of global and local elements – to capture the way that local communities actively modify global processes to fit into indig-enous **cultures**. This leads to multidirectional flows of cultural products across the world's societies. Those more impressed with *political globalization* focus on increasing regional and international governance mechanisms, such as the United Nations and European Union. These institutions gather nation states and international non-governmental organizations into common decision-making forums to regulate the emerging global system.

Globalization involves several processes. Trade and market exchanges routinely take place on a worldwide scale. Growing international political cooperation, as in the notion of an active 'international community' or the use of multinational peacekeeping forces, demonstrates political and military coordination beyond national boundaries. Recent developments in information technology and more systematic (and cheaper) transportation also mean that social and cultural activity operates at a global level. In addition, the globalizing of human activity is becoming *intensified*. That is, there is *more* global trade, *more* international pol-itics, *more frequent* global transport and *more routine* cultural interchanges. The sheer volume of activity at the global level is increasing. And many sociologists perceive a *speeding up* of globalization since the 1970s with the advent of digitiza-tion, information technology and improvements in the transportation of goods, services and people. This rapid globalization has far-reaching consequences. Decisions taken in one location can have an enormous impact on other, distant societies, and the nation state, so long the central actor, appears to have lost some of its power and control.

Critical Points

Globalization theorists see the process as fundamentally changing the way people live, but others argue that such claims are exaggerated (Held et al. 1999). Globalization sceptics contend that present levels of economic interdependence are not unprecedented. There may well be more contact between countries than previously, but the world economy is not sufficiently interdependent as to consti-tute a single system (Hirst et al. 2009). Most trade actually occurs within regional groupings – such as the European Union, the Asia-Pacific region and North America – rather than within a single global context. Sceptics see this growing *regionalization* as evidence that the world economy has become *less* rather than more integrated.

The idea that globalization has undermined the role of the nation state can also

be challenged. National governments continue to be key players because they regulate and coordinate economic activity in trade agreements and policies of economic liberalization. Pooling of national sovereignty does not mean its inevitable loss. National governments have retained a good deal of power even though global interdependencies are stronger, but states adopt a more active, outward-looking stance under the conditions of rapid globalization. Globalization is not a one-way process of ever closer integration but a two-way flow of images, information and influence with diverse outcomes.

Continuing Relevance

Because globalization forms the essential conceptual backdrop to sociology, it is present in an enormous range of recent research studies on diverse subjects, including transnational terrorism, **social movement** activity, **conflict** and wars, migration studies, environmental sociology, multiculturalism and many more. As research has progressed, some of the unintended consequences of large-scale globalization have been discovered. For instance, Renard (1999) studied the emergence and growth of the market for 'fair trade' products which aim to reward small-scale producers in developing countries fairly by selling to ethical consumers in the industrialized nations. Mainstream globalization processes are dominated by large transnational companies, and it is extremely difficult for small businesses to break into their mass markets. However, Renard found that economic globalization actually creates smaller gaps, or niches, which small producers can move into and develop. This is an interesting piece of research which shows how globalization can open the way for small producers (in this case, of fair-trade coffee) to succeed based on the shared values of fairness and solidarity among sections of the population in both the developed and developing countries.

If globalization has a political dimension, we might expect social movements to organize above the level of local and national politics. A quantitative analysis by Barnartt (2010) looked at possible evidence for this in disabled people's movements. She analysed more than 1,200 protest events in the USA and over 700 outside events in 1970 and 2005. The project found that the number of disability protests in the USA increased rapidly after 1984 and outside America after 1989. Barnartt argues that disabled people's protests have indeed increased and spread across the world. Yet this is not necessarily indicative of globalization. The majority of these events were concerned with local or national issues rather than global ones. Similarly, there were 'few if any' transnational organizations involved. Despite similarities across the various movements, Barnartt concludes that disabled people's movements are not part of globalization processes.

Assessments of globalization differ markedly, but Martell's (2010) recent evaluation returns to the familiar theme of inequality. He argues that, although many sociologists see globalization as partly or mainly a cultural phenomenon, sociologists need to acknowledge the key role played by **capitalist** economics and

material interests. Martell takes issue with cosmopolitan theories of an emerging transnational political sphere, which he sees as too optimistic. To the extent that it is real, globalization is uneven, reproducing existing inequalities and unequal power chances. Global free movement, for instance, means 'those least in need, rich elites, being the most free, while those most in need of mobility, the poor and those beyond the rich core, are most restricted' (Martell 2010: 312). Although cultural change is important, for Martell, capitalist economics remains *the* crucial driving force.

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Modernity

Working Definition

The period from the mid-eighteenth-century European Enlightenment to at least the mid-1980s, characterized by secularization, **rationalization**, democratization, individualization and the rise of **science**.

Origins of the Concept

The word 'modern' can be used to refer to anything that is contemporary, with the contrast between ancient and the modern becoming more commonplace in Europe by the late sixteenth century (Williams 1987). The idea of modern*ization* – making something more contemporary – was seen as a retrograde step until the nineteenth century, when modernization took on a more positive hue. Over the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, modernization of transport, houses, social attitudes, fashions and much more was widely seen as necessary and progressive. However, in social theory, 'modernity' has a much broader meaning,