RESEARCHING SOCIAL LIFE

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PART I

FOUNDATIONS AND FIRST STEPS

Undertaking social scientific research for the first time can be very daunting. There is much to consider in terms of how we as researchers think about the world and how we try and make sense of it. This Part outlines the foundations of this journey by initially identifying the highly influential role that **concepts** and theory have in determining how we view the world and what we choose to study (Chapter 1), but also how we choose to study it (Chapter 2). In working towards defining your research problem, this Part goes on to consider how to refine a wide-ranging interest into a focused, researchable question (Chapter 3) and how to review literature in a systematic way to provide a focused research agenda (Chapter 4).

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CONCEPTUALISING SOCIAL LIFE

Geoff Cooper and Robert Meadows

key points

- This chapter will allow you to appreciate some of the ways in which sociological theory can open up new issues and questions.
- You will understand that different theoretical frameworks provide different perspectives on the object of study.
- These different perspectives can therefore influence research questions.
- It is important to appreciate the significance of the sociologist's membership of society and presence in the research setting, for the way we understand the ethical and political dimensions of research.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Good social research involves more than the identification of a worthwhile topic and the selection and competent use of an appropriate method, vital though these are. This chapter looks at the way in which research is inevitably framed by conceptual and theoretical considerations and shows how such frameworks, when properly handled, can enrich and enhance the research.

It is worth outlining, at the offset, why we consider this to be an important focus. In one sense, it is not a question of choosing whether to ignore or attend to these issues, since theory will be present in the research, but it may be present in the form of unrecognised assumptions that shape what is done in an uncontrolled manner. The explicit use of concepts and theories is therefore part of good research practice, in that the researcher is more in control of the direction, meaning and implications of his or her work. However, the main emphasis of this chapter is on a slightly different point, which is that theoretical and conceptual frameworks can inspire fresh ways of looking at the social world and suggest new angles of approach or lines of inquiry. The significance or purpose of particular frameworks may differ. They may, for example, provide a critical view of some feature of society or they may show us that familiar and apparently unremarkable features of everyday life can in fact be seen as rather strange. What they share is the capacity to re-conceptualise the social world, and thereby to stimulate us to ask new questions of it.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, the different senses of theory are clarified and we elaborate on our main aim: that is, to demonstrate how different theoretical frameworks, largely derived from the discipline of sociology, can lead us in particular directions, open up new lines of inquiry and illuminate particular issues. Second, we illustrate this variation with some examples. Third, we look at the way in which different theories can bring an apparently unpromising thing to life and open up a number of sociological dimensions for possible further exploration. Fourth, we consider the **relationship** between theoretical frameworks, empirical research and society, and indicate that different conceptions of this relationship can have important consequences for our approach. Finally, it is suggested that attending to the issues discussed in the chapter can provoke us to ask questions not only of the social world, but also of ourselves as researchers, thereby developing a more critical sensitivity.

THEORIES, CONCEPTS, FRAMEWORKS – CLARIFYING OUR FOCUS

1.2 'Theory' has become an increasingly difficult term to define with any certainty, since it can refer to quite different things in different contexts. In the natural sciences, it denotes a possible explanation which, crucially, can be tested: thus, in this context and in the most common everyday meaning of the term, a theory is something provisional, tentative and in need of confirmation. In the humanities, literary criticism or history, for example, it can mean something quite different: a style of work which engages with philosophical questions (what is a text? what is history?), sometimes in a formidably abstract manner, often borrowing ideas from other disciplines in order to address them (Culler, 1987).

In sociological work, both of these meanings, and others, are found. 'Sociological theory' – clearly referring to work within the discipline of sociology, and our main focus here – can be used in the former sense to describe an explanation which takes the form of an assertion that can be tested. However, it can also denote a framework for viewing the social world that is too general, too broad and too all-encompassing to be confirmed or refuted by empirical research; indeed, the kind of empirical research we choose to do will be profoundly shaped and influenced by the framework in the first place. One cannot compare theoretical frameworks by simply checking which one has come up with the right answer about some feature of society: for since each conceptualises society in quite a different way, they are likely to be asking quite different questions. The philosopher Thomas Kuhn (1970) uses the term '**paradigms**' to describe these kinds of broad and radically different frameworks; they can also be referred to as, for instance, 'theoretical frameworks', 'theoretical perspectives', 'sociological perspectives', or simply 'sociological theories' (although each term carries its own specific connotations).

There is much that could be said about the relationship between these very broad conceptions/frameworks and specific theories that can be tested. For example, some have argued that we should think of the relationship in terms of different levels of theory, and indeed suggested that there is at least one more level that comes in between the two – a so-called '**middle-range**' **theory** (Merton, 1967). We leave this issue to one side in this chapter. One thing we can say is that sociological theories, at whatever level, all share a common general orientation: they focus on the ways in which phenomena (be they institutions, political arrangements, communities, everyday activities, beliefs and attitudes, forms of knowledge, technologies, art, media representations) are socially organised; and they assert that this social organisation has important consequences. However, it is also the case that there are enormous differences between them: for some, 'social organisation' is taken to mean the ways in which people interact, talk, and make use of gestures within particular settings; for others, it may mean large-scale structures of domination and subordination which affect the whole of society.

Chapter 2 discusses the use of theory in research, focusing on theory as a specific hypothesis about some phenomenon which can be tested through empirical investigation. This chapter, by contrast, is mainly concerned with theory in the sense of broad frameworks that shape our view of the world. Some of these broad frameworks are more comprehensive than others in scope, that is, in the range of social phenomena they claim to explain, and in the level of detail at which they tend to operate. Confusingly, some even claim that they are not theories at all since they are committed to exploring, without preconceptions, the ways in which people interpret the world (see Rock, 1979, on **symbolic interactionism**) or the everyday methods by which people routinely achieve social order (see Garfinkel, 1967, on **ethnomethodology**); that is, in both cases, they think about the social world in its own terms. These are important qualifications. Nevertheless, it remains the case that even these approaches have an interest in explaining features of social organisation, and are thus sociological and have a distinctive orientation, style and conception which can be contrasted with other approaches. The key issue remains the way in which we conceptualise the social world; and it is on the basis of different conceptions or pictures of the world that we can distinguish between different theoretical frameworks. They highlight particular features of the world as significant; they direct our attention towards certain forms of behaviour; and they suggest certain kinds of research questions. Some will have a relatively direct influence on the kinds of research methods we use; for example, symbolic interactionism's interest in the ways in which people interact and construct meaning within particular settings, determines that qualitative methods which focus on behaviour in its natural context will be most appropriate (see Chapters 16 and 17). Some frameworks may have a less direct link to method: feminist research, for instance, can equally profitably use statistical methods to examine large-scale structural inequalities, look at the operation of patriarchy in the media via textual analyses or study social interaction in particular institutional settings by the use of observational methods. Some frameworks also challenge existing methodological practice. McCall (2005), for example, suggests that intersectionality – which emerged as a major paradigm of research in women's studies – has introduced new methodological problems because of its emphasis on multiple modalities of social relations. In other words, the strength of the links between particular frameworks and particular methods varies considerably. Nevertheless, each framework will, at a deeper level, exert a profound influence on the design, orientation and character of the study.

DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE SOCIAL WORLD

1.3 There are many more theoretical approaches than can be listed in the space available, let alone properly explained. (Some observers regard this high level of variation as a problem, while others see it as evidence of the discipline's richness; these authors tend towards the latter view.) The following examples are intended to give a flavour of this variation and illustrate how these different ways of conceptualising the social world bring different facets of social life to our attention and suggest different lines of inquiry.

That said, it is important to note that some issues and questions recur throughout more than one framework, even though they are often envisaged in very different terms. For example:

- What is the nature of the relationship between the individual and the collective?
- Is society a structure that limits and constrains the way we act or rather the sum total of various forms of social interaction in different settings?
- How do power and inequality operate within society?
- Is society inherently consensual or riven by conflict?
- How do the informal rules and norms which seem to govern social life come into being?

Schools of thought

1.3.1 By schools of thought, we mean theoretical approaches that have achieved a degree of recognition such that a number of people subscribe to them, and that can be clearly differentiated from other approaches in terms of their key concepts and issues of concern. **Structural functionalism** sees society as a single and unified entity, almost like an organism, and for the most part sees its component parts (the family, for example) as being functional for the maintenance of equilibrium. **Marxism**, by contrast, envisages society as being structured around what it calls a mode of production: it focuses, in particular, on the capitalist mode of production, which is seen as fundamentally exploitative and unjust. Marxist theory thus places conflict centre stage and sees its own role as helping to challenge existing arrangements. Likewise, **feminism** sees society as unjust and seeks to challenge it, but the basis of exploitation here is seen to lie in gender relations, in patriarchy. In both of these cases, theory is closely linked to political movements. Ethnomethodology is interested in how social order is achieved but, unlike structural functionalism, sees this as something which is routinely accomplished in everyday life by a host of 'methods' – such as knowing when to take a turn in conversation – which are both taken for granted and yet, when properly studied, extraordinarily skilful. **Rational choice theory**, by contrast, tries to explain social behaviour by positing the individual as a strategic and calculating actor who makes choices according to rational criteria. Complexity theory, to give a final example, rejects the formulation of systems and equilibrium found within schools of thought such as structural functionalism, instead stressing such things as non-linear change and co-evolution.

It should be noted that the history of the discipline shows that different theoretical frameworks come to have a more or less dominant presence at different times; some may be seen as particularly pertinent to, even influenced by, the prevailing socio-political context. This alerts us to the fact that sociology is very much a part of the society that it sets out to study, as we discuss in section 1.5.

Theoretical frameworks are not always easily located within schools of thought. Distinctive and sometimes highly influential views of the world may be derived from the work of individual writers, who may be more or less easy to categorise in this way. Let us look at three writers, each of whom casts a distinctive light on the social world.

Erving Goffman

1.3.2 Goffman – sometimes identified as a symbolic interactionist, but thought by many to be too unorthodox to be located within any school – studied a wide variety of social phenomena, using a wide variety of approaches. One strand that ran through much of his work was an interest in the details of what he called the 'interaction order', that is, the ways we behave in face-to-face interaction with others. Goffman suggests that we continually manage the impression that we make on others, that such things as gesture and gaze are crucially important for monitoring and interpreting the behaviour of others, and that this world of face-to-face interaction is patterned according to subtle but powerful norms and expectations about what is appropriate: a kind of moral order.

+A great resource to find different theoretical frameworks for exploring social life. NCRM repository: 'Frameworks for research and design: epistemology' http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/view/subjects/01=5F01.html

In city life, for example, where we are often in close proximity with others (on public transport, for instance), we routinely control the direction of our gaze and adopt what Goffman calls 'civil inattention', because direct eye contact may imply certain kinds of direct involvement that are inappropriate. Even the apparently simple business of walking along the street emerges as a delicately structured and complex activity. We continually monitor the gestures and movements of others in order to interpret their behaviour; we recognise certain kinds of behaviour such as two people engaged in conversation, and take action to avoid walking in between them; and in some cases we have to balance the requirements of communicating with others and making progress. For example, if we see an acquaintance in the distance coming our way, we often feign ignorance until they are closer and only then acknowledge their presence: this avoids the awkwardness, and physical difficulty, of maintaining eye contact, and perhaps of sustaining a suitable expression on the face, while simultaneously navigating through the pedestrian traffic (Goffman, 1971).

We also have ways of displaying social relationships to others, which Goffman calls 'tie signs'. Holding hands is an obvious one, but in some cases they can become more complicated. Someone on the phone to a close friend or partner, in the presence of a business colleague, may go to great lengths to keep both parties from feeling left out: talking in a friendly tone into the phone, while simultaneously making gestures of impatience to the other person present, is one strategy that is sometimes adopted.

To read Goffman describing how behaviour in public places is patterned can be to recognise features of one's own behaviour but discover that they are in fact socially organised: they are general properties of social life. We experience a kind of recognition, but the world of everyday social interaction is transformed and never looks quite the same again. Goffman draws our attention to the ways in which people are continually controlling and skilfully interpreting the signals they give off to each other, and to the complex tissue of obligations and expectations that we observe, even in our interactions with strangers.

research in action 1.1

Goffman has provided an important resource and source of inspiration for theoretical and empirical studies. For example, Heath's studies of doctor–patient interaction draw on Goffman in highlighting such factors as the ways in which patients systematically avert their gaze in order to minimise embarrassment during intimate medical examinations (Heath, 1986). Hochschild's (1983) innovative work on the emotional dimensions of social interaction, which has provided a key foundation for the sociology of emotion, both relies on and extends Goffman's work. Her formulation of the concept of 'emotional labour', for example, has significantly facilitated understanding of the demands made of employees in service industries where the professional smile is a requirement, some of the strategies used to deal with these demands and, in many cases, the gendered aspects of this kind of work.

Michel Foucault

1.3.3 Foucault was not a sociologist, but he has had a good deal of influence within the discipline. (The same could be said of Marx, now regarded as one of the key figures in 'classical' sociology.) Often described as a 'post-structuralist', Foucault was interested in explaining how many features of social organisation which we now take for granted as normal and unremarkable have come into being; these features include our sense of self, that is, our notions of what an individual is. His work takes the form of historical studies that show that particular, widespread practices can be seen as quite recent inventions. He forces us to ask uncomfortable questions about the way that society operates, the workings of power and even our own role as social scientists.

One strand that runs throughout many of Foucault's studies is a critical view of the role that certain kinds of knowledge have played in modern Western societies. He argues that the 'human sciences', a range of disciplines which turn people into objects of study, have played a key role in the extension of certain kinds of power. Let us look at just one example. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), he suggests that the widespread assumption that we are now more compassionate and lenient in our treatment and punishment of criminals is misleading; as with much of his work, he attempts to turn such an assumption on its head. We may not be so visibly cruel as before, may no longer have public torture or executions, but we monitor, regulate and control behaviour with a thoroughness that could not have been dreamed of in former times, both within prisons and in the wider population. Foucault suggests that the human sciences have been central to this process. They urge that we have to 'really understand' people and must therefore study them more closely; and they define what is normal and what is abnormal behaviour, which then provides a basis for judgements of various kinds. Moreover, they have often done so with the very best of intentions, such as playing a key role in prison reform. However, the effect has been to extend power throughout society to the point where surveillance of many different kinds, by institutions *and* fellow citizens, is a taken-for-granted feature of daily life.

Foucault gives us a very uncomfortable and in many ways gloomy picture of modern Western societies. Like any account, it is one that can be questioned, but its value is as a form of criticism. Foucault shows us the extent to which our society is organised and regulated according to ideas about what is normal (whether we are talking of intelligence, physical development, social behaviour or whatever). He fosters a sceptical attitude towards many different forms of expertise and claims to authority, and suggests that we should not assume that the good intentions of particular institutions will guarantee good outcomes. In so doing, he opens up new avenues of inquiry.

Bruno Latour

1.3.4 Latour's main interests lie in the field of Science and Technology Studies, but the influence of his ideas and general approach, which he terms actor network theory, is becoming more widely felt in other areas of social science. Latour argues that, in spite of the fact that technologies have an obvious and undeniable presence in modern Western societies, most theories of social behaviour fail to take the role that they play sufficiently seriously. The idea, put forward particularly forcefully by Émile Durkheim, that there are distinctively 'social' things which are quite separate from technological – or indeed natural – things is something that Latour (2005) contests. Rather, to put this in terms of our earlier definition of sociology as the discipline which looks at the social organisation of phenomena, Latour suggests that such organisation is always achieved by combinations, or networks, of different categories of actor – people certainly, but also technologies, texts, natural phenomena, materials and artefacts, to name but a few.

One important element of this argument is that many social functions are now routinely performed by technologies. When we consider the centrality of computers and digital technologies in so many areas of social life, the reasoning seems obvious but, interestingly, Latour often uses different, simpler technologies to make his point. For example, he focuses on the ways in which moral functions are frequently handled by technological means (Latour, 1992). Hotels stop guests removing, and possibly losing, their keys by the simple expedient of attaching heavy weights to them, which make them inconvenient to carry around; ineffective laws designed to prevent people driving without seat belts can be enforced by designing ignition systems which will not work until the seat belt has been fastened; and the problem of getting people to close doors behind them in institutional buildings is solved by the design of an (automatic) door closer. As Latour sees it, what is happening, in all three examples, is a process in which we delegate to technologies the task of disciplining people to act in the correct way: in each case, the technology in question appears to succeed where human interventions or written instructions on their own have failed. To understand social life today, we need to acknowledge that even some of its most trivial features involve the use of technologies, and consider the significance of this fact.

CONCEPTUALISING COMMON OBJECTS: AN EXAMPLE

1.4 Different conceptualisations of social life can mean that different kinds of things are studied: the figures we have briefly considered, for example, could be said to focus on social interaction (Goffman), the historical development of forms of power (Foucault) and the ways in which technologies become an integral feature of everyday life (Latour). At the same time, considering how the work of different thinkers can be brought to bear on a common object can be a useful exercise in highlighting conceptual differences and illustrating the different kinds of questions and concerns that are raised by particular approaches. It can also show the richness and diversity of what C. Wright Mills (1959) called 'the sociological imagination'. With this in mind, let us return to Latour's simple example of doors in public or institutional buildings and consider what different kinds of sociologists might have to say about them.

Latour encourages recognition of the ways in which social functions routinely become 'delegated' to technologies. In the case of doors, the problem of ensuring that people keep them closed is solved by the use of a simple technology – the automatic door closer – which performs this function and, moreover, does so in such an unobtrusive way that we take it for granted. The example is in some ways idiosyncratic, in the sense that doors (and door closers) are not normally thought of as obvious topics for sociological analysis, but its apparent idiosyncrasy serves to highlight the extent to which we do not notice the many forms of technical mediation that are woven into the fabric of everyday life.

Doors can become the focus of a rather different kind of study if we consider them with some of Goffman's insights in mind. Large doors and the areas around them, whether they are within or are the entrance to a building, are sites of quite delicately co-ordinated forms of social interaction. People not only choose whether or not to hold a door open for someone who is following them, but make such choices within the framework of sets of expectations about what is reasonable or polite behaviour; and they signal their intentions by means of subtle but discernible actions, gestures and facial expressions. Simply going through a door, in other words, turns out to be a highly ritualised form of activity, and the ritual properties of this simple activity are crucial both to the co-ordination of action and to the ways in which people manage the impression that they convey to others.

Goffman's work suggests other ways in which doors in institutional buildings can be of sociological interest. It is not the case, as we know, that all doors serve relatively neutral social purposes, such as keeping out the rain and wind. Many doors open into rooms or spaces that are not accessible to everyone, and in these cases may serve as a kind of boundary beyond which different forms of behaviour take place. Goffman himself famously noted that the doorway from a restaurant to its kitchen constitutes just such a boundary, and that waiters' facial expressions, speech and general demeanour can change radically as they cross the threshold and leave the public space where politeness is required (Goffman, 1969). Here, consideration of the part played by the doorway in social life directs attention to highly differentiated forms of behaviour and to the ways in which such factors as occupation may constrain the ways people act in particular spaces.

Foucault provides another way of thinking about such constraints on behaviour in public spaces. As for Goffman, visibility is crucial, but it is conceptualised in more explicitly historical terms: here, the door is one element in a wider and developing set of forces. The disciplinary power that is characteristic of the modern era takes on a concrete form in, among other things, the architecture of institutional buildings; initially prisons, but subsequently military barracks, hospitals, schools and other institutions are designed in ways that facilitate continuous surveillance and control. According to this approach, some of the features of public or institutional buildings whose overt purpose is to ensure and enhance public safety should be seen as also controlling people: the siting of CCTV cameras at entrance doors, and at other strategic places within a building, are a good example of this duality of purpose.

A historical sociology of doors and their use could take many other forms. The fact that there has been, in recent years, an increase in the number of doors within the corridors of many large buildings appears to be the result of an increasing concern with risk and public safety. Fire doors may therefore be a symptom of wider developments that, according to some, are characteristic or even definitive features of many contemporary societies (see Beck, 1992). Elias's (1998) historical analysis of the changing functions of etiquette points to the importance of the layout of rooms and doors to the structure and form of court rituals, and he notes that the extraordinarily elaborate ceremony of Louis XIV's *levée* (getting up in the morning) could not take place in any building: rather, the arrangement of doorways and rooms had to be designed in a way that made the ceremony possible. More generally, his work illuminates the ways in which customs and conventions change, and could provide a framework for analysing the evolution of arrangements for getting through doors. One such custom, less widespread today but still observable in some settings, involves men holding doors open for women, and could provide a focus for critical feminist analysis of the gendered dimensions of behaviour and rituals in public spaces. Frye (1983), for example, argues that this practice can only be interpreted as helpful if one ignores its place within more general social relations of gendered oppression, and that an analysis which takes account of this wider system would have to conclude that the symbolic purpose of the practice is to reinforce female dependence.

We can therefore see that approaching, in this case, doors in different ways opens up different kinds of questions for investigation, and alerts us to different kinds of issues. Furthermore, even with this simple example, we can see how some of these issues connect and intersect with matters of public concern or political significance: safety, control, surveillance, social hierarchy and oppression, to name but a few. In this respect, there are further questions that could be considered – such as the ways in which door and building design might be implicated in the **social construction** of disability, or the energy costs of the increasing numbers of automatic doors in use – and sociological approaches which can illuminate them (see, respectively, Oliver, 1996 and Shove, 2003). These interconnections demonstrate that theories do not exist in a vacuum. It is therefore time to close the door on this specific example and look in more general terms at the relationship between theories, on the one hand, and society and its concerns, on the other.

research in action 1.2

It is not just doors. To offer further examples, since the mid 1980s, sociology has become increasingly concerned with 'the body'. Different conceptualisations of the body can mean that different kinds of things are studied. Foucault prompts us to explore the ways in which bodies are regulated and to ask questions about the way power is wielded on and through the body (Cregan, 2006). Goffman prompts us to consider the 'body as performance' and the ways in which people both *have* and *do* a body (Waskul and Vannini, 2006). Sleep serves as another example for us here. As noted above, symbolic interactionism is committed to the ways people interpret the world. Sleep, therefore, becomes situated as something which is 'done' or 'negotiated'. It is for this reason that symbolic interactionist studies of sleep tend to focus on the meanings, methods and motives surrounding sleep (Williams, 2005).

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THEORY, RESEARCH AND SOCIETY

1.5 The reader should now have some idea of how sociological theory can be used to construct distinctive views of the social world, views which suggest certain questions, issues and problems that might be explored or pursued through empirical research. The relative usefulness of these views will depend on the general area in which research is to be done, and the kinds of issues that are of interest. Further questions then arise about the nature of the links between theory, research and society.

The following chapter deals with the important issues of how exactly theory should be incorporated into the research process and at what stage in the research it should be employed. However, there is more to the relationship between theory, research and society than this; indeed, there is a danger that focusing exclusively on how theory connects to research and research methods can reinforce a particular picture of sociological work which is, in important respects, misleading. This picture is one in which the sociologist occupies a vantage point which is quite separate from the object of study (society or some aspect of it) and from which it can be clearly viewed: to extend the metaphor, he or she merely has to select some interesting theoretical spectacles, and perhaps some appropriate measurement devices from the available tool kit of methods, before proceeding to analyse the phenomena of interest from this position of detachment. (One disadvantage of the term 'theoretical perspective' is that it can be taken to imply something along these lines.) The sociologist, according to this view, is quite disengaged from society, and the problems that arise in attempting to study it are simply technical ones (about such matters as choice and correct use of methods). In fact, however, the relationship between sociologist (whether theorist or researcher) and society is more complicated, more contentious and more interesting than this picture suggests. Indeed, some have argued that the existence and prevalence of this picture of disengaged, empirical observation is itself the product of particular pernicious currents within modern Western societies (Adorno, 2000).

A key issue that needs to be considered in this respect is the obvious fact that sociologists are not the only people to construct theories about society. There are of course many different disciplines that can validly claim this to be an important part of their work; but, even more importantly, coming up with theories about society is an important part of everyday life and a recurrent feature of everyday talk. These lay theories can take many forms: they may be explicit, as in statements about the relationship between poverty and crime; they may be visible in the form of the assumptions that underlie particular statements, for example about whether one society is more modern than another; or they may be implicit in jokes and clichés such as 'it's a fair cop but society is to blame', which suggests a very specific relation between individual and society. The point here is that people studying society professionally do not have a monopoly on theories about society. This raises the issue of the relationship between, and the relative importance of, everyday theories and 'professional', that is, social scientific theories. There are different approaches to this, but we will briefly sketch out two that, though different, take the issue very seriously. Ethnomethodologists take the line that the world is already so full of theories that the last thing that is needed is for social scientists to add more: what is needed is a shift of emphasis and focus (see, for example, Sacks, 1963). Furthermore, they argue that too often sociology has set about constructing its own theory without critically examining the significance of the fact that much of this is derived from common-sense notions (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1973). Insofar as ethnomethodologists are interested in theories at all – much of their work being focused on what people do and how they do it, rather than what they believe – it is in everyday theories as *topics* of investigation, as things that can be studied in their own right. They are vehemently opposed to the idea that social science, by virtue of its professional status, can construct allegedly superior theories which can then form the basis for criticism of 'mere' common-sense theory.

Although Pierre Bourdieu shares with ethnomethodology an interest in the understanding of the patterns and forms of everyday activities, his approach to this question is, in one respect at least, quite different. Following, among others, the philosopher of science Bachelard (1984), he argues that a true science is one which makes a radical break with common sense, and that this is the goal to which sociology should aspire (Bourdieu et al., 1991). Thus, when sociology has reached this level, it is legitimate and sometimes necessary to take a critical attitude towards everyday beliefs and attitudes, to say that they are mistaken, and to explain which particular social forces are responsible for these misunderstandings.

To summarise, in the first case the recommendation is that we shift focus and avoid accidentally incorporating everyday beliefs into our work, and trying to construct superior theories. In the second, we are urged to improve the quality of our theories (by following a number of principles of good practice) until we can claim that we have managed to break away from the limitations of common sense into true science, from which position we can engage in criticism. In both, there is a recognition of the extent to which sociology is embedded within society, and therefore of the need to think clearly about the consequences of this.

There are other positions that have been taken on this question, including ignoring it altogether! However, these two approaches illustrate, albeit in a rather paradoxical way in one case, the value of a distinctive conceptualisation of the world to be studied: for the very closeness of this world, the fact that we cannot assume that we have a clear and detached view of it, alerts us to one important function of a theoretical framework. It can help us see the social world afresh; it can help us conceptualise it in new ways, even when dealing with things that may be all too familiar to us (as we saw with the example of Goffman). Other things can do this too, notably art. Just as with art's sometimes shocking representations of the world we inhabit, these new views may become commonplace as they are incorporated into mainstream culture over time, and this provides part of the force that helps produce new theoretical work. This can provide a stimulus and framework for the further investigation of the world and can generate new topics, questions and problems.

QUESTIONING OURSELVES: REFLEXIVE SOCIOLOGY

+ **1.6** We have seen that theoretical and conceptual frameworks have the capacity to provide new views of the social world, but we have also indicated that the social world includes the activities of sociology and social research. It therefore follows that conceptual frameworks have further value in helping us to reflect on our position as sociologists and researchers and to develop a more critical sensitivity towards the activity of social research.

We have already touched on some of these issues. What, for example, is the relationship between 'lay' and 'professional' interpretations of the world? Does one have a higher status than the other? These might be crucial issues to consider if we are carrying out an interview-based study, for example. We might also ask questions more specifically of ourselves as researchers since, no matter what professional hat we have on, we are also members of society:

- Does our personal identity (thinking of such variables as class, race, gender and age) have some significance for the way people respond to us? Okely (2007) stresses that fieldwork is 'embodied'. Anthropologists in the field learn to use their bodies in new ways, encounter bodily risks, pains and pleasures and can be marked by their respondents as sexed, racialised and 'othered'.
- Does our membership of a particular professional community predispose us to see the world in a quite different way to that of our respondents, and thus form a kind of barrier to understanding, one that we must take into account (Bourdieu, 1990)?
- Or is it the case that some styles of sociological work are themselves more closely related to certain forms of social organisation, such as the gendered division of labour, than is usually acknowledged (Smith, 1996)?

There are many such questions. What they have in common is a recognition that an adequate conceptualisation of the social world has to include the activity of researching it; the researcher is not simply observing from a position of detachment. This inclusive conceptualisation is sometimes called **reflexive inquiry** and it can be invaluable for improving the quality of our research.

Reflexive sociology also has ethical importance in that it prompts us to ask questions about what we are doing as researchers, whether we are justified in doing it and, more generally, what our responsibilities and obligations are (see Chapter 11). As noted in section 1.3.3, Foucault's work, for example, argues that the human sciences – those forms of

+A very interesting blog taking a reflexive look on the use of sociological concepts in everyday life: http://www.everydaysociologyblog.com/

knowledge which turn the human into something to be studied – are a relatively recent and rather peculiar invention, and have played a key role in monitoring, examining and judging the populations of modern Western societies; moreover, Foucault suggests that in many cases they have done so with the very best of intentions. This should make us, at the very least, pause for thought before setting out to do more research, particularly in a society in which more and more research is being carried out, to the extent that one might legitimately characterise it as a research society. Reflection on such issues, and subsequent consideration of the different ways in which our research might be designed, carried out and used, are vital to responsible, sensitive and critical research (see also Chapter 27).

Just as there is no separate vantage point from which to view and describe society, so there is no neutral space from which to describe theoretical and conceptual issues. Any text setting out to describe a range of theories will do so from some position or another – one which sees others from a particular angle and defines the key issues accordingly. This chapter has stressed the usefulness of frameworks in helping us see the world in new ways, and avoided discussion of, for example, whether some more accurately represent the world than others: in this respect, it is in line with pragmatist thought, as articulated and defended by Rorty (2000). Other accounts will have a quite different emphasis.

SUMMARY

1.7 This chapter has argued that theoretical and conceptual issues are indispensable features of social research, and that they can enrich it in a number of ways. Research is impoverished if these issues are neglected, but, more simply, theoretical frameworks are valuable in that they provide us with new and different conceptualisations of the social world, inspiring us to see it in new ways and ask different questions of it and of ourselves as social researchers.

checklist

- Ensure that you elucidate the role that theories, concepts and frameworks play in your conceptualisation of the social world (and therefore your research). They will have played a part – whether acknowledged or not – and hopefully will have been part of the initial inspiration for the inquiry.
- Remember that the social world includes you as researcher and that an adequate conceptualisation has to include the activity of researching it.

discussion questions

Social theories – whether in the form of assertions, statements, policies or even jokes – are all around us:

1. Can you think of any theories currently in circulation?
2. Do any of these depend on, or presuppose, wider frameworks of assumptions?
3. Do you see any problems with these assumptions?

projects

One of the central claims of this chapter is that theoretical and conceptual frameworks can inspire fresh ways of looking at the social world, and suggest new angles of approach or lines of inquiry. We will explore this a little further with the example of 'sleep/sleeping':

- Sociologists have grown increasingly interested in sleep. Venn et al. (2008), for example, studied the ways in which couples negotiate who cares for children at night. Williams et al. (2008) looked at the ways in which insomnia and snoring are portrayed in the media. Make a list of some sociological aspects of sleep/sleeping. One way to apply the sociological imagination here is to think about how things currently are (including variations), how things used to be and how things could be in the future.
- Now consider the work of Norbert Elias. Elias (1998: 163) tells us that in medieval society it was common for many people to sleep in one room and that sleep was a relatively 'public' matter. Nowadays – by contrast – the nuclear family 'remains the only legitimate, socially sanctioned enclave for this and many other functions. Its visible and invisible walls withdrew the most "private", "intimate", irrepressibly "animal" aspects of human existence from the sight of others. For Elias, this change was bound up within a process which saw people become more and more dependent on each other: behaviour became more predictable and refined, and body self-monitoring and control increased (Shilling, 2012).
- Now go back to your list. What aspects would Elias be interested in? Does the brief paragraph above inspire new questions/issues? Think, for example, about the words 'legitimate' and 'socially sanctioned', which imply that there are normative conventions surrounding sleep. What are these conventions? What might the sanctions be if they are breached? How might we study this?

resources

For general introductions to sociology, Scott (2006) *Social Theory: Central Issues in Sociology*, Lemert (2005) *Social Things: An Introduction to the Sociological Life* (3rd edn) and Bauman and May (2001) *Thinking Sociologically* are both accessible and critical; Lemert is particularly good on the 'political' dimensions of sociology in terms of who is included and excluded. Wright Mills' classic (1959) introduction, *The Sociological Imagination*, is addressed to a different era, but contains much that is still pertinent.

On theoretical frameworks, Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014) *Sociological Theory* (9th edn) and Cuff et al. (2006) *Perspectives in Sociology*, provide informed overviews, while Abbott et al. (2005) is a good guide to feminist approaches. For readers interested in learning more about sociological understandings of technology, Sismondo (2009) *An Introduction to Science and Technology Studies* (2nd edn) provides a useful introduction.

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