

Theory and methods

This chapter examines a number of ideas related to sociological *methodology*; how, in short, we can produce *reliable* and *valid* knowledge about the social world, both in theoretical terms, such as different sociological theories, and in practical terms when, for example, we explore the relationship between sociological theory and *social policy*.

This chapter, therefore, is designed to enhance and complement the work you did on sociological *methods* at AS level.

1. Concepts of modernity and postmodernity in relation to sociological theory - consensus, conflict, structural and social action theories



Preparing the ground: Sociology and modernity

'Sociology', according to **Peter Taylor** (2000), 'is a product of modernity' – by which he means it has its origins, as an academic discipline, in the development of 'modern society'. To understand why this is significant, we can initially classify our society in terms of three broad historical periods:

- **Pre-modern**, considered (very roughly) as a type of society existing before the late sixteenth century.
- **Modern**, a type that developed out of the pre-modern period and (arguably) stretches to the late twentieth century.

- **Postmodern** – a type considered by some sociologists (others, such as **Giddens** (1998) or **Habermas** (1992) refer to this period as 'high' or 'late' modernity) to be characteristic of our society in the twenty-first century.

This, as we stress, is a very *basic classification* used primarily to sensitise you to the concept of different types of society. Its secondary purpose is to allow us to identify some *key features* (economic, political and cultural) of modern society that arguably differentiate it from both its pre- and postmodern counterparts.

WARM-UP: SOCIETIES AS SHOPS

In this exercise we can use an analogy to understand the difference between types of society. Think of:

- pre-modern society as a corner shop
- modern society as a supermarket
- postmodern society as shopping on the internet.

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In small groups, identify some of the features that characterise the different types of shops (a mall, for example, is much larger than a corner shop, it has more choice and involves different types of relationship between customer and staff).

As a class, discuss how these differences can be applied to different types of society.

Economic characteristics

Modernity differs from *pre-modernity* in a number of ways:

Technology: The invention of machines – and the gradual discovery/invention of new sources of power (gas, electricity and, eventually, nuclear, for example) – opened up the potential for:

- **Industrialisation** – the application of machine technology to the production of things (*commodities*). People working with machines (*mechanisation*) led to the development of factories that allowed large quantities of goods to be produced quickly, cheaply and to the same general standard (*mass production*). Further developments included *automation* (machines controlling other machines, with little or no direct human involvement) and, most recently, the *computerisation* of some production processes.

Alongside these developments, modern society is characterised by:

Capitalist economic relationships ('employer–employee', for example) that involve a process of:

Rationalisation, in the sense of ideas about organisation and efficiency being applied to the production process. As **Sarup**

(1993) puts it, modernity involves '... the progressive economic and administrative rationalisation ... of the social world'. For **Weber** (1905), rationalisation involved *institutions* (such as work) and *practices* becoming increasingly well organised and efficient. Examples of different types of economic rationalisation include:

- **Fordism:** Named after the production-line technique developed by the US car manufacturer Henry Ford at the beginning of the twentieth century. With this technique a complex task, such as assembling a car, is broken down into a number of smaller, relatively simple tasks.



The potting shed

Modern supermarkets are contemporary examples of rationally organised institutions. Identify and briefly explain two ways 'selling food' is broken down into highly specialised roles.

- **Global Fordism:** Where *Fordism* involves production-line principles applied *within* a factory, this version involves different parts of a product being created in different countries (where labour and parts may be relatively inexpensive) and assembled in yet another country.
- **Just-in-time (JIT):** Involves bringing together the parts needed to create a product 'just in time' to sell the completed product (thereby saving on things like storage costs).

For **Weber**, a further feature that developed alongside *rationalisation* was:

Bureaucracy, which **Ritzer** (1996) describes as 'a large-scale organisation

composed of a hierarchy of offices ... people have certain responsibilities and must act in accord with rules, written regulations, and ... compulsion exercised by those who occupy higher-level positions’.

A final characteristic we can add (with the proviso that there is some dispute as to whether this is characteristic of *modernity* or *postmodernity*) is:

Globalisation, considered in terms of ideas such as:

- **Global Fordism.**
- **Transnational corporations** that operate and trade on a global scale. Areas such as *telecommunications* (BT, for example) and *computer software* (think Microsoft – which sounds a bit like subliminal advertising) are contemporary examples of global marketplaces for transnational companies.

Political characteristics

Modernity involves ideas like:

- **Nation states:** Although ‘a nation’ may exist in some pre-modern societies, a *nation state* is a feature of modernity – the basic idea being that *states* develop systems of national government with some form of political representation (a parliament, for example), legal system, civil service and fixed geographic borders.
- **Representation:** This doesn’t have to be *democratic* – many early-modern nation states involved monarchies, and even into the twentieth century a range of totalitarian societies have existed (Germany, Italy, Spain and the USSR, for example), but political democracy is a feature of most Western societies in the twenty-first century.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: Note how the above ideas about the origin and nature of the state underpin discussion of the role of the state in modern society.

If we turn the focus slightly to the idea of *modernity* itself (as a way of thinking about and understanding the social and natural worlds), we can explore the:

Cultural characteristics of modern society, mainly because modernity involved major changes in the way people experience and interpret the world (something that led to the development of both sociology and many other forms of intellectual endeavour).

Cultural characteristics

The obvious place to start, in this respect, is with the concept of:

Belief systems which, for our current purpose, we can examine in terms of:

The Enlightenment: Harvey (1990) argues that the origins of *modernity* as a belief are in the explosion of creative thinking and practice that began in late seventeenth-century Europe. As Scambler and Higgs (1998) argue: ‘Modernity refers to Western society over the past 200 years, with its triumphs of medicine and science, beliefs in social progress and improvement, and the emergence of mass institutions such as hospitals, schools, and the nation state, as well as mass production. Social theory ... has its roots in the project of modernity.’

The philosopher and social reformer Thomas Paine (1795) called the Enlightenment the ‘Age of Reason’, with good reason (pun intended) because it involved rejecting the ‘ignorance and superstition’ of pre-modernity and embracing

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a rational understanding of the natural and social worlds – an idea that introduces a major defining feature of modernity:

Science: For O'Donnell (1997) modernity is: '... a period during which science and reason become the main means by which human beings seek to understand the world and solve problems ... modernity is driven by a belief in the power of human reason to understand and change, in short, to master the world'; and the impact of scientific thought was – and continues to be – felt in terms of:

Objectivity: Scientific beliefs involve the idea that it's possible to both discover and create knowledge through objective observations. In other words, both the natural world (the object of study) and the scientific method are based on:

Foundational principles or assumptions. In the former, the world is subject to 'laws' governing behaviour and in the latter, objective science can be used to discover these laws (based, for example, on the foundational principle of 'cause and effect').

Science, therefore, is a very powerful method of explaining the world, for two reasons:

- **Truth** can be separated from fallacy (*fiction*). A classic example is the religious suppression of Galileo's argument that the Earth revolved around the Sun (and not the other way around, as the Catholic Church hierarchy believed). For a time this idea was successfully suppressed, but its *demonstrable truth* was simply too powerful to deny. Under modernity, therefore, *objective truths* replace *subjective faiths* as the primary form of explanation.
- **Instrumental utility:** Keat and Urry (1975) note that one of the most powerful features of science is that 'it works' – scientific thinking and principles have a use in the 'real world' of cars, computers and compact disks.

From this, it's only a short step to the concept of:

Progress – the idea that, as we understand more and more about the natural world, modern society is constantly 'moving

Discussion point: Can things only get better?

Split into two groups. One group should identify the *benefits* of science and the other should identify its *drawbacks*.

As a class, discuss the benefits/drawbacks you've identified (some, you'll find, have *both*).

Benefits	Drawbacks
Longer life expectancy The eradication of disease (such as smallpox)	Nuclear war? Genetic modifications
Further examples?	

forward' – from superstition to science, ignorance to knowledge and, finally, from subservience to mastery of nature.

Once the natural world has been 'mastered' (or at least its foundational principles understood), it's but a small step to the idea of mastery of the social world; if the inanimate world of 'things' is governed by natural laws, perhaps the same is true of the animated world of people?



Digging deeper: Modernity and sociological theory

Given sociology's origins in 'the modern period', it's not surprising that the founders of the discipline (writers such as **Saint-Simon**, **Comte** and **Durkheim** in France, **Weber** and **Marx** in Germany and **Spencer** in England) were immersed in the general philosophies and principles of modernist social thought. **Lechner** (1998) notes: 'Modernity is the central concern of sociology as a discipline ... In its early period, sociology aimed to illuminate ... the changes that were remaking Europe and America ... it dealt with the consequences of industrialization and urbanization in leading nation-states ... [as] part of a broader debate about the meaning of social change.'

Sociology in the early modern period (from **Saint-Simon** onwards) was concerned with the description and explanation of modernity and its associated processes. To paraphrase **O'Donnell** (1997), sociology was initially driven by a belief in the power of human reason to understand, change and – possibly – master the social world. In this section, therefore, we're going to explore a couple of areas:

- **Themes:** involves relating some of the basic concepts of 'modernist sociology' to the cultural themes of modernity we outlined above.
- **Perspectives:** we can examine *consensus*, *conflict* and *social action* theories and their relationship to both *modernity* and *postmodernity*.

Themes

In terms of the first of these ideas, therefore, in many of the classic texts of 'modernist sociology' we can see the basic themes of eighteenth/nineteenth-century thought:

Science represents one of the key ideas for classical sociology, since sociology, as the 'science of society', was founded on a number of assumptions that dovetailed neatly with modernity:

Structure over action: Just as behaviour in the natural world was subject to certain *objective forces* (laws of gravity, for example), social behaviour was subject to 'social forces' that pushed people into *action*. Different sociologists did, of course, have different views about the nature and extent of these forces:

- **Consensus** theorists (such as **Comte** and **Durkheim**) focused on forces of *order* and *stability* – in the case of the former, the attempt to isolate the laws governing social behaviour; in the latter case, laws governing *social statics* (order) and *dynamics* (change).
- **Conflict** theorists (such as **Marx**) focused on forces of *conflict* and *change* (such as the idea of class struggle).

Whatever their difference of emphasis and approach, the underlying belief was similar: these forces could be discovered using



The X-Files

A modernist preoccupation with 'truth' and 'certainty' in a mixed-up postmodern world? Or just a daft TV programme about aliens?

scientific methods (such as detailed *observation*, *theory* development and *objective testing*) – a belief that reflected an underlying modernist certainty that 'the truth', to coin a phrase, was 'Out There Somewhere'. The task of *any* scientist was to find it.

Thus, if behaviour was subject to 'underlying forces', this presupposed:

Regularity: There was a *logic* to behaviour based on the various ways cultural behaviour was structured by 'unseen forces' that could be both *theorised* and *observed*:

Theorised: If behaviour isn't random, unstructured and meaningless, it follows that we can speculate about its causes.

Observed in terms of its effects (using various indicators). In dealing with objective forces, observation had to be similarly objective, structured and free from subjective judgements, in other words:

Empirical: *Objectivity* and *value freedom* are, for modernist theory, non-negotiable; if the aim is to find undiscovered or obscured truth, scientists must be objective in their theory and practice since, if they were not,

we could not be certain a truth had really been discovered.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Religion: 'Secularisation' (a decline in religious belief and behaviour) is, for some sociologists, a 'hidden process' that cannot be directly observed; its existence, however, can be theorised by studying observable indicators of its effect.

Essentialism: All varieties of early modern sociology contained a belief in human behaviour/societies having fundamental (*essential*) organisational features, an idea reflected in the concept of:

Progress: For both consensus and conflict sociology the idea of a progressive revelation of 'scientific truths' was a fundamental goal. In this respect, the concept of *progress* is found in much of classical sociology – from writers as diverse as **Saint-Simon** (*Fonseca* and *Ussher* (1999) point to his call, in the early eighteenth century, for a 'science of society' having parity with the natural sciences), **Comte** (and his vision of society governed by a 'scientific priesthood' based on their understanding and mastery of the 'laws of human behaviour'), **Marx** (with his scientific critique of nineteenth-century capitalism and the vision of a future, communist society) and **Weber** (who saw the rational ordering of society as an achievable goal).

Finally, we can note how classical sociology gave rise to two forms of scientific *methodology*:

- **positivism**, mainly associated with *consensus* sociology, and
- **realism**, mainly associated with *conflict* sociology.

Perspectives

Modernist sociology, as we've suggested, has historically been dominated by *structuralist perspectives*, the basic themes of which we can review next, beginning with:

Consensus structuralism, which involves, for **Giddens** (2001), a focus on the way agreement over '... basic social values by the members of a group, community or society' is both socially constructed and a fundamental characteristic of social behaviour. The persistence of society, therefore, is based around a:

Common value system involving 'consensual beliefs held by the majority of the population'. Value systems are organised around:

Social institutions – patterns of shared, stable behaviour that persist over time and around which modern societies are structured in terms of:

- **economic** institutions (work, for example)
- **political** institutions (government, police, judiciary, and so forth)
- **cultural** institutions (such as religion, education and the media).

Each institution (or set of related institutions) is *functional* for society because they are connected by their:

- **Purpose** – what each institution exists to do (the function of economic institutions is to provide the physical means to survive; the function of the family is primary socialisation, and so forth).
- **Needs** – what each institution takes from other institutions in order to function. Work, for example, needs the family to produce socialised individuals and, in return, provides the means of family group survival.

Themes

This perspective is related to a couple of the main themes of modernism:

Foundationalism: The concept of *function* – the basic *foundation* on which consensus theory rests – takes a number of forms, an example of which is:

- **Functional imperative** (a command that must be obeyed): Each social institution is functionally connected to other, related institutions on the basis of the functions they must perform if a society is to survive and prosper (*purpose* and *needs*, in other words).
- **Structure**: Because institutions are *functionally linked*, we experience society in terms of pressures and constraints on our behaviour (the pressure to work, form a family, and so forth). In this respect, society is a *hidden hand* pushing people to perform the roles required for the reproduction of social order. **Durkheim** (1895) identified two significant aspects of order:
 - **Social solidarity** – the feeling we both belong to a society and have certain basic things in common: culture, socialisation, values and the like.
 - **Collective conscience** – the 'external expression' of the will of the people. This is the force that binds people to each other as a society (to integrate them into collective forms of behaviour).
- **Essentialism**: **Parsons** (1951) argued that every institution needs to solve four *essential problems* if it is to exist and function:
 - **Goal attainment** involves the need to



Growing it yourself: Fun with GAIL

Although functional imperatives apply to any institution, Parsons (1959) explicitly identified the functional imperatives for an *education system*. Using the following table as a template (we've given you some examples to get you started), how do schools perform the following essential functions?

Goal attainment	Adaptation	Integration	Latency
Qualifications	The school	Uniforms	School rules
Further examples?			

set behavioural goals and to specify the means through which they can be achieved.

- **Adaptation** involves *creating* the means to achieve valued goals. This may, for example, involve the ability to provide the *physical necessities* of institutional life.
- **Integration:** People need to feel a part of any institution and one way to achieve this is to provide something they have in common (norms and values, for example). The ability of an institution to successfully integrate people is crucial for its internal harmony and reproduction.
- **Latency** (or pattern maintenance) refers to the development of *social control* mechanisms to manage tensions, motivate people, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and so forth.

Perspectives

Conflict structuralism focuses, according to Bilton et al. (1996) on 'the notion that society is based on an unequal distribution of advantage and is characterised by a conflict of interests between the advantaged and the

disadvantaged'. It encompasses perspectives such as *Marxism* (conflict between social classes) and *feminism* (gender conflicts) and can be related to the main themes of modernism in terms of:

Foundationalism: Conflicts of interest, as we've just noted, are central to this perspective. For Marxists, a key term is:

Social class, where class conflict creates social change through the opposition of classes as they pursue their different *collective* interests. For Marxists, classes are defined in terms of their relationship to the:

Means of production – the social process whereby goods are created. For *traditional* Marxism, capitalist society consists of two great classes:

- **the bourgeoisie** – those who own and control the means of production
- **the proletariat** – those who sell their labour in the economic marketplace.

Modern forms of Marxism, however, tend to note the existence of:

Class fractions (subdivisions of each main class). For example, the bourgeoisie (or ruling class) might be subdivided into the:

- **bourgeoisie** (owners of large companies)

- **petit (small) bourgeoisie** (owners of small businesses) and
- **professionals** (such as academics or managers who control the day-to-day running of companies).

Essentialism: Different forms of conflict theory have slightly different essential features. Marxism, for example, focuses on areas such as the economic structure of society as the key to understanding human behaviour and development. Radical feminists, meanwhile, focus on the essential features of males and females in terms of, for example, their different psychologies.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: These ideas are developed in more detail in relation to ideas about – and consequences of – the changing class structure.



Preparing the ground: Sociology and postmodernity

The idea of postmodern society is a *contested concept* within sociology in that, although economic and cultural changes are clearly occurring, there are arguments about whether these changes relate to a *new type* of (postmodern) society or are simply a *different form* of modern society – what **Giddens** (1998) calls *late modernity* or ‘modernisation happening under different conditions from the past’. Whatever your position on this argument, we’ve split this section into a discussion of:

- **Late modernity** – considered, for theoretical convenience, to include sociological theories (such as

interactionist sociology) from the mid- to late twentieth century and

- **Postmodernity** – considered in terms of the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries, where we look at some possible characteristics of postmodern society.

We can identify some of the main features of late/postmodernity in the following terms.

Economic characteristics

Writers such as **Bell** (1973) suggest that a major economic change in the late twentieth century was the development of:

Post-industrial society, with an emphasis on the *provision of services* (banking, insurance, etc.) rather than the *production of goods* (a feature of modern society) – something that involves an increasing emphasis on *knowledge* (ideas about how to do things) as a saleable commodity. For **Bell**, post-industrial society was based on three main characteristics:

- **Service:** Most people would be employed in service industries, from the low-level, poorly paid and insecure (shopworking, call centres and the like) to the high-level, handsomely rewarded and relatively secure (information technology, computing, finance, and so forth).
- **Science:** The development of computer technology, applied to the production of *goods* and *services*, that would revolutionise how things were made and distributed.
- **Consumption:** In modernity, *producers* of goods and services, rather than consumers, were the dominant economic force; in postmodernity, the reverse is true. Through information technology (such as the internet) the consumer

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exercises *choice* that exposes producers to such fierce competition that the consumer becomes the main focus of economic activity.

the construction of individual identities. **Bauman (1997)**, for example, questions the importance of class as a source of identity in postmodernity.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: This type of economic change has had important consequences for both the way we define and measure social class (traditionally involving occupation as a crucial indicator) and the significance of concepts like class in

Post-industrial society, **Bell** argued, developed in the heavily industrialised societies of the USA and Western Europe and would, eventually, spread across the world. The UK, for example, saw a steady decline throughout the twentieth century in the economic significance of, first,



Growing it yourself: Can you do it?

Read the following:

You can do it, if you B&Q it

Source: Heather Stewart, *The Guardian* 06/12/03

'Manton Colliery – Sharing Success' reads the blue crest on the pit wheel of what was once one of the most productive coal mines in the country. Silent since the pit was shut almost 10 years ago, the wheel now sits embedded in the grass – a monument to an economy which has disappeared.

Stacked on top of those memories, though, will soon be pallets of bathroom tiles, power tools and six-inch nails – and 1,000 new jobs . . . There could be few better symbols of the changing shape of Britain's economy over the last decade than a once-mighty coal mine levelled off to make room for a giant distribution centre for DIY bits and bobs.

In 1996, the claimant count in Bassetlaw was close to 4,000; the latest figures show that has fallen to just over 1,000, many of whom should be swept up by B&Q with its on-site gym and its crèche to help mums get into work. The firm says it wants to have more women, and more part-time workers, than at its average distribution centre.

Split into two groups and use the following table as the basis for:

- Group 1 identifying positive aspects of this economic change
- Group 2 identifying negative aspects of this economic change.

As a class, consider the conclusions that can be drawn from these changes.

Positive	Negative
New forms of employment?	Job insecurity?

agriculture (which now accounts for about 3% of all employment) and, second, manufacturing (now roughly 20% of all employment). The past 30 years have seen a sharp decline in heavy industry (such as coal-mining and steel production) and a rapid rise in computer-based, service technologies – something that's partly accounted for by the increasing *rationality* of economic production. Economic decisions, in this respect, are made in *global*, rather than national, contexts, partly because of the behaviour and influence of:

Transnational corporations: Where corporations are able to operate freely across national borders (moving capital, production and even people from one country to the next) it becomes difficult for *national governments* to control the behaviour of such corporations. To take one example, the development of cheap international communications has meant call-centre jobs once based in the UK can now just as easily be based in countries such as India, where labour costs are lower.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Power and politics: The behaviour and influence of transnational companies has a significant impact on the role of the state in modern societies.



Weeding the path

Not everyone necessarily subscribes to the idea of a post-industrial society. **Harvey** (1990) argues that there has simply been a gradual change in the nature of economic production, away from:

Fordist models of accumulation based

around what **Postero** (2005) characterises as mass production, rigid labour relationships and centralised production processes, towards:

Flexible accumulation involving the combination of a range of ideas **Harvey** characterises as:

- **Flexibility** across all areas – from the way goods and services are produced (products created in different countries and assembled in their 'home markets', for example), through *labour markets* (people employed on short-term contracts and being prepared to seek work across national frontiers), to *consumption patterns* (where people are encouraged to seek out new products and experiences).
- **New production sectors:** The constant development and refinement of services, the seeking out of new markets and '... above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organisational innovation'.
- **Time and space compression:** With computer technology making global communication quicker (instantaneous at times), the world appears 'smaller', enabling transnational corporations to coordinate the manufacture of goods and the provision of services in a wide range of countries. Examples here might be the development of internet-based companies such as the book retailer Amazon.

Flexible accumulation, therefore, involves a complex interplay of ideas and activities, from the:

Global Fordism of car manufacturers where **Harvey** notes '... production is spread out, complexly intertwining across the globe like a spider web – Japanese cars

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are made with Korean parts in the United States', to the behaviour of:

Cyberspace companies such as **eBay**, a company that hardly exists in the physical sense of buildings and factories.

These ideas reflect what **Goldman et al.** (1995) argue is a significant development, unique to postmodern society:

Agile corporations – a 'new type of transnational corporation' that developed at the end of the twentieth century. These operate globally (coordinating production, distribution and exchange across a number of markets, countries and continents) and are alert to economic and cultural developments and changes.

* SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: We can link these ideas into Sabel's (1991) concept of **unbounded networks (economic networks that have no boundaries)**.

Political characteristics

The political characteristics of late/postmodernity are many and varied, but some significant ideas we can note are:

Nation states that came into being in the modern period steadily *decline* in significance, gradually being replaced by one – or both – of the following:

- **International states** that take two potential forms:
 - **Real**, as in something like the European Union where nation states (Britain, Germany, France, and so forth) form a much larger, international, political bloc. The EU, for example, has its own elected parliament, and individual member

states abide by a range of common political and legal agreements.

- **Virtual:** In this situation people transcend national boundaries through communication systems like the internet. Virtual communities of like-minded individuals and groups can 'meet' and interact in cyberspace.
- **Local states:** As nation states dissolve, local or regional communities (and identities) become more important to people. **Chiu et al.** (1997) argue that places like Hong Kong resemble the 'walled city states' of pre-modern societies.

These ideas have implications for concepts of identity; the global movement of people, commodities and knowledge, for example, makes the idea of 'a nation' increasingly difficult to sustain in postmodern society and also impacts on ideas about:

Community: This is an important concept for both sociology in general and modernist sociology (especially conflict and consensus perspectives) in particular, since it represents a significant source of *personal* and *social identity*. **Bellah** (1985) suggests that a community consists of people who:

- are socially **interdependent**
- **participate** in discussion and decision-making
- **share practices** that define and nurture a sense of community.

The concept of community, in modernist social theory, is frequently used to underscore the idea of categories such as class, age, gender, ethnicity and region (both local and national) as sources of identity. In other words, a clearly defined sense of community provides support for identities

based around these categories, since they are:

Solid referents: Within *modernist theory*, gender, for example, has a relatively clear meaning in that it refers to both *biological* categories (male and female) and *social* categories (masculine and feminine) that reflect this basic biological division.

Postmodern social theory, however, questions this notion of community and, by extension, the kinds of theory on which it's based – within postmodernity, for example, the usefulness of concepts like class and gender as the basis for analysing behaviour is questioned. We can understand this by thinking in terms of what **Hudgins** and **Richards** (2000) call 'traditional approaches to understanding community' that stress, as in the **Bellah** example, things like:

- **physical proximity**
- **face-to-face interaction**
- **primary social relationships**
- **commitment** to shared meanings and beliefs
- **centred identities.**

Community

Hudgins and **Richards** suggest that, in postmodern society, concepts of community based on 'shared social spaces' (physically interacting with people) and 'community as a source of meaning and identity' may change. As they put it: 'What happens to the spatial sense of community, for example, in an era of hyperspace in which our modern concepts of space are meaningless; in which space has been annihilated and spatial barriers have disappeared?'

Rosenau (1992) further argues that, in postmodern society, the concept of

community changes (she refers to the notion of 'community without unity' – the idea that we still look to 'the community' for a sense of meaning and identity, but this 'community' may exist only in a *virtual world* of people with whom we interact but never meet). In terms of social theory, therefore, postmodern explanations of behaviour are radically different to modernist explanations, if for no other reason than the fact that they view the concept of 'society' (and, by extension, concepts of community and identity) in radically different ways – an idea that leads us to consider the cultural characteristics of postmodern society.

Cultural characteristics

Belief systems: Postmodern societies are characterised by multiple belief systems – in terms of differences *between* economic, political and cultural systems and *within* such systems. **Lyotard** (1984) argues that one consequence of this:

Diversity of belief systems is an 'incredulity towards grand narratives'; people are increasingly *unlikely* to believe 'all-encompassing explanations' that claim to explain 'everything about something'. This includes explanations produced by *religions* (Christianity, Islam), *politicians* (conservatism, socialism), *philosophers* (Marxism, fascism) and – of particular interest here – *scientists*. This sense of 'incredulity' represents a form of:

Anti-essentialism – the idea that it is impossible to reduce complex systems (such as societies) to their 'essential features' – for example, that 'gendered behaviour' can be explained in terms of the 'essential qualities' of males and females (their genetic, biological or psychological differences, for example). The 'search for essence' is, for

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postmodernists, a peculiarly *modernist* quest, one related to the concept of:

Truth: In modernist theory ‘truth’ is an essence; it represents the idea that it is possible to distinguish *objectively* between truth and falsity such that we can demonstrate that something is ‘true for all time’.

Postmodern *anti-essentialism*, however, sees ‘truth’ as a socially constructed category – nothing in the social world ‘exists’ outside of ideology and social construction. In other words, ‘truth’ is both *ideological* (defined from a particular viewpoint) and *relative*; my truth may not necessarily be your truth – and even if it is, this truth may not survive into the future.

Relativity

These ideas have important consequences for how we understand concepts of sociological theory and science (discussed in the following section) – mainly because ‘The Truth’ is not ‘Out There’ waiting to be discovered in some objective way. Rather, ‘truth’ is *always* a *relative* concept, constructed from the subjective ways people experience and understand their world. If we accept this idea, it follows that a concept such as:

Progress is a subjective concept that cannot be measured quantitatively. It is simply one more form of ideological construction (or *discourse*, as postmodernists describe it).

In the above we’ve outlined some basic ideas relating to the idea of late/postmodern society, and it was in the light of such changes throughout the twentieth century that sociology took a distinctive turn, away from a preoccupation with *structure* and towards thinking about *agency*. We can examine this idea by thinking, first, about *interactionist* perspectives, and second, *postmodern* perspectives.