

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY ABOUT STRUCTURES AND INSTITUTIONS

Social institutions are culturally and historically contingent and are the result of social norms and tangible organizations that enforce these rules. Importantly, today's Western social institutions are relatively recent, emerging in their current forms during the Industrial Revolution. We have examined four of the key social institutions in society – family, education, media and work – and have explored the ways in which these institutions have been analysed and understood by sociologists. We could have looked at many other institutions – from sport and leisure to medicine and health – and the way we have approached them can be applied to other areas.

In each of the four cases, studying the implicit and taken-for-granted norms of institutions yields important and surprising results. For example, when focusing on education, examining the institution of education confounds some of our expectations about meritocracy and the success of education as an institution – education does not necessarily reward the most innately able or the hardest working. Indeed, success is determined in no small part by how well suited a person is to the forms of assessment that are used. Similarly, the sociology of the media tells us that how we enjoy our leisure time and the culture we like may have more negative effects than we realize – are we cultural dupes who waste our time when we could proactively be campaigning for positive social change? The study of structures and institutions is a vital part of sociology precisely because it challenges our preconceived ideas of society, helps route out injustice and inequality, and has the potential to effect progressive social change in the future.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that society is highly organized through invisible social structures. These structures both constrain and enable our individual behaviours and are supported by social institutions, some of which are formal and others informal. These institutions socialize us into particular behaviours and roles in society which allow us to maintain the existing social structures. We have explored the ways in which sociologists have critiqued institutions and the social structures they support, focusing on education, the family, the media and work. Some of the more radical sociological thinkers have even suggested we move away from social institutions altogether, assuming that this would eventually lead to the collapse of some of the more problematic structures which are built on inequality.

HOW WOULD...?

- » How would a qualitative sociologist study representations in the media from an empirical perspective?
- » Think back to [Chapter 4](#). What key methods might be used to practically examine the more abstract ideas of cultural theorists like Stuart Hall? What areas would you look at?