

Key Concepts in Sociology

The result is that when males are marginalised, they respond with more serious, often violent crime; when females are marginalised, they respond with nonviolent property crime. (Heimer, 1995: 142)

See also: *Anomie, Culture, Feminism, Rational Choice*

FURTHER READING

Durkheim's argument that crime and deviance are functional necessities for society is presented in several of his works, including *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1982 [1895]). Both Sutherland's *Principles of Criminology* (1949 [1939]) and Merton's *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968 [1949]) seek to explain why some people conform while others do not. On labelling theory and the ability to depict certain groups and behaviours as deviant, see Howard Becker's 'Becoming a marijuana user' (1953) and *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963), and Goffman's *Stigma – Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1964).

discourse

Discourse refers to how knowledge, subjects, behaviour, and events are depicted and defined in statements, assumptions, concepts, themes, and shared ideas. The simplest way to think of the concept of discourse is that it provides a framework through which we see the world. According to Apter, discourse theory concerns how people convince themselves to act, how they define choices, interpret events and experiences using, amongst other things, signs, symbols, language, myths and meaning (2005: 113–114). For example, national culture can be seen as a discourse carrying meanings that can help shape our actions and self-conceptions of who 'we' are:

National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about 'the nation' with which we can identify; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it ... The discourse of England represents what 'England' is. (Hall, 1992b: 293; original emphasis)

As Hall put it, the attention devoted to language and discourse and the so-called discursive or 'cultural turn' in social sciences can be seen as marking a significant shift in our approach to knowledge about society (1997a: 6):

By exploring the role of language, discourse and culture in the construction of meaning, we can find that the things we take for granted are much more open to question than we have often supposed. For instance, the ways we define society, inequality, culture and politics ... have all changed significantly over time. (Smith, 2003: 233)

Given that our knowledge of the world comes through the language and discourse that we encounter, it follows that what we are can be said to be discursively constructed or constituted (Bilton et al., 1996: 551). As Probyn put it: 'As anyone who has felt their power knows, words matter' (2005: 519). The power of discourses therefore resides in allowing or encouraging certain things to be thought, said, or acted out by constructing positions that are seen to be 'self evident', 'received wisdom', 'taken-for-granted' because they 'make sense' to us, or are 'what we expect'. Conversely, a discourse will tend to limit or prevent *other* things being thought, said, or done precisely because they do not satisfy these criteria. Thus, discourse can be seen as relating to the operation of power, both for those who 'transmit' it and those who 'receive' it, or as Apter expressed it, discourse theory can reveal how language, speech, symbols, myths, and metaphors can help to build what he termed a 'symbolic density' that may constitute a form of 'capital' (2005: 114).

A discourse analyst is then less interested in assessing the truth or falsity of the social reality as shaped by a particular discourse, than in the ways that people use language to construct their accounts of their social world. For example, Tonkiss considered different explanations of juvenile crime constructed within discourses of 'deviancy' or 'delinquency':

... because the meanings and explanations that are given to different social factors shape the practical ways that people and institutions respond to them. If a common understanding of juvenile crime rests on discourses of individual pathology (for example, crimes arise from the personal failings of the individual), it is likely that this problem will be tackled in a quite different way than if it was commonly understood in terms of a discourse of poverty (for example, crimes arise as a result of material deprivation). (Tonkiss, 1998: 249)

Perhaps because of the interdisciplinary nature of discourse theory, most of its main practitioners came from outside sociology itself. Key works include Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957), Baudrillard's *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993) and Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978). However, the discursive approach to analysing the social is primarily associated with Michel Foucault's work, which he first outlined in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972). His premise was that systems of thought and knowledge (*epistemes* or discursive formations in his terminology) were governed by rules that operated beneath the consciousness of individual subjects that determines the boundaries of thought in a given sphere and period. In his view, a discourse gave credibility to certain ideas and denied credibility to others, thus establishing what

could be known and thought about a subject. For Foucault, discourse *constituted the world* by shaping the way knowledge was produced in particular historical circumstances:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned ... the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as truth. (Foucault, 1980: 131, quoted in Hall, 1997c: 49)

Foucault considered that discourse was inextricably connected to social power and that power was conveyed by discourse. In practice, discourses are often in effect 'housed' in organisations and institutions that act as custodians of knowledge and authority – perhaps best exemplified in medicine, but also evident in other fields, notably law and education. More broadly, the power of discourse resides in the creation of knowledge that has the status of 'truth'. As such, it influences, regulates and constrains practices and meanings (therefore in order to think, people have to do so in terms established by the discourse).

Foucault's exploration of discourse focused on a number of spheres – prisons and punishment, deviance, sexuality, medicine, psychiatry and madness – and in each case he sought to reveal the ideas and practices that formed and changed them. In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) he examined the development of psychiatric discourse and the ideas, concepts, and theories that empowered this discourse. Previously, in *Madness and Civilization* (1961), he examined how what was once defined as 'madness' later became defined as 'mental illness': in the fifteenth century madness had been seen as a powerful force that befell and threatened to destroy individuals (yet also gave them special knowledge) and also as a signal of the frailty of human beings. In this period, the mad – though outcasts – were free to wander. In the late eighteenth century, however, there came a radical change: now the mad were seen as having chosen madness; they were therefore beyond rational persuasion and had to be coerced and confined to asylums, in which they were subjected to harsh treatment. As Foucault pointed out, the 'great confinement' that occurred in this period involved an indiscriminate locking away of socially troublesome individuals (namely not just the mad, but also the poor, the vagrant, and the sick).

Subsequently, though, a distinction was made between those thought capable of work and those seen as incapable. It was at this point that the hospital came to be viewed as the appropriate place for the mad: according to Cuff et al.,

The differentiation of the mad from the general population of the undesirable and their relocation to the hospital context is widely advertised as a progressive development, involving more humane and better-informed treatment. The mad person was becoming the patient, and the patient was no longer treated through brutal discipline, but through medical regimes based upon scientific knowledge. [But] Foucault maintains that this appealing image is not true. (2006: 259–260)

In Foucault's opinion, the new belief that the mad were merely sick ('mentally ill') and in need of medical treatment was by no means a clear advance on earlier conceptions of madness. Foucault also sought to show how the body has been treated in discursive practices. He argued that the body was not merely given certain social meanings, it was wholly constituted by discursive practices. For instance, according to Thomas (1998: 120) feminists of different theoretical positions have argued for 'the reclamation of women's bodies from the hands of patriarchal discourses', and she cited Martin's study *The Woman in the Body* (1989) as a demonstration of how the ways that women feel about their own bodies are frequently quite contrary to the assumptions medical science holds about women, as presented, for instance, in medical textbooks.

A similar argument may be made about what is 'known' about women more generally. As Bilton et al. put it, in modern Western societies people 'know' that women are independent, rational, and able to make sensible choices 'which overcome the dictates of instincts, hormones or emotions', and, consequently, they possess full political and legal rights as citizens and 'are not simply extensions of their more rational fathers or husbands'. But, they add, however obvious all this is in the present day:

This conception of women is recent and even now precariously established. The discourses of individualism, citizenship and rational conduct were for a long time applied only to men. It took struggles to *constitute* women as really *possessing* these qualities in the eyes of society. Feminists had to get existing powerful discourses applied to them (e.g. citizenship) as well as trying to initiate their own new discourse (or discourses) of feminism. (Bilton et al., 1996: 637; original emphasis)

Foucault has been criticised for imputing too much to 'discourse' and those who would follow in his footsteps have been accused of neglecting the influence that material, economic, and structural factors have on how power/knowledge operate (Hall, 1997c: 51). Others have suggested that usage of the concept of discourse has been so glib, facile, and widespread that it has lost meaning.

See also: *Citizenship, Culture, Deviance, Feminism, Orientalism, The Body*

FURTHER READING

See Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* (1961); *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972); *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977 [1975]); and *Power/Knowledge* (1980). Said's *Orientalism* (1978) presents a dichotomy between East and West, wherein the prevailing discourse in the West depicts the East in wholly negative terms. Hall's introduction to *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997a) offers a good introduction to the part discourse plays in how we make sense of our world.