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# PART ONE

## Foundations of Sociology

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### CHAPTER 1

## Introduction to Sociology

### Postmodern Theory

A good way to think of postmodern **theory** is to consider the **concept** of *voices*. In all societies, there are different voices that speak, and together they represent a diversity of life experiences and social locations. Postmodern **theory** is concerned with recognizing that there are many such voices, and that they should not be drowned out by the powerful voice of those who are dominant in society (traditionally, white **heterosexual**<sup>1</sup> men from middle- and upper-class backgrounds).

A leading figure in postmodern **theory** was the French philosopher and historian **Michel Foucault** (1926–1984). In his **groundbreaking**<sup>2</sup> article “Two Lectures” (1980), Foucault talked about the misleading nature of what he termed **totalitarian discourse**. A totalitarian discourse is any universal claim about how knowledge or understanding is achieved. Western science, for example, is at the centre of a totalitarian discourse used by those who claim that it is the only **legitimate**<sup>3</sup> path to discovering the “truth” about the causes and cures for different diseases, while dismissing **alternative** forms of medicine that are popular and trusted in many non-Western cultures.

“Totalitarian” in this context should be easy enough to understand: it describes a set of beliefs or ideas that dominates (“totally”) all others. The other part of this term, “discourse,” is not as easily understood. A **discourse** can be defined as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> **Heterosexual:** not gay; people who are sexually attracted to the other sex

<sup>2</sup> **Groundbreaking:** starting something new and different; creative

<sup>3</sup> **Legitimate:** accepted; proper

A conceptual **framework** with its own **internal logic** and underlying assumptions that may be readily **recognizable**<sup>4</sup> to the audience. A discourse involves a **distinct** way of speaking about some **aspect** of reality. [Use of the term] also suggests that the **item** under discussion is not a natural **attribute** of reality but socially constructed and defined. (Fleras & Elliott 1999: p. 433)

A discourse is not necessarily wrong or false. The term really just refers to a particular treatment of a **topic** that has been created through a given set of assumptions, a vocabulary, rules, **logic**, and so on. However, to call something a *totalizing* (or *totalitarian*) discourse is to **condemn**<sup>5</sup> it as **overly**<sup>6</sup> ambitious and narrow-minded. Consider the common observation that the brain is like a computer. We can **create** a discourse comparing the functions and capabilities of the brain to those of a computer. Both store memories—sounds, images, video—and both **acquire** and **process** “**data**.” We can all relate to a time when we felt that our brains had “crashed.” But the discourse fails when we consider how poorly computers handle translation. Computers cannot translate well—not as well as humans—since they cannot deal with the complicated **input** of cultural context. Very few words or phrases from any given language can be translated directly and perfectly into another. Our discourse, then, is problematic: the brain may be *similar* to a computer *in certain ways*, but it would be wrong to say that the human brain is *just like* a computer. A discourse becomes totalitarian when it is promoted by those with power and influence until it becomes widely accepted as the only “right” interpretation.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* ([1972]/1994), Foucault wrote about the importance of discovering how **individual** discourses developed as a way of examining their strengths, weaknesses, and limitations. He called this **process** of discovery an **archaeology of knowledge**. The sociologist must dig through the layers of presented information considered to be factual (a discourse) in order to discover how the supposed fact was established or constructed. Through this **process** of **excavation**<sup>7</sup> the sociologist may find that some parts of the discourse have been distorted along the way, which affects how people **interpret** and act upon the discourse. The Our Stories **segment**<sup>8</sup> on page 22 presents an example of how an archaeology of knowledge can lead

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<sup>4</sup> **Recognizable:** familiar; something that you’ve seen before

<sup>5</sup> **Condemn:** if you condemn something, you say it’s bad

<sup>6</sup> **Overly:** too

<sup>7</sup> **Excavation:** digging through layers

<sup>8</sup> **Segment:** part

us to reassess our understanding of a supposed historical fact.

Foucault's **challenge** to students of sociology is to understand that knowledge is constructed, and that it is important to **investigate** the question, *How do we know that?* Because there are conceptual constraints that both determine and limit our thinking in ways that we are not **aware** of, there may be **alternative** constructions of knowledge on a particular subject that are just as **valid** as—or even more **valid** than—our own.