- **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

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

✻ 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

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

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

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* (conservativism, 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

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.

Interactionism is a generic name we give to a range of positions (symbolic interaction, phenomenology and ethnomethodology, for example) that 'reversed the theoretical gaze' – away from a preoccupation with *structures* and onto a consideration of human *agency*. In this respect, we can begin by noting that, for interactionists, the theoretical focus is on:

Action over structure: Interactionist perspectives focus on the individual – rather than 'society' or 'social structure' – as the primary unit of analysis. Understanding how and why people construct and reconstruct the world on a daily basis is, therefore, the main object of interest for this type of sociology. As **Heise** (1996) puts it: 'Interactionism emphasizes the force of shared culture and individual agency in human interaction [and offers] a view of society as constantly reinvented by individual people applying their shared culture to solve immediate problems'. This, he argues, leads to:

Society representing the ' … net outcome of active individuals dealing with daily challenges'. In other words, when we talk about 'society' we can do so only 'as if' it were a real force; from this perspective society is something we create, in our minds and through our behaviours, to express a sense of social solidarity and belonging.

Micro sociology

To explain human behaviour, therefore, we need to study social interaction at the *micro* level – that of people going about their daily lives. From this perspective neither *society* nor *reality* are things that can be studied separately from people because they are:

Negotiated abstractions: **Schutz** (1962) argued that 'subjective meanings give rise to an apparently objective social world'. In

⚠ 🌷 Growing it yourself: Creating the world

For this exercise you need to split into groups and each take a particular area of the social world to analyse (obvious choices might be education, which we've used as an illustration, family, crime, religion, and so forth).

Each group should identify the 'things we do to create' education (or whatever) and also the various ways our creation 'reflects back' on us to be experienced as a 'structural force'.

Things we do to create [education]	How our creation reflects back on behaviour
Attend Create authority structures Obey norms	Organisational rules Classroom norms
Further examples?	

other words, our individual (subjective) behaviours give rise to *apparently* objective social structures (*abstractions*) that 'reflect back' on the behaviour we originally created.

The concept of *negotiated reality* brings into question the idea of 'objectivity'; if a world we experience objectively (such as going to school) is actually the result of the subjective behaviour and intentions of many individuals, we can similarly understand 'education' only subjectively, in terms of how people experience this elaborate 'structural fiction'. **Wilson** (2002) expresses this in terms of:

Intersubjectivity, where 'we experience the world with and through others. Whatever meaning we create has its roots in human actions'. In other words, the social world – its 'social artefacts and cultural objects' – consists of *phenomena* whose meaning is both *negotiated* and *interpreted* through social interaction. For example, we may learn something through personal

experience ('fire burns') that we pass on to others who may then incorporate it in to their own belief system. In school, for example, you build on the work done by previous human beings – as **Wilson** argues, in geography you don't have to sail around the globe to 'map countries of the world (although someone once did have to do just that'), just as in PE you don't have to invent football before you can play it.

In terms of sociological theory, these ideas run *counter* to early modernist notions that social behaviour can be theoretically isolated and empirically studied (the idea of *essentialism* …); such ideas and research techniques are simply not going to work in the kind of world described by interactionists, governed by subjective beliefs and processes like:

Categorisation: To help us keep track of our lives and interact successfully in wider society, we 'group related phenomena' by developing stereotypical categories that help

maintain a sense of order and stability in a potentially chaotic world. This gives rise to the concept of:

Labelling: The labels we devise ('mother', 'criminal' and the like) define the nature of the social categories we create. In late/postmodern societies people increasingly behave towards each other on the basis of the labels each attracts from others, mainly because face-to-face interaction may be limited (or, as in the virtual world, non-existent). Some labels can be considered:

Master labels because they are so powerful they condition *every* aspect of our behaviour towards the person so labelled (think about the consequences of being labelled a 'terrorist', for example). The labels we attract, either through choice (*achievement*) or through imposition (*ascription*), are important because knowledge of a label serves to unlock the assumptions we hold about particular social categories and, of course, conditions the way we feel it appropriate to behave towards someone.

✳ SYNOPTIC LINK

Crime and deviance: Labelling theory is an important explanation of both crime and deviance.

⚠ Digging deeper: Postmodernity and sociological theory

We can dig a little deeper into late/postmodern social theory by, first, developing some ideas about:

Interactionist sociology

Like the structuralist (consensus and conflict) theories we've discussed previously, Interactionist sociology is rooted in modernist ideas about the possibility of explaining the social world in ways that are both *reliable* and *valid* – although, as we've discussed, its theoretical focus is very different. The main question we need to address, however, is, to paraphrase **Heise** (1996), how do the 'minute-by-minute behaviour inventions of millions of individuals culminate in the machine-like daily order' that, to take only one example, educates us in schools and colleges across the country? How, in other words, is social order possible if 'society' consists of people 'going about their individual lives'?

Networks

The answer, **Heise** suggests, is ' . . . society emerges from the creative activities of enculturated individuals'. In other words, patterns of behaviour – how they originate and develop in terms of social groups – can be understood in terms of:

Social networks based, according to **Cook** (2001), on two features:

- **Nodes** – defined as people (individuals or groups) in a particular network. 'The only requirement for a node,' according to **Cook**, 'is that it must be able to relate in some manner to other nodes' – something that leads to the concept of:

- **Ties** – or the relationships between two *nodes* (that can be many and varied – think about the range of relationships within your sociology class, for example). *Ties* (a relationship people recognise) are generated through *shared meanings* based around role-play – for example, the tie between a teacher and a student in an educational network. Group networks are

also *not* self-contained; they involve links to other social networks, which leads to the development of larger networks and, ultimately, a sense of *social structure*.

Cook refers to the connections *between* networks as:

Bridging ties – a relationship that 'connects two otherwise distant portions of a network'. Continuing the educational theme, a class teacher plays a bridging role here because they link a specific class into the wider structure of the educational network. Individual students may also represent bridging ties by, for example, linking a school into a parental network. In this way we can see how, according to **Heise** and **Durig** (1997):

- **Micro-actions** – the actions of individuals – lead to:
- **Macro-actions** – routines that shape the behaviour and structure of large organisational networks.

Before we move on to consider a different approach to understanding the construction of social systems, we can note that, in **Heise's** (1996) formulation, *network theory* – what he terms:

Affect control theory – can be used to explain how 'the majestic order of society emerges from repetitive application of evolved cultural resources to frame and solve recurrent problems' – social structures result from people's repeated, meaningful actions within social networks.

Weeding the path

Although this is one way contemporary modernist theory examines and explains the development of social structures, we can explore an *alternative explanation* that reflects a more *structuralist* preoccupation with social order, namely **Luhmann's** (1995) concept of:

Growing it yourself: The ties that bind

This concept of social networks is one based on the idea of a **role set** (a group of related roles). In this exercise, you're required to construct a social network diagram for your class, showing the relationships that exist within this network.

To help you, we've constructed a simple network example (five students focused on one teacher).

In your example, you should not only show the ties within the network; you should also indicate how this particular network (the school class) links to additional networks both within and outside education.
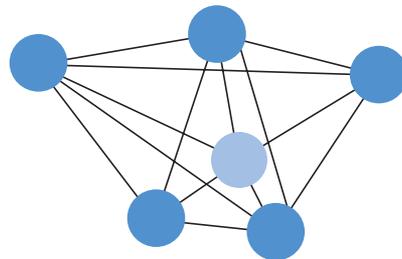
Simple social network showing nodes and indicating ties

Systems theory

Where something like *affect control theory* argues that *complex systems* are created through the purposeful actions of individuals, **Luhmann's** *systems theory* argues the reverse; he begins from the idea of a 'world system' (all societies in the modern world are in some way connected) and, effectively, *works backwards* to an explanation of individual social action. To understand how this works we need to think about societies as:

Complex systems: **Luhmann** assumes human behaviour is generally characterised by complexity, considered in terms, for example, of the number and range of possible relational combinations across the social world. In addition, this level of complexity introduces the idea of:

Chaos: If social life is (essentially) based on conscious individuals making behavioural choices across a range of groups and social networks, it's difficult to see how social order can be created and maintained; in other words, if we focus on the idea that networks are built *upwards* – from individuals at the bottom to systems at the top – it's difficult to explain how individual behaviours (in terms of the possible behavioural choices people can make in any given situation) can produce a relatively orderly and predictable social system.

Luhmann suggest this is possible only if we think in terms of systems *imposing* an order and stability on individual behaviour that is, in turn, sufficiently flexible to accommodate individual choice and deviation. The question here, according to **Vandenberghe** (1998), is how 'the social ordering of chaos' comes about, and the answer involves:

Autopoiesis ('auto-poe-ee-sis'): According to **Maturana** and **Varela** (1980), autopoiesis involves an organisation (such as a social system) being *self-reproductive*; in other words, **Luhmann** sees social systems as both:

- **Autonomous** – systems effectively operate 'independently' of people. They are able to do this, for **Luhmann**, because societies are not 'things' or 'structures', as such, but *communication networks*.
- **Self-maintaining** – through their involvement 'in' and use of 'the system', people effectively contribute to its reproduction.

According to **Krippendorff** (1986), an *autopoietic system* ' … produces its own organisation and maintains and constitutes itself .. for example, a living organism … a corporation or a society as a whole'. To put this in less abstract terms, think about society as, in **Maturana** and **Varela's** evocative description, 'living machines' (or, if it makes it easier, something like the *internet*).

✳ SYNOPTIC LINK

Stratification and differentiation: Luhmann's ideas about autopoietic networks link into modernist theories of stratification.

We can clarify these ideas through the following example.

Every Sociology A2 class in England is structured by a range of *exterior* factors – some *formal* and *direct* (the Specification, for example), others *informal* and *indirect* – your personal reasons for being in class perhaps.

On a *systems level* the behaviour is much the same. Each class is a *network* contributing to the continued functioning of the educational system without the *conscious* efforts of the people involved. In other words, when you arrive for your sociology class you don't think, 'How does this behaviour help to reproduce social relationships at the structural level of society?' And even if you did you'd have no way of knowing exactly what behaviour is required to 'reproduce the education system'.

Structure, therefore, is imposed (from *outside*) and reproduced *within* (the class), which effectively means structure is the most significant variable involved in understanding human behaviour, since, without the initial sense of structure, a social network could not form.

This type of analysis provides a bridge between *modernist* and *postmodernist* social theory – the former in terms of, to paraphrase **Vandenberghe** (1998), systems theory being an attempt to 'explain everything' about the construction of the social world (a *metanarrative,* in other words), and the latter in terms of the conclusion that the social world 'is like a ship adrift from its moorings and without the possibility of a captain on board'. In other words, for postmodernists social life can be understood only through *descriptions* of social encounters; the world is too large, diverse and fragmented to be understood as some sort of coherent, unified system in the way it's generally understood by modernist sociology.

Postmodern

Postmodern perspectives, therefore, focus on the concept of:

Narrative as a way of conceptualising the different ways people have of describing their situation. These 'stories' relate to both sociologists and non-sociologists alike – while sociological stories are of a different order they are, from this position, no more and no less 'true'. Narratives alone, however, don't adequately explain how social life hangs together. For this we need the concept of:

Discourse, something that refers, according to writers like **Foucault** (1972), to a system of ideas, organised in terms of a specific vocabulary. Both sociology and psychology, for example, are social science *discourses* (which is itself a further discourse). A discourse, therefore, involves a set of related narratives that both define something and, consequently, shape the way we interpret and understand its meaning. The same thing can, of course, be the subject of a number of different discourses – homosexuality, for example, may be the subject of different discourses depending on how you view this behaviour.

🏠 The potting shed

Identify and briefly explain one discourse on human sexuality (for example, think about what some people class as 'normal' or 'abnormal' sexuality).

Fiske (1987) notes how the meaning of something both depends on the discourse that surrounds it and 'serves the interests of' the social group from which it arises. The term 'queer', for example, has a different meaning for gay men than it does for the British National Party.

✻ SYNOPTIC LINK

We can find examples of discourse and narrative right across the Specification – from politics (conservative and socialist discourses), through religion (such as Christianity and Islam), to education (selective or comprehensive schooling).

If discourses are part of everyday life, surrounding and shaping our perception of both people and the world, it follows that all knowledge must be *subjective* (or ideological, if you prefer), which has important ramifications for how sociologists can study the world, since it seems to negate the concept of:

Truth: We suggested earlier that postmodernists consider all forms of knowledge to be *relative*; one form can never be objectively proven to be superior to another form. This characterisation is, however, true(?) only up to a point. Questions of truth are *not wholly* relative; rather, they are *partially* relative – a nice distinction, perhaps, but one that has considerable relevance for sociology since it suggests something may be 'true in principle', but not universally true for all time. In other words, the concept of truth is:

Context-bound: Something may be true (or false) within a given set of specified parameters and under certain conditions. Thus, 'truth' itself is *not* a relative concept; the *contexts* within which truths can be established are, however, relative in time and space. If this is a little unclear, an example should clarify it.

Example

It is true that I have the status 'husband'; however, the validity (or truth) of this statement is *context-bound* in the sense that it depends on how the concept of 'husband' is defined. For example, if we define it as 'a man who is married to a woman', then I am a husband. If, however, 'husband' is defined as 'a man married to a lamp post', then I am *not* a husband. In this particular context, of course, we would also raise questions about how things like 'man', 'woman' and 'lamp post' were defined (but that only goes to show how complicated things can get).

⚠ Weeding the path

In terms of *social theory*, the idea of truth being context-bound has implications for sociology, science and, perhaps, the question of whether or not sociology is scientific. If questions of truth are necessarily bound up with both narratives and discourses, it follows that we are effectively defining them from a particular, partial and subjective viewpoint – which raises the question of how it is possible to generate reliable and valid knowledge, not just about the *social* world, but about the *natural* world as well.

Characteristics

To complete this section we can draw on **Rosenau's** (1991) ideas about the general characteristics of postmodernity and their implications for social science:

- **Objectivity**: All knowledge is *inherently subjective* in terms of the assumptions made about how it is possible to study and understand the world (both natural and social). This follows, for postmodernists, because knowledge is created and validated within the context of specific discourses; thus, for natural scientists knowledge is validated by a belief in *empirical* principles (such as the existence

of facts, causality, and so forth). If we buy into a natural scientific discourse we *must* accept its ability to produce reliable and valid knowledge; if we *reject* that discourse we also, of course, reject its assumptions about reliability and validity.

- **Transgression**: Postmodernists raise important questions about *how* we can study the social world. In particular, they question the idea that knowledge can be neatly compartmentalised (in terms of categories like 'science' and 'non-science' or 'sociology' and 'physics'). They question, therefore, the idea of *rigid* (modernist) *boundaries* in all areas of social life (from the distinction between 'men and women' to that between 'truth and falsity').

- **Diversity**: Knowledge is always tentative, partial and incomplete; what we believe we know is always open to challenge and, in this respect, consists of 'competing stories' that are evaluated in terms of prevailing cultural orthodoxies. There is not – and can never be – a universal truth.

Finally, **Hudgins** and **Richards** (2000) summarise quite neatly the different perspectives we've examined in this section when they note: 'Postmodernism … may be seen as a completely new social science paradigm and a complete overthrow of modernism, or as the most recent stage of modernism itself. It may be seen as a force undermining social order leading to chaos and anarchy, or as the freedom from the repressive systems of thought of the past. Some fear the radical relativism of postmodernism, and some see it as the promise of a new and better society … One thing is certain, however, we are moving toward a new way of understanding the social world … '

Moving on

In this section we've looked at the ideas of modernity and postmodernity and how they relate, in very broad terms, to different forms of sociological theorising. In so doing we've raised questions about the methodological concepts of reliability and validity along the way, and in the next section we're going to focus on this area by examining questions about the nature of 'science' and the status of sociological knowledge.

2. The nature of 'science' and the extent to which sociology may be regarded as scientific

In the previous section we raised some methodological questions relating to the production of knowledge about the social world which, in this section, we can develop in the context of how we define 'science' and the question of whether or not sociology can be classified as 'scientific' in both its approach and the knowledge it produces. Initially, however, we can note a couple of reasons for wanting to explore these ideas, both related to the concept of *status*:

- **Knowledge status**: Scientific knowledge is generally considered, in modern societies, to be the most reliable, valid and (perhaps) superior form of knowledge it's possible to generate. In short, we associate (rightly or wrongly) scientific knowledge with *truth* – which is probably reason enough to think about this particular assumption in more detail.

- **Subject status**: If scientific knowledge is