

Introduction

This module continues the discussion of social institutions. In this module you will learn about the institutions of media and medicine. You will learn how culture determines our leisure practices and how these have become tied to the institution of the media. You will learn how health practices, definitions and beliefs are molded by culture and controlled by society.



Healthcare at Work¹

The Study of Leisure

When you hear the word leisure, you likely think of the opposite of work. This is the time that is yours to enjoy. Sociologists have recently turned to the study of leisure as an important element of understanding social life. As [technology](#) [Video, 3:21 mins] has developed over time, leisure activities have become more [complex](#) [Video, 7:17 mins], variable, expensive and time-consuming. Leisure has also become more connected to media and important in developing self-image and defining social status. After all, as adults, most of you likely choose your own leisure activities. If you have a family, these activities may take into account the wants and needs of your spouse and/or children. However, social norms do not dictate that all of your leisure time must be spent in the presence of others. You will likely choose some leisure activities that suit only your preferences. Sociologists argue that the true self can be found within one's leisure activities.



Father and Son Watching Television²

Trends in Leisure

In some ways, advanced technology has increased leisure time. Work that once took hours may take only moments in the computer age. For example, ask any social scientist over the age of sixty about their analytical training and they will likely tell you a story of hand designed key punch cards and programming main frames. This assumes, of course, that they were not trained before the computer was available and the calculator was the social scientist's best friend. In other ways, advanced technology has blurred the line between [work and leisure](#) [Video, 4:17 mins]. How many times have you or someone you know taken a work related



Little League Baseball Team³

cell phone call or checked email during your leisure time, even during a meal? When Americans have leisure time, they are significantly likely to spend it in front of their television sets. Most Americans spend 5 hours or more a day watching [television](#) [Video, 1:29 mins]. Whether this is leisure that reinvigorates a person, or merely more conditioning to our commercialized society remains an open question. Leisure has become commercialized. Going back to your older professor and asking about his or her childhood will likely get you stories of neighborhood games of baseball, called pickup games. Children still play baseball, but they are more likely to play on organized teams and more likely to be [pressured to win](#) [Video, 5:51 mins]. This is an example of the **commodification** of leisure. There is a multi-million dollar market for leisure equipment with new technology being introduced every day. From the sweat-wicking workout clothes, to the sonar fish finder to the high-tech wristbands that track miles and heart rate, Americans purchase quite a bit to support their leisure time.

The Role of the Media

You may tend to associate the media with entertainment when you think of it, or perhaps the news. In reality, there is a strong link between the [media](#) [Video, 22:28 mins] and democracy.

That is why the US Constitution guarantees [the freedom of the press in the seminal first amendment to the Constitution](#).

The media is often referred to as the “**Fourth Estate**,” because it was designed to serve as a check and balancing actor within the US political system’s structure of power. The first three estates are the Congress, the Presidency and the Judiciary. The media is supposed to report the facts without government interference. Despite the strong tradition of the Fourth Estate, Americans often question the neutrality of the press, and have done so ever since [the colloquial term media was substituted for the press beginning in the 1970s](#) [PDF, File Size 371 KB]. The major media outlets are owned by a few [conglomerations](#) [Video, 3:37 mins]. These are wealthy corporations that own a wide range of unrelated companies or products. Sociologists that study the media are concerned that this leads to the media representing only the cultural and social representations that serve the needs of the wealthy.



Newsboys⁴

Power and the Media

There are laws in place to regulate the market and anti-competitive business practices. For example, anti-trust laws were designed to protect competition in the market by eliminating [monopolies](#) [Video, 5:30 mins] and **price fixing**. A monopoly exists when all or nearly all of the ownership of a product, or service marketplace belongs to one company.



Think about the morning coffee that many Americans buy. You have many choices to buy that morning coffee. This results in the companies competing for your business by either offering a better product or the same product for a lower price. If all coffee purchasing options were owned by Starbucks, competition would disappear. There would be no incentive for Starbucks to keep the quality of the coffee high or the prices reasonable. The media has expanded very quickly due to technology, and newspapers and television stations can be cross-owned by the same media barons, leaving citizen consumers with little diversity of news and information. A [vibrant “market place of ideas” requires](#) [PDF, File Size 383 KB] active and diverse media finding and reporting relevant news to the broader society. In lesser fashion, you likely have a computer and a smart phone and they may be from the same company. If you have a Mac and an iPhone, then both of your systems were made by Apple. Apple also owns music labels, software, video and music streaming devices and an audio book division. Having their fingers in so many different entertainment pies increases the amount of power that Apple has. The same is true of print media and cable news outlets.

Culture and the Media

As mentioned earlier, the average American spends 5 or more hours a day engaged with the media, principally in the form of television, as newspaper readership has fallen dramatically. Media is an important part of American culture. In fact, it is integrated so well into culture that it not only reflects it, but also creates it. Sociologists have divided cultural practices into High, Low and Popular categories, and leisure and media activities fall into these categories as well. **High culture** refers to the cultural practices of the wealthy or dominant class in society. Examples of high culture are classical music, the theater or the ballet. **Low or Popular** culture refers to the cultural practices of the masses or the poorer sectors of society. Social scientists stopped using the term “low” because it implied a value judgement. Examples of Popular culture are Country Music or Hip-Hop, prime-time television, sporting events or “professional” wrestling.



The English National Ballet⁶

Table 13.2 Theory in Everyday Life

Perspective	Approach to Recreation and Leisure	Case Study: Spectator Sports in America
Structural Functionalism	Social institutions such as recreation and leisure provide for the needs of society and its members and help to maintain social cohesion and unity.	Participation in spectator sports helps to reaffirm social bonds; rooting for a team underscores the value of performance and competition.
Conflict Theory	Social institutions such as recreation and leisure reflect the existing power structures in society and thus create and maintain social inequalities.	Participation in spectator sports legitimizes conflict between groups in society and the belief in winners and losers.
Symbolic Interactionism	Social institutions such as recreation and leisure are produced when people act together; they play a meaningful role in the everyday lives of members.	Participation in spectator sports provides members with a sense of group affiliation and personal identification.

Theories to Explain Leisure⁷

Health and Illness

Like the media, the health care system is a social institution that is culturally defined. In many ways, as society becomes more advanced, our understanding of health and illness becomes more advanced. This can and should lead to longer lives and better treatments, but [there are persistent inequalities in healthcare leading to different outcomes like longevity due to wealth disparities](#). These trends have also led to the creation of the sub-discipline of [medical sociology](#) [Video, 9:29 mins]. Medical sociology focuses on all aspects of health, illness and related behaviors. Sociologists from every theoretical persuasion work in the field of medical sociology. Functionalists explore how the institution of medicine works to promote healthy behaviors and keep society stable. Think of the many public service announcements that proliferate the airwaves as evidence of this promotion. Conflict theorists examine how we have unequal access to health care as well as training to be health care professionals. While recent years have seen an increase in females entering medical school (nearing 50%), the majority of American medical school students is still white and come from upper and upper middle class families. Symbolic interactionists examine how culture and understanding of illness motivate our understanding of health and the behaviors that accompany it. For example, at one time the skin disease Pinta was so prevalent in one South American tribe that the 3% of the population that did not have the disease were considered unattractive and deficient. This bacterial infection only became defined as a disease when the tribe was introduced to Western medicine. (See this article if you would like to learn more about the effect that culture has on health care and health [outcomes](#) [PDF, File Size 3.0 MB].)

Entrance to an Emergency Room⁸

Medicalization

Medical sociologists are also very interested in understanding how an event or disorder becomes medicalized. [Childbirth](#) [Video, 3:06 mins] is a good example of **medicalization**. [Medicalization](#) [Video, 1:45:31 mins] occurs when a social problem or issue becomes part of medicine's social domain. Prior to the growth of a formal, technology driven medical system, childbirth was overseen by women known as Midwives. Midwives were not formally trained and often came from the poorer or working classes. Many were likely to be slaves or servants of the wealthier classes. Childbirth was considered a natural occurrence and not a medical condition. Compare this to modern obstetrics. The majority of OBGYNs are male, though this is expected to change with newer groups of medical students. Pregnant women and women of childbearing age are seen more by the medical system than any other category of healthy people. Pregnant women are warned about and tested for a wide range of things that can go wrong, but rarely do, in pregnancy. Another example is addiction. Prior to the early 1970s, addiction was seen as a personal problem and a sign of a weak personality. When studies showed that wealthy, successful, educated whites were more likely to be alcoholics, scientists began to look for a biological or genetic explanation for addiction. What was once an individual failing became a medical disorder within the broader society, requiring the intervention of medical professionals and state social services.



Pregnant woman getting prenatal checkup⁹

The Social Construction of Mental Illness

[Mental illness](#) [Video, 2:45 mins] covers a wide range of areas from milder forms of intermittent depression or stress to problems that create severe strain and stress in an individual's life and social functioning. These disorders often lead to medical intervention because the individual creates problems for those around them, such as family, coworkers and friends. People with mental illness rarely self-diagnose. For example, individuals with bipolar disorder may not realize that they have a problem, especially when they are in a manic state. During this cycle of the disorder they feel euphoric and capable of outstanding accomplishments. When they are in a depressed



Conceptual Art Depicting Mental Illness¹⁰

state, they may realize there is a problem. They will often seek treatment because both the depressed and the manic phases create problems for the people in their lives. Another aspect of the social construction of mental illness is the way cause and cure are defined and designed. At one time, the mentally ill were considered possessed and might be put through an exorcism as a cure. Early medical treatments included sterilization so that the mental illness could not be transmitted. "Medical" treatment of mental illnesses has also included institutionalization and isolation, or even very severe medical interventions such as lobotomy or shock treatment. Lobotomy is the surgical severing of nerves in the frontal lobe of the brain and shock treatment is the use of electrical current to alter neurotransmission in the brain in the hope of stabilizing behavior to societal norms. Current treatment norms include widespread use of pharmaceuticals and therapy. In part due to mental illness treatments, Americans consume more pharmaceuticals than any other nation on earth. The US crossed the 50 percent of global pharmaceutical sales threshold in 2000, when the [Americans bought 52 percent of the world's pharmaceuticals](#). In more recent years, [Americans account for slightly less than 50 percent](#) of the world's pharmaceutical sales, but the apparent societal and industry desire to find a pill for every socially constructed illness endures.

Epidemiology

[**Epidemiologists**](#) [Video, 6:25 mins] study the patterns of disease in society. They are typically multidisciplinary specialists, and include biologists, sociologists, psychologists, infectious disease specialists and physicians. Their work is most recognized when society experiences an **epidemic** or a pandemic. The HIV/AIDS pandemic is a good example of how an epidemiological team works. Biologists and infectious disease specialists worked to identify how the disease was transmitted. They determined that the disease was transmitted



through contact with bodily fluids such as blood and sperm. Sociologists and public health members of the team worked to identify the at-risk populations and the “**patient zero**”. Patient zero is the term used to identify the first known person to have the disease. These members found that gay men, IV drug users and hemophiliacs were at the greatest risks for infection. They traced the start of the infection to a French flight attendant. If you are interested in more information on how this was accomplished the book [And the Band Played On](#) [Video, 2:17:45 mins] by Randy Shilts is a good resource. This has also been made into an HBO movie. While epidemics and pandemics are part of the work of these teams, the majority of their current work is studying the patterns of chronic and acute disease in society, such as cancer, diabetes and the various forms of flu.

Visual conception of spread of

H1N1 Flu virus¹¹

Inequality and Health

Medical sociologists are very concerned about [inequality in health care](#) [Video, 2:15 mins]. Much of their work focuses on how class, race and gender intersect to affect health outcomes of the population. For example, they study the phenomenon known as **food deserts**. Food deserts are poor communities that lack access to a grocery store that provides affordable and healthy food. Poor communities are more likely to have stores with out of date food on the shelves, few or no fresh fruits and vegetables, and poor building hygiene and maintenance. The grocery stores that middle and working class Americans take for granted may be inaccessible to these individuals due to distance or affordability. Imagine if you had to take a one hour bus trip on an unreliable public transit system to buy groceries for your family. The absence of proper nutrition takes its toll on the rest of an individual’s health, and then the broader society. This situation has led to an increase in high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity, in these populations living in food deserts. Medical sociologists argue that we need to understand how race, class and gender affect health and illness. Other examples, include the finding that non-whites are more likely to be diagnosed with high blood pressure (hypertension) due to stress related to racism, and that women are more likely to be diagnosed with mental illness. Medical sociologists argue that this is due in part to devaluing female experiences, but also to the cultural pressure on men to “tough it out” and “play through the pain,” which leads to less interaction with the health care system.



Food Desert¹²

This module concluded your introduction to the various social institutions. You learned about leisure and the connection that it has to technology, work and the media. You learned about the importance of the media to democracy. You learned theories that explain and critique the function of the media in modern society. Likewise, you learned theories that explain and critique the modern institution of medicine. You learned how health and wellness are shaped by cultural expectations.

You learned how race, class and gender intersect to affect health access and outcomes. The following activities will give you the opportunity to apply what you have learned in this module.

Image Citation:

- 1 Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- 2 http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/154_2887118
- 3 http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/139_1924278
- 4 http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/109_243431
- 5 http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/104_147760
- 6 http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/115_3856370
- 7 Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- 8 http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/300_2260577
- 9 http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/158_2433442
- 10 http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/132_1263484
- 11 http://quest.eb.com.vlib.excelsior.edu/search/132_1221281
- 12 Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2016). *The real world: An introduction to sociology* (5th ed.). New York, NY: W.W. Norton.