The *Public Sociology* student support material contains the following resources which have been developed to deepen your understanding of the topics covered in each chapter. The support material for each chapter contains:

- Case studies on topical issues with discussion questions
- Video clips
- Up-to-date weblinks
- Further reading extracts from relevant Allen & Unwin titles for each chapter

The citation details for the further reading extracts for this chapter are available below; and clicking on the hyperlink in the title will take you to the book’s page on the Allen & Unwin website. To download the reading itself, please see the chapter-specific zip-file on the student resources section of the *Public Sociology* website.
Chapter 1: 
The sociological gaze: Linking private lives to public issues

Ice breaker 1
C. Wright Mills maintained that the ‘sociological imagination’ involved making a link between personal troubles and public issues. Mills identified unemployment as one example of the link between personal and public issues. Can you think of further examples that could be described as personal troubles, but that are also public issues?

Ice breaker 2
Childhood obesity is a subject of intense public debate. In what ways is this a personal trouble? In what ways can it be explained as a public issue? Refer to Sociological reflection 1 discussed in Chapter 1 as a guide.

Case study
Is sociology a science? On scientism and the sociology of knowledge
Philosophers since Aristotle and Plato have been concerned with the nature of human behaviour and social organisation. While they often postulated on the conditions for ‘the good life’ and the ideal society, they did not engage in a systematic study of people and societies. The development of sociology, arising primarily from the work of philosophers and economists, explicitly sought to study contemporary society and human behaviour in a scientific way. Some of the earliest sociologists, such as Auguste Comte (1798–1857), were exponents of the view that the research methods used in the natural sciences (for example, physics, chemistry, and biology) could be used to study society. Comte called this scientific method ‘positivism’, which was based on the following features:

- **Empirical evidence and measurable events**: Information about the world is based on data derived from the human senses; that is, facts are observable, measurable, and recordable.
- **Systematic enquiry**: Researchers document the methods used to collect evidence so they can be scrutinised and replicated to test the reliability of findings.
- **Objectivity and value-freedom**: The design, conduct, and interpretation of research is not biased by the personal values and beliefs of the researcher.
- **Causation**: Evidence gathered about the world can be used to construct theories of causation and universal laws of human behaviour and social organisation.
As many sociologists have pointed out since Comte, human behaviour is a much more complex and variable subject of study than that of the natural world. Humans are conscious beings who have motivations, intentions, and feelings, and have the ability to choose various courses of action. As a consequence, the notion of 'social laws', akin to the laws of physics, is nonsensical.

Many researchers in the natural sciences remain committed to positivism and continue to view the study of anything that cannot be objectively quantified, such as human beliefs and intentions, as unscientific. Sociologists often characterise this as 'scientism' (a dogmatic belief in the superiority of the methods of the natural sciences to discover 'the truth'). At its extreme, scientism represents a reverence for (natural) science and 'scientific progress' and dismisses the social sciences as unscientific. A sociology of knowledge, particularly that advocated by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) in *The Social Construction of Reality*, suggests that all knowledge is socially influenced by the cultural, political, moral, and historical context in which it is produced.

The sheer cultural diversity that exists among societies (such as the differences between Chinese, French, and Argentinean societies, for example) provides empirical evidence that refutes the assumptions of positivism. Nonetheless, as sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) extolled, this does not mean sociologists should not attempt to conduct 'value-free' and systematic research by being detached and open-minded about what they study.

Sociology is a social science: it uses systematic research methods and attempts to interpret data in an objective way that is open to public scrutiny. Still, the subjective nature of human existence means it is unlikely that there can ever be a universal theory of human behaviour or the identification of social laws that specify the causes of societal development and change. This is not to say that sociology cannot identify social patterns and common influences that affect individuals and societies, but this is far from the universal laws of the natural sciences. It should also be noted that theories and 'facts' have changed over time in the natural sciences as well, as new methods and knowledge come to light. As Thomas Kuhn (1922–96) argued in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, 1970, 1996), there have been many 'paradigm shifts' and scientific revolutions of thought in the natural sciences (see also Hacking 1981, 1999).
While few sociologists subscribe to positivism today, there are disagreements over the most appropriate ways to study society, with some researchers preferring quantitative approaches (such as surveys) over qualitative approaches (such as interviews) because they believe that quantitative research is more objective (see Chapter 4 in Public Sociology for further discussion of this issue). Such a stance is often taken by ‘post-positivists’, who acknowledge the limits of a scientific model of research, but nonetheless persevere with such study due to a belief in its superiority over other forms of knowledge. In general, though, there has been an acceptance in sociology, and in the social sciences more broadly, that all research methods potentially have something to offer.

References

Discussion questions
1. In what ways is sociology a science? How does it differ from common sense?
2. Can sociologists, or any researcher, ever really be value-free?
3. What examples of scientism can you think of in everyday life?

Australian sociology milestones
- 1911: Francis Anderson unsuccessfully advocates for a Chair in Sociology to be established at the University of Sydney.
- 1914: Meredith Atkinson introduces sociology courses into the Workers’ Education Association (WEA) program.
- 1918: Atkinson takes up a professorship at the University of Melbourne and allegedly uses the self-proclaimed title of Professor of Sociology, teaching sociology until his resignation in 1922.
- 1942: Adolphus Peter Elkin founds the short-lived Australian Institute of Sociology and its journal Social Horizons (1943–45).
- 1959: First professor of sociology appointed—Morven S. Brown at the University
of New South Wales, with the first Department of Sociology created in the same year.

- **1963: Sociological Association of Australia and New Zealand (SAANZ) established.**
- **1965: *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology (ANZJS)* established; first Australian sociology textbook published by Alan Davies and Sol Encel, *Australian Society*.**
- **1978: Allen & Unwin begin the Studies in Society series, followed by the Women’s Studies series, a substantial outlet for Australian sociological books.**
- **1988–89: The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) established after New Zealand sociologists secede to form an independent association.**
- **1996: TASA website established by John Germov.**
- **1998: *ANZJS’* name changed to the *Journal of Sociology (JOS).***
- **2002: TASA hosts the ISA XV World Congress of Sociology at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane in July and attracts almost 3000 delegates.**
- **2005: TASA thematic groups established.**
- **2013: TASA’s 50th anniversary.**


### Video clips

These clips give brief introductions to Sociology:

- **What Is Sociology?**
  

- **What Is Sociology?**
  
  [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFdUtCAXAUM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFdUtCAXAUM)

### Weblinks

#### Associations

- **TASA—The Australian Sociological Association:**
  
  [www.tasa.org.au](http://www.tasa.org.au)

  The premier website for Australian sociology with plenty of free resources and helpful links, including a Public Access Sociology section that provides a range of online papers and information briefs about the discipline. Students thinking of majoring in sociology should consider joining TASA as a student member.
American Sociological Association (ASA):
http://www.asanet.org/
Founded in 1905, the ASA is the national organisation for sociologists in the US. It has over 14,000 members and is a publisher of 10 professional journals and magazines.

British Sociological Association (BSA):
http://www.britsoc.co.uk
Founded in 1951, the BSA seeks to influence policies affecting sociology within the wider social sciences. It also publishes journals, books, and other materials.

International Sociological Association (ISA):
http://www.isa-sociology.org/
Founded in 1949 under the auspices of UNESCO. Includes detailed international research networks with members from 109 countries.

Helpful links

- **Electronic Journal of Sociology:**
  http://www.sociology.org
  A journal made available online free of charge to individuals, libraries, and academic and commercial organisations.

- **Sociological Research Online:**
  http://www.socresonline.org.uk
  A good database of theoretical research and discussions.

- **Sociological Tour through Cyberspace:**
  http://www.trinity.edu/mkearl
  Dedicated to providing a ‘theatre of ideas’ for sociological discussion.

- **Sociosite:**
  http://www.sociosite.net
  One of the best and longest-running sociology portal websites, it includes links to many high-quality resources.

- **Asia-Pacific Sociological Association (APSA):**
  http://www.apsa-sociology.org/
  Affiliated with the ISA, the APSA was established in 1996 to provide a sociological network for the diversity of cultures, nations, ethnicities, and perspectives from across the Asia-Pacific region.

- **Michael Burawoy—Public Sociology:**
  http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS.Webpage/ps.mainpage.htm
  Michael Burawoy’s personal website contains a section devoted to public sociology, on which he keeps an updated and extensive list of publications on public sociology, all accessible from this site.

Further reading