

What is Otherness?

This page provides a sociological definition of otherness and how it works in societies. I will also include examples and resources for people interested in learning more about otherness. I will add to this page over time.

Defining Otherness

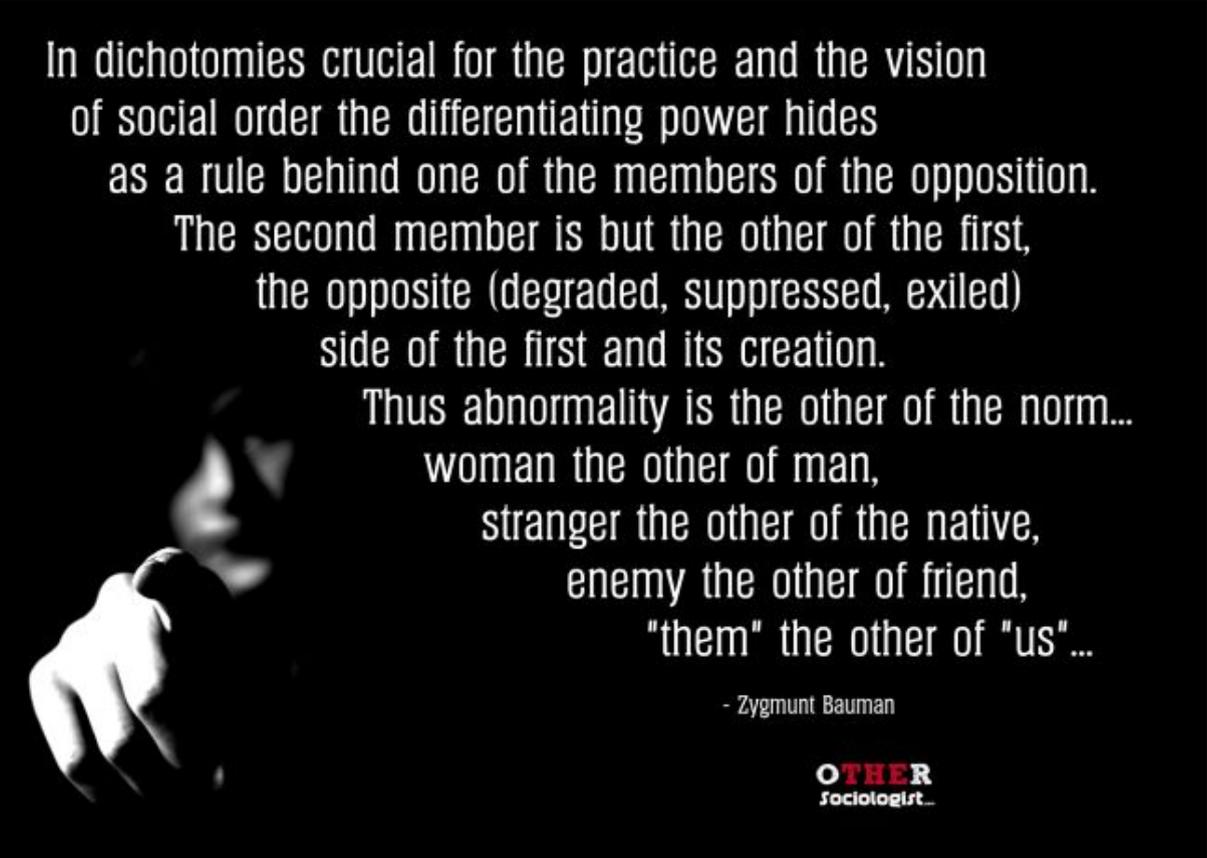
The idea of 'otherness' is central to sociological analyses of how majority and minority identities are constructed. This is because the representation of different groups within any given society is controlled by groups that have greater political power. In order to understand the notion of The Other, sociologists first seek to put a critical spotlight on the ways in which social identities are constructed. Identities are often thought as being natural or innate – something that we are born with – but sociologists highlight that this taken-for-granted view is not true.

Rather than talking about the individual characteristics or personalities of different individuals, which is generally the focus for psychology, sociologists focus on **social identities**. Social identities reflect the way individuals and groups internalise established social categories within their societies, such as their cultural (or ethnic) identities, gender identities, class identities, and so on. These social categories shape our ideas about who we think we are, how we want to be seen by others, and the groups to which we belong.

George Herbert Mead's classic text, **Mind Self and Society**, established that social identities are created through our ongoing social interaction with other people and our subsequent self-reflection about who we think we are according to these social exchanges. Mead's work shows that identities are produced through agreement, disagreement, and negotiation with other people. We adjust our behaviour and our self-image based upon our interactions and our self-reflection about these interactions (this is also known as **the looking glass self**).

Ideas of **similarity and difference** are central to the way in which we achieve a sense of identity and social belonging. Identities have some element of exclusivity. Just as when we formally join a club or an organisation, social membership depends upon fulfilling a set of criteria. It just so happens that such criteria are socially-constructed (that is, created by societies and social groups). As such 'we' cannot belong to any group unless 'they' (other people) do *not* belong to 'our' group. Sociologists set out to study how societies manage collective ideas about who gets to belong to 'our group' and which types of people are seen as different – the outsiders of society.

Zygmunt Bauman writes that the notion of otherness is central to the way in which societies establish identity categories. He argues that **identities are set up as dichotomies**:



In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision
of social order the differentiating power hides
as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition.

The second member is but the other of the first,
the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled)
side of the first and its creation.

Thus abnormality is the other of the norm...
woman the other of man,
stranger the other of the native,
enemy the other of friend,
"them" the other of "us"...

- Zygmunt Bauman

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Zygmunt Bauman on Otherness

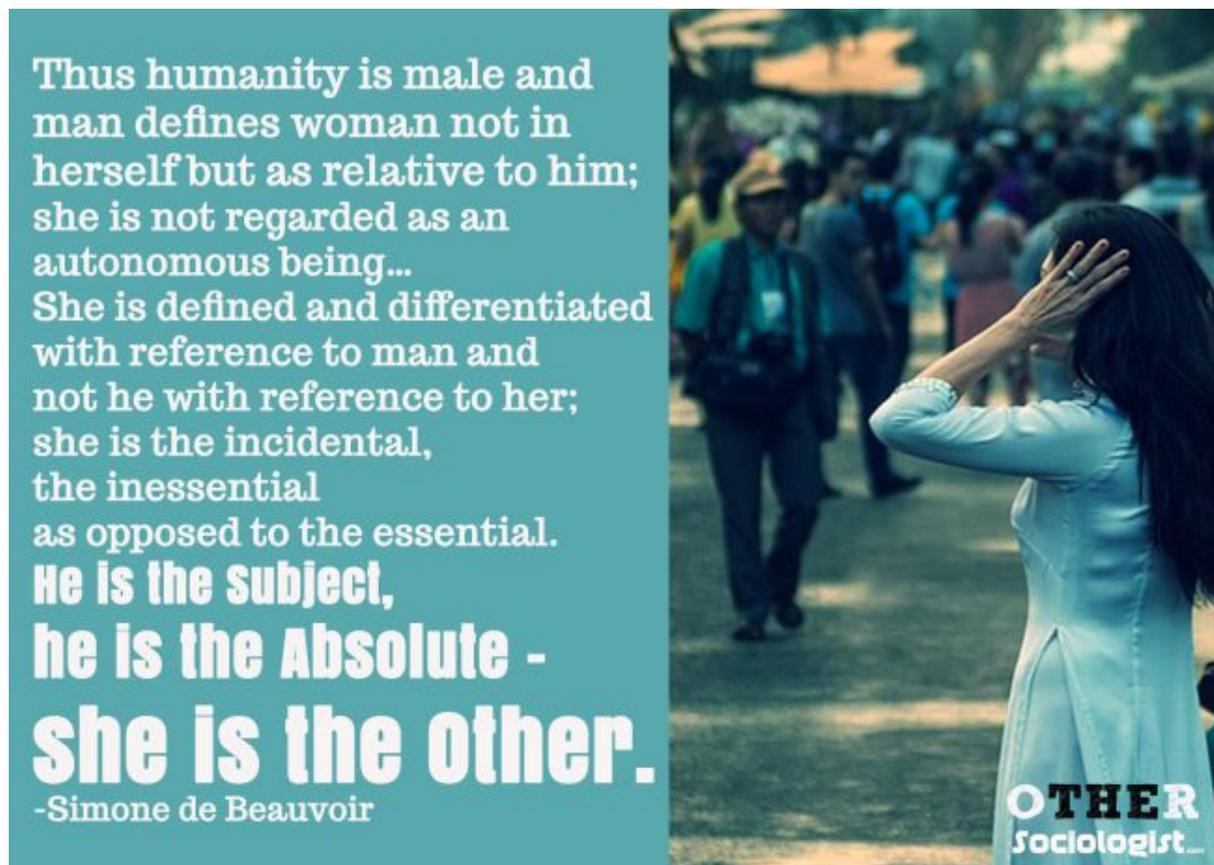
Woman is the other of man, animal is the other of human, stranger is the other of native, abnormality the other of norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, insanity the other of reason, lay public the other of the expert, foreigner the other of state subject, enemy the other of friend (Bauman 1991: 8).

Gender

The concept of The Other highlights how many societies create a sense of belonging, identity and social status by constructing social categories as binary opposites. This is clear in the social construction of gender in Western societies, or how socialisation shapes our ideas about what it means to be a "man" or a "woman." There is an inherently unequal relationship between these two categories. Note that these two identities are set up as opposites, without acknowledging alternative gender expressions. In the early 1950s, **Simone de Beauvoir** argued that

Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself.

de Beauvoir argued that woman is set up as the Other of man. Masculinity is therefore socially constructed as the universal norm by which social ideas about humanity are defined, discussed and legislated against.



Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.’

– Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

Power

Dichotomies of otherness are set up as being natural and so often times in everyday life they are taken for granted and presumed to be natural. But social identities are *not* natural – they represent an established social order – a hierarchy where certain groups are established as being superior to other groups. Individuals have the choice (or agency) to create their identities according to their own beliefs about the

world. Yet the negotiation of identity equally depends upon the negotiation of **power relationships**. As Andrew Okolie **puts it**:

Social identities are relational; groups typically define themselves in relation to others. This is because identity has little meaning without the “other”. So, by defining itself a group defines others. Identity is rarely claimed or assigned for its own sake. These definitions of self and others have purposes and consequences. They are tied to rewards and punishment, which may be material or symbolic. There is usually an expectation of gain or loss as a consequence of identity claims. This is why identities are contested. Power is implicated here, and because groups do not have equal powers to define both *self* and the *other*, the consequences reflect these power differentials. Often notions of superiority and inferiority are embedded in particular identities (2003: 2).

Social institutions such as the law, the media, education, religion and so on hold the balance of power through their representation of what is accepted as “normal” and what is considered Other. British sociologist Stuart Hall argues that **visual representations** of otherness hold special cultural authority. In Western countries with a colonial history, like the UK, Australia and the USA, whether difference is portrayed positively or negatively is judged against the dominant group – namely White, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual Christians, with cis-men being the default to which Others are judged against.

The notion of otherness is used by sociologists to highlight how social identities are contested. We also use this concept to break down the ideologies and resources that groups use to maintain their social identities. Sociologists are therefore interested in the ways in which notions of otherness are managed in society. For example, we study how some groups become stigmatised as outsiders, and how such ideas change over time. As Dutch-American sociologist Philomena Essed argues, the power of othering includes opting out of “seeing” or **responding to racism**.



Everyday Racism and Power

Power exists as long as the group stays together against the “others”
... Exercising power over other people affects them, through action or inaction...whether or not those who exercise power are aware of the success or consequences of their practices and whether or not the other party is aware of the power being exercised over him or her.

- Prof. Philomena Essed, sociologist

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Notes

This article was first published on 14 October 2011 and it is a living document, meaning that I will add to it over time.

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