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1 Introduction

At an early stage of our childhood development we all probably cried: 'That's not fair!' It might have referred to a feeling that one of our siblings had been apportioned more of a good than us; or that one of our friends was allowed to stay up later than us; or that we were not allowed to watch a televised event when someone else was. Regardless of the context, these illustrations reveal that at a very early age we become conscious of the way resources or favours are distributed unevenly, or at least in ways that do not accord with our needs or wants, or with what we perceive as our rights.

These experiences or feelings of inequality remain with us as we pass through the process of childhood socialisation and enter adulthood. While our earlier feelings might have focused on dimensions of inequality relating to age, later we can experience these same feelings in a range of ways, from gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, religion and class. We often become more conscious of these dimensions as we grow apart from childhood friends. Some of us develop means for justifying why some people receive more than others; some resign themselves to the situation that the world as we experience it cannot be changed; others maintain a passionate belief that resources should and can be distributed more equally.

Controversies surrounding inequality manifest themselves most overtly at the political level, and towards the end of this book this level will be explored in more depth. However, before we attempt to reinterpret some recent Australian political debates surrounding inequality, we want to suggest that inequality affects us at more personal levels as well, or to put it another way, that the politics of inequality affects the way we perceive our bodies and construct our identities.

This claim – that inequality affects the very core of our being, the way we look upon ourselves, the way others look upon us, the way we experience and

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relate to others and the way we act upon the world – has helped shape the organisation of this book around three broad domains: inequality and the body (part 1); inequality and the self (part 2); and politics and inequality (part 3).

Why a new look at inequality?

Our central claim is that, in attempting to explain the persistent structures and the transformations of social inequality, a new approach is necessary. Approaches that might have been appropriate from the turn of the century until the 1970s cannot adequately explain transformations experienced in western industrial societies such as Australia over the past few decades.

In our 'holistic' approach we have drawn links between three facets of inequality: the sociological approaches to it (theory), the extent of individuals' experiences of it (self-experience), and the evidence for its existence (empirical reality). These links are central for understanding not only contemporary patterns of social inequality, but also their history. Although related to matters concerning the body, self-experience is analytically separate in that it incorporates individuals' understandings of themselves and their place in the wider social context. Often covered by the term *self-identity*, self-experience, as we use this term, is a 'constellation of characteristics' (van Krieken et al. 2000:8) that includes notions such as personal experience and the meanings people attribute to specific social situations, self-understanding and consciousness. These conceptions of the self are not unique to any individual or moment in history, for they are often patterned or structured and are changing.

The advantage of our approach to inequality is that it captures more accurately the lived experience of social agents. Although we acknowledge the empirical realities associated with the class, race and ethnicity of individuals, explaining their patterns of inequality involves more. It involves demonstrating not only how these major concepts interact in people's lives, but also how they are involved in wider social change that includes individuals' changing patterns of consciousness of facets of their lives. This focus therefore claims a close relationship between how sociologists attempt to describe inequality and how individuals in general perceive the circumstances of a changing world. This wider, more dynamic approach is evident in the chapters addressing the broad domains of the body, the self and politics. Their similarities, in terms of acknowledging the relationship between theory, experience and empirical reality, contribute to the explanation of how new forms of inequality emerge and old ones recede. Our attempt systematically to relate the broad domains of the body, the self and politics to theory, experience and empirical reality is thus, in effect, the filling in of the nine cells so created (see figure 1.1).

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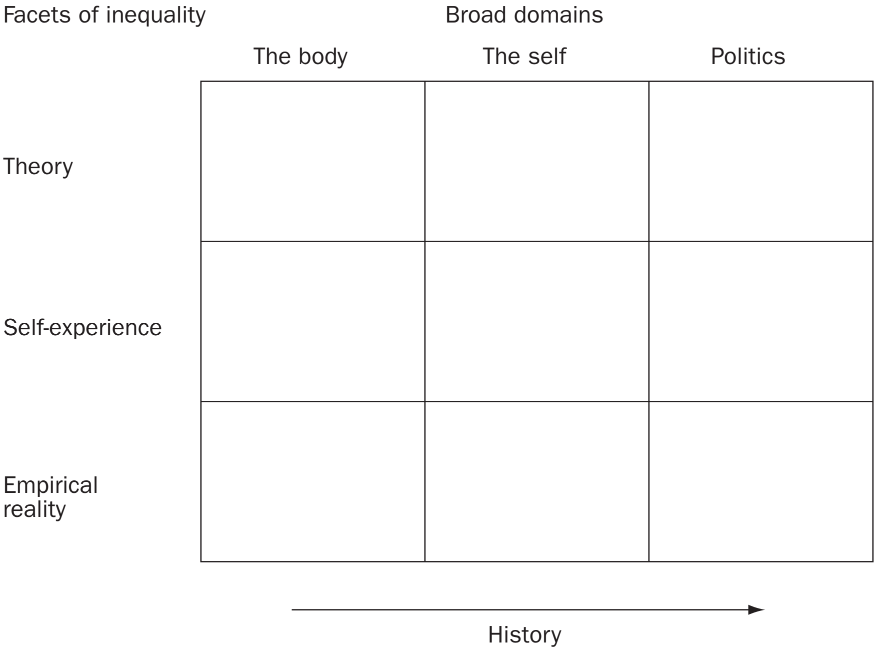

Figure 1.1 The broad picture of *Inequality in Australia*

Another way of grasping our claim that the approach adopted in this book captures more accurately the lived experience of social beings is to think of theory, self-experience and empirical reality as three zones in a triangle. An adequate account of social inequality must acknowledge all three and their interrelations (see figure 1.2). This important point needs to be stressed because we are not saying that theory based on self-experience and individual meanings is an alternative to social structural explanations, a claim found among poststructuralist sociology (see Bradley 1996:1–10). Instead, these elements complement each other to provide a more holistic explanation of social inequality. Also, on a different front, failure to acknowledge self-experience helps perpetuate one of the major puzzles of studies in this area. Why is it that inequalities in areas that most affect our life chances are often not perceived as important by those most affected?

This ‘silence’ of individuals most affected by patterned inequality suggests that an important domain of evidence has hitherto not been given due recognition. In addressing this gap, apart from examining forms of inequality that go beyond the familiar focus on life chances, we examine the role of individual consciousness in understanding inequality. Before turning to the following chapters, it is important briefly to state why we should want to include individual consciousness in our approach to inequality.

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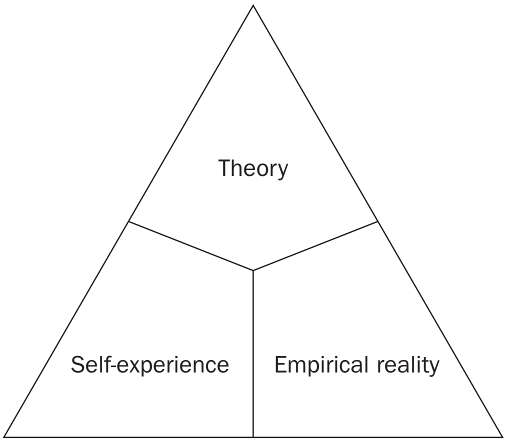

Figure 1.2 The relationship of sociological theory, self-experience and empirical reality

The explanation of any instance of social inequality has five facets: (1) whether inequality *exists* in a particular social setting; (2) the *nature of the structure* of that inequality; (3) the factors *producing* it; (4) the factors *maintaining* it; and (5) the *effects* of that inequality. Our approach attempts to address all five of these areas. Earlier works are valuable in providing a historical benchmark for the structure of inequality, and their detailed descriptions provide an important comparison when it comes to an examination of the current situation in Australia.

Our argument is that the role of self-experience is especially crucial in explaining the maintenance of social inequality. Where individuals have no consciousness of certain inequalities, then that 'silence' helps perpetuate their situation. By way of illustration, take the case of individuals who are shown to be slowly dying because they have been ingesting harmful compounds in their water supply. If they do not see their water supply as contaminated or, more to the point, if they see themselves as 'healthy and normal', then that state of consciousness helps explain why their situation persists. By contrast, where individuals have some consciousness of certain inequalities that impinge on their lives, the nature of that consciousness or their definition of the situation becomes a crucial part of our understanding of the situation. If people believe, for example, that poverty is their 'lot' in life – that is, a consequence of their own individual misfortunes – then they are more likely to be resigned to continuing poverty, compared to the political activist who sees poverty as structured inequality that is contingent on other factors and able to be changed.

This type of example is well-known to sociologists because it illustrates an important distinction Mills (1959) makes in *The Sociological Imagination*. In

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the former situation, 'private troubles' are seen as specific to those individuals and, therefore, less amenable to change. By contrast, where poverty is viewed, as Mills would have it, as a 'public issue', then it is potentially also a political issue and capable of alteration. The more individuals experience social inequality as private troubles rather than as public issues, the more we are able to pinpoint a key factor to explain the maintenance of that inequality. Despite Mills's contribution to a way of approaching sociology, it is perhaps surprising that more attention has not been paid to the role of individuals' experiences of inequality.

The importance of the social

Australia is now more unequal than at any stage of its past. As Travers and Richardson (1993:72) point out,

> The richest 1% of the adult population owns about 20% of private wealth; the richest 10% own half the wealth and the poorest 30% have no net wealth (although they may own consumer durables and a car).

Yet most Australians would still claim to live in an egalitarian society, and claim that they personally do not experience inequality and indeed are middle class (McGregor, C. 1997). This book explores this paradox, and provides evidence of the extensive inequality at the heart of Australian society. We also analyse how it is that patterns of inequality in Australia are maintained, and in particular what it is about people's experiences that contributes to the ongoing patterns of inequality.

We argue that Australian perceptions of their society as equal and egalitarian are built on three interlocking myths. They are the myth of the natural body, the myth of the autonomous self, and the myth of egalitarianism in Australian history. The three parts of the book address these myths. Using the three broad domains of the body, the self and politics, our major concern is to show that things we take for granted in daily life, and often assume to be natural or inevitable aspects of our lives, are in fact shaped by powerful social forces, especially class, gender and ethnicity.

The book explores the interactions between the ways in which sociologists conceptualise and analyse society, the empirical reality of Australian social life, and individuals' perceptions of society. New understandings and experiences of inequality are the outcome of the transformation of the organisation of industrial, familial, ethnic and political relations. The concepts sociologists adopted from the turn of the century until the 1970s cannot adequately explain the profound transformation of experience in Australia over the past few

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decades. Equally the empirical realities associated with individuals' class, gender and ethnicity are experienced differently from those of forty years ago. The organisation of work, of the social roles associated with men and women, and continuing arrivals of people from other countries have transformed old forms of inequality and produced new forms.

In part 1 we deal with the myth that our bodies are parts of nature and exist independently of social life. Chapter 2 charts the way in which sociologists and anthropologists have demonstrated that rather than being part of nature, our bodies – and how we understand them – are historically and socially produced. As society changes, so too do sociological concepts change to take into account new social relationships. The important change in western industrialised societies has been their relative deindustrialisation, with many multinational companies moving their production plants to countries with lower labour costs. This has meant that the dominant form of social life from the 1930s to the 1970s – stable employment over the adult life cycle, with identity conferred on individuals by their place in the occupational hierarchy, living in stable communities and with politics aligned with the division between labour and capital – has been transformed. With the growth of the service sector, many Australians are now in occupations that are based in information technology, with high degrees of uncertainty about their work, are geographically more mobile, and are constantly reconstructing their biography in the light of changed jobs and places of living.

Sociologists such as Giddens (1991), Beck (1992) and Bauman (1992) argue that these changes have 'freed' us from the old patterns of inequality produced by industrial life, that we remake our biographies as we choose, and that our bodies, liberated from factory production, can now be remade as we choose. We argue that this is over-optimistic and document how the patterns of inequality laid down in the industrial period still dominate, especially in terms of our bodily health and the workplace. Life chances, especially in health, are the product of social circumstances and not individual lifestyle or biology. That we take them to be natural, individually based, or genetically structured means that we take for granted the profound inequalities that Australian society produces in the distribution of health and illness. In chapter 3 we explore the socioeconomic inequalities that profoundly shape the experience of health and disease. Put simply, members of the lower socioeconomic groups have sicker, shorter lives. Furthermore, Australia loses more than a million years of productive life per annum from the burden of disease – that is, the measure of preventable deaths and preventable accidents leading to disability. This figure is no surprise given the scant regard for public health in this country where less than 2 per cent of the gross domestic product is spent on public health.

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Nowhere is the naturalness of unequal social experiences more ingrained than in the idea that the roles that men and women fulfil are natural. In chapter 4 we show that women are constructed as sick in medical conceptions of them, placing them under constant medical surveillance, and exhorting them to have ongoing check-ups and evaluation. They thus appear naturally sicker and are over-represented in the statistics on health-care use. While constructed as sickly in comparison to men, their reproductive capacity is extended to assert that because women bear children they should care for them, that indeed caring is part of their natural constitution. Recent government policies have built on this assumption and have used it in the context of deinstitutionalisation to make women take care of the ageing and disabled. Furthermore, in ways that will carry socioeconomic inequalities into retirement, the government is placing more and more responsibility on the elderly to rely on their own resources, or on those of their family.

In part 2 we examine the understandings of the self into which we are socialised in contemporary Australian society. We seek particularly to explore individuals' understandings of and accounts of social reality. In this we analyse recent theoretical arguments in sociology, which state that with the changes to industrialised society each individual is now freer to make choices about their self and its expression. This argument is developed by many postmodernists, who argue that individuals have the capacities to choose their own identities and priorities in life, and by extension their own life chances (chapter 5). We challenge this position on empirical grounds. Using a variety of materials, we show that the self with and into which we grew up is not the product of free choice, but is profoundly shaped by experiences in education, the families and the communities we live in. Even the language we use to make sense of the social world is differentially distributed, as we show in a discussion of Aboriginality in chapter 7, and reflects inequalities of access to education and opportunities to construct ourselves that are dependent on factors such as income and status. As these factors have changed over the past forty or so years, so too has the experience of inequality that they produce.

Rather than celebrate the new individualism in the postmodernist approach, we will show that individuals in a variety of social contexts with varying selves are still dependent on a wide range of social goods and capital. These are provided to them not by virtue of their own choosing, or of their ambitions or abilities, but by structural features of social life. We continue to explore such postmodernist arguments in chapter 5. Claims of the fading of the importance of occupation, wealth and income as dimensions of inequality and the emergence of consumption as the new form of self-identity will be examined. Specifically, the evidence will demonstrate new types of structured inequality,

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such as the variable capacity of individuals to be able to imagine and articulate identity choices. While postmodernist approaches overlook the macrostructural determinants of identity, other Australian work on inequality overlooks the role of individual consciousness. It is only by taking into account individuals' understandings of inequality that we can lay out explanations of its continuity.

The issue of fully taking into account individuals' self-understandings of inequality is pursued in chapter 6, where we examine in detail issues of ethnic consciousness and Aboriginal identity. Starting with migrants, we argue that their presumed ethnicity in earlier research has led to an approach that emphasises ethnicity as a primordial category conferring all aspects of identity on migrant groups. We emphasise the political nature of expressions of ethnicity and its links with inequality, in particular viewing ethnicity as a process. Aborigines are examined as a separate case, consistent with our claim that individuals' experiences must be incorporated in any analysis of inequality. Because Aboriginal people consistently deny that they have anything in common with migrants and that Aboriginality can be equated with ethnicity, they warrant separate scrutiny. We will explore the consequences of understanding Aboriginal inequality by examining the varieties of Aboriginality, for there is no overarching concept of Aborigines and no singular self-identity. Central to understanding Aboriginality is the role of white Australian institutions in shaping not only wider perceptions of Aboriginality, but also Aborigines' self-identity, and its links with inequality.

Just as ethnicity and Aboriginality are not fixed concepts or realities, neither is gender (chapter 7). It is only by taking into account individuals' lived experiences of gender identity that we can clearly see the ways in which it is a negotiated reality. However, we are careful not to dissolve gender identity to the level of complete voluntarism, and in a case study of transsexualism show how individual choice is restricted and defined by a wide range of structural variables.

Our analyses of the body and the self have been carried out to demonstrate that they are social, political and gendered accomplishments. The body is the intersection of biology and social structure, and its sicknesses and diseases are socially produced and distributed unequally. Our selves, too, are the product of social life. We are not the independent, autonomous agents that our socialisation would lead us to believe. How we experience our selves is shaped by our ethnicity, our access to social goods such as education, our position in the labour market, and our gender. These experiences lay fundamental parameters around who we are, and who we can choose to be. So too do the historical processes that lie behind the present.

In part 3 we turn to how Australia's development, and the myths that go with it, have shaped and continue to shape inequality.

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The importance of history

If, as the previous section suggested, an adequate understanding of inequality needs to take into consideration its social context, it is also necessary to contextualise inequality historically. This is the principal claim of part 3. Many studies provide us with valuable information relating to inequality at a particular point in time. However, while these historical snapshots might provide us with a wealth of empirical data, by themselves they cannot reveal much social significance unless they are placed in historical perspective. This is because a person's experience of and attitude towards inequality is dependent upon their ability to draw comparisons with the past. Our elders often note that conditions and attitudes that are intolerable today were unreflectively considered normal only a few decades ago. Throughout this book many such examples will be illustrated, such as marriage bars on women's entrance to specific areas of employment, and citizenship bars on people with specific racial characteristics. The social significance of inequality includes consciousness of how things were before the present. This observation does not apply only to our contemporary experience of rapid social and technological change. In *Democracy in America*, written in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville (quoted in Hughes, R. 1994) wrote that:

> Men will never establish any equality with which they will be contented … When inequality of condition is the common law of society, the most marked inequalities do not strike the eye; when everything is nearly on the same level, the slightest are marked enough to hurt it. Hence the desire for equality always becomes more insatiable in proportion as equality is more complete.

In these lines, de Tocqueville manages elegantly to capture the social and historical contexts that guide our approach to inequality. By approach, however, we do not mean that we slavishly follow de Tocqueville's philosophy of history, or anyone else's for that matter.

Although on one level de Tocqueville's lines might provoke the response that if inequality is so historically relative then there is little point in appreciating the way in which it becomes transformed, we argue that this would fail to take into consideration the importance of personal experience and its relationship to political struggles or, to use Mills's phrase again, between 'private troubles' and 'public issues'. This 'sociological imagination', he argued, 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the relation between the two within society' (Mills 1973:12). Mills's claim goes deeper than the warning that those who ignore history are condemned to repeat its mistakes. His statement, which tends to emphasise the importance of consciousness, is a plea to social theorists, and even practising revolutionaries, that an understanding of

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social conditions requires a sharp 'historical imagination'. While this is one 'point' of our triangular framework, history has another more empirical 'point' – preceding social negotiations and struggles invariably shift the parameters within which later understandings of inequality operate. In other words, at any time our appreciation of any specific dimension of inequality is dependent on the social compromises that preceding configurations of social forces negotiated or enforced. This highlights another aspect of the historical imagination that coincides with the sociological imagination – at a particular point in time, any set of unequal social relations is based on a historically contingent balance of political forces, rather than some natural state.

The study of inequality is therefore relational in more than one sense. While we usually acknowledge that inequality must by definition be measured between people or social categories, its significance also depends on its measure across time. If an adequate understanding of inequality needs to take into account historical context and if our perceptions of inequality are historically relative, then it is always a good time to take a new look at inequality.

This historical dimension is emphasised most strongly in the third and final part of the book, which examines the politics of inequality in Australia. Chapter 8 begins by returning to the question of why inequality persists, and focuses on the construction of social and political values at the level of nationality. After discussing some of the racial myths of white invasion and white settlement, the chapter charts the pervasive and persistent myth of egalitarianism. We use the concept of myth to refer to a 'systematic organization of signifiers around a set of connotations and meanings', rather than referring to something that is 'untrue' (Fiske, Hodge and Turner 1987:xi). From this perspective, it matters little whether Australia can be measured as more or less egalitarian at any particular time. What counts is the impact that the myth has upon people's consciousness of their situation.

Chapter 8 charts the path of these signifiers through the nineteenth-century myth of 'a workingman's paradise' through to the post-World War II affluent 'Australian way of life' and the 'lucky country' in the 1960s. Throughout these periods, popular literature and intellectual discourse invariably listed fairness and egalitarianism as attributes of the Australian character and psyche. Many an academic life was devoted to the search for the origins of this egalitarian symbolism in various times and places, ranging from convict settlement to the bush, the frontier, the workplace and the battlefield. At the end of chapter 8, we note how many of the political, social, cultural and economic certainties that sustained this vision of the national character began to crumble towards the end of the twentieth century, an issue to which we return in chapter 10.

Before exploring contemporary debates on egalitarianism and inequality, however, chapter 9 explores in more detail the claim that until quite recently