

## Researching Culture

### Key concepts: Ontology and Epistemology

- *Ontology*: Your perspective, philosophy, or, more colloquially, your ‘take’ on the nature of human being and of the social world
- *Epistemology*: The philosophy of knowledge. It concerns what knowledge is, how we know things, how we assess the validity of our knowledge
- Researchers’ choices about methods involve more than technical decisions: they reflect the researchers’ *ontological* and *epistemological* frameworks (perspectives).
- **Ontological perspectives:**
  - The world is made up of stories and interpretations
  - The world is made up of socio-architectural structures
  - The world is made up of individuals or humans
  - The world is made up of behaviours, actions and events
  - The world is an environmental, non-human, sensory world
  - The world is made up of relationalities, connections and situations
  - The world is either:
    - A singular and coherent entity OR
    - Multiple and non-cohering
- E.g. “Australia Day” – not just a label, but a way of imagining Australia, a way of understanding, an angle on our history, our intercommunal relations and the way of situating ourselves in the larger historical narrative – imagining ourselves as part of the Australian community
- “...Stories and histories are not simply told about the world but are woven tightly back into the fabric of both everyday existences and societies and cultures” (Mason & Dale, 2010, p.5)
- Ontological perspective: “A world of socio-architectural structures”: an emphasis on the importance of networks, contexts, institutions to human being and social forms
- Understanding society is through the networks we are apart and institutions and contexts and policies that shape us
- “The human subject is not the same thing as the individual” (M&D, 2010, p.8)
  - Aren’t we all humans and aren’t we all individuals?
  - To understand a world of humans or individuals, you need to understand some of the problems with the concept of the individual
  - The individual is seen as the foundational and building block of society
  - Society is an aggregation of individuals – an ordered structure that individual function and fit into... sometimes challenged
  - Two problems with this way of thinking about the Human Being:
    - The Idea of the Individual – it’s not universal. Not all societies have a concept of the individual – “The individual is not a universal understanding of human being: it is culturally and historically specific”
    - An alternative ontological perspective make take account of our relationships with our environments and other people: ‘a world of relationalities, connections and situations’ (p.12) – our selves are formed through relationship and when we are situation in particular environments (natural and technologies)