

encyclopedia of social theory

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MENTALITIES

developed and marketed in the 1950s and their use is now widespread, including for individuals who never come into contact with specialist mental health services.

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JOAN BUSFIELD

MENTALITIES

Mentalities are **individual** and **collective** forms of consciousness, interpretation and **action**. As a technical term mentality goes beyond collective interests in order to explain the emergence of common interests within heterogeneous social groups. Mentalities are not only rational ideas, but rather encompass the **emotional** and irrational dimension of human consciousness. The concept of mentality analyzes collective actions through mental dispositions and world-views that underlie the particular contents of individual consciousness. Mentalities mediate between the individual and the *collective*, especially as they concern collective attitudes towards life, **death**, childhood, **sexuality**, **love**, **family**, **health and illness** and other aspects of **everyday** life.

The French sociologist Emile **Durkheim** was the first to bridge the gap between the individual and the collective level through the concepts of the *conscience collective* and the *representations collectives*. His approach was taken up by the French *Annales* school around Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in the 1920s. They applied the concept of mentalities to the history of medieval and early modern society. A second generation of *Annales* historians after 1945, led by

Fernand Braudel, overcame the high culture bias of the first generation by using quantitative and statistical **methods** to describe the historical cycles of economic and *social mentalities*. It was the third generation after 1970 (represented by Georges Duby, Jacques LeGoff, *Le Roy Ladurie*), that reoriented the *Annales* school theoretically around the concept of **mentality** by combining history with anthropology, sociology and psychology.

But there have been other traditions as well. Norbert **Elias** explained modern **civilizations** through the taming and disciplining function of collective mentalities. German and Anglo-American historians and social scientists have focused more on social and cultural **representations**. Recent debates have criticized the descriptive approach of the *Annales* school and reoriented mentalities towards the original question of why and how collective action is possible and how collective mentalities develop. In current historiography *mentalities are often understood* as 'collective representations' and the history of mentalities has become an established part of cultural history and social anthropology.

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