



## The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World

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**Discipline.** “Discipline” can refer to either (1) a specific set of rules, methods, routines, drills, exercises and techniques of control that lead to the formation of individuals in specific social environments, such as family, school, prison, or military, or (2) the formation of specific areas of knowledge and branches of science. The concept of discipline was introduced and made popular by the works of the German social theorists Max Weber (1864–1920) and Norbert Elias (1897–1990), as well as by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984). Each of these thinkers claimed that discipline is connected to the development of standards and rational structures that we either impose on ourselves or are forced to take over, and which apply in all areas of society and within our daily lives.

### Discipline and Knowledge.

Scientific disciplines and branches of knowledge are a result of the modern development of the universities, which originally started with four traditional faculties, namely, theology, philosophy, law, and medicine. New scientific disciplines emerged within the nineteenth century, including disciplines such as economy, chemistry, biology, psychology, and sociology. A scientific discipline is characterized by a set of rules that defines the curriculum, the plan of study, and the object of investigation. However, the boundaries of disciplines often remain blurred and would shift during the historical development of the sciences, of universities, and of societies. In this vein, Foucault in his work *Archaeology of Knowledge* holds the thesis that all disciplines are defined and implicitly determined by certain principles that determine what can be said and what cannot be said within these areas of knowledge. During the last fifty years, disciplines have been rapidly changing, especially since new knowledge is produced, published, and distributed more quickly than was ever possible in earlier times. This has in turn led to new interdisciplinary fields, such as cultural studies.

### Discipline and Society.

Discipline as a social phenomenon can be found in all societies, though it became very important for the study of modern societies. As Weber, in his famous study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, demonstrated, it was not only the development of economic structures after the Middle Ages that brought forth rational social order and modern capitalism, it was the development of religious factors that was responsible for a specific modern mentality, which made modern rational organization of societies possible. This mentality, as Weber

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claimed, can be traced back to the emergence of Protestantism (among Lutherans, Calvinists, Baptists, Methodists, and Puritans), which was based on religious doctrines that required individuals to reject certain pleasures, while asking them to work hard and put their daily routine under efficient control. Modern economy was possible, according to this analysis, because individuals developed techniques, rules, and expectations through which they began to “rationalize” their lives and though which they could discipline their behaviors in methodological ways. In contradistinction from the monastic discipline, which was imposed on monks and other members of the church, the Protestant doctrine allowed their members to enter a “worldly” ascetic life outside of religious institutions. In addition, modern societies were successful at the beginning of the twentieth century because the idea and the “spirit” of military institutions began to reshape other social areas, including educational institutions and the labor process. Hierarchical structures, the ideal of efficiency, and the introduction of standards, forced members of these groups to control themselves. For example, the role of a member of a political party is usually regulated and controlled by a doctrine that defines strategic goals and a set of expectations. Without the voluntary subjection of individuals to the party doctrine and a systematic method of living in accordance with the doctrine, ordered life within political groups would be near impossible and most certainly ineffective. Most contemporary researchers, however, do not believe that discipline is a possible effect of voluntary submission; rather, it is taken to be a structural, necessary consequence of human life itself.

## Discipline and Civilization.

Discipline not only plays a role in modern societies, it is also taken to be a key factor for civilization processes as a whole. Research in this area is concerned with the further development of a thesis that the Austrian founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), presented in his famous text *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In this text, Freud claimed that in order for the process of civilization to emerge, human beings must not only suppress their instinctual needs, they must also socially “discipline” themselves. Norbert Elias further developed Freud's speculative claims in his work *The Civilizing Process* by presenting a historical reconstruction of the habitual behavior (*habitus*) of modern individuals, which he traced back to psychological changes during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In his view, postmedieval societies in Europe emerged because the members of these societies began to control themselves. Indeed, shame, sexual repression, social norms, “etiquette,” and various forms of speaking led to specific modern forms of how individuals restrain themselves. For example, the introduction of table manners (in particular the rejection of eating with fingers, other eating rules, specific postures, etc.) led to the establishment of upper-class behavior in Europe. Individuals,

according to this model, disciplined themselves in order to produce a distinctive way of behavior, which allowed them to reach a certain status in their societies. As a consequence, social structures can be understood as a result of social self-control and discipline.

### **Industrial Discipline.**

The rise of the factory system, from the late eighteenth century onward, tended to generate new forms of work discipline. Factory rules and foremen were meant to enforce new standards of punctuality and an increasingly rapid pace. More informal work direction, often by family members, declined in favor of these more generalized requirements. Modern work discipline imposed considerable strain on many workers, but many reports suggested that adaptation improved after the first generation of factory industry. Industrial discipline related to broader change in disciplinary methods, including new efforts to regulate informal violence and new standards applied in childrearing (including the inculcation of a more specific sense of clock time).

### **Discipline and Institutions.**

In contrast to Weber and Elias, Foucault focused his analyses on the relations between individuals, knowledge, and institutions in our societies. For example, he claims that the birth of the “sick,” the “mad,” and the “criminal” in the eighteenth century, is closely tied to the invention of institutions (hospitals, asylums, prisons) where these individuals can be observed and subjected to social standards and norms. In addition, modern scientific disciplines, such as medicine, sociology, and psychology, are connected to the emergence of these institutions. As Foucault claimed in his famous study *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, the emergence of the modern idea of punishment and the emergence of prisons, was not really tied to a new conception of justice; rather, it was based on a new social category, which he called “the abnormal.” As such, prisons are institutions through which modern societies define what they take to be “normal,” and thus institutions such as prisons produce normality and a standardized individual. Through his work, Foucault called into question our assumption that prisons were introduced for “humane” reasons and that they are concerned with the psyche of inmates. On the contrary, as he demonstrates in his detailed descriptions of prisons, which include descriptions of prison manuals and architecture, it is, interestingly, the body that takes over the key role in modern punishment. Indeed, the institution takes total control of the inmate's body through a highly complex and efficient system of techniques that “examine,” “observe,” “normalize,” and “discipline” the individual through rigorous control of time and movement. In this way, the prison remains closely tied to the development of the military as a key component of modern

societies. Military behavior is based on the rigorous (self-) control of its members, which determines the individual all the way down to her bodily movements, including movements of fingers, bodily postures, and general social behavior. Discipline thereby “produces” efficient individuals. Not surprisingly, Foucault's initial work has resulted in intense debates in political science, cultural studies, sociology, and philosophy.

### **Discipline and Education.**

Finally, discipline is a highly debated concept in regard to the education of children within families, and with regard to the treatment of students in schools. It remains undecided whether institutions should impose strict rules on students, such as punishments or dress codes, or whether the necessary discipline in schools should employ alternative methods, such as judgments, rewards, exams, or self-responsibility. The integration of sports into the general education of students plays a special role in this context; the contention is that athletics provides a good model for education, insofar as both may be connected to the idea of a disciplined and self-controlled body.

[See also [Prisons and Punishment](#) and [Spanking](#).]

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