
An Introduction to Sociology

Concerts, sports games, and political rallies can have very large crowds. When you attend one of these events, you may know only the people you came with. Yet you may experience a feeling of connection to the group. You are one of the crowd. You cheer and applaud when everyone else does. You boo and yell alongside them. You move out of the way when someone needs to get by, and you say "excuse me" when you need to leave. You know how to behave in this kind of crowd.

It can be a very different experience if you are traveling in a foreign country and find yourself in a crowd moving down the street. You may have trouble figuring out what is happening. Is the crowd just the usual morning rush, or is it a political protest of some kind? Perhaps there was some sort of accident or disaster. Is it safe in this crowd, or should you try to extract yourself? How can you find out what is going on? Although you are in it, you may not feel like you are part of this crowd. You may not know what to do or how to behave.

Even within one type of crowd, different groups exist and different behaviors are on display. At a rock concert, for example, some may enjoy singing along, others prefer to sit and observe, while still others may join in a mosh pit or try crowd surfing. Why do we feel and act differently in different types of social situations? Why might people of a single group exhibit different behaviors in the same situation? Why might people acting similarly not feel connected to others exhibiting the same behavior? These are some of the many questions sociologists ask as they study people and societies.

1.1 What Is Sociology?

A dictionary defines sociology as the systematic study of society and social interaction. The word "sociology" is derived from the Latin word *socius* (companion) and the Greek word *logos* (study of), meaning "the study of companionship." While this is a starting point for the discipline, sociology is actually much more complex. It uses many different methods to study a wide range of subject matter and to apply these studies to the real world.

What Are Society and Culture?

Sociologists study all aspects and levels of society. A society is a group of people whose members interact, reside in a definable area, and share a culture. A culture includes the group's shared practices, values, and beliefs. One sociologist might analyze video of people from different societies as they carry on everyday conversations to study the rules of polite conversation from different world cultures.

Another sociologist might interview a representative sample of people to see how texting has changed the way they communicate. Yet another sociologist might study how migration determined the way in which language spread and changed over time. A fourth sociologist might be part of a team developing signs to warn people living thousands of years in the future, and speaking many different languages, to stay away from still-dangerous nuclear waste.

The Sociological Imagination

Although these studies and the methods of carrying them out are different, the sociologists involved in them all have something in common. Each of them looks at society using what pioneer sociologist C. Wright Mills called the sociological imagination, sometimes also referred to as the sociological lens or sociological perspective. Mills defined sociological imagination as how individuals understand their own and others' pasts in relation to history and social structure (1959).

By looking at individuals and societies and how they interact through this lens, sociologists are able to examine what influences behavior, attitudes, and culture. By applying systematic and scientific methods to this process, they try to do so without letting their own biases and pre-conceived ideas influence their conclusions.

Studying Patterns: How Sociologists View Society

All sociologists are interested in the experiences of individuals and how those experiences are shaped by interactions with social groups and society as a whole. To a sociologist, the personal decisions an individual makes do not exist in a vacuum. Cultural patterns and social forces put pressure on people to select one choice over another. Sociologists try to identify these general patterns by examining the behavior of large groups of people living in the same society and experiencing the same societal pressures.

The recent turmoil in the U.S. housing market and the high rate of foreclosures offer an example of how a sociologist might explore social patterns. Owning a home has long been considered an essential part of the American Dream. People often work for years to save for a down payment on what will be the largest investment they ever make. The monthly mortgage is often a person's largest budget item. Missing one or more mortgage payments can result in serious consequences. The lender may foreclose on the mortgage and repossess the property. People may lose their homes and may not be able to borrow money in the future. Walking away from the responsibility to pay debts is not a choice most people make easily.

About three million homes were repossessed in the United States between 2006 and 2011. Experts predict the number could double by 2013 (Levy and Gop 2011). This is a much higher rate than the historical average. What social factors are contributing to this situation, and where might sociologists find patterns? Do Americans view debt, including mortgages, differently than in the past? What role do unemployment rates play? Might a shift in class structure be an influential factor? What about the way major economic players operate?

To answer these questions, sociologists will look beyond individual foreclosures at national trends. They will see that in recent years unemployment has been at record highs. They will observe that many lenders approved subprime mortgages with adjustable rates that started low and ballooned. They may look into whether unemployment and lending practices were different for members of different social classes, races, or genders. By analyzing the impact of these external conditions on individuals' choices, sociologists can better explain why people make the decisions they do.

Another example of how society influences individual decisions can be seen in people's opinions about and use of food stamps (also known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP benefits). Some people believe that those who receive food stamps are lazy and unmotivated. Statistics from the United States Department of Agriculture show a complex picture.

Percent Eligible by Reason for Eligibility

	Living in Waiver Area	Have Not Exceeded Time Limits ^a	In E & T Program	Received Exemption	Total Percent Eligible for the FSP ^a
Alabama	29	62 / 72	0	1	73 / 80
Alaska	100	62 / 72	0	0	100
California	6	62 / 72	0	0	64 / 74
District of Columbia	100	62 / 72	0	0	100
Florida	48	62 / 72	0	0	80 / 85
Mississippi	39	62 / 72	0	3	100
Wyoming	7	62 / 72	0	0	64 / 74

Food Stamp Use by State Sociologists examine social conditions in different states to explain differences in the number of people receiving food stamps. (Table courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture)

Table 1.1 Food Stamp Use by State Sociologists examine social conditions in different states to explain differences in the number of people receiving food stamps. (Table courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture)

The percentage of the population receiving food stamps is much higher in certain states than in others. Does this mean, if the stereotype above were applied, that people in some states are lazier and less motivated than those in other states? Sociologists study the economies in each state—comparing unemployment rates, food, energy costs, and other factors—to explain differences in social issues like this.

To identify social trends, sociologists also study how people use food stamps and how people react to their use. Research has found that for many people from all classes, there is a strong stigma attached to the use of food stamps. This stigma can prevent people who qualify for this type of assistance from using food stamps. According to Hanson and Gundersen (2002), how strongly this stigma is felt is linked to the general economic climate. This illustrates how sociologists observe a pattern in society.

Sociologists identify and study patterns related to all kinds of contemporary social issues. The “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy, the emergence of the Tea Party as a political faction, how Twitter has influenced everyday communication—these are all examples of topics that sociologists might explore.

Studying Part and Whole: How Sociologists View Social Structures

A key basis of the sociological perspective is the concept that the individual and society are inseparable. It is impossible to study one without the other. German sociologist Norbert Elias called the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of individuals and the society that shapes that behavior *figuration*. He described it through a metaphor of dancing. There can be no dance without the dancers, but there can be no dancers without the dance. Without the dancers, a dance is just an idea about motions in a choreographer’s head. Without a dance, there is just a group of people moving around a floor. Similarly, there is no society without the individuals that make it up, and there are also no individuals who are not affected by the society in which they live (Elias 1978).

An application that makes this concept understandable is the practice of religion. While people experience their religion in a distinctly individual manner, religion exists in a larger social context. For instance, an individual’s religious practice may be influenced by what government dictates, holidays, teachers, places of worship, rituals, and so on. These influences underscore the important relationship between individual practices of religion and social pressures that influence that religious experience.

1.2 The History of Sociology

Since ancient times, people have been fascinated by the relationship between individuals and the societies to which they belong. Many of the topics that are central to modern sociological scholarship were studied by ancient philosophers. Many of these earlier thinkers were motivated by their desire to describe an ideal society.

In the 13th century, Ma Tuan-Lin, a Chinese historian, first recognized social dynamics as an underlying component of historical development in his seminal encyclopedia, *General Study of Literary Remains*. The next century saw the emergence of the historian some consider to be the world’s first sociologist: Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) of Tunisia. He wrote about many topics of interest today, setting a foundation for both modern sociology and economics, including a theory of social conflict, a comparison of nomadic and sedentary life, a description of political economy, and a study connecting a tribe’s social cohesion to its capacity for power (Hannoum 2003).

In the 18th century, Age of Enlightenment philosophers developed general principles that could be used to explain social life. Thinkers such as John Locke, Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Hobbes responded to what they saw as social ills by writing on topics that they hoped would lead to social reform.

The early 19th century saw great changes with the Industrial Revolution, increased mobility, and new kinds of employment. It was also a time of great social and political upheaval with the rise of empires that exposed many people—for the first time—to societies and cultures other than their own. Millions of people were moving into cities and many people were turning away from their traditional religious beliefs.

The Father of Sociology

The term sociology was first coined in 1780 by the French essayist Emmanuel-Joseph Sieys (1748–1836) in an unpublished manuscript (Faur. et al. 1999). In 1838, the term was reinvented by Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte originally studied to be an engineer, but later became a pupil of social philosopher Claude Henri de Rouvroy Comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825). They both thought that society could be studied using the same scientific methods utilized in natural sciences. Comte also believed in the potential of social scientists to work toward the betterment of society. He held that once scholars identified the laws that governed society, sociologists could address problems such as poor education and poverty (Abercrombie et al. 2000).

Comte named the scientific study of social patterns positivism. He described his philosophy in a series of books called *The Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830–1842) and *A General View of Positivism* (1848). He believed that using scientific methods to reveal the laws by which societies and individuals interact would usher in a new “positivist” age of history. While the field and its terminology have grown, sociologists still believe in the positive impact of their work.

Karl Marx

Karl Marx (1818–1883) was a German philosopher and economist. In 1848 he and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) coauthored the *Communist Manifesto*. This book is one of the most influential political manuscripts in history. It also presents Marx's theory of society, which differed from what Comte proposed.

Marx rejected Comte's positivism. He believed that societies grew and changed as a result of the struggles of different social classes over the means of production. At the time he was developing his theories, the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism led to great disparities in wealth between the owners of the factories and workers. Capitalism, an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of goods and the means to produce them, grew in many nations.

Marx predicted that inequalities of capitalism would become so extreme that workers would eventually revolt. This would lead to the collapse of capitalism, which would be replaced by communism. Communism is an economic system under which there is no private or corporate ownership: everything is owned communally and distributed as needed. Marx believed that communism was a more equitable system than capitalism.

While his economic predictions may not have come true in the time frame he predicted, Marx's idea that social conflict leads to change in society is still one of the major theories used in modern sociology.

Creating a Discipline

In 1873, the English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) published *The Study of Sociology*, the first book with the term “sociology” in the title. Spencer rejected much of Comte's philosophy as well as Marx's theory of class struggle and his support of communism. Instead, he favored a form of government that allowed market forces to control capitalism. His work influenced many early sociologists including .mile

Durkheim (1858–1917).

Durkheim helped establish sociology as a formal academic discipline by establishing the first European department of sociology at the University of Bordeaux in 1895 and by publishing his *Rules of the Sociological Method* in 1895. In another important work, *Division of Labour in Society* (1893), Durkheim laid out his theory on how societies transformed from a primitive state into a capitalist, industrial society. According to Durkheim, people rise to their proper level in society based on merit.

Durkheim believed that sociologists could study objective “social facts” (Poggi 2000). He also believed that through such studies it would be possible to determine if a society was “healthy” or “pathological.” He saw healthy societies as stable, while pathological societies experienced a breakdown in social norms between individuals and society.

In 1897, Durkheim attempted to demonstrate the effectiveness of his rules of social research when he published a work titled *Suicide*. Durkheim examined suicide statistics in different police districts to research differences between Catholic and Protestant communities. He attributed the differences to socioreligious forces rather than to individual or psychological causes.

Prominent sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) established a sociology department in Germany at the Ludwig Maximilians University of Munich in 1919. Weber wrote on many topics related to sociology including political change in Russia and social forces that affect factory workers. He is known best for his 1904 book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The theory that Weber sets forth in this book is still controversial. Some believe that Weber was arguing that the beliefs of many Protestants, especially Calvinists, led to the creation of capitalism. Others interpret it as simply claiming that the ideologies of capitalism and Protestantism are complementary.

Weber also made a major contribution to the methodology of sociological research. Along with other researchers such as Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936), Weber believed that it was difficult if not impossible to use standard scientific methods to accurately predict the behavior of groups as people hoped to do. They argued that the influence of culture on human behavior had to be taken into account. This even applied to the researchers themselves, who, they believed, should be aware of how their own cultural biases could influence their research. To deal with this problem, Weber and Dilthey introduced the concept of *verstehen*, a German word that means to understand in a deep way. In seeking *verstehen*, outside observers of a social world—an entire culture or a small setting—attempt to understand it from an insider’s point of view.

In his book *The Nature of Social Action* (1922), Weber described sociology as striving to "interpret the meaning of social action and thereby give a causal explanation of the way in which action proceeds and the effects it produces." He and other like-minded sociologists proposed a philosophy of antipositivism whereby social researchers would strive for subjectivity as they worked to represent social processes, cultural norms, and societal values. This approach led to some research methods whose aim was not to generalize or predict (traditional in science), but to systematically gain an in-depth understanding of social worlds.

Social Policy & Debate

The different approaches to research based on positivism or antipositivism are often considered the foundation for the differences found today between quantitative sociology and qualitative sociology. Quantitative sociology uses statistical methods such as surveys with large numbers of participants. Researchers analyze data using statistical techniques to see if they can uncover patterns of human behavior. Qualitative sociology seeks to understand human behavior by learning about it through in depth interviews, focus groups, and analysis of content sources (like books, magazines, journals, and popular media).

How Do Working Moms Impact Society?

What constitutes a “typical family” in America has changed tremendously over the past decades. One of the most notable changes has been the increasing number of mothers who work outside the home. Earlier in U.S. society, most family households consisted of one parent working outside the home and the other being the primary childcare provider. Because of traditional gender roles and family structures, this was typically a working father and a stay-at-home mom. Quantitative research shows that in 1940 only 27 percent of all women worked outside the home. Today, 59.2 percent of all women do. Almost half of women with children younger than one year of age are employed (U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee Report 2010).

Sociologists interested in this topic might approach its study from a variety of angles. One might be interested in its impact on a child’s development, another may explore related economic values, while a third might examine how other social institutions have responded to this shift in society. A sociologist studying the impact of working mothers on a child’s development might ask questions about children raised in childcare settings. How is a child socialized differently when raised largely by a childcare provider rather than a parent? Do early experiences in a school-like childcare setting lead to improved academic performance later in life? How does a child with two working parents perceive gender roles compared to a child raised with a stay-at-home parent? Another sociologist might be interested in the increase in working mothers from an economic perspective. Why do so many households today have dual incomes? Has there been a contributing change in social class expectations? What impact does the larger economy play in the economic conditions of an

individual household? Do people view money—savings, spending, debt—differently than they have in the past?

Curiosity about this trend's influence on social institutions might lead a researcher to explore its effect on the nation's educational system. Has the increase in working mothers shifted traditional family responsibilities onto schools, such as providing lunch and even breakfast for students? How does the creation of after-school care programs shift resources away from traditional academics? As these examples show, sociologists study many real-world topics. Their research often influences social policies and political issues. Results from sociological studies on this topic might play a role in developing federal laws like the Family and Medical Leave Act, or they might bolster the efforts of an advocacy group striving to reduce social stigmas placed on stay-at-home dads, or they might help governments determine how to best allocate funding for education.

1.3 Theoretical Perspectives

Sociologists study social events, interactions, and patterns. They then develop theories to explain why these occur and what can result from them. In sociology, a theory is a way to explain different aspects of social interactions and to create testable propositions about society (Allan 2006).

For example, early in the development of sociology, Emile Durkheim was interested in explaining the social phenomenon of suicide. He gathered data on large groups of people in Europe who had ended their lives. When he analyzed the data, he found that suicide rates differed among groups with different religious affiliations. For example, the data showed that Protestants were more likely to commit suicide than Catholics.

To explain this, Durkheim developed the concept of social solidarity. Social solidarity described the social ties that bind a group of people together such as kinship, shared location, or religion. Durkheim combined these concepts with the data he analyzed to propose a theory that explained the religion-based differences in suicide rates. He suggested that differences in social solidarity between the two groups corresponded to the differences in suicide rates.

Although some have disagreed with his methods and his conclusions, Durkheim's work shows the importance of theory in sociology. Proposing theories supported by data gives sociologists a way to explain social patterns and to posit cause-and-effect relationships in social situations.

Theories vary in scope depending on the scale of the issues they are meant to explain. Grand theories, also described as macro-level, are attempts to explain large-scale relationships and answer fundamental questions such as why societies form and why they change. These theories tend to be abstract and can be difficult if not impossible to test empirically. Micro-level theories are at the other end of the scale and cover very specific relationships between individuals or small groups. They are dependent on their context and are more concrete. This means they are more scientifically testable.

An example of a micro-theory would be a theory to explain why middle-class teenage girls text to communicate instead of making telephone calls. A sociologist might develop a hypothesis that the reason they do this is because they think texting is silent and therefore more private. A sociologist might then conduct interviews or design a survey to test this hypothesis. If there is enough supportive data, a hypothesis can become a theory.

Sociological theory is constantly evolving and should never be considered complete. Classic sociological theories are still considered important and current, but new sociological theories build upon the work of their predecessors and add to them (Calhoun 2002).

In sociology, a few theories provide broad perspectives that help to explain many different aspects of social life. These theories are so prominent that many consider them paradigms. Paradigms are philosophical and theoretical frameworks used within a discipline to formulate theories, generalizations, and the experiments performed in support of them. Three of these paradigms have come to dominate sociological thinking because they provide useful explanations: structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism.

Functionalism

Functionalism, also called structural functional theory, sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of individuals who make up that society. It is the oldest of the main theories of sociology. In fact, its origins began before sociology emerged as a formal discipline. It grew out of the writings of English philosopher and biologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) who likened society to a human body. He argued that just as the various organs in the body work together to keep the entire system functioning and regulated, the various parts of society work together to keep the entire society functioning and regulated (Spencer 1898). By parts of society, Spencer was referring to such social institutions as the economy, political systems, healthcare, education, media, and religion. Spencer continued the analogy by pointing out that societies evolve just as the bodies of humans and other animals do (Maryanski and Turner 1992).

One of the founders of sociology, Emile Durkheim, applied Spencer's analogy to explain the structure of societies and how they change and survive over time. Durkheim believed that earlier, more primitive societies were held together because most people performed similar tasks and shared values, language, and symbols. They exchanged goods and services in similar ways. Modern societies, according to Durkheim, were more complex. People served many different functions in society and their ability to carry out their function depended upon others being able to carry out theirs. Durkheim's theory sees society as a complex system of interrelated parts, working together to maintain stability (Durkheim 1893). According to this sociological viewpoint, the parts of society are interdependent. This means each part influences the others. In a healthy society, all of these parts work together to produce a stable state called dynamic equilibrium (Parsons 1961).

Durkheim believed that individuals may make up society, but in order to study society, sociologists have to look beyond individuals to social facts. Social facts are the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and all of the cultural rules that govern social life (Durkheim 1895).

Each of these social facts serves one or more functions within a society. For example, one function of a society's laws may be to protect society from violence, while another is to punish criminal behavior, while another is to preserve public health.

The English sociologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955) shared Comte's and Durkheim's views. He believed that how these functions worked together to maintain a stable society was controlled by laws that could be discovered through systematic comparison (Broce 1973). Like Durkheim, he argued that explanations of social interactions had to be made at the social level and not involve the wants and needs of individuals (Goldschmidt 1996). He defined the function of any recurrent activity as the part it plays in the social life as a whole, and thereby, the contribution it makes to structural continuity (Radcliffe-Brown 1952).

Another noted structural functionalist, Robert Merton (1910–2003), pointed out that social processes often have many functions. Manifest functions are the consequences of a social process that are sought or anticipated, while latent functions are the unsought consequences of a social process. A manifest function of college education, for example, includes gaining knowledge, preparing for a career, and finding a good job that utilizes that education. Latent functions of your college years include meeting new people, participating in extracurricular activities, or even finding a spouse or partner. Another latent function of education is creating a hierarchy of employment based on the level of education attained. Latent functions can be beneficial, neutral, or harmful. Social processes that have undesirable consequences for the operation of society are called dysfunctions. In education, examples of dysfunction include getting bad grades, truancy, dropping out, not graduating, and not finding suitable employment.

Criticism

Structural-functionalism was the sociological paradigm that prevailed between World War II and the Vietnam War. Its influence declined in the 1960s and 1970s because many sociologists believed that it could not adequately explain the many rapid social changes taking place at the time. Many sociologists now believe that structural functionalism is no longer useful as a macro-level theory, but that it does serve as useful purpose in many mid-range analyses.

A Global Culture?

Some sociologists see the online world contributing to the creation of an emerging global culture. Are you a part of any global communities?

Sociologists around the world are looking closely for signs of what would be an unprecedented event: the emergence of a global culture. In the past, empires such as those that existed in China, Europe, Africa, and Central and South America linked people from many different countries, but those people rarely became part of a common culture. They lived too far from each other, spoke different languages, practiced different religions, and traded few goods. Today, increases in communication, travel, and trade have made the world a much smaller place. More and more people are able to communicate with each other instantly—wherever they are located—by telephone, video, and text. They share movies, television shows, music, games, and information over the internet. Students can study with teachers and pupils from the other side of the globe. Governments find it harder to hide conditions inside their countries from the rest of the world. Sociologists are researching many different aspects of this potential global culture. Some are exploring the dynamics involved in the social interactions of global online communities, such as when members feel a closer kinship to other group members than to people residing in their own country. Other sociologists are studying the impact this growing international culture has on smaller, less-powerful local cultures. Yet other researchers are exploring how international markets and the outsourcing of labor impact social inequalities. Sociology can play a key role in people's ability to understand the nature of this emerging global culture and how to respond to it.

Conflict Theory

Another theory with a macro-level view, called conflict theory, looks at society as a competition for limited resources. Conflict theory sees society as being made up of individuals who must compete for social, political, and material resources such as political power, leisure time, money, housing, and entertainment. Social structures and organizations such as religious groups, governments, and corporations reflect this competition in their inherent inequalities. Some individuals and organizations are able to obtain and keep more resources than others. These "winners" use their power and influence to maintain their positions of power in society and to suppress the advancement of other individuals and groups. Of the early founders of sociology, Karl Marx is most closely identified with this theory. He focused on the economic conflict between different social classes. As he and Fredrick Engels famously described in their *Communist Manifesto*, "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed" (1848).

Developing on this foundation, Polish-Austrian sociologist Ludwig Gumplowicz (1838–1909) expanded on Marx's ideas to develop his own version of conflict theory, adding his knowledge about how civilizations evolve. In *Outlines of Sociology* (1884), he argues that war and conquest are the basis on which civilizations have been shaped. He believed that cultural and ethnic conflicts led to states being identified and defined by a dominant group that had power over other groups (Irving 2007).

The German sociologist Max Weber agreed with Marx that the economic inequalities of the capitalist system were a source of widespread conflict. However, he disagreed that the conflict must lead to revolution and the collapse of capitalism. Weber theorized that there was more than one cause for conflict: besides economics, inequalities could exist over political power and social status. The level of inequalities could also be different for different groups based on education, race, or gender. As long as these conflicts remained separate, the system as a whole was not threatened.

Weber also identified several factors that moderated people's reaction to inequality. If the authority of the people in power was considered legitimate by those over whom they had power, then conflicts were less intense. Other moderating factors were high rates of social mobility and low rates of class difference.

Another German sociologist, Georg Simmel (1858–1918), wrote that conflict can in fact help integrate and stabilize a society. Like Weber, Simmel said that the nature of social conflict was highly variable. The intensity and violence of the conflict depended upon the emotional involvement of the different sides,

the degree of solidarity among the opposing groups, and if there were clear and limited goals to be achieved. Simmel also said that frequent smaller conflicts would be less violent than a few large conflicts. Simmel also studied how conflict changes the parties involved. He showed that groups work to increase their internal solidarity, centralize power, reduce dissent, and become less tolerant of those not in the group during conflict. Resolving conflicts can release tension and hostility and pave the way for future agreements.

More recently, conflict theory has been used to explain inequalities between groups based on gender or race. Janet Saltzman Chafetz (1941–2006) was a leader in the field of feminist conflict theory. Her books *Masculine/Feminine or Human* (1974), *Feminist Sociology* (1988), and *Gender Equity* (1990) and other studies Dr. Chafetz uses conflict theory to present a set of models to explain the forces maintaining a system of gender inequality as well as a theory of how such a system can be changed.

She argues that two types of forces sustain a system of gender inequality. One type of force is coercive and is based on the advantages men have in finding, keeping, and advancing in positions within the workforce. The other depends on the voluntary choices individuals make based on the gender roles that have been passed down through their families. Chafetz argues that the system can be changed through changes in the number and types of jobs available to increasingly large numbers of well-educated women entering the workforce (Turner 2003).

Criticism: Just as structural functionalism was criticized for focusing too much on the stability of societies, conflict theory has been criticized because it tends to focus on conflict to the exclusion of recognizing stability. Many social structures are extremely stable or have gradually progressed over time rather than changing abruptly as conflict theory would suggest.

Symbolic Interactionist Theory

Symbolic Interactionism provides a theoretical perspective that helps scholars examine the relationship of individuals within their society. This perspective is centered on the notion that communication—or the exchange of meaning through language and symbols—is how people make sense of their social worlds. As pointed out by Herman and Reynolds (1994), this viewpoint sees people as active in shaping their world, rather than as entities who are acted upon by society (Herman and Reynolds 1994). This approach looks at society and people from a micro-level perspective.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is considered one of the founders of symbolic interactionism, though he never published his work on it (LaRossa & Reitzes 1993). It was up to his student Herbert Blumer (1900–1987) to interpret Mead's work and popularize the theory. Blumer coined the term “symbolic interactionism” and identified its three basic premises:

1. Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things.
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society.
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters (Blumer 1969).

Social scientists who apply symbolic-interactionist thinking look for patterns of interaction between individuals. Their studies often involve observation of one-on-one interactions. For example, while a conflict theorist studying a political protest might focus on class difference, a symbolic interactionist would be more interested in how individuals in the protesting group interact, as well as the signs and symbols protesters use to communicate their message. The focus on the importance of symbols in building a society led sociologists like Erving Goffman (1922–1982) to develop a technique called dramaturgical analysis. Goffman used theater as an analogy for social interaction and recognized that people's interactions showed patterns of cultural “scripts.” Because it can be unclear what part a person may play in a given situation, he or she has to improvise his or her role as the situation unfolds (Goffman 1958).

Studies that use the symbolic interactionist perspective are more likely to use qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews or participant observation, because they seek to understand the symbolic worlds in which research subjects lived.

Criticism

Research done from this perspective is often scrutinized because of the difficulty of remaining objective. Others criticize the extremely narrow focus on symbolic interaction. Proponents, of course, consider this one of its greatest strengths.

1.4 Why Study Sociology?

When Elizabeth Eckford tried to enter Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957, she was met by an angry crowd. But she knew she had the law on her side. Three years earlier in the landmark *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case, the U.S. Supreme Court had overturned 21 state laws that allowed blacks and whites to be taught in separate school systems as long as the school systems were “equal.” One of the major factors influencing that decision was research conducted by the husband-and-wife team of sociologists, Kenneth and Mamie Clark. Their research showed that segregation was harmful to young black schoolchildren, and the Court found that harm to be unconstitutional.

Since it was first founded, many people interested in sociology have been driven by the scholarly desire to contribute knowledge to this field, while others have seen it as way not only to study society, but also to improve it. Besides desegregation, sociology has played a crucial role in many important social reforms such as equal opportunity for women in the workplace, improved treatment for individuals with mental handicaps or learning disabilities, increased accessibility and accommodation for people with physical handicaps, the right of native populations to preserve their land and culture, and prison system reforms.

The prominent sociologist Peter L. Berger (1929–), in his 1963 book *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*, describes a sociologist as “someone concerned with understanding society in a disciplined way.” He asserts that sociologists have a natural interest in the monumental moments of people’s lives, as well as a fascination with banal, everyday occurrences. Berger also describes the “aha” moment when a sociological theory becomes applicable and understood:

[T]here is a deceptive simplicity and obviousness about some sociological investigations. One reads them, nods at the familiar scene, remarks that one has heard all this before and don't people have better things to do than to waste their time on truisms—until one is suddenly brought up against an insight that radically questions everything one had previously assumed about this familiar scene. This is the point at which one begins to sense the excitement of sociology. (Berger 1963)

Sociology can be exciting because it teaches people ways to recognize how they fit into the world and how others perceive them. Looking at themselves and society from a sociological perspective helps people see where they connect to different groups based on the many different ways they classify themselves and how society classifies them in turn. It raises awareness of how those classifications—such as economic and status levels, education, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—affect perceptions.

Sociology teaches people not to accept easy explanations. It teaches them a way to organize their thinking so that they can ask better questions and formulate better answers. It makes people more aware that there are many different kinds of people in the world who do not necessarily think the way they do. It increases their willingness and ability to try to see the world from other people's perspectives. This prepares them to live and work in an increasingly diverse and integrated world.

Sociology in the Workplace

Employers continue to seek people with what are called “transferable skills.” This means that they want to hire people whose knowledge and education can be applied in a variety of settings and whose skills will contribute to various tasks. Studying sociology can provide people with this wide knowledge and a skill set that can contribute to many workplaces, including:

- an understanding of social systems and large bureaucracies,
- the ability to devise and carry out research projects to assess whether a program or policy is working,
- the ability to collect, read, and analyze statistical information from polls or surveys,
- the ability to recognize important differences in people’s social, cultural, and economic backgrounds,
- skills in preparing reports and communicating complex ideas,

- the capacity for critical thinking about social issues and problems that confront modern society.
(Department of Sociology, University of Alabama)

Sociology prepares people for a wide variety of careers. Besides actually conducting social research or training others in the field, people who graduate from college with a degree in sociology are hired by government agencies and corporations in fields such as social services, counseling (e.g., family planning, career, substance abuse), community planning, health services, marketing, market research, and human resources. Even a small amount of training in sociology can be an asset in careers like sales, public relations, journalism, teaching, law, and criminal justice.

Please “Friend” Me: Students and Social Networking

The phenomenon known as Facebook was designed specifically for students. Whereas earlier generations wrote notes in each other’s printed yearbooks at the end of the academic year, modern technology and the internet ushered in dynamic new ways for people to interact socially. Instead of having to meet up on campus, students can call, text, and Skype from their dorm rooms. Instead of a study group gathering weekly in the library, online forums and chat rooms help learners connect. The availability and immediacy of computer technology has forever changed the ways students engage with each other.

Now, after several social networks have vied for primacy, a few have established their place in the market and some have attracted niche audience. While Facebook launched the social networking trend geared toward teens and young adults, now people of all ages are actively “friending” each other. LinkedIn distinguished itself by focusing on professional connections, serving as a virtual world for workplace networking. Newer offshoots like Foursquare help people connect based on the real-world places they frequent, while Twitter has cornered the market on brevity.

These newer modes of social interaction have also spawned harmful consequences, such as cyberbullying and what some call FAD, or Facebook Addiction Disorder. Researchers have also examined other potential negative impacts, such as whether Facebooking lowers a student’s GPA, or whether there might be long-term effects of replacing face-to-face interaction with social media. All of these social networks demonstrate emerging ways that people interact, whether positive or negative. They illustrate how sociological topics are alive and changing today. Social media will most certainly be a developing topic in the study of sociology for decades to come.

Summary

Studying sociology is beneficial both for the individual and for society. By studying sociology people learn how to think critically about social issues and problems that confront our society. The study of sociology enriches students’ lives and prepares them for careers in an increasingly diverse world. Society benefits because people with sociological training are better prepared to make informed decisions about social issues and take effective action to deal with them.