

Introduction to Sociology

Lecture 1: Basic Concepts of Sociology

Sociology



- **Sociology** is the scientific study of social behavior and human groups.
- Sub-sections of study range from analysis of conversations to the development of theories and explaining how the world works.

What is Sociology?

- **Sociology** is the study of groups and group interactions, societies and social interactions
- A **group** is any collection of at least two people who interact with some frequency and who share some sense of aligned identity
- A **society** is a group of people who live in a defined geographic area who interact and share a common culture
- Sociologists study small groups and individual interactions from the micro-level and trends among and between large groups and societies on the macro-level
- **Culture** refers to the group's shared practices, values, and beliefs
- **Sociological imagination** (C. Wright Mills): an awareness of the relationship between one's behavior and experience and the wider culture that shaped a person's choices and perceptions

What is Sociology, continued (1)

- **Reification** is an error of treating an abstract concept as though it has a real, material existence
- All sociologists are interested in the experiences of individuals and how they are shaped by interactions with social groups and society as a whole
- Cultural patterns and social forces put pressure on people to select one choice over another
- Sociologists study **social facts** that are aspects of social life shaping a person's behavior and can include laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and cultural rules that govern social life

What is Sociology, continued (2)

- Sociologists might also study the consequences of new patterns such as the ways children are affected by them or changing needs for education, housing, and healthcare
- Part of the **sociological imagination** is that the individual and society are inseparable and must be studied together
- Norbert Elias called the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of individuals and society that shapes the behavior **figuration**, which can be seen in the practice of religion

The Development of Sociology

- **Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857)**, coined the term sociology
- The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution greatly impacted Comte
- Comte believed that society developed in stages:
 - Theological stage where people took religious views of society
 - Metaphysical stage where people understood society as natural
 - Scientific or **positivist** stage where society is governed by reliable knowledge understood in light of scientific knowledge (mainly sociology)
- **Positivism** is the scientific study of social patterns
- Comte's lasting contribution to sociology has been his classification of sciences



Harriet Martineau

- **Harriet Martineau (1802 – 1876)** was a writer who addressed a wide range of social science issues
- She was an early observer of social practices, including economics, social class, religion, suicide, government, and women's rights
- She translated Comte's writing from French to English and introduced sociology to English-speaking scholars
- She is also credited with the first systematic methodological international comparisons of social institutions with works *Society in America* (1837) and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838)
- She pointed out the faults with the free enterprise system in which workers were exploited and impoverished while business owners became wealthy
- Martineau was often discounted in her own time by the male domination of academic sociology

Karl Marx

- **Karl Marx (1818 - 1883):** German philosopher and economist who coauthored *The Communist Manifesto* with Friedrich Engels, one of the most influential political manuscripts in history
- Marx rejected Comte's positivism, believing societies grew and changed as a result of the struggles of different social classes over the means of production
- Marx predicted that I
- nequalities of capitalism would become so extreme that workers would eventually revolt and result in the collapse of capitalism and rise of communism
- Communism is an economic system under which there is no private or corporate ownership but with everything distributed as needed
- Marx's idea that social conflict leads to change in society remains a major theory used in modern sociology

Ida B. Wells-Barnett

- **Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862 - 1931):** born in Mississippi and eventually became a teacher in a black elementary school so that she could support her five other siblings
- In 1884, Wells refused to give up her seat on a train and was dragged from the car
- Wells fought the case and lost but strengthened her passion for equality and social justice
- She became one of the most vocal anti-lynching activists after three friends were lynched
- Wells was one of the founding members of the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and worked to have full inclusion for black women in the Women's Suffrage Movement



Max Weber

- **Max Weber (1864 – 1920)** was a prominent German sociologist who wrote on many sociological topics
- His best known book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*
- Weber believed that the influence of culture on human behavior had to be taken into account
- **Verstehen**: concept meaning to understand in a deep way and that in seeking verstehen, outside observers attempt to understand it from an insider's point of view
- Weber and others proposed **antipositivism**
- Differences between positivism and antipositivism have been considered the foundation for the differences between **quantitative** (like surveys with many participants) and **qualitative** (like in-depth interviews, focus groups, content analysis)

Why Study Sociology?

- The field of sociology consists of people interested in contributing to the body of knowledge as well as those interested in both the study and improvement of society
- Sociology has played a crucial role in desegregation, gender equality in the workplace, improved treatment of individuals with disabilities, and the rights of native populations
- Sociology can teach people ways to recognize how they fit into the world and how others perceive them and increase awareness of differences

Sociology in the Workplace

- Studying sociology can provide people with much desired knowledge and education that can contribute to many workplaces:
 - an understanding of social systems and large bureaucracies
 - the ability to devise and carry out research projects
 - the ability to collect, read, and analyze statistical information
 - the ability to recognize important differences
 - skills in preparing reports and communicating complex ideas
 - the capacity for critical thinking
- Sociology prepares people for a wide variety of careers include government agencies and corporations

Practice Question 1

What is Sociology?

- a. The study of personal choices and behavior.
- b. The study of cultures and ways of life.
- c. The study of society and social interaction.
- d. The study of personality and social behavior.

Practice Question 1 Answer

What is Sociology?

- a. The study of personal choices and behavior.
- b. The study of cultures and ways of life.
- c. The study of society and social interaction.**
- d. The study of personality and social behavior.

Explanation of answer:

Sociology is the study of social behavior and human groups. Sociologists study how society effects people and how people effect society.

Practice Question 2

Which of the following statements best aligns with what a sociologist might say?

- a. Personal decisions an individual makes do not exist in a vacuum.
- b. Large groups of people living in the same society and experiencing the same social pressures will not act in predictable ways.
- c. It is important to study the individual without the society.
- d. Each person is unique and makes their own choices.

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Explanation of answer:

Sociologists believe that cultural and social forces put pressure on people to make one decision over another. As such, personal decisions do not exist in a vacuum.

Practice Question 3

This British sociologist translated Comte's work into English, which made sociological topics more accessible to the English-speaking world. This person also found American capitalism and the inequality of women to be at odds with the country's professed moral principles. Who does this describe?

- a. Auguste Comte
- b. Harriet Martineau
- c. Karl Marx
- d. W.E.B. DuBois

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Explanation of answer:

Martineau was the first to translate Comte's writing from French to English and in doing so introduced sociology to English-speaking scholars. She found capitalism at odds with the professed moral principles of the United States, and she noted that the belief in all things being created equal was inconsistent with the lack of women's rights.

Practice Question 4

Which scholar focused on the struggles among groups in society and felt that social conflict leads to societal change?

- a. Karl Marx
- b. Herbert Spencer
- c. Émile Durkheim
- d. Max Weber

Practice Question 4 Answer

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Explanation of answer:

Marx believed that societies grew and changed as a result of the struggles of different social classes over the means of production. Marx predicted that the inequalities of capitalism would become so extreme that workers would eventually revolt, leading to the collapse of capitalism and the rise of communism.

Introduction to the Sociological Imagination

- The **sociological imagination** (C. Wright Mills, 1916 - 1962) provides a framework for understanding our social world and makes the connection between personal challenges and larger social issues
- **Personal troubles** are private problems experienced within the character of the individual and the range of their immediate relation to others
- Larger **social or public issues** are those that are outside of one's personal control and the range of one's inner life
- The real power of the sociological imagination is in how we learn to distinguish between the personal and social levels in our own lives
- A majority of personal problems are not experienced only personally but are also influenced and affected by social norms, habits, and expectations

Introduction to Sociological Perspectives

- Sociologists use paradigms to understand the social world
- A **paradigm** is a broad viewpoint, perspective, or lens that permit social scientists to have a wide range of tools to describe society and then build hypotheses and theories
- Paradigms can also be considered guiding principles or belief systems



The Main Sociological Theories

- A sociological **theory** seeks to explain social phenomena and are used to create a testable proposition about society, or **hypothesis**
- **Macro-level** theories relate to large-scale issues and large groups of people
- **Micro-level** theories look at very specific relationships between individuals or small groups
- **Grand theories** attempt to explain large-scale relationships and answer fundamental questions about society
- **Paradigms** are philosophical and theoretical frameworks used within a discipline to formulate theories, generalizations, and experiments performed in support of them
- Three paradigms in sociology: structural functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism

Structural-Functional Theory

- **Structural-functional theory** sees society as a structure with interrelated parts designed to meet the biological and social needs of individuals in society
- English philosopher and biologist Herbert Spencer (1820 - 1903) wrote about the similarities between society and the human body and argued that as various organs of the body work together, various parts of society work together to keep society functioning
- These parts of society are **social institutions** that include patterns of belief and behaviors focused on meeting social needs
- Émile Durkheim applied Spencer's theory to explain how societies change and survive over time
- Durkheim believed that society is a complex system of interrelated and interdependent parts working together to maintain stability
- Durkheim believed that sociologists need to look beyond individuals to social facts in order to study society

Structural-Functional Theory, continued

- **Social facts** include the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, fashions, rituals, and all of the cultural rules governing social life
- Durkheim also studied **social solidarity**, social ties within a group, and hypothesized that differences in suicide rates might be explained by religion-based differences
- Robert Merton (1910 - 2003) explored the functions of social processes
 - **Manifest functions** are the consequences of a social process that are sought or anticipated
 - **Latent functions** are the unsought consequences of a social process and can be beneficial, neutral, or harmful
 - **Dysfunctions** are the social processes that have undesirable consequences for society
- Criticism includes that structural-functional theory can't adequately explain social change and that dysfunctions may continue even if they do not have a function

Conflict Theory

- **Conflict theory** looks at society as a competition for limited resources
- This is a macro-level approach most identified with Karl Marx who saw society as being made of capitalist (bourgeoisie) and worker (proletariat) classes
- The bourgeoisie control the means of production, leading to exploitation
- **False consciousness**: the proletariat's inability to see their position in the class system
- **Class consciousness**: structural constraints that prevent workers from joining together to create a common group identity of exploited proletariat
- Max Weber expanded Marx's view to include inequalities of political power and social structure that is regulated by class differences and rates of social mobility