Thinking Like a Sociologist

CHAPTER 1 TOPICS

1. What Is Sociology?

Sociology is the systematic study of social interaction at a variety of levels. Sociologists use scientific research to discover patterns and create theories about who we are, how we interact with others, and why we do what we do. Sociology goes beyond common sense and conventional wisdom in understanding our social world, including small groups (e.g., families and friends), large organizations and institutions (e.g., your college), and entire societies (e.g., the United States).

2. What Is a Sociological Imagination?

The sociological imagination, which emphasizes the intersection between individual lives and external social influences, relies on both micro-level and macro-level approaches in examining the social world. Microsociology concentrates on the relationships between individuals, whereas macrosociology examines social dynamics across the breadth of a society. Macro-level systems shape society, often limiting our personal options on the micro level.

3. Why Study Sociology?

Regardless of your major, this course will help you (1) make more informed decisions, (2) understand diversity, (3) increase your input in shaping social policies and practices, (4) think critically, and (5) expand your career opportunities.

4. Some Origins of Sociological Theory

Sociologists use theories to explain why a phenomenon occurs among people, institutions, and societies. Theories produce knowledge, but can also offer solutions to everyday social problems. Some of the most influential theorists have included Auguste Comte, Harriet Martineau, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Jane Addams, and W. E. B. Du Bois. Each brought to sociology a new level of understanding about our world.

KEY TERMS

- **sociology**: the systematic study of social interaction at a variety of levels.
- **sociological imagination**: the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and larger social influences.
- **microsociology**: a sociological approach that examines the patterns of individuals’ social interaction in specific settings.
- **macrosociology**: the study of large-scale patterns and processes that characterize society as a whole.
- **theory**: a set of statements that explains why a phenomenon occurs.
- **empirical**: information that is based on observations, experiments, or other data collection rather than on ideology, religion, intuition, or conventional wisdom.
- **social facts**: aspects of social life, external to the individual, that can be measured.
- **social solidarity**: social cohesiveness and harmony.
- **division of labor**: an interdependence of different tasks and occupations, characteristic of industrialized societies, that produce social unity and facilitate change.
- **capitalism**: an economic system in which the ownership of the means of production—such as land, factories, large sums of money, and machines—is in private hands.
- **alienation**: the feeling of separation from one’s group or society.
- **value free**: separating one’s personal values, opinions, ideology, and beliefs from scientific research.
- **functionalism (structural functionalism)**: an approach that maintains that society is a complex system of interdependent parts that work together to ensure a society’s survival.
- **dysfunctions**: social patterns that have a negative impact on a group or society.
- **manifest functions**: purposes and activities that are intended and recognized; they are present and clearly evident.
- **latent functions**: purposes and activities that are unintended and unrecognized; they are present but not immediately obvious.
- **conflict theory**: an approach that examines how and why groups disagree, struggle over power, and compete for scarce resources (such as property, wealth, and prestige).
- **feminist theories**: approaches that examine and seek to explain the social, economic, and political inequality of women in society.
- **symbolic interactionism (interactionism)**: a micro-level perspective that examines individuals’ everyday behavior through the communication of knowledge, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes.
- **social interaction**: a process in which people take each other into account in their own behavior.

5. Contemporary Sociological Theories

Sociologists typically use more than one theory to explain human behavior. The fullest understanding of society comes from using all four of these theories:

- **Functionalism** explains society as interconnected social systems. Critics contend that functionalism ignores social inequality and social conflict.
- **Conflict theory** sees disagreement and the resulting changes in society as natural, inevitable, and even desirable. Critics argue that conflict theory ignores the importance of harmony and cooperation.
- **Feminist theories**, which build on conflict theory, maintain that sex inequality is central to all conflict. Critics claim that these theories are too narrowly focused.
- **Symbolic interaction focuses on the meanings of micro-level interactions**. Critics maintain that this theoretical perspective overlooks the impact of macro-level factors on our everyday behavior.

Example: Critical Thinking versus Common Sense and Conventional Wisdom

When thinking critically, it's important to differentiate between common sense myths and facts. Here are a few examples:

- **Myth**: Old people make up the largest group of those who are poor.
- **Fact**: Children younger than 6, not older people, make up the largest group of those who are poor.

- **Myth**: Divorce rates are higher today than ever before.
- **Fact**: Divorce rates are lower today than they were between 1980 and 1990.

Now, based on the material you read in this chapter, construct your own “myth” and “fact.”
TEST YOUR LEARNING

1. ___ looks at the relationship between individual characteristics; ___ examines the relationships between institutional characteristics.
   a. Microsociology; macrosociology
   b. Macrosociology; microsociology
   c. Metasociology; macrosociology
   d. Macrosociology; microsociology

2. Which social class, as identified by Karl Marx, includes the ruling elite who own the means of production?
   a. Capitalists
   b. Communists
   c. Power elite
   d. Proletariat

3. James sees Julie laughing in the hallway with a friend and assumes that Julie is feeling happy. James is using Weber's
   a. explanatory understanding.
   b. surveillance understanding.
   c. common understanding.
   d. direct observational understanding.

4. Jeremy views society as a system of interrelated parts, but Thomas sees society as composed of groups competing for scarce resources. Jeremy would be considered a ___ theorist, and Thomas would be seen as a ___ theorist.
   a. symbolic interactionist; functionalist
   b. conflict; functionalist
   c. functionalist; symbolic interactionist
   d. functionalist; conflict

5. Many people buy designer clothes that they can't afford. The clothes are an example of a status symbol that reflects a
   a. latent function.
   b. manifest function.
   c. dysfunction.
   d. social system.

6. True or False in the definition of sociology, "systematic" means behavior that is built into the larger social structure of society.

7. True or False Emile Durkheim saw sociology as the scientific study of two aspects of society: social statics and social dynamics.

8. True or False Jane Addams was an early sociologist who published extensively on topics such as social disorganization, immigration, and urban neighborhoods.

9. True or False Much of contemporary functionalism grew out of the work of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim.

10. True or False Conflict theorists see society as cooperative and harmonious.

11. What does C. Wright Mills mean when he says that there's a connection between personal troubles and structural issues? Use an example, but not unemployment, to explain and illustrate the sociological imagination concept.

12. Suppose one of your friends is considering getting an abortion and seeks your advice. Would functionalist, conflict, feminist, and interactionists perspectives be useful in your response? Explain why or why not.

TABLE 1.2
Leading Contemporary Perspectives in Sociology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE</th>
<th>FUNCTIONALIST</th>
<th>CONFLICT</th>
<th>FEMINIST</th>
<th>SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of Analysis</td>
<td>Macro</td>
<td>Macro</td>
<td>Macro and Micro</td>
<td>Micro</td>
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<td>Key Points</td>
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<td>• Society is composed of interrelated, mutually dependent parts.</td>
<td>• Life is a continuous struggle between the “haves” and the “have-nots.”</td>
<td>• Women experience widespread inequality in society because, as a group, they have little power.</td>
<td>• People act on the basis of the meaning they attribute to others. Meaning grows out of the social interaction that we have with others.</td>
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<td>• Structures and functions maintain a society’s or group’s stability, cohesion, and continuity.</td>
<td>• People compete for limited resources that are controlled by a small number of powerful groups.</td>
<td>• Sex, ethnicity, race, age, sexual orientation, and social class—rather than a person’s intelligence and ability—explain many of our social interactions and lack of access to resources.</td>
<td>• People continuously reinterpret and reevaluate their knowledge and information in their everyday encounters.</td>
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<td>• Dysfunctional activities that threaten a society’s or group’s survival are controlled or eliminated.</td>
<td>• Society is based on inequality in terms of ethnicity, race, social class, and sex.</td>
<td>• Social change is possible only if we change our institutional structures and our day-to-day interactions.</td>
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