

Chapter 1: What Is Sociology?

I. Sociology - The scientific study of human social life, groups, & societies. Sociology explores human behavior as social beings. It looks beyond the surface to put human behavior into the social context.

Sociologists do not deny the role of individual personality in behavior. However, they first look for explanations in the ways society influences individuals:

A. Suicide: Sociologists agree that the reasons for suicide are on some level psychological (having to do w/ one's personal struggles); however, sociologists examine why suicide rates are higher among some groups: age, gender, sexual orientation, race, etc.

Developing a Sociological Perspective

Sociology asks that we give up the familiar idea that human behavior is simply a matter of individual choice, in favor of the notion that society guides our thoughts & actions.

Sociology requires us to look beyond the surface of people's actions and study the social context of what happened.

Sociology teaches us to identify general patterns of behavior in individuals and to explain social influences on these behavioral patterns.

Sociology helps us to establish the connections between what society makes of us and what we make of ourselves.

The Origins of Sociological Thinking



Auguste Comte
(1798 - 1857)

- II. Comte wrote in the wake of the Industrial and the French Revolutions – he was concerned about the chaos brought about by these two sources of major social change – Comte viewed sociology as the science that could aid humanity by using science to understand human behavior

“By knowing the laws of phenomena, we can make predictions about them and change the world to our advantage” – A. Comte

Early Theoretical Approaches

- A. **E. Durkheim:** main dynamic of modern society is division of labor – creates social cohesion - society constrains individual behavior
➔ **FUNCTIONALISM**
- B. **K. Marx:** main dynamic of modern society is capitalism – creates social division – sociology must study social inequalities
➔ **CLASS CONFLICT**
- C. **M. Weber:** main dynamic of modern society is the rationalization of social & economic life – why do societies differ from one another? – role of cultural ideas & values
➔ **SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM**

3 Modern Sociological Perspectives

III. 3 Major Sociological Paradigms in Contemporary Sociology:

- A. **Functionalism:** society is a complex system whose structures & arrangements serve social purposes: promote solidarity & stability (**MACRO**) - does this ignore inequities (racial, gender, social class) that generate societal conflict? (**R. Merton**)

- B. **Class Conflict:** society is an arena of inequity causing conflict & change (**MACRO**) - does this ignore how shared values & interdependence unify members of a society?

- C. **Symbolic Interactionism:** society is a product of repeated interactions among individuals (**MICRO**) - does this overlook influence of culture, race, gender, social class, etc? (**G. Mead**)

Ex. Education System:

Functionalists - the higher education system helps prepare young adults – provides skills & knowledge needed to perform jobs - by doing so, it limits unemployment.

Conflict Theorists – educational opportunities vary by student (tracking) - tracks do not benefit students, but rather divide children based on race, socio-economic status, etc.

Interactionists - explore interactions w/in the system - interactions are possible b/c of shared symbols – individuals seek out mates & peers that offer them as much as they can give in return.

Sociology in Our Lives

IV. Levels of Analysis: The major theoretical perspectives work at different levels

A. Microsociology: study of everyday behavior in face-to-face interactions (interactionism)

B. Macrosociology: analysis of large scale social systems (functionalism & conflict)

***analysis at both levels is important for understanding human behavior**

V. Practical Implications of Sociology in Our Own Lives

Sociology allows us to:

A. see the world from different perspectives – by understanding others we acquire a better understanding of their challenges

B. assess results of policy initiatives – is a particular initiative effective? / does it have intended or desired outcomes? / what are unintended implications?

C. achieve self-enlightenment – the more we understand our own (and other's behavior) – the more we can influence our own futures positively (self help groups)