

South Dakota State University

Sociological Perspectives

Please note that the following perspectives and definitions should not to be considered a complete compilation of all theories/ideas or works related to the question being posed. This is merely an elementary guide to help with understanding the larger concepts found within the field of sociology.

What is Sociology? Sociology is the scientific study of society and human behavior (Henslin 2003: GL-13).

What is the field of Sociology? The field of sociology is the professional application of scientific and humanistic approaches to the understanding of society and human behavior. It is a science based profession used to understand the social and human condition. Sociologist, C. Wright Mills (1959) in his text, *The Sociological Imagination*, encourages readers to think about the relationship between themselves and the society in which they reside. Mills espouses that we are innately influenced by the larger society and the historical context in which we find ourselves.

What is the unit of analysis in sociology? The unit of analysis in sociology can range from the individual person to a large group of persons. The unit of analysis can be one to a whole society. Different theoretical perspectives within sociology focus on different units of analysis. Sociologists use the terms Micro, Mezzo, and Macro to define what level of analysis is being utilized.

What are the major theoretical orientations in the field of sociology? There is debate in the field of sociology as to what are the major theoretical orientations that guide the profession. These debates merit attention to those within the field, however, sociologists would generally state that the profession is primarily focused on three theoretical orientations. These three theoretical orientations are: Structural Functionalism, Symbolic Interactionism, and Conflict Perspective.

To understand a theoretical orientation in any profession it is critical to understand what is meant by the term theory. Simply stated, “A theory is a statement of how and why specific facts are related” (Maconis 2006: 11).

1. Structural Functional Approach: this theoretical orientation views society as a complex interconnected system of parts that work together in harmony. “... This approach points to the importance of social structure, any relatively stable pattern of social behavior. [Secondly], this approach looks for any structure’s social function, the consequences of any social pattern for the operation of society as a whole” (Maconis 2006: 12-13). Structural Functionalists approach society from a macro-level perspective; they view

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society and its pieces as a whole. Major sociological theorists or contributors to this theoretical approach include: Auguste Comte (considered the founder of sociology); Emile Durkheim; Herbert Spencer; Talcott Parsons; and Robert Merton.

2. Symbolic – Interaction Approach: this theoretical orientation is considered a micro-level approach, which is an individual level approach. In symbolic interaction society is viewed as an ongoing, ever changing event or drama. The primary focus in this approach is communication and exchange of ideas using symbols. In this approach, “society is nothing more than the reality people construct for themselves as they interact with one another” (Macionis 2006: 14). Major sociological theorists or contributors to this theoretical approach include: Max Weber; George Herbert Mead; Charles Horton Cooley; Erving Goffman; George Homans; and Peter Blau.
3. Conflict Approach: this theoretical orientation is considered a macro-level approach that focuses on inequality. Society is composed of unequal distribution of desired resources that benefit a minority at the expense of the majority. This unequal distribution of desired resources causes conflict within a society. Those that have the resources develop structures and methods to maintain these resources. Those that do not have the resources are always creating new ways to acquire resources; hence this approach views society in constant conflict. Major sociological theorists or contributors to this theoretical approach include: Karl Marx; W. E. B. DuBois; C. Wright Mills; and Ralf Dahrendorf.

What is the history of the discipline of sociology? Auguste Comte (1798-1857) is credited with creating the term sociology, and is considered the founder of sociology (Henslin 2003). Comte desired to understand society using the scientific method, this is called positivism. Comte believed that society operated under laws similar to physical laws of nature. To discover what these social laws were meant one had to study society. “Comte stressed that this new science not only would discover social principles but also would apply them to social reform. Sociologists would reform the entire society, making it a better place to live” (Henslin 2003: 9). From this early focus on science a number of theoretical approaches to understanding society have been developed, see above. Sociology remains connected to its early foundational roots as it is still using science to understand society and human behavior.

What are some career options in the field of sociology? According to the American Sociological Association booklet, *Careers in Sociology, Sixth Edition*; there are a number of career options. All sociological careers require a college degree. At the bachelor’s level, common sociology careers can include: social service work, community work, corrections, business, college settings (such as admissions, alumni relations and placement offices), health services, publishing, journalism, government services, and teaching (with additional appropriate teacher certification. At the master’s and doctoral level of sociological education, career opportunities include those listed at the bachelor’s level and expands to include, teaching, research, and applied practice.

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Reference:

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