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SOCIOLOGY

Lecture 1.2:

SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

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Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology



Theoretical Perspectives

- Explain what sociological theories are and how they are used.
- Describe sociology as a multi-perspectival social science, which is divided into positivist, interpretive and critical paradigms.
- Understand the similarities and differences between structural functionalism, critical sociology, and symbolic interactionism.

Theoretical perspectives (paradigms)

provide sociologists with an orienting framework—a philosophical position—for asking certain kinds of questions about society and its people.

Sociologists study everything from specific events (the **micro level** of analysis of small social patterns) to the “big picture” (the **macro level** of analysis of large social patterns).

Three primary theoretical perspectives:

- ❖ the symbolic interactionist perspective
- ❖ the functionalist perspective
- ❖ the conflict perspective

The symbolic interactionist perspective

- ❖ The symbolic interactionist perspective, also known as symbolic interactionism, directs sociologists to consider the symbols and details of everyday life, what these symbols mean, and how people interact with each other.
- ❖ Symbolic interactionism traces its origins to Max Weber's assertion that individuals act according to their interpretation of the meaning of their world
- ❖ The American philosopher George H. Mead (1863–1931) introduced this perspective to American sociology in the 1920s.

The functionalist perspective

- ❖ According to the functionalist perspective, also called **functionalism**, each aspect of society is interdependent and contributes to society's functioning as a whole.
- ❖ Functionalists believe that social **consensus or cohesion** held society together, in which members of the society agree upon, and work together to achieve, what is best for society as a whole.

Emile Durkheim suggested that social consensus takes one of two forms:

- ❖ **Mechanical solidarity** is a form of social cohesion that arises when people in a society maintain similar values and beliefs and engage in similar types of work.

Mechanical solidarity most commonly occurs in traditional, simple societies such as those in which everyone herds cattle or farms. Amish society exemplifies mechanical solidarity.

- ❖ In contrast, **organic solidarity** is a form of social cohesion that arises when the people in a society are interdependent, but hold to varying values and beliefs and engage in varying types of work.

Organic solidarity most commonly occurs in industrialized, complex societies such those in large American cities like New York in the 2000s.

American functionalist sociologist **Robert Merton** (b. 1910) divides human functions into two types:

- ◆ **manifest functions** are intentional and obvious
- ◆ **latent functions** are unintentional and not obvious.

The conflict perspective

The conflict perspective, which originated primarily out of **Karl Marx's** writings on class struggles, presents society in a different light than do the functionalist and symbolic interactionist perspectives.

While these latter perspectives focus on the positive aspects of society that contribute to its stability, **the conflict perspective** focuses on the negative, conflicted, and ever-changing nature of society.

Comparison of theoretical perspectives

SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE	KEY CONCEPTS	MAIN ASSUMPTIONS
Structural functionalism	Manifest and latent functions Dysfunctions Social stability	Social institutions are structured to maintain stability and order in society
Conflict theory	Power Inequality Conflict dominance	The various institutions in society promote inequality and conflict among groups of people
Symbolic interactionism	Symbolic communication Social interaction Subjective meaning	Society is structured and maintained through everyday interactions and people's subjective definitions of their worlds

SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

THEORETICAL COMPONENT	FUNCTIONALISM	CONFLICT (& FEMINIST)	SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM
level of analysis	macro	macro	micro
general view of society	stable, integrated	tension, conflict, inequality	socially constructed
key interests	manifest & latent functions, dysfunctions, integration	inequality, exploitation, stratification, capitalism, patriarchy	symbols, non-verbal communication, social construction of reality
nature of human beings	negative-selfish, self-motivated, society molds & contains human impulses	positive-human potential, society distorts human goodness	socially constructed
what maintains social order	cooperation & consensus	force & coercion	shared understanding
societal goal	societal stability	realized human potential & happiness	n/a
role of sociologist	value-neutral scientist	scientist & educator, advocate	value-engaged scientist
general political orientation	conservative	liberal to radical	not implicit, not explicit
theorists	Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Parsons, Merton	Marx, Engles, Max Weber, Dubois, Mills, Martineau, Addams, Gilman, Well-Barnett, Cooper, Webb, Marianne Weber	Mead, Cooley, Goffman, Horton, Thomas

Sociology is the rigorous and methodical study of society.

Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organisations, and societies, and how people interact in various contexts. Anthony Giddens (2013) offers the following definition: Sociology is the study of human social life, groups and societies. It is a dazzling and compelling enterprise, having as its subject matter our own behaviour as human beings. The scope of sociology is extremely wide, ranging from the analysis of passing encounters between individuals in the street up to the investigation of global social processes. The scope of sociology is extremely wide and may encompass a multitude of topic areas and theoretical perspectives.

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1. SOCIOLOGY AS A SCIENCE

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