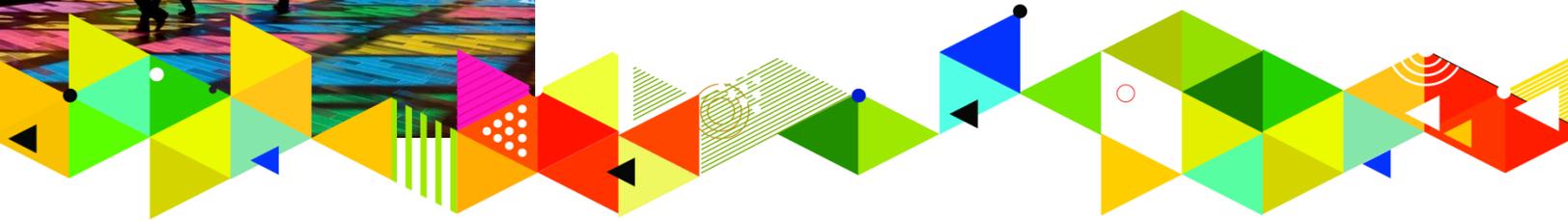




Introduction to Sociology



Learning Objectives

After reading chapter 1, you will be able to

- distinguish sociology from other disciplines in the social sciences.
- outline the historical development of sociology as an academic discipline.
- describe the sociological imagination.
- explain and compare key sociological approaches.
- describe and compare different strands of sociology by their intended audience.
- compare central ideas of key sociologists, such as Durkheim, Marx, Weber and Merton.

Chapter Summary

Sociology can be defined as the social science that studies the development, structure, and functioning of human society. However, it is probably more useful to focus on what the discipline *does* rather than what it *is*. Sociology does investigate social patterns in human practices and relationships that are organized by gender, age, class, ethnicity, “race,” religion, sexual orientation, and other social categories. Sociology thus helps people understand various issues facing society, but also ourselves and other members of society. Sociologists often incorporate approaches from other disciplines, such as anthropology, economics, philosophy, political science, psychology, and social work. Yet, sociology is unique and distinguishes itself from other disciplines through its history, vocabulary, and set of tools, such as the sociological imagination.

The term **sociological imagination** was coined by C. Wright Mills in 1959. The sociological imagination encourages us to shift from one perspective to another—thinking about “how society works,” as well as “how society works in terms of my personal life.” In other words, the sociological imagination allows us to understand individuals’ circumstances as shaped by larger social forces.

Although systematic studies of social life were carried out in other parts of the world as early as the fourteenth century (e.g., the work of Ibn Khaldûn), sociology did not emerge as an academic interest in the West until the nineteenth century. In Europe—particularly in France, Germany, and Britain—

sociology developed as a response to industrialization, urbanization, and population increase. Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Karl Marx are key theorists that shaped the development of early Western sociology. Max Weber, for example, contributed to early sociology by studying the **Protestant work ethic**, concluding that Protestantism helped drive the development of modern capitalism. Émile Durkheim proposed that **social facts**—patterned ways of thinking, acting, and feeling that exist outside of but exert control over the individual—should be the main focus of sociologists. Durkheim examined suicide, for example, as a social fact, finding patterns in suicide rates that were connected to occupation, religion, and marital status. Finally, Karl Marx promoted the idea that social change is driven by the inevitable conflict between two **classes**—the **bourgeoisie** and the **proletariat**—which are characterized by differing relations to the means of production. Another lesser known pioneer in the discipline was Harriet Martineau, widely considered the first woman sociologist. She carried out some of the earliest research on women's societal roles

In North America, sociology emerged as a discipline during the late nineteenth century in response to the societal challenges created by European immigration. The first professional sociologist in Canada was Carl Addington Dawson, who founded the sociology department at McGill University in 1922. At the same time, the University of Toronto developed the discipline with a specific focus on **political economy**. Three Canadian women pioneered gendered sociological analyses in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Annie Marion MacLean was the first Canadian woman to obtain a PhD in sociology and pioneered the study of women wage earners. Aileen Ross was the first woman to be hired to teach sociology in Canada. She was a founding member of the Canadian Human Rights Foundation and focused her research on homeless women and women in India. Helen C. Abell was the founder of rural sociology in Canada and established a research department devoted to rural sociology within the federal Department of Agriculture.

The development of a distinctly Canadian sociology is characterized by a focus on the connections between social class and ethnicity, the historical relations between English and French Canada, and a close working relationship with anthropology. Different kinds of sociology can be categorized in two ways: by the type of theoretical approach used, and by the intended audience for the sociological work.

Sociologists distinguish five central theoretical approaches: structural functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, feminist theory, and postmodern theory. These theoretical approaches can be broadly divided into macro- and micro-sociological approaches. **Macrosociology** focuses on the big picture of society and its institutions (for example, structural functionalism, conflict theory, feminist theory, and postmodern theory), while **microsociology** focuses on individuals and small groups (for example, symbolic interactionism). **Structural functionalism** identifies the various structures of society (e.g., the family), and describes the functions the structure performs to maintain the entire social system and produce social cohesion. The **conflict approach** is based on the idea that societies are made up of groups in (class) conflict with each other. The **symbolic interactionist** approach observes the symbolic meanings of social interactions between individuals and groups within society. **Feminist theory** focuses on highlighting the various social conditions of women, correcting centuries of gender bias and discrimination against women. Finally, **postmodern theory** focuses on the social construction of knowledge and the notion that multiple voices should be heard in any **discourse**, rather than only those of the powerful.

Another way to categorize sociology is to look at the intended audience for the sociological work and to examine how critical the sociologist is of the discipline itself. **Professional sociology** entails

the academic world of sociology departments, as well as academic journals, conferences, and associations. The focus is generally on applying research to a specific problem or intellectual question. **Critical sociology** challenges professional sociology and aims to remind sociologists of issues of inequality that the discipline was created to address. **Policy sociology** is relatively new and is used to develop social policy, mainly in the areas of education, health, and social welfare. Finally, **public sociology** addresses an audience outside of the academy, often popularizing sociological analyses.

Study Questions

1. Where and why did sociology as an academic discipline first emerge?
2. What is the “sociological imagination” and why do sociologists strive to achieve it? Outline its origins and give an example.
3. Compare and contrast structural functionalism and conflict theory.
4. Distinguish between macro- and microsociology. Name one macro-sociologist and one micro-sociologist.
5. According to Michel Foucault, what is a “totalitarian discourse”? Give an example of how this term is used in sociology.
6. What was Carl Addington Dawson’s most significant contribution to sociology in Canada?
7. How does the work of C. Wright Mills help us to understand the events 9/11, according to Henry Giroux?
8. Who developed standpoint theory? What it is? Why is it significant for sociological research?

Exploration and Discussion Exercises

1. Have you ever sat in a coffee shop and spent the time just watching people there? Try this exercise after class one day. Take some paper and a pen and write down the interactions that you see as sociologically meaningful.
 - Why are these interactions particularly interesting?
 - What symbols do you notice (e.g., a handshake, a bow, a wink)?
 - Do they reflect any of the fundamental sociological theories learned in Chapter 1?
 - How do these patterns of interactions impact society?Use one of the theories explored in Chapter 1 to explain this *sociology of everyday life*. In addition, outline why you think different theories have formed, why some are more accepted than others, and what you would change.
2. How do you think theories help us understand our social world? Detail the ways in which they are significant to your life.

Further Readings

Curtis, B. (2004). Reading Reflexively: The 2003 Porter Lecture. *Journal of Historical Sociology* 17(2–3): 240–264.

On the relationship between history and sociology

Helmes-Hayes, R. (2002). John Porter: Canada's most famous sociologist and his links to American sociology. *The American Sociologist* 33(1): 79–104.

This article describes John Porter's contribution to the discipline in Canada beyond his influential book *The Vertical Mosaic* (1965)

McGuire, P.D. (2012). Indigenous spaces in sociology. In L. Tepperman and A. Kalyta, (Eds.), *Reading Sociology: Canadian Perspectives* (pp. 11–15). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

A discussion of intellectual colonialism and Indigenous knowledge(s)

Warren, J.-P. (2009). The three axes of sociological practice: The case of French Quebec. *Canadian Journal of Sociology* 34(3): 803–830.

This article discusses an extension to the four types of sociology

Helpful Websites

Canadian Sociological Association: <http://www.csa-scs.ca/>

Famous Sociologists: <http://www.sociosite.net/topics/sociologists.php>

Feminist sociological theories: <http://sociology.about.com/od/Sociological-Theory/a/Feminist-Theory.htm>

Sociological Images: <https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/>

Key terms and definitions: <http://www.webref.org/sociology/sociology.htm>

An illustrative discussion of the difference between macro- and microsociology: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BVeSykcQeE>

A good discussion of sociological theories that also provides links to further discussions of each sociological approach: <https://youtu.be/XfKQ-ozKktM>