

Lecture 2: Sociological Perspectives

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1 Theory

- Way of explaining, understanding, and planning
- Trying to relate a new situation to an old one based on patterns.
- Common sense involves theory with privileged assumptions.

Theories are subsets of models, which are ways of helping you see the world. *Concepts* are clusters of cases that share some same characteristic to distinguish two things from each other. *Propositions* are statements that relate concepts.

- Theory A supposition or system of ideas composed of **interrelated propositions** intended to explain a phenomenon, grounded independently of the specific things being explained.
- Opinion A personal view or judgment, not necessarily based on evidence or systematic knowledge. Driven by individual tastes, feelings, and ideas.
- Fact “Something that is indisputably the case,” often claimed to be beyond dispute when grounded in empirical data (information through the five senses). While concrete experiences, facts can still be debated due to interpretation, measurement, or competing evidence.

2 Approaches to Science

Scientific arguments should be internally logical, and externally empirical.

Definition 1: Objectivity

Observation of the world can occur in a neutral fashion without being influenced by theory or cultural or personal assumptions - “We all see the same thing”

Definition 2: Subjectivity

Observation of the world is influenced by theory or cultural or personal assumptions - “You don’t see that?”

Definition 3: Paradigm

heoretical perspective about reality that guides research. Frames of reference from which to view the world. Assumptions made are taken for granted, “the way things are”.

3 Approaches to social science

1. Positivism (objective explanation and prediction). The idea that sociology is closer to a natural science (i.e. there exists *the* social reality, independent of perceptions. Ways of knowing are more based on reliability, replicability, hypotheses. Wants to discover *universal* social laws.
2. Critical (Challenging power and promoting emancipation). More political, aims to be transformative. Believes that knowledge cannot be neutral, aims to unmask ideologies and empower marginalized groups. Ways of knowing are more based on comparing to history, participatory research, critical discourse analysis, etc. Aims to critique and change oppressive systems.
3. Interpretive (intepreting meaning and social action). Understanding how actors interpret world. Different subjective “realities”. Aim of understanding.

4 Theoretical Paradigms

4.1 Structural Functionalism

Definition 4: Structural Functionalism

Views society as a complex system whose parts work together to promote stability and social order.

Shows how social structures, based on shared values or preferences, can either maintain or undermine social stability. Social facts are above individuals, but different social structures have different forms of social solidarity.

1. Mechanical solidarity: Found in smaller, simpler societies. Cohesion comes from similarity. Typically requires more collectivist thinking and shared values.
2. Organic solidarity: Cohesion comes from interdependence. With higher division of labour, people who perform specialized tasks rely on one another to survive. Requires flexible norms, because people differ in roles and beliefs.

4.2 Marxism - Historical Materialism

Definition 5: Marxism

Capitalist mode of production allowed the Bourgeoisie to exploit the Proletariat (people who sold time for wages). Since the Proletariat doesn't own the Means of Production, the Bourgeoisie can exploit them, causing alienation.

Marx believed that workers would develop class consciousness (be aware of their exploitation), and form unions and labour parties (political), which would end private ownership and bring about a communist society.

4.3 Symbolic Interactionism

Definition 6: Symbolic Interactionism

A micro-level paradigm focusing on the symbolic meanings individuals create and negotiate through social interaction, shaping self and society.

4.4 Feminist Theory

Definition 7: Patriarchy

A gendered system of institutional structures in which men as a group dominate, oppress, and exploit women as a group. Patriarchy is maintained not by biological necessity but by socially constructed norms and power relations.

Feminist theory originated with the critique of *patriarchy*, arguing that male domination and female subordination arise from **structures of power**: legal, economic, political, and cultural; rather than any innate differences between the sexes.

Definition 8: Structures of Power

The network of institutions, organizations, and cultural practices that allocate resources and define legitimate authority. In a patriarchal system, these structures systematically privilege men's interests while constraining women's opportunities.

Feminist scholars examine how power operates at both the *macro* and *micro* levels:

- **Macro level:** Laws, policies, corporate hierarchies, religious doctrines, media industries.
- **Micro level:** Everyday interactions, language use, family dynamics, workplace routines.

Together these reproduce a dominant gender ideology that naturalizes men's authority and marginalizes women's voices.

Definition 9: Dominant Gender Ideology

A set of cultural beliefs and practices that define “appropriate” roles, behaviours, and traits for men and women, often portraying masculinity as rational and authoritative, and femininity as emotional and subordinate.

Feminist theory also advocates for the dismantling of gender inequalities and the expansion of its analytical lens through *intersectionality*.

Definition 10: Intersectionality

A framework for understanding how multiple systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, racism, classism, ableism, and heteronormativity; intersect to shape individuals’ experiences and social outcomes.

By applying intersectionality, feminist researchers show that women’s experiences of power and inequality cannot be fully understood without considering race, class, sexuality, disability, and other axes of difference.

Example 1: Intersectional Analysis

Studying wage gaps not only by gender but also by race reveals that Black and Indigenous women often face the largest pay disparities, demonstrating how gender and racial hierarchies combine to produce unique forms of disadvantage.

4.5 Critical Race Theory

Definition 11: Critical Race Theory (CRT)

A macro-level, critical approach that examines how racial discrimination is embedded and reproduced within social structures and institutions. CRT focuses on the ways in which law, policy, and cultural norms function to maintain racial hierarchies and white dominance.

CRT argues that in societies historically controlled by white elites, social, economic, and legal differences between racial groups are not accidental but are institutionalized to protect (white) elite interests. These institutional practices produce and perpetuate systemic racism.

Definition 12: Systemic Racism

A form of racism expressed in the *social, economic, and political* systems that create and enforce discriminatory outcomes, disadvantaging people of colour, irrespective of individual intentions.

Example 2: Systemic Racism

Systemic racism manifests in multiple domains:

- **Housing and Segregation:** Redlining and discriminatory lending keep neighbourhoods racially divided and hinder wealth accumulation.
- **Criminal Justice:** Disparate policing, sentencing, and incarceration rates disproportionately target communities of colour.
- **Education and Employment:** Unequal access to quality schools and biased hiring practices limit socioeconomic mobility.

These institutional power structures rely on white privilege and white supremacy ideology to legitimize the marginalization of people of colour.

Definition 13: White Privilege

The unearned advantages and immunities granted to white people by virtue of systemic biases, which remain invisible to many who benefit from them.

4.6 Symbolic Interactionism

Definition 14: Symbolic Interactionism

A micro-level theoretical perspective that examines how individuals create, negotiate, and interpret meanings through *interpersonal communication*. It holds that social reality is constructed in face-to-face interactions rather than simply existing “out there.”

Key tenets of Symbolic Interactionism include:

- **Meanings are constructed:** People attach symbols (words, gestures, objects) to experiences, and these shared meanings make social life possible.
- **Active agents:** Individuals *create* their social circumstances by interpreting and responding to the symbolic environment, not merely reacting to external stimuli.

Example 3: Everyday Symbolic Exchange

When two colleagues greet each other with a particular handshake or phrase, they are not just exchanging a greeting but also reaffirming in-group membership and a shared workplace culture.

4.6.1 Goffman and the presentation of self

Definition 15: Dramaturgical Approach

Erving Goffman's analogy of social interaction to a *staged play*, where individuals are actors managing impressions in front of an audience.

Key components of Goffman's framework:

- **Front Stage:** The region where actors perform a specific role for an audience, adhering to expected scripts, costumes (appearance), and props (objects or setting).
- **Back Stage:** The private area where actors can relax, drop their performance, and prepare for future front-stage roles

Definition 16: Impression Management

The process by which individuals attempt to control the perceptions others form of them, by regulating their front-stage performance and the cues they emit.

Definition 17: Interaction Ritual Chain

A sequence of front-stage performances by different actors that create a shared definition of the situation and reinforce social bonds.

5 Comparative Table of Paradigms

Aspect	Functionalism	Critical	Interpretivist
Level of Analysis	Macro	Macro	Micro
Core Question	How does society maintain order?	How is power contested and inequality produced?	How do individuals create and interpret meaning?
Key Mechanism	Social integration, consensus	Power struggle, coercion, ideology	Symbols, interaction, self-concept
View of Society	Stable system	Arena of conflict	Network of interactions
Primary Methods	Surveys, comparative-historical	Historical materialism, critical analysis	Ethnography, participant observation

6 Research Implications

- **Functionalist Studies:** often use large-scale surveys to test hypotheses about social cohesion (e.g., Durkheim's suicide rates).
- **Critical Studies:** employ critical discourse analysis, historical data, and power-mapping to expose inequality (e.g., studies on class and schooling).

- **Intepretivist Studies:** rely on qualitative interviews, fieldwork, and coding of micro-interactions (e.g., symbolic meanings in online communities).

From slides:

- **Functionalism** – Role, Function, Purpose
- **Critical Theory** – Inequality, Power, Who Benefits
- **Feminist Theory** – Interrogating Categories; Structural and Interpersonal Power
- **Interpretivist (Symbolic Interactionism)** – Construction of Meaning; Interaction; Self