

UNIT 1

Introduction

Overview

This unit is the first of the eight units of this course, a course that will introduce you to the basic concepts you should know in Sociology. It will equip you with the foundational content and direction you will need to move onto the next units in the course and other Sociology courses you are doing. In this unit students will be exposed to a definition of Sociology, the origins of the discipline and the research methodologies people engaged in sociology use to understand social issues. For the last mentioned, we provide only a light introduction. The unit is designed to help you reinforce and reflect on your learning and you are, therefore, expected to participate in the learning activities including the peer assessments.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit you will be able to:

1. Define sociology.
2. Discuss the explanations provided about its origin.
3. Differentiate between sociology and other major social sciences.
4. Explain key concepts in sociological methodologies including positivism, empiricism, survey research and triangulation.
5. Draw on your own reading and research to explain the importance of sociology in understanding human behaviour.

This unit is divided into three sessions as follows:

Session 1.1: What is Sociology? (History and Purpose)

Session 1.2: Sociology as a Science

Session 1.3: Research and Sociology (Types: Quantitative, Qualitative)



Readings and Resources

Required Reading

Mustapha, N. (2013). *Sociology for Caribbean Students* (2nd edition). Module 1. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Available via [UWILinC](#).

OpenStax. (2016). *Introduction to Sociology*. OpenStax CNX. May 18, 2016. Section 1. Available at <http://cnx.org/contents/afe4332a-c97f-4fc4-be27-4e4d384a32d8@7.23>

Suggested Readings

Alpert, H. (1959). Emile Durkheim: A Perspective and Appreciation. *American Sociological Review*, 24 (4), pp. 462-465. Available via [UWILinC](#).

Bellah, R. (1959). Durkheim and History. *American Sociological Review*, 24 (4), p. 447-461. Available via [UWILinC](#) from http://www.jstor.org.library.open.uwi.edu/stable/2089531?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Gorard, S. & Taylor, C. (2004). *Combining Methods in Educational and Social Research*. Chapters 1-3. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education. Available via [UWILinC](#).

Turner, J. (2003). Herbert Spencer. In Ritzer, G. (Ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Major Classical Social Theorists*. Editor. Geore Ritzer. Blackwell Publishing Limited. Available via [UWILinC](#).

You are also advised to locate and read: Additional papers relevant to the topics covered.

Session 1.1

What is Sociology? (History and Purpose)

Introduction

Sociology has been described as the study of interaction between individuals in a society. It has also been described as the study of human behavior in a society, as well as, the scientific study of human society interactions (Mustapha 2013 p. 6). Since earlier years, humans have had to learn to live with each other for the fostering of relationships that would encourage the establishment of units, groups, communities and societies. Sociology then, is a more complex area of study as it also involves the interaction of people, as well as, the interaction of people within and in relation to the units, groups, communities and societies they are part of.

Sociology: Historical Roots

Sociology emerged out of a need in European society to understand how the structure of the society changed with the economic shifts in production. European societies' movement from agrarian to industrial affected the traditional dynamics of how people related to each other and their role in society. The movement from agrarian to industrial meant migration from feudal estates to urban centers, a reorganizing of how people participate in an industrial society. Part of the new thrust in integration had to also be informed by new ways of thinking and this was also made possible by movements away from the predominant Catholicism and belief systems that existed in Europe. The periods of Renaissance, Enlightenment, Reformation and the rise in Protestantism, are some examples of triggering events shifting traditional European society between the 13th and 16th centuries. Events like these and the French Revolution significantly impacted the political and social landscape of Europe.

Sociology is a discipline that was required to provide a frame for the study of all of this change occurring in European societies. Thus it was then, and continues to be, a tool for the analysis of change in society and the study of patterns in human behavior.

There are a few points to consider as you read on about the descriptions and definitions of sociology. One, for example, is that the discipline was not named this at first. Early proponents such as Auguste Comte (1798-1857) who is regarded as a founding father, termed the study 'social physics' and then sociology. Part of the reasoning for

revisiting what a discipline studying social phenomena should be named involved a recognition of what would make such a discipline different from other ongoing efforts interested in human behavior and relationships. Much of this pursuit for originality is captured in the work of sociology's early academics such as Comte, Saint Simon, Emile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer as they set to outline facets of interaction and systems guiding such interaction. Worthy of note is their efforts to scientifically study human behavior and interaction.

What does it mean to scientifically study human behavior and interaction? It means that people – researchers, students – who wish to put forward a sociological understanding of a phenomenon, have to apply the same principles of information gathering that is typical of researchers studying matter in the natural sciences.

Sociology's Focus as Perceived by Durkheim and Spencer

Let us look now at the work of these early academics and see what their focus was in demarcating the academic space that this sociology, as a discipline, was to inhabit.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 1.1

Reading

Read the following:

- Mustapha, N. (2013) *Sociology for Caribbean Students*, Chapter 1 of Module 1, **pp. 5-17.**
- Chapter 1 of Openstax *Introduction to Sociology 2e* Sections 1.1-1.2 **pp6-14.**

Note: You should pay special attention to the ways in which the relationship between individuals and the societies in which they live has evolved into scientific discipline. You should also pay careful attention to the ideas that Spencer and Durkheim had, which have provided important guidance for thinking through sociological questions. So, Spencer's thoughts on what sociology should be, and Durkheim's contribution in advancing on the application of scientific and research principles to the study of social phenomena are all areas for careful attention.

Have you completed the readings and extracted the important points? If you have, you may move on to Learning Activity 1.2. But do not forget what you have read and collected on Spencer and Durkheim.

Please note, in particular, the following:

- Both are functionalist theorists
- Functionalist theorists study society as a complete whole
- They both have been criticized for ignoring the agency that individuals must exercise in determining their actions.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 1.2

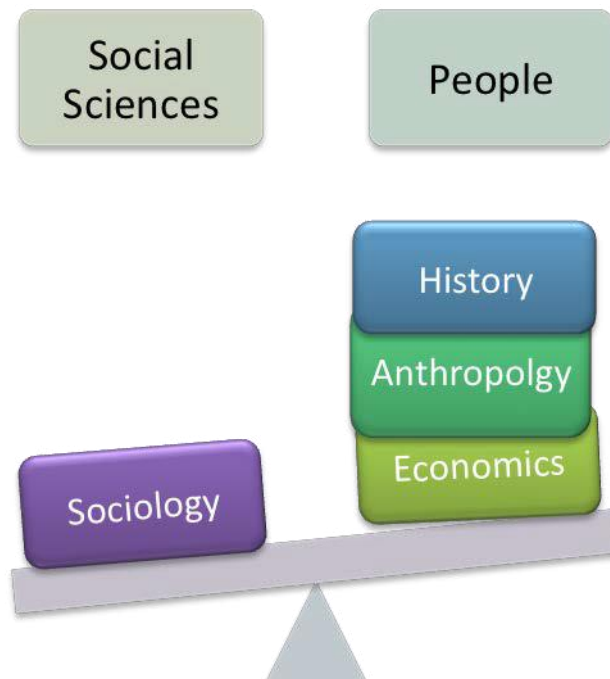
Testing What You Have Learnt About Sociology

Below are two questions which should help you test how well your knowledge building is going. Respond to the questions below in the designated forum. Respond to the posts of at least two of your peers

1. Research two definitions of sociology. In your opinion, which best captures what you have come to learn as the meaning of sociology? Provide reasons for your assessment.
2. In your own words, explain what you understand as Auguste Comte's view of sociology.

Sociology as a Discipline Compared to Other Disciplines

In this session so far, sociology has been defined and some of you may be wondering about the nature of the relationship between sociology and other disciplines. You may even be wondering what makes sociology different from disciplines that involve the study of human beings. Learning Activity 1.3 below takes you a step further in identifying the distinction between sociology and the rest.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 1.3

Connecting Disciplines to Human Behaviour

Below is a list of disciplines. Briefly explain their connection with the study of human behaviour. Once you have done that, compare these findings with your notes on what concerns sociology.

- History
- Anthropology
- Economics
- Demography
- Social Work

Did your research help you to discover the points listed below?

- Both history and sociology study human behavior and patterns over time but historians are likely to focus on the influence of events and individuals in particular contexts, all occurring in the past. Sociology is concerned with the cause and effect of change over time.
- Demographers use numerical analysis in their study of population structure, change and spatial relationship profile whilst persons in sociology would use numerical analysis along side qualitative inquiry to understand these descriptions and the influence of these realities.
- Anthropologists put a lot of emphasis of their study on culture and the way people organize themselves. Sociologists study this element too, but with a wider cross section of research methods. Still, anthropology is regarded as one of the closest of the disciplines in social sciences to sociology.
- Economics is focused more on the laws associated with generating money. There is a specific interest in the economy and the production of goods and services. Sociology is concerned with the production of goods and services as well but someone studying sociology, for example, would be concerned with how people are organized in the production of goods and services and how this organizational differentiation impacts way of life and relationships.
- Social Work is about the practice of implementing sociological principles for the benefit of citizens. Sociology is the science upon which social work is based. Both are concerned with human welfare across various contexts and the extent to which the integration of these contexts stimulate patterned responses.

Session 1.1 Summary

This first session in Unit 1 has provided us an understanding of sociology, its origins, the reasons it is referred to as a science and the distinguishing features of sociology that identifies it as being different from other disciplines such as history and anthropology. We also focused some attention on two of Sociology's Founding Fathers, Durkheim and Spencer. In the next session we will be looking at Sociology as a science.

Session 1.2

Sociology as a Science

Introduction

Sociologists such as Comte believed that human behavior can be studied using the same laws that governs the natural sciences and their study of matter. Comte believed that human behavior could be objectively measured. His thinking was a plus for the departure from traditional ways of thinking influenced by institutions such as the church or anecdotal explanations for human behavior. In the sciences, there is a systematic interrogation of a problem or a unit of analysis based on a hypothesis or towards developing a theory on cause and effect. The systematic interrogation of the problem or understanding of cause and effect is done through methods which will be discussed in the next section. These methods however are based on ideas of empiricism, positivism and rationalism.

For now, you should be concerned with familiarizing yourself with some key concepts that are associated with conducting sociological research. Read the instructions presented below for the upcoming Learning Activity.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 1.4

Reading

Read Chapter 1 pp. 22-23 of Module 1 of Mustapha, N. (2013) Sociology for Caribbean Students, the section entitled Sociology as a Science.

Construct statements (working definitions) which represent the meaning you have drawn for each of the following terms:

- Positivism
- Empiricism
- Value Free
- Cumulative

Identify two other terms which you encountered in the reading and develop similar statements for these.

N.B. *A working definition is not one which is found in a dictionary or similar source. It is, rather, a practical one which you, as user, pull together and which is good enough for you to 'work with' since it helps you understand the term and apply its meaning.*

We need to be aware of some special terms which are very much a part of the language of sociology and, hence, you need to know them and know what they mean. You will be expected to use them in the right context. Here are the terms and brief definitions of these:

Empiricism

This is a philosophy about the way researchers should gain knowledge. It is a crucial element in science. Empiricism is concerned with obtaining fact beyond hypothesizing and imagination and it has remained an important philosophy in the conducting of scientific research that encouraging minimized researcher bias due to the adherence of systematic strategies.

Positivism

This term refers to the practice of applying the same rules that govern the study of matter in the natural sciences to the study of human behavior. It holds that behavior in human can objectively be measured.

Objectivity and 'Value free'

This requires the researcher to be unbiased at all points or times in the research. This is linked to the philosophy of empiricism. When researchers are objective, they are impartial and unbiased. Being objective also means freeing the research from your ideological influences. For example, you may want to get some answers regarding coping strategies of inner city poor, which includes Rastafarians. You may be hesitant to interview the Rastafarians and exclude them if you allow your innate feelings towards this group, influenced by your religion and own beliefs. This should not happen.

Being value free, however, concerns the reporting of research facts accurately. In other words, when the research is conducted, the answers derived have to reflect the findings from the research. The answers cannot be judgmental. It is possible that research can be carried out and findings are influenced by judgment or traditional thinking. Take for example an instance where a finding or truth from research is not considered because it may have implications for electoral votes.

The issue of being value free has been argued against by researchers, as simple questions such as why did you choose to pursue a particular problem and not another is already loaded with subjectivity.

Cumulative

Sociological research is said to be cumulative because it builds on the work of predecessors and this way is contributing to the expansion of knowledge on a particular subject.

Session 1.2 Summary

In this session we delved deeper into the perspective of sociology being a science. There are some associative key terms and concepts that should not be divorced from discussions of sociology as a science. We recognized these terms to be mainly positivism, empiricism.

Having identified these key terms and their explanations, we further built upon the perspectives of Comte, Durkheim and Spencer to formulate sociology as a science, as part of established thought on how sociology should be studied and the tools that must be used with it. This is addressed further in the next session.

Session 1.3

Research in Sociology

Introduction

As you would have learnt in the previous session, the early proponents of sociology had a positivist approach to the study of social phenomena. This attention to principles of empiricism and science in the application of studies on human relations and social issues formed part of the positivist school. The emphasis on measurement is mostly associated with quantitative methods and the use of surveys. The other way of collecting information is the interpretive way and that has become affiliated with qualitative research which relies on face to face interviews, participant observation and ethnography.

Quantitative and Qualitative Methods of Enquiry

These two schools of thought and the various techniques they use to gather information on problems and phenomena in society have been dominant for decades. However, in the last decade we have seen researchers studying social phenomena incorporating both methods producing a syncretic approach to doing research that complements strengths and diminishes weaknesses inherent to the techniques associated with these methodologies. This contemporary practice allows for more accuracy and precision in arriving at answers to the problem.

Early researchers used the process of triangulation to assure the reliability of their findings. *Triangulation* involves the use of multiple data sources to validate information collected. This might involve an appreciation of multiple research methods or techniques to corroborate information. Today, researchers use integrated methodologies or mixed methodologies in the design of their data collection. We are not going to discuss these new approaches here but you should note that such developments can be mentioned as efforts to update techniques that can match the increasing complexity of human behavior and relationships.

You should also note that there has been a 'quarrel' between quantitative and qualitative schools of thought on the effectiveness of their techniques and you will derive from your readings a preference by researchers to use quantitative techniques. This is not by

chance, however. Your reading on sociology as a science would have illustrated that the precision positivist seek in answers is closely related to the statistical and mathematical inputs that the quantitative methodology produces. One of the arguments supportive of this has been that human beings are unpredictable and therefore the possibility of getting a reliable understanding to explain behavior becomes difficult with qualitative methodology. That, however, has been dismissed by the qualitative school who claim to uphold the application of advanced rigour to their study of human behavior and relations. For example, while quantitative researchers may speak of reliability, qualitative researchers may use the term transferability. Both amount to the same end, a concern about the extent to which answers for patterned human behaviour can be repeated under similar or various conditions. Qualitative researchers do hold themselves to an appreciation of rigour. This is evident in the systematic way of coding information collected to produce themes. It is noteworthy to mention that certain qualitative researchers are constructivist in thinking and practice so they hold no preconceived ideas about what it is they wish to study and derive all perspectives from the information they gather through prolonged engagement with participants and immersion in the participant environment. This is one treatment of bias technically and a challenge to the factions in the quantitative school who rely on surveys to gather information, which tend to already have imbued ideas on what it is they are studying. Considering all of this, we may be inclined to support mixed methodological techniques.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 1.5

Learning About Sociological Research

Read Mustapha (2013) Chapter 2, **pp. 40-52** which presents information on sociological research.

Please pay attention to the various advantages and drawbacks associated with the data collection tools.

One of the points you would have noted from your reading is this: researchers studying social phenomena start off by identifying a problem existing in the society. This problem identification prompts the researchers to ask about the structure of problem, its relationships and causation. They may also examine what schools of thoughts have examined or investigated in the problem and what were the findings. This can be achieved through a review of literature on the problem. This review of the literature is presented in the researcher's presentation of a report or academic paper on what s/he has found. Below is a list of important elements that form part of the research process which can also be included in the researcher's presentation or report of their findings on problem studied.

1. **Identification of the Problem:** This can be informed by official statistics e.g. census data or vital statistics that illustrate a phenomena occurring outside of normative behavior. For example, the problem of youth violence and the risk factors that are associated with youth engaged in violence.
2. **Setting Out Research Questions:** This is where the researcher advances ideas about the problem in the form statements. These statements usually accompany a hypothesis or you may just encounter the presentation of a hypothesis.
3. **Objectives of the Study:** These are very specific statements speaking to the researcher's intent for the reader.
4. **Literature Review:** This is the researcher's analytical account of what has been written on the problem by different writers. This also allows for recognition of gaps in the contribution to understanding the problem and where a contribution can be made.
5. **Methods:** In your method section you articulate the type of research methodology you are employing to study the problem and the research questions you identified. There are some key activities you should involve in this section. These include the data collection process, data management and data analysis. There are smaller but critical activities that occur within these three dimensions. For example, in speaking to data collection, you will have to speak about your sampling technique when you are doing quantitative. There are different sampling approaches including simple random sampling and cluster-based sampling. In both quantitative and qualitative research sometimes data collected from participants may have to be done through a purposeful selection or based on convenient sampling. You should become familiar with the limitations of the techniques used in both research methodologies.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 1.6

Scenario: To Use or Not To Use

You are at a Town Hall meeting in your rural community. The meeting is to address some social issues that have become worrying to at least 10 % of 10,000 plus residents. A resident suggests that there are too many community-based organizations doing the same thing and as a result there is overlapping and no efficiency in tackling the problems. The Member of Parliament suggests that a small study be done to find out what activities organizations working in the community are doing instead of just assuming. Persons in attendance agree that a questionnaire should be developed and sent out to the respective heads of the organizations. Having done sociology and read about questionnaires, list at least three reasons why a questionnaire would (or would not) be, **in this context**, a suitable data collection tool and put forward a recommendation. When you are done, share your discussion with your colleagues in the designated forum.

Session 1.3 Summary

We have come to the end of Session 1.3. In this session we looked at sociological research which is an important aspect of the discipline, Sociology. We reviewed key terms used in sociological research and explored data collection tools for their usefulness and their appropriateness in various contexts. We learnt that quantitative and qualitative researchers represent two different schools of thought on how research should be conducted. While proponents of either schools may not converge on the style of gathering information, modern perspectives appreciative of the technical value each brings to securing greater reliability of findings has been emergent. The fact that each does not reach a level of reliability should not be downplayed. To the credit of each, dismissing this would run counter to the findings of numerous studies that have been produced by practitioners in both schools, findings that have guided policy development leading to the advancement on human well being.

Unit 1 Summary

In this unit we covered some interesting and vital ideas required for an introductory understanding of sociology. In Unit 2 which follows, there will be more important terms to consider because of their centrality to studying human behavior. In concluding this unit let us reflect on our main findings:

1. Sociology is the study of human behavior. But it prides itself in doing so systematically through techniques that fall within the purview of qualitative and quantitative inquiry and a combination of both is part of a stronger attempt to understand and predict human behavior.
2. The foundation of sociological thought which incorporates its positivistic and empirical appreciation can be traced to the work of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim. It is important to remember these scholars began their work by determining and shaping the paradigm of sociological thinking and research.

Having understood what it means to study sociology and conduct sociological research we also learnt the key inputs common to writing sociological research. This is procedural and follows some linearity, meaning that in sociological research we cannot talk about findings without explaining methods or before this what informed the purpose of conducting the research. In this context, we can argue that sociological thinking and how sociologists arrive at answers and conclusions is systematic. In the next unit we shall explore basic sociological concepts.

References

Moore, S., Chapman, S., Holborn, M., & Haralambos, M. (2013). *Sociology Themes and Perspectives*. Harper Collin Publishers, pp. 4-19,726-728.

UWIDEC. (1997). *Introduction to Sociology: Social Sciences Reader*, Unit 1. Barbados: University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre.