

UNIT 3

Perspectives in Sociology

Overview

The first two units introduced you to the foundation of sociological thought and key terms and phrases in the study of social life. In respect of the latter, understanding the key terms and how they have been defined and agreed on by sociologists is critical to moving forward with a common understanding when talking about sociology or society. In this unit we will examine two umbrella perspectives for sociology. The perspectives are representations of what founding sociological thinkers proposed about how people live or do not live harmoniously and the contributions of various parts of society to the wider project of harmonious living. As you participate in this unit, pay careful attention to the reasons proffered by thinkers such as Karl Marx and Talcott Parson for this harmony (or the lack thereof) in society.

Learning Objectives

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

1. Identify thinkers associated with various sociological perspectives.
2. Discuss the explanations offered by functionalism, conflict theory and interpretivism for explaining society and social behaviours.
3. Discuss notions associated with macro-sociology and micro-sociology.
4. Critically review the explanations offered by functionalism, conflict theory and interpretivism about the maintenance of social order.

This Unit is divided into two Sessions as follows:

Session 3.1: Micro-Sociology

Session 3.2: Macro-Sociology



Readings & Resources

Required Readings

Mustapha, N. (2013). *Sociology for Caribbean Students* Second Edition, Kingston, Ian Randle Publishers (Module 1). Available at [UWIlInC](#).

OpenStax, *Introduction to Sociology*. OpenStax CNX. May 18, 2016. Available at http://cnx.org/contents/rQzKsl_@7.23:FRUxRAYN@2/Introduction-to-Culture

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

Session 3.1

Micro-Sociology

Introduction

Micro-sociology perspectives are concerned with the interactions taking place between individuals. Micro-sociology focuses on the meanings of actions between exchanges and how people are managing their actions to meet the requirements of the social setting which they are in. This view contrasts with the view held by macro sociologists, a view to which you will be introduced a little later. Micro-sociology focuses on the ways in which human beings interact on a small scale as opposed to the focus on broader social structures applied by the macro-sociologists as both seek explanations for the ways in which society functions. Micro-sociology, then, values the meaning ascribed to actions by individuals. So we will start our exploration into micro-sociological explanations by taking a look at how micro-sociologists explain social action.

Micro-Sociologists Explain Social Action

Social action begins with understanding what meanings individuals have for their actions as the cause for the actions. The theory came to being through the work of Max Weber, German philosopher who like social action thinkers of the time postulated that an understanding of human behaviour would be achieved by studying the patterns of social interaction for causal explanations for why people do things when they do. For Weber social action and interaction had some properties. The individual must be aware of the action, cognizant of how others react to the action. If there is none of the latter, then there cannot be social action. Weber was concerned with the meanings of the actions individuals had in the interactions with one another. He believed that understanding why people behaved particular ways could best be understood by putting yourself in their shoes. He referred to this as Verstehen, which he believed was a methodical way of systematically arriving at causal explanations. It is about understanding the meaning attributed to experiences, actions and interactions. What is being proposed by Weber in this perspective is the explanation of people's action by studying their actions directly and, secondly, reflecting on the action through the person's eyes.

Interactionists such as social action thinkers also think about meanings in interactions. They focus on symbols and the meanings attached to these as part of understanding how people communicate. They reject schools of thought that support the influencing of human behaviour and social order mainly through the work of social institutions.

The interactionist perspective has other sub-interpretations of social action associated with it. These include, symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, ethnomethodology and phenomenology.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 3.1

Reading

Read [Mustapha \(2013\) pp 31-33](#) which discusses the **Interactionist Perspectives**. You must pay attention to the various explanations offered for the ways in which people interpret the actions of others around them.

Available via [UWUlinC](#).

Now that you have completed the reading please note the following important points:

1. Symbolic Interactionism is associated with symbols and the meanings people attach to them within the context of interaction. Symbolic interactionism has three principles. Look for:
 - (a) Ascribed meanings: where the actions of individuals are based on the meanings that they assign to things
 - (b) Meanings evolve out of interaction and engagement with others
 - (c) And people go through an interpretive process through which they assign these meanings to objects in their environment
2. Dramaturgy proposes that human beings are like actors on stage. They play particular roles that are necessary for interaction and individuals can perform differently based on the roles they are playing at the time.
3. Phenomenology is concerned with the studying of the lived experiences by people of phenomena. This type of observation and analysis requires sociologists to experience to the phenomena and how its meaning evokes a type of action which becomes part of the human being's consciousness.

4. Ethnomethodologists believe that we must be clear in what tools we use to understand social action and social life. According to Mustapha (p.33), ethnomethodology takes the view that “social life appears to be orderly, when in fact it is very chaotic; social order is constructed in the minds of individuals. The order is achieved through a process called the documentary method”, where individuals make sense of social life through observation of “unwritten rules that guide routine situations” (Mustapha 2013).



LEARNING ACTIVITY 3.2

Below is a list of names of theorists associated with the interactionist school.

1. Correctly match the names of the theorists listed below with the theories.
2. Outline a contribution each theorist has made to the perspective with which you matched them.

Post your responses in the designated forum.

Theorists' Names are as follows:

- George Herbert Mead
- Erving Goffman
- Alfred Schultz
- Harold Garfinkel

Session 2.1 Summary

The session introduced you to the interactionist school of thought and the sub perspectives of phenomenology, dramaturgy and ethnomethodology. As you would have realized, the value of the interpretivists or interactionist school is the focus on the interactions between individuals and groups and how the meanings and interpretations gathered from the interactions they have help them and sociologists to, establish patterns which they can use to make sense of the social environment.

We also learnt about Max Weber and his work on social action which rejected the views on behaviour largely being influenced by social institutions. We will now move on to Macro-sociology.

Session 3.2

Macro-sociology

Introduction

In the previous session we would have explored micro-sociological perspectives. In this session we are going to be considering explanations offered by macro-sociologists. So, we will turn our attention to exploring Functionalism and Conflict Theory and examine the ways in which these account for the functioning of social systems and populations.

What is It?

It is useful to have different perspectives because it allows you to get a more holistic, universal view of how people like sociologists see the social world. In sociology we can examine the world through macro or micro lens. The functionalist and conflict theorist schools of thought are situated within the macro perspectives while the Interpretive school of thought defines the scope of the micro-sociological perspective.

Macro-sociology focuses on the interaction that happens on a large scale. This interaction is happening between social structures and the influence on human behaviour. The drivers of this influence and interaction include institutions and processes such as education, religion and the family.

Functionalism

Functionalism is a sociological approach that has roots of emergence in the work of Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. It came at a time when there were several questions to be answered about the ordering and function of society, which needed to be answered. In earlier units, these functionalists were mentioned. The movements at the time associated with the change in Europe, Industrial Revolution, Enlightenment and Rationalism had created new economic groups and elevated appreciation for scientific thinking.

Functionalists believe that society is made up of a set of interrelated parts and all of these parts are working together for the whole. You might remember when we talked about Herbert Spencer is the previous units that we mentioned society being viewed as an organism. Functionalists emphasize shared values and beliefs which help with the creation of harmonious living. This of course can be criticized for its utopian presentation of life.

As mentioned earlier in Unit 1, August Comte was a French philosopher. Comte approached society as a body made up of parts that each worked harmoniously towards maintaining the ordered state of the whole. These parts for instance included social institutions like the family.

Comte's contribution to functionalist thought can be found in his examination of social statics and social dynamics as he sought to find answers for the change that he was experiencing in society at the time.

Social statics can be described as the study of the factors that contribute to the equilibrium between groups and the society as a whole. He thought that the study of these groups would lead to an understanding of how they function with the context of a 'whole'.

Social dynamics is concerned with the progressive evolutionary change taking place with societies. Comte theorized that this took place during a linear stage process and during this time people became more concerned with development as a whole. The contribution made by Comte to sociological thought is that having understood this type of movement, sociologists could also now predict change in society.

We will take another, but deeper, look at the philosophy of Emile Durkheim. Regarded as one of the first functionalists to systematically apply the approach to the study of social life Durkheim was concerned with patterns of human behaviour and the relationship between social institutions and structure impacted human behaviour. He advanced the work of earlier functionalists such as Spencer and was pre-occupied with understanding how social order was maintained.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 3.3

Reading

Read [Section 1.3, Theoretical Perspectives, of Chapter 1 of Openstax', Introduction to Sociology 2e](#), p.14.

Note the ways in which perspectives are developed as sociologists attempt to make sense of the social world.

Durkheim developed some frames of investigation for answers to social order. Social facts, he proposed, were those things that constrained the individual to act in a certain way. These were described as norms, folkways which were external to the individual but acted as a guide for behaviour. These social facts exerted pressure on the individual because of expectations related to ways of thinking and feeling that are transmitted through key agents such as the family. Social facts are maintained also through the presence of sanctions.

Another frame of examination for social order that Durkheim developed was the collective conscience, which is the social bond human beings share that is transmitted in the ways of life and culture and institutionalized in the social structure. A key thought is the dependence of human on society as part of maintaining social order. Of course, there are other perspectives rejecting this view of control and more appreciative of the agency individuals have patterning behaviour and responses.

One of the foremost contributors to functionalist thought in the modern era was Talcott Parsons. One of his well-known contributions was his explorations of functional relationships that exist between and within institutions that contributes to harmony in the system. Parsons also supported the views of persons like Durkheim and rational thinkers based on his philosophy that people generally had an interest to cooperate and not the opposite. A collective recognition of this provides commonalities that holds people together. This belief by Parsons introduced the term, value consensus, which refers to the agreement of core values that become the glue holding society and serving the interest of society.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 3.4

Reading

Comte theorized about three stages of society: the **theological**, **metaphysical** and **positive**. Following your reading of the article provided through the link below, write a short description of the main assumptions in each of these stages:

Read **Chapter 2 on Auguste Comte** of *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists: Classical Social Theorists*, Volume I, pp. 30-38.

Alternate link: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/library/open.uwi.edu/doi/10.1002/9781444396621.ch2/summary>

Emile Durkheim's work shows a preoccupation with how people and society remained cohesive. He advanced thoughts on the social change such as the movement from pre- industrial to industrial society and the integration of groups and roles during this transition. In this learning activity make brief notes on the following:

- Organic solidarity
- Mechanic solidarity
- Durkheim's view of suicide

Having done your research on Parsons, you would know that Parsons recognized four prerequisites important to the functioning and maintenance of a harmonious society. Make a brief note for the processes mentioned below that he identified:

- Adaptation
- Goal Attainment
- Integration
- Latency

Conflict Theory

Having examined the functionalist perspective of society, we will now shift to the views of the conflict perspective. In this section you will learn about the thoughts of Karl Marx specifically. Conflict theory, to which Karl Marx can be credited as contributing, does not take the view like the functionalists that society is all harmony and that people are not exploring advantages and disadvantages of others or, at worst doing such within the context of subscribing to value consensus. This is certainly not a view projected in the work of Marx. In Marx's work the problem of inequality is sharply brought across through his interrogation of capitalism and new industrial society. His work focuses on the disproportionate control over power and resources and he argues that that change will occur when those with less power rise up to overturn those who have the power. It also puts forward the idea that people's relationships are determined by the forces of production – land, for example.

It is important to note, however, that Marx's theory is located in a particular context, the industrial society, and so there must be an appreciation for the characteristics of the society leading and creating the environment for the change that Marx said would happen. The Caribbean, for example did not go through the type of evolutionary change that Europe social and economic life underwent. It did not evolve or progress from a feudal to an industrial society. It could be proposed that from a dependency and under development view, the Caribbean went through a

process of colonialization and industry development through foreign direct investment. This is critical for you to note because there is a lot of criticism of Marxism because of the economic and political ideologies such as Socialism and Communism that have come to be associated with it but are indeed far from the operationalizing of the Marxism philosophy. To be fair, capitalism has made adjustments to ensure the working class did not rise up against the bourgeoisie. Capitalism offered benefits to workers that further weakened the likelihood of their becoming more homogeneous.

Conflict theory is useful to the discourse on development because it allows for a evaluative approach to hegemonic rules or how society should be ordered. Of note in the discourse is the discussion on division of labour especially as it concerns women and the social construction of their capabilities as required in production.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 3.5

Reading

Read pages 9, 13 and 30 of [Module 1 in Mustapha \(2013\)](#) (available via [UWUlinC](#)).

1. Provide a short explanation for the term ‘Marxist revolution’ and share with your colleagues in the designated forum. Highlight in your explanation what the possible implication for interaction of people in a society would be with class consciousness.
2. When you are done, read the contribution provided by **at least one of your peers** and tell them what you think is similar about yours and their discussion of the term.
3. You are the Junior Editor on Development Issues and Public Affairs at a prestigious news agency and you are asked by the Senior Editor to critically review an article submitted by a local politician in opposition who is arguing that the ruling party of 20 years because of poor “good governance” will experience a revolution Marxist in nature. What are some of the elements in his article you would be looking for to determine if the pre-requisite for a revolution Marxist in nature is at play? Share your responses in the designated forum.

Session 3.2 Summary

In concluding this session, we can derive from the readings that macro-sociology is at odds with micro-sociology in terms of the ways in which each school of thought approaches gathering information to understand human behaviour. In macro- sociology there is an emphasis on social institutions and the work that they do to contribute to social order. On the other hand, micro-sociology has a pre-occupation with the interactions between individual and the meanings within the context of these interactions. While one perspective appreciates the control of institutions on the behaviour of humans, another identifies patterns for human behaviour from continued observation and immersion in the interaction of which they want to study.

While there are differences in the approaches to understanding human behaviour and social life, if you examine them closely you will see that both approaches rely on consensus between individuals for cooperation. Individuals have to agree on the expectations of their interactions.

UNIT SUMMARY

There is value in both macro- and micro-sociology. One places a lot of importance on the exertion of external factors influencing human behaviour and to the detriment of recognizing the active participation of individuals in influencing the behaviour of others and themselves. The critical thing to note is how the presence of both views are made manifest in society and, in fact, because of their co-existence are contributing to the integrated maintenance of order in society. While this beneficial co-existence is the anticipated outcome, it is, sometimes, hard to leverage such an argument where indicators of disharmony in the subscription of wider social values, such as high murder rates points to differences in the meaning of cooperation. Cooperation which in this discussion means conforming to social norms and expectations can be built up through the process of socialization and strengthened in secondary and tertiary socialization processes. All of these processes rely on institutions such as the family and education to acculturate persons but as we know from our everyday experiences, it is not necessarily a system that is fool-proof.

In this unit we also learnt about sub-perspectives. Here is what we gathered:

1. Functionalism and Conflict Theory are two sides of the same coin. That coin is signatored by structuralism thinking.
2. Social action thinkers develop an understanding of patterned behaviour by studying the meanings of small scale actions between individuals.
2. The social action school rejects the idea of society being some large system and that human behaviour is only understood through an understanding of that system.

3. Human beings and social life have been compared to theatre, where they play different roles in the context of scripted expectations of behaviour. This thinking belongs to the sub-perspective of interpretive sociology called dramaturgy by Erving Goffman. According to Goffman, people have front stage and backstage roles that they play and performance of either is dependent on who they are interacting with. We learnt that there are other sub-perspectives such as Phenomenology (Alfred Schultz), Ethnomethodology (Harold Garfinkel), and Symbolic Interactionism (Herbert Mead).
4. Conflict theory does not subscribe to the view that society is total harmony and that this is maintained through a general consensus. They see society as experiencing struggle and have a realist view of relations in the society.
5. Karl Marx is a conflict theorist who criticized the structural relationships in industrial society and the inequalities maintained by a false class consciousness and the perpetuation of the status quo by social institutions such as religion. The key points to remember about Marx and his critique of industrial society are:
 - a) power remains in the hands of the few who control the modes and means of production;
 - b) social relations is influenced on economic relations;
 - c) the role of social institutions is to reproduce the oppressive status quo.

In the next unit, Unit 4, we will explore social change in society and how useful these perspectives discussed here have been in explaining the dynamics of social life.

References

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