

Chapter 2 Social Theories

Table of Contents

| Section | Page |
|--|-------------|
| Chapter Summary | 15 |
| Section Summary | 16 |
| Preconception survey | 18 |
| In-Class Discussion Questions | 19 |
| Essay Questions | 22 |
| Assignments | 23 |
| Post-Lecture Survey | 24 |
| Suggestions for Local Guest Lecturers | 25 |
| Keeping it Fresh: Ideas for the Experienced Instructor | 25 |
| Annotated Resources | 26 |

Chapter Summary

Understanding the social world around us is made possible, in part because of the theories that we create. This chapter introduces the student to a wide array of classic and modern social theories (e.g., functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, feminism, post-structuralism, and queer theory). By utilizing social theories, we attempt to explain the observations we make about social interactions and to predict future activities.

To explain the theoretical approaches within sociology, it is best to start with the Enlightenment, its relationship to the emergence of sociology, and a few of the philosophical underpinnings of sociology (e.g., the ideas of Newton, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, which are all mentioned briefly in sections of this chapter). This will help the student place sociology in historical context.

Functionalism is discussed as one of the three major sociological theories. The work of Durkheim and Parsons is emphasized. Functionalists see the social world from a macro-level analysis which emphasizes that society is a system of interrelated and independent parts. To a functionalist, a society is like an organism (e.g., known as the organic analogy) that functions because of an established equilibrium between its parts.

Conflict theory, as represented by Marx and Engels, is noted as another theoretical perspective in sociology that uses a macro-level analysis. Here, unlike functionalism, society is seen as based on inequality and competition over scarce resources, which ultimately leads to conflict.

Last, symbolic interactionism can easily be distinguished from both functionalism and conflict theory because of its microsociological orientation and its focus on the ways in which meanings are created, constructed, mediated, and changed by members of society. The contributions of Weber, Mead, and Cooley (Blumer, Thomas, and Simmel are briefly discussed) are emphasized.

Rounding out the first half of the chapter is a discussion of marginalized voices and social theory which includes some discussion of contributions by women, visible minorities, and non-Western scholars (e.g., Wollstonecraft and MacLean, Du Bois, Fanon and Padmore, respectively).

Modern theories such as Western Marxism, Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and Queer Theory are introduced in the second half of the chapter. The chapter begins its coverage of modern social theories by introducing the student to Gramsci's concept of hegemony (i.e., the ideology of the ruling class is the mechanism by which they dominate society).

As for feminism, the text emphasizes second-wave and third-wave feminist approaches such as – respectively – Dorothy Smith’s arguments about beginning with the actualities of people’s lives and bell hooks’ criticism of second wave feminism noting that race is inextricable from gender.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of Foucault’s conception of power and how it is linked to knowledge, and the three principals of Queer Theory (desire, language, and identity).

Section Summary

Seeing the World Theoretically:

- A theory is a statement that tries to explain how certain facts or variables are related to predict future events.
- Learning to see the world as each theorist saw it or sees it will aid students of sociology in their exploration of the discipline.
- Some theories are more helpful than others when we utilize them to explain a current event or situation.

Philosophical Roots of Classical Sociological Theory:

- The Enlightenment is represented by one main group – The Philosophes – who were a group who advocated critical thinking and practical knowledge, not thinking directed by God, the Church, and the aristocracy. This movement built on scientific thinking and was inspired through the French and American Revolutions.
- The “Conservative Reaction” to the Enlightenment rejected revolutionary ideas such as self-reflection, free thinking, and social change. It embraced tradition, authority, pre-determined hierarchies, and a fixed natural social order.

Functionalism:

- Theorists who adopt this perspective see the world as a dynamic system of interrelated and interdependent parts and society as an organism.
- Durkheim, often considered the founder of modern sociology, worked at creating sociology as discipline for much of his career.
- Durkheim introduces us to such terms as the collective conscience, social facts, anomie, and mechanical and organic solidarity.
- Parsons’ social action theory is an attempt to separate behaviours and actions.
- Parsons developed the four functional imperatives – adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency – required for a social system to maintain homeostasis.
- A critique of functionalism follows in the text.

Conflict theory:

- Conflict theory assumes that society is based on inequality and competition over scarce resources.
- Marx and Engels developed a clear alternative to functionalism.
- The concept of power is key here in terms of how it defines and influences virtually all human interactions.
- Here we are introduced to some of Marx's key terms such as dialectic, idealism, means of production, relations of production, social class, alienation, and exploitation, to name a few.
- This section ends with a critique of conflict theory.

Symbolic Interactionism

- Utilizing a microsociological approach to the study of the social world, symbolic interactionism differs from both functionalism and conflict theory, which are both macro in focus.
- This perspective originated in the U.S. and is largely based on the works of Mead and Cooley, though others such as Weber, Simmel, Blumer, and Thomas can be discussed here as well.
- Symbolic interactionism maintains seven basic principles regarding humanness: (1) capacity for thought, (2) thinking is shaped by social interaction, (3) people learn social meanings that allow them to interact in social groups, (4) symbolic communication is uniquely human, (5) social meanings and symbols can change, (6) people can interact with themselves, and (7) groups and societies are the culmination of patterns of actions and interaction.
- Weber's term "verstehen", referring to a deep understanding of subjective social meanings, is noted here as key to our understanding the actions of others.
- Mead argued that human behaviour is almost always the product of interaction with others.
- Cooley, in his insights into human behaviour, proposed that we develop our self-image through the cues we receive from others.

Marginalized Voices and Social Theory:

- Addressed in this section are the contributions of women, visible minorities, and non-Western scholars.
- This section explores the exclusion and oppression of the weak and social theory.

Western Marxism:

- Distinct from earlier Marxist thought, Western Marxism refers to more independent and critical forms of Marxism that emerged after the 1920s.
- Gramsci's concept of hegemony refers to ideological control and consent of those of all classes by the ruling class.
- Using Gramsci's concept of hegemony, we can see how some features of social organization come to be taken for granted,

Feminist Theories:

- All feminist theories are concerned about gender oppression.
- First-wave feminism, occurring from the mid-1800s to after World War I, dealt with issues of women as persons.
- Second-wave feminism, beginning in the 1960s, sought to characterize women as a coherent social group.
- Dorothy Smith, a second-wave Canadian feminist, focuses her attention on the social relations that shape the worlds of women.
- bell hooks, a third-wave feminist, shows us that one voice for all women is not sufficient.
- Black women, for example, are a unique category of women revealing that women cannot be collapsed into single homogeneous category.

Post-Structuralism:

- As represented by the ideas of Foucault, post-structuralism focuses on the notion that power relations are key to understanding how knowledge is produced.
- Foucault rethinks power as that which is multidirectional – we can resist power and one group does not always dominate.
- Truth is contextual – it cannot be separated from the relations of power in which it is produced.
- Discipline refers to how we come to be motivated to produce particular realities – like a healthy body.

Queer Theory:

- Queer theory turns its attention to the oppression of gays and lesbians, as is present in a discussion of desire, language, and identity.
- Desire should be defined as widely as possible, from this perspective, to include more diverse expression.
- Language comes into play for queer theorists in that language is related to power.
- Our language is value-laden with essentially heterosexual values.
- Language operates with the logic of binaries – in this context, as homosexual and heterosexual – and these binaries are not without inherent value judgements.
- Identity is socially produced, fluid, multiple, always partial, and contextual.

Preconception Survey

True or *False* All sociologists see society the same way, regardless of their actual theoretical perspective.

True or *False* A theory is always untestable.

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| True or <i>False</i> | All thinkers throughout history believed that humans define and create society, not the other way around. |
| True or <i>False</i> | All people commit suicide for the same reasons. |
| <i>True</i> or <i>False</i> | Traditionally, many fields of academia have excluded the ideas of minorities. |
| True or <i>False</i> | Capitalism has shown itself, even to sociologists in the modern world, to be a primarily positive economic form. |
| True or <i>False</i> | All feminists address the same issues and generally agree with each other's approach. |
| <i>True</i> or <i>False</i> | Queer theory pursues social justice by challenging binary categories of normal sexual behaviour. |

In-Class Discussion Questions

Opportunities for Discussion: Reviewing the Concepts

1. The organic analogy draws upon a number of ideas that provided an early foundation for understanding society and how it works. Ask students to explain why the organic analogy is so important to functionalism. This discussion should make it clear that within the organic analogy, any change in an institution will have an impact upon the functioning of society. Further, the model also clearly emphasizes the connection that early thinkers sought between sociology and science.
2. Ask students to compare and contrast mechanical solidarity with organic solidarity. Students often tend to – erroneously – think of mechanical solidarity as a feature of industrial society. With this in mind, you may want to help them devise a way associate mechanical solidarity with early societies whereas organic solidarity emerged with increased divisions of labour in contemporary society.
3. Focus on the ways that knowledge cannot be separated from the relations of power that produces it. Perhaps asking them to think about how knowledge and power are related in the classroom would be a useful way for them to think through this question.

4. Ask students to discuss Smith's critique of traditional approaches to sociology. Among the themes that Smith discusses, she emphasizes that the regime of male rationality must be challenged by feminists in academia.

Small Group exercises

For these exercises, break the class into appropriately sized groups, depending on the exercise and/or class size. Then, assign each group a question. Once students have completed the assignment, the students will report their ideas to the class. The pedagogical point behind this exercise is: (1) to allow the students a different forum to engage in thinking and (2) to apply the concepts of the chapter to everyday life.

1. Break the class into several groups. Provide each group with a short newspaper article on a recent event. Ask students to examine the article through the lens of each of the main perspectives discussed in the chapter.

When students come back to the main class and report their findings, this provides you with an opportunity to expand and clarify the various theoretical perspectives.

2. Divide the class into several groups. Assign each group a different classical theorist (preferably the earlier ones). Ask each group to come up with three ways in which the ideas of the classical theorist are present in contemporary society.

Upon the completion of this assignment, ask each group to present their finding to the class. Through this exercise, the link between the ideas of these theorists and our contemporary everyday lives will be illuminated.

3. After separating the class into groups, ask each group to create plans for a company that would not exploit its workers. Have students decide on the product, organizational structure, and employment strategies.

As each group presents its unique company to the class, focus on getting students to consider whether profitability is possible without exploitation.

4. Bring in several advertisements into class. After breaking the class into several groups, give each an advertisement. Request that students in each group investigate each of these visual texts for cues of common sense, which underlies hegemony. How is the intended audience supposed to read the advertisement? In what ways does consent factor into the intended (or dominant) reading of the artifact?

Through this exercise, encourage students to think of how our social worlds are filled with such hegemonic artifacts, all of which call for our consent to a degree.

5. Introduce the entire class to a single event. Perhaps it can be in the form of a newspaper article, a YouTube video, or a narrative. Then, break the class into different groups. Assign each group the role of a particular social group. Then, request that they ponder how a member of the social group that they are representing might view the original event.

Once they come back to discuss their results as a class, emphasize the different ways that seemingly objective circumstances can be viewed by those who are from different standpoints.

Think-Pair-Share Exercise

Direct the students to work in pairs and take turns asking and answering the following questions. For example, Student A asks Student B question 1; Student B answers question 1, then asks Student A question 2, and so on. Give the students five minutes to form answers to each question, then ask the questions of the class, and choose students to share their answers with the larger group. The purpose of this activity is to focus the students' attention on their own experiences, as well as to improve their listening and reporting skills. Tell the students before they begin the exercise that they may be called upon afterwards to report, orally, to the rest of the class, their partner's answers. When conducting the group discussion at the end of the activity, be sure to phrase your question in this manner: "Jerry, how did Elaine say her personality has changed over her life course? What sort of events created these changes?"

1. What do you think the *natural state* of humans is? Why do you think this?
2. Do you think that you could apply the organic analogy to this classroom? If so, what would it look like? If not, why?
3. Have you ever had a job? Were you exploited in this job? Were you alienated?
4. How has hegemony and common sense affected your everyday life? What sorts of things that you do every day are based on common sense? Where is the hegemony in such actions?
5. What are some of the practices that you do every day that exemplify normalization? What are the ramifications if you were to enact the opposite?
6. How is your identity not always fluid and dynamic (i.e., not consistent)? How do you understand these inconsistencies in your identity?

Essay Questions

1. What did Durkheim mean when he talked about 4 different types of suicide? Compare and contrast the four types that he identified. Which type do you think would be most common among your general age group in Canada? Explain your decision.

ANSWER

- Durkheim links suicide to large-scale collective phenomena.
 - According to Durkheim, a person's decision to attempt or commit suicide is a function of their relationship, or lack of relationship, to the larger social group.
 - Altruistic suicide involves too much integration into the larger social group.
 - Egoistic suicide involves not enough integration into the larger social group.
 - Fatalistic suicide occurs when a person experiences too much regulation in the larger social group.
 - Anomic suicide occurs when an individual suffers from a lack of regulation from the larger social group.
 - Student answers to the second part of the question will be different and should be justified.
2. How did distinct groups like women, visible minorities, and non-Western scholars introduce viewpoints into sociology that are beneficial to us in terms of understanding the social world? Without such standpoints, would sociology be able to produce an accurate understanding of the social world?

ANSWER

- Women began questioning and challenging traditional views of women in society.
 - Visible minorities added social insight into how race played a defining role in contemporary, mostly American, society.
 - Non-Western scholars explored the legacy of colonial experiences of peoples around the world.
 - Sociology would not be able to describe the social world of more than half of the human population if only white males were to comment on what are essentially their own experiences and interpretations of the experiences of others.
3. What do feminist theories add to our understanding of the social world? Be sure to discuss both Dorothy Smith and bell hooks in your answer.

ANSWER

- While there is no single feminist theory, all feminists focus their attention on gender oppression.

- Feminist theorists typically differ in terms of their understanding of the degree to which oppression is experienced by women and how emancipation must be undertaken.
- Second-wave feminism understand women as a cohesive group with a common experience as women – as such, gender oppression is experienced in the same way by all women.
- All women share responsibility for domestic labour and social reproduction.
- Smith notes that all women share being dominated by men.
- Smith also points us to the larger social conditions within which women's experiences are formed, but focuses on how the relations of ruling shape lives.
- bell hooks, as a third-wave feminist, criticizes the view that all women share an experience of the world.
- hooks points to the worlds of women of colour and other minority women as dissimilar to the world of white, heterosexual, middle-class, educated women.
- hooks argues for a more complex view of women's lives incorporating race, class, sexuality, etc. differences among women and a focus on how these variables would shape lives differently.

Assignments

Insights and Opportunities for Discussion from Thinking Sociologically

1. Get your students to adopt the position of a functionalist. Have them argue if there is any individual behaviour that is not the result of collective influences.
2. Ask you students to make a list of three historical or current situations of conflict that are not the result of social inequality.
3. Have your students make a list of highly paid occupations in Canada that yield a lot of respect and are dominated by women.

Going Beyond the Classroom

Encourage your students to think about active citizenship through involvement with, or support of, these various groups:

- Consider asking students to join an Organization that is trying to eliminate labour exploitation in the world. For example, the International Labour Organization <http://www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/lang--en/index.htm> attempts to prevent the exploitation of children's and women's labour internationally.
- Join a political party that seeks to change the political landscape in a way that matches the theoretical perspective that you agree with.

- There are many organizations that are based on ideals and principles that the Classical Theorists propose. Students could join one of these organizations and be involved in the dissemination of the ideas that they support. For example, one such organization is: <http://www.marxist.ca/>.
- Students might join or support the National Council of Women of Canada, which has emerged to address women's issues in Canada.
- Students might consider joining or following the activities of the International Lesbian, Gay, Trans, and Intersexed Association addresses a variety of issues involving sexual orientation, identify, and equality: <http://ilga.org/>

Probing Questions to Facilitate Students' Sociological Imaginations

1. Why, do you think, women are excluded from the group of classical theorists? Do you agree that the insights of women were not theoretical? Why or why not?
2. If you accept Marx's notion of false consciousness, how would a person become aware of their own false consciousness? Or, is it something that she/he needs to be informed of by an external observer?
3. The three main theoretical perspectives presuppose that society is knowable, that there are universals in place that can be observed and recorded. What other ways are there to imagine society?
4. If common-sense thinking is grounded in hegemony, how can we challenge ideological control and manipulation if our very consciousness is anchored in the ideas of the ruling class?
5. Given Foucault's linkage of knowledge and power, is the classroom a site for subjugation? What would a classroom that delinked knowledge and power look like?
6. If Queer Theory critiques the rights-based discourses that are based in the liberal humanist perspective, what other possibility for global justice exists?

Post-Lecture Survey

Thinking about the in-class lecture or lectures on Classical Social Theories:

1. Do you feel that the material in this chapter was covered in an easily understandable way?

2. Was the lecture on this topic too fast, too slow, or just right?
3. Do you feel that the lecture(s) added to your understanding of this material?
4. How would you improve the presentation of this material in class? Be as specific as possible.
5. What modern examples could have been used in class to emphasize the material in this chapter?

Suggestions for Local Guest Lecturers

- Invite a political scientist to discuss how the various political philosophies have affected our current political order.
- Ask a historian to discuss the importance of the French Revolution to social and cultural change.
- Invite a scholar from women's studies to discuss the role of women in classical social theory.
- Invite a representative of a labour union who can address how the situation for women in the work force still necessitates a feminist perspective.
- Ask a sociological colleague who works with statistics, to demonstrate how the idea of 'normal' can be a statistical artefact, one without a necessary grounding in reality.

Keeping it Fresh: Ideas for the Experienced Instructor

1. Provide a lecture that delves further into the philosophical and historical underpinnings associated with the emergence of sociology. Discuss social philosophers such as Hobbes (emphasize the twin passions, the social contract and the leviathan, and responsibility), Locke (God-given social rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, social responsibility, the American Revolution, and the ability to change society), and Rousseau (the natural state of humans, tutelage, perfecting humans through social development, social change and the French Revolution). This will provide the historical context for a discussion of Comte and the conservative reaction to the Enlightenment.

2. Since this chapter pays little attention to female theorists in the classical tradition, it may be useful to talk a bit about this with your class. You can develop a lecture to discuss the various contributions of women to classical sociology, and allow your students an opportunity to decide if women's role was 'theoretical'.
3. To help your students understand that classical theory can still be used to explore the contemporary social landscape, consider analyzing the 2008 economic collapse from each of the classical theories as reviewed in the text. By demonstrating your own ability to see the world through a theoretical lens, students will gain experience seeing contemporary issues from the classical perspectives.
4. Given the centrality of his work for the other contemporary theories, it might be useful for students to spend some time on Michel Foucault's ideas. With the abstraction of theory, concrete examples are always helpful. Consequently, tracing the movement from a pre-Disciplinary Society to a Disciplinary Society would be an accessible way to locate his notion of discipline in history. Likewise, his discussion of the changes in attitudes towards sexuality would be a comprehensible way to talk about discourse.

Annotated Resources

Web Resources

<http://www.6sociologists.20m.com/index.html>

The website provides overviews of 6 major classical social theorists, including Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Harriet Martineau, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, and Max Weber.

<http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/intellect.html#table>

This excellent resource contains information with which to create lectures on important and relevant social events, such as the French and Industrial Revolutions, Comte, and Marx.

<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-quee.htm>

This website introduces the reader to Queer Theory, with a list of relevant books, authors, and links. In addition, it briefly discusses some critics of the perspective.

<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/>

This Feminist Theory website includes a list of writings and a brief synopsis of the philosophies of individual feminists, as well as a list of books within each sub-field of feminism generally.

Videos

(2006). *Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment*. Madison [WI]: Hawkhill Associates.

The western world experienced revolutionary transformations from the 15th to the 17th centuries. This new program can help your students understand why these revolutions were so important in preparing the ground for our modern 21st century world.

(1996). *The Nationalists*. Princeton: Films for the Humanities & Sciences.

This program examines how liberal ideas from the French Revolution fueled the fires of European nationalism, and how extreme nationalistic beliefs led to World War I. In Germany, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck constructed the philosophical and political framework for a unified Germany, steeped in the mythology of a German super-race and its destiny: to rule Europe. Serbians, inflamed by nationalism, assassinated Austrian Archduke Ferdinand, and Germany, as Austria's ally, declared war on Russia, and subsequently on Britain and France.

Banning, L. (2004). *The History of Sociology*. New York: Insight Media.

This video looks at the move from premodernity to modernity to the information age, as well as looking at the conflict perspective, the structural functional perspective, and symbolic interactionism.

(2000). *Is Feminism Dead?* Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities.

A new generation of women seems to be questioning the meaning and value of the battles fought in previous times by the women's movements. Six prominent women appraise the women's movement as it currently exists and discuss its relevance in today's cultural climate.

Howes, S. (1999). *Understanding Sociology: From Modernity to Postmodernity*. New York: Insight Media.

Examining the sociologist's definition of modernity, this program illustrates how sociology grew out of and is still influenced by the "modern way of thinking." It also considers how postmodern theory has identified fundamental cultural and social changes that have transformed the nature of contemporary society.