

Sociology: perspective, theory, and method

Chapter 1
Society: the basics

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A brief **roadmap** for the next little while...

- I will follow the textbook for a while in introducing sociology.
- **But only for a while...**
- I will then break away and offer my own introduction to sociology, the sociological imagination, the three perspectives, Emile Durkheim, and an overview of research methods.
 - I'll be using the movie "Freedom Writers" to help along the way.
- Once I get past this, then I will rejoin the textbook to finish Chapter 1 and move on to chapter 2 and 16.

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Chapter overview

- This chapter gives us our first look at sociology
- To do sociology you need to understand and develop a **sociological perspective** – which is just a sociological way of looking at and understanding what human beings are doing.
 - Note I will use the terms "**sociological perspective**" and "**sociological imagination**" interchangeably.
- This Perspective or Imagination is guided by theory, and we'll have lots to say about that.
- Along with this, we'll also consider, from the text, how sociologists do their craft or science, describing **three approaches** to conducting research and **four methods of data collection**.
 - In my terms, I'll say that the sociological imagination has three theoretical variations, which we'll meet soon, and these three variations lead to the "three approaches to conducting research" mentioned above.

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Chapter overview (cont'd)

So, let's begin...

- **Box:** from the moment he first saw Tonya...
- We assume falling in love is a quirky, highly individualistic, thing.
- But what if it's not?
- What if society and social forces have more to do with falling in love than we might imagine?
- "There is plenty of evidence that if love is the key to marriage, Cupid's arrow is carefully aimed by the society around us."
- What might some of that evidence be?

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The sociological perspective

- With the previous example, you've already exercised your **sociological imagination**.
- That is, you're trying to understand the **true relationship** between **people** and their **real social environments**.
- This involves:
 - ✓ Seeing the general in the particular
 - ✓ Seeing the strange in the familiar
 - ✓ Seeing society in our everyday lives

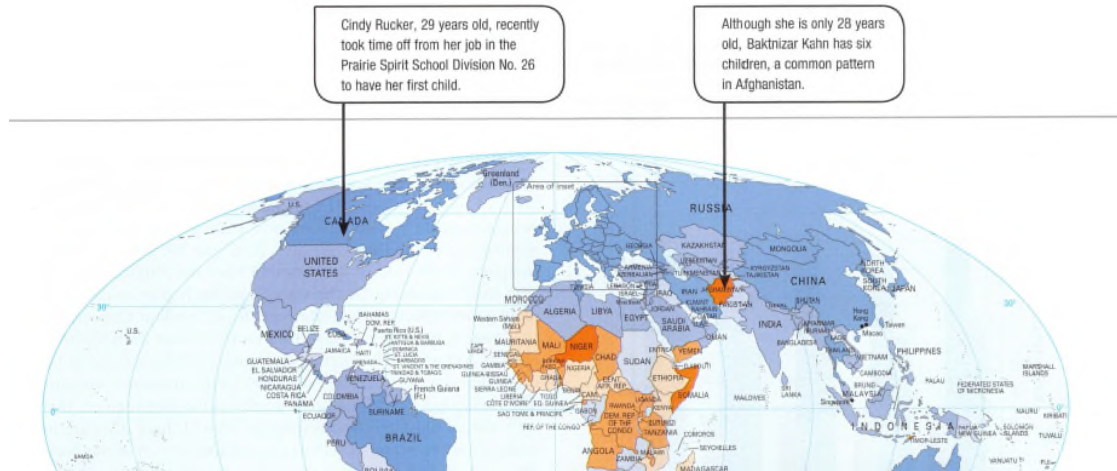
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Seeing the general in the particular

- Although every person is unique, society shapes the lives of people in various categories (such as children and adults, women and men, the rich and the poor) differently.
- We see the world sociologically by realizing how the general categories into which we fall shape our particular life experiences.
- Examples?

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Seeing the strange in the familiar



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Seeing society in our everyday lives

- What could be more individualistic, unique, and personal than taking one's own life?
- Yet, just as we saw with **falling in love** and **birth rates**, **suicide** turns out to be a highly social accomplishment.
- **Emile Durkheim's** classic study "**Suicide**" demonstrates this thoroughly – and is still relevant today!
- The key to understanding suicide, according to Durkheim, is the extent of **social integration** experienced by members of societies.
 - It's possible to experience not enough or too much social integration.
- So, who would you guess is or isn't at risk of committing suicide?

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Seeing society in our everyday lives

Men are more than three times as likely as women to end their own lives.

Diversity Snapshot

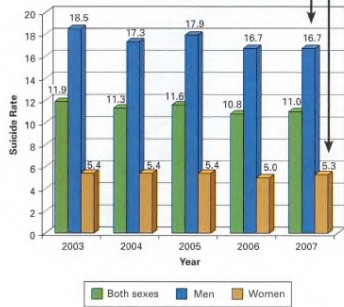


FIGURE 1-1 Rate of Death by Suicide, by Gender, for Canada
Rates indicate the number of deaths by suicide for every 100 000 people in each category for 2003 to 2007.
Source: Statistics Canada (2011a).

Lithuania has one of the highest suicide rates in the world.

Global Snapshot

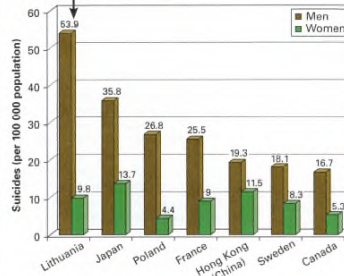
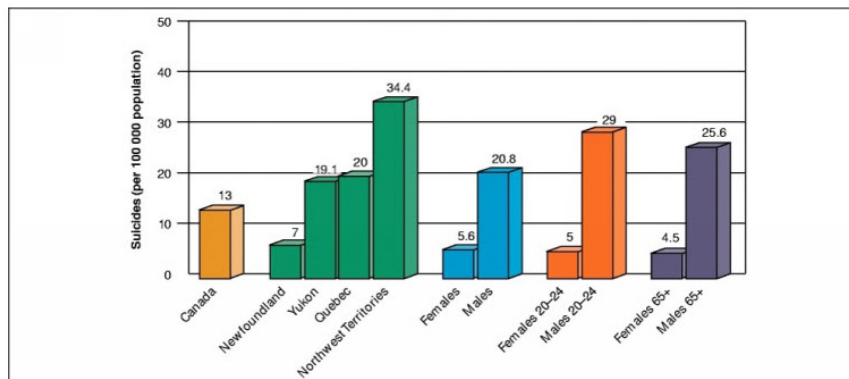


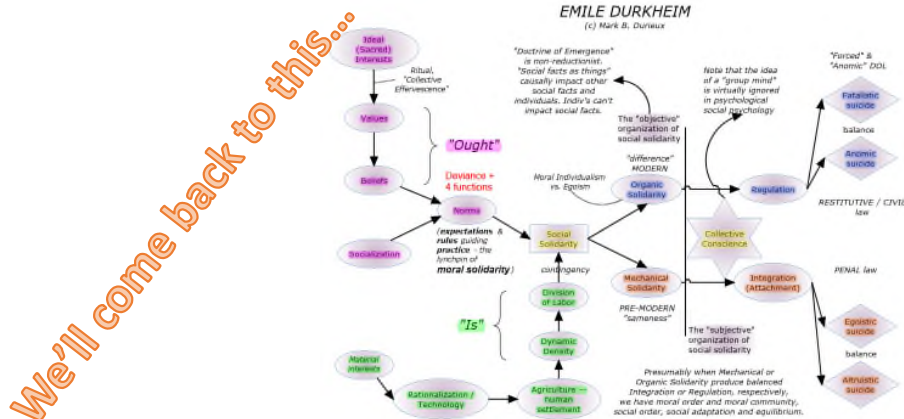
FIGURE 1-2 Suicide Rates of Men and Women in Canada and Selected Countries, 2009
Canada's suicide rate is high compared with that of some nations and low compared with that of still other nations. How do these data support or contradict Durkheim's theory of suicide? Why?
Sources: Statistics Canada (2011a); World Health Organization (2009a).

Seeing society in our everyday lives (cont'd)



Seeing society in our everyday lives (cont'd)

- Durkheim's social theory and its links to his theory of suicide
- http://www.evernote.com/l/ARjK_2lTm8NM4b7qxKI95aNWR7Zv978Xu-o/



Seeing sociologically: marginality and crisis

- Two other situations can help us see how society and personal lives relate:
 - ❑ living on the margins of society
 - People at the margins of social life, including women, Aboriginals, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and the very old, know of social patterns that others rarely think about. Examples?
 - ❑ living through a social crisis
 - Periods of change or crisis make everyone feel a little off balance, encouraging us to use the sociological perspective. Unemployment. Other examples?

The importance of a global perspective

- Finally, for now, let's take a “bird’s eye view” and think in **global** terms.
- **Information technology** makes it easier for people all around the world to share knowledge. *This includes sharing a sociological perspective.*
 - But is there variation in this sharing? For example, the world's 213 nations can be broadly divided into three categories: high, middle, and low-income countries.
 - **69 countries, like Canada, are high income.**
 - *This is because these countries – a minority – generate most of the world’s goods and services, and the people who live in them own most of the planet’s wealth.*
 - Economically speaking, people in these countries are well off. Why?

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The importance of a global perspective (cont’d)

- There are 101 middle income countries.
 - They are a mix of rural villages and cities.
 - Eastern Europe, South Africa and some other African nations, and almost all of Latin America and Asia
- Then there are 43 low income countries.
 - Life here is rural and many live in poverty.
 - Most are in Africa and a few are in Asia.
- **Where we live shapes our life chances and the lives we lead.**
- To really “get” this we need to understand not only how countries are **interconnected** but how they may also **differ**.
- When we do this, we will see our own problems and potentials in a new light and better understand ourselves.

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Applying the sociological perspective

- There are many good reasons to think about sociology and use it . Among them are:
 1. **Sociology and Public Policy**
 - Canadian researcher Robin Bagley's (1984) work on sex offences against minors had a major impact on public policy, leading to the 1988 enactment of section 212 of the Criminal Code. This prohibits attempts to buy sex from persons under 18 .
 2. **Sociology and Personal Growth**
 - The sociological perspective
 - helps us assess the truth of "common sense."
 - helps us see the opportunities and constraints in our lives.
 - empowers us to be active participants in our society.
 - helps us live in a diverse world.

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Applying the sociological perspective (cont'd)

- **Careers: the "sociology advantage"**
 - Many sociologists teach in colleges and universities.
 - But many, too, work as researchers for government agencies or private foundations and businesses.

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Ok, time to reboot...



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A kind of introduction via Jeremy Rifkin

- https://www.ted.com/talks/jeremy_rifkin_on_the_empathic_civilization



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Not everyone is a fan of sociology!

http://www.evernote.com//AAOtYMXVwMpF_a1kaY9PcAqJfPjZufh3lhg/

Opinion / Commentary

The ideological roots of Stephen Harper's vendetta against sociology

Harper's seemingly bizarre beef with sociology is actually an ideological attempt to prevent us from being able to identify, and tackle, our structural injustices.



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“Sociological mumbo-jumbo”



Naomi Lakritz
Calgary Herald columnist
Just after New Year's, not long ago.

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"Sociological mumbo-jumbo aside, LRT kids were jerks"

- "When Michigan's Lake Superior State University compiles its next annual list of **tiresome words and tedious phrases**,
- it can add **'root causes'** to the roster requiring **immediate banishment** from the vocabulary."
- For the complete column, see
 - <http://www.evernote.com/l/AAMWQxGSOadPv4Ns6YM3PVdr3E4INPn-z7Y/>

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"Sociological mumbo-jumbo aside, LRT kids were jerks"

"That tired old term reared its rhetorical head last week after an incident on the Edmonton LRT in which 30 aboriginal kids beat up five non-aboriginal teens riding the train late at night."



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“Sociological mumbo-jumbo aside, LRT kids were jerks”

“University of Alberta sociologist Bryan Hogeveen used the dreaded phrase when an Edmonton journal reporter phoned him for his views on the incident.”



“(Adding police and security guards to the LRT) doesn't address the root cause of the problem,” Hogeveen said.”

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To which Lakritz replies...



“Now, granted the reporter called him for comment, which is standard journalistic practice, but did Hogeveen have to use standard academic practice and blame ‘root causes’ for **evil?**”

So, what do you think?

“Sociological mumbo-jumbo aside, LRT kids were jerks”

- Let me just say that
- Sociology doesn't have all the answers
 - But it's got a...

Deep interest

In understanding the real relationships between so-called “individuals” (really, **unique members**) and the **social arrangements** these folks find themselves a part of (whether groups, categories, or societies).

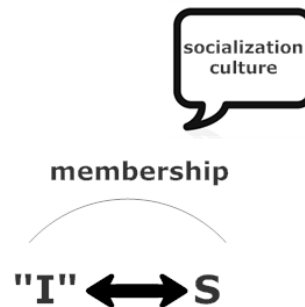


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"Sociological mumbo-jumbo aside, LRT kids were jerks"

- This is the sociological imagination – connecting...
- BIOGRAPHY to HISTORY.
- PERSONAL SITUATIONS to SOCIAL REALITIES.

In fact, it's these kinds of insights that enable sociology to be extremely practical and contribute to positive social change worldwide.



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“Sociological mumbo-jumbo aside, LRT kids were jerks”

- On that note, let me invoke Martin Luther King Jr. – the great African-American religious and civil rights leader who clearly understood the importance of a sociological perspective:

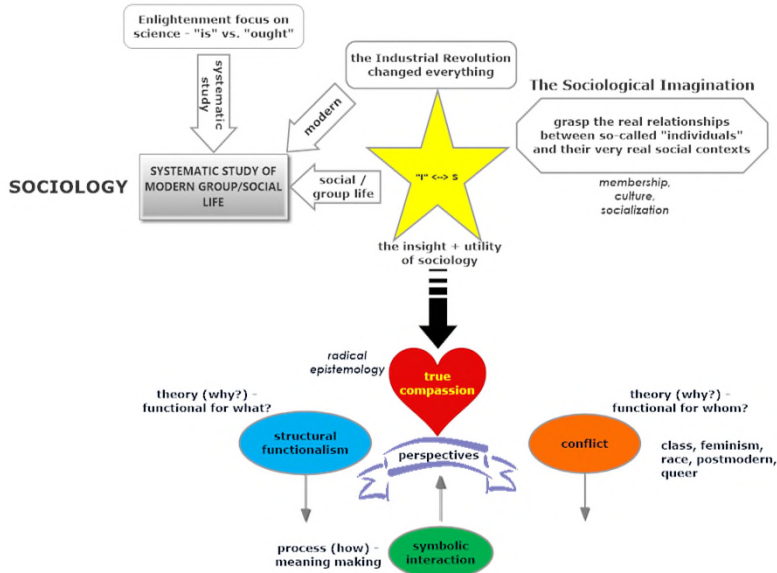


• **“True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”**

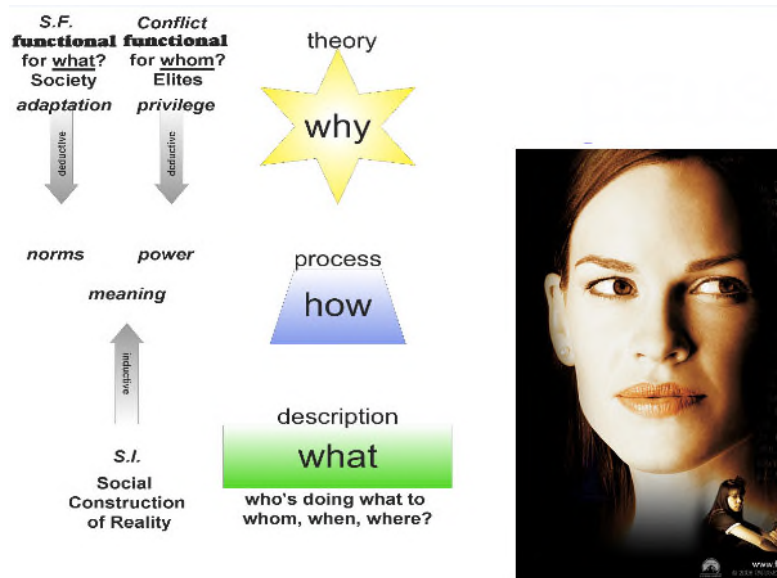


Now to expand on the sociological imagination

Sociology Overview Concept Map



What does Erin do right?



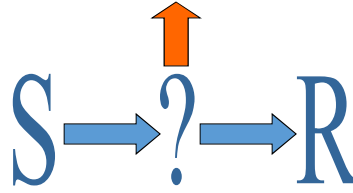
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What is sociology? Leading to a discussion of research methods...

- *“Sociologists study human societies and their social interactions in order to develop theories of how human **behaviour** is shaped by group life and how, in turn, group life is affected by individuals.”*
 - A pretty typical textbook quote
- You know by now that I am suspicious of the term “individual”, favouring “unique member”.
- I am also suspicious of the term “behaviour.”

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The scientific study of human social
 “behaviour” (vs. action)

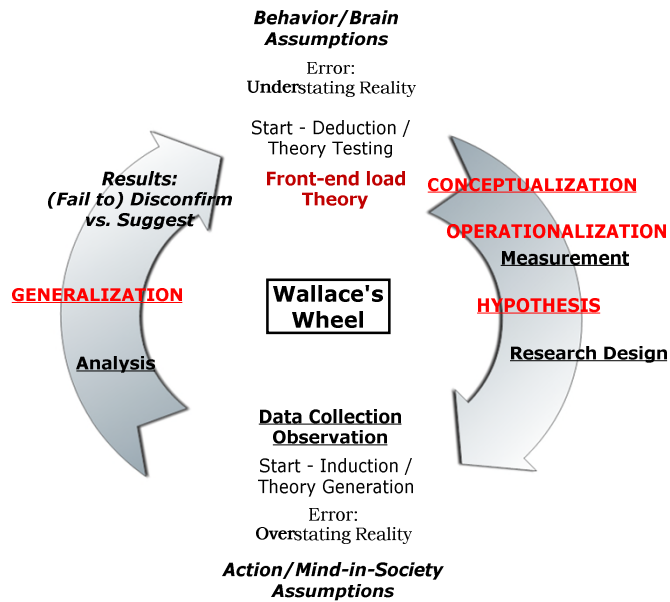


Are we just
 big-brained
 hominids?



Answering this
 question leads us to
 consider the
 difference between
 “positivism” and
 “anti-positivism”...

An Overview of Research Methods



Are “anti-positivists” unscientific?

- **Positivism vs. Anti-Positivism – a frequent topic of discussion.**
- What is science, really?
- Causality vs. Meaning vs. Dialectics...
- The twin pillars – **empiricism** and the logic of **falsification**.

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What does sociology study?

- Sociology emphasizes human **interconnectedness & interdependence**
- And so finds that social life displays **regularities** and **patterns**.
 - Social life is not haphazard!
- So, what’s going on here?



Ajit Solanki, Associated Press
People form a human pyramid as a boy dressed as Hindu God Krishna reaches out to break a “dahi handi,” an earthen pot filled with yogurt, as they celebrate Janmashtami, Krishna’s birth anniversary, in Ahmedabad, India, on Friday. The pot is broken in depiction of Krishna’s childhood antics.

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What does sociology study?

- Sociology, furthermore:
 - Believes that these patterns of social life can't be sufficiently understood if we ignore the **separate** (*distinctly sociological*) **reality** of **social forces**.
 - operating both “out there” (“objectively”) and/or “in here” (“subjectively”).

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What does sociology study?

- So, in the “dahi-handi” photo there are social forces at work that help us understand the patterns of interconnected action /behaviour.

- **But are these social forces real?**
 - Some might say they are an illusion.
- **If they are, are they really real?**
 - Others might say if that even if they are real, they're reducible to biological and/or psychological forces.



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What does sociology study?

➤ But sociology says:

Are you kidding?

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What does sociology study?

• See, sociology believes that –

group life is group life!

Group or social life is not reducible to anything else. There's nothing else like it. So there are no substitutes.

This is the basic distinction between social theorists and sociological theorists!!!

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What does sociology study?

- Group/social life exists as a separate, distinct reality.
- The characteristics of a social group, institution, or society for that matter are much more than the reductionist sum of individual parts!
 - Which is not to discount the importance of the parts, or unique members, to the group.

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What does sociology study?

- As Emile Durkheim would say, groups, social institutions, and societies exist, "*sui generis*."
 - **They are "of their own kind."**
- Groups, etc., have unique "lives," experiences, and even identities.
- And that's why social forces have a separate, distinctly sociological reality.



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What does sociology study?

✓ Every sociologist and thinking human being should buy into this

● Or else they'll never "pass GO" and "collect \$200" when they seek to grasp social, patterned a/b.



[back](#)

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Sociological Imagination

• With this reality of groups in mind, we come to the –

"The Sociological Imagination."

- This term first used by C. Wright Mills

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Sociological Imagination

- The sociological imagination challenges us to think about (**theorize**) the relationship between members and their very real groups.
- How and why do unique members and groups influence each other?
- How can we “connect the dots” from a member’s “personal troubles” to larger scale social realities?

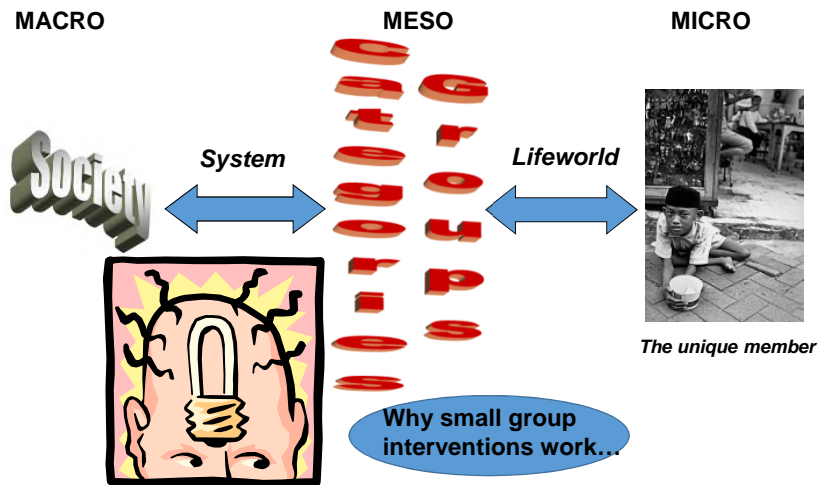
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Sociological Imagination

- The sociological imagination then, as theory, is the product of social science.
 - It is not fiction!
- So, it arises out of careful observation (empiricism) and logic (falsification – not trying to hide from contradictory or damning evidence).
 - This, plus its distinctive focus on group membership, is why sociology is so often seen as a form of “debunking.”

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- Mills thought that no socially oriented intellectual journey of any age is complete until the sociological imagination, as a piece of theorizing, is exercised.
 - And Martin Luther King Jr., I'm sure, would agree!



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3 main versions of the sociological imagination

- Sociology relies on paradigms or perspectives of thought.
- So, a paradigm is simply a scheme that organizes our perception of a phenomenon or series of events.

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The Perspectives

- 3-4 paradigms/perspectives in sociology (depending on who you read).
 - Well, just to keep things simple for now, I'm going to say three, because I think Feminism is really a variant of conflict theory.
 - Anyway, it's important to note that **each paradigm (at its best) is a theoretical variation on the sociological imagination.**

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The Structural-Functional Paradigm

- Structural functionalism sees society as a theoretically complex system
- parts work together to promote solidarity and stability
- so, the **emphasis is on social structure**
- meaning relatively stable patterns of human a/b

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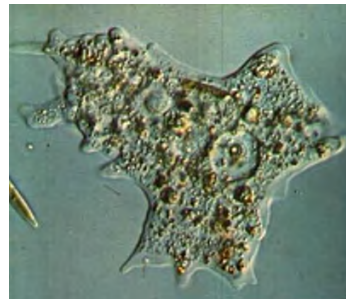
The Structural-Functional Paradigm [cont'd]

- But the emphasis is also on what each part does
- to promote the integrity or EQUILIBRIUM and continued adaptation of society as a whole.
- The discussion is then on the **FUNCTIONS** of the parts.

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The Structural-Functional Paradigm [cont'd]

- Drawing initially on a biological metaphor (since dropped)
- Every institution (relatively stable patterns of human doings) functions to reproduce society as a whole.
- *Interesting sidebar – see “Conservative Reaction to Enlightenment Thinking” and then “Functionalism”.*



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The Structural-Functional Paradigm [cont'd]

- Some big names, which we'll kind of get back to:
- Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and...
- More recently... Robert Merton's corrections...
- functions could be...

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The Structural-Functional Paradigm [cont'd]

- **manifest**
 - **consequences for society both recognized and intended**
 - The manifest function of higher education is to provide people with the information and skills needed to perform jobs.
- **latent**
 - **consequences unrecognized and unintended**
 - The latent function of higher education is to make the college or university into a "marriage brokering" site.
 - Also, keep high school grads from flooding the labour market and causing economic distress.

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The Structural-Functional Paradigm [cont'd]

- also functions could be **dysfunctional**
 - institutions could lead to social breakdown or undesirable consequences
 - Not every structure, custom, idea, belief, and so forth has positive functions.
 - For example, **rabid nationalism** can be highly dysfunctional in a world of proliferating nuclear arms.

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The Structural-Functional Paradigm [cont'd]

- Another example of dysfunction
- Bureaucracies can become so enmeshed in the formalities of their “red tape” processes that they lose site of their goals
 - And so fail to achieve their purposes
 - So bureaucratic processes can be dysfunctional

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The Structural-Functional Paradigm [cont'd]

- And what about crime?
- Does it have a manifest function? Latent function? Or is it dysfunctional?
- Any thoughts on this?

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The Structural-Functional Paradigm [cont'd]

- structural-functionalism: criticisms
 - Is society really that stable?
 - What happened to conflict?
 - Do our many inequalities that generate tension and conflict really contribute to the betterment of society?
 - a **CONSERVATIVE** paradigm

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The Social-Conflict Paradigm

- theorizes that society is an arena of [inequality](#)
- conflict and change
- it is not society as a whole that benefits !
- but only a privileged few
 - **Those who benefit do so on the backs of others**
 - **Tends to be functionalist, too - but asks: “functional for WHOM?”**
 - **Not “for what” (some abstract social system).**

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The Social-Conflict Paradigm [cont'd]

- **educational tracking -- an example**
 - *Secondary schools channel students into academic or vocational streams.*
- ***The structural- functionalist would view tracking as a good thing***
 - **Matches schooling and ability**
 - **This benefits society**
- ***The conflict theorist shows that tracking has less to do with ability than social background***
 - **The social standing of one generation is passed on to the next**

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The Social-Conflict Paradigm [cont'd]

- social conflict's moral component
- *Not only does the social conflict paradigm try to explain society*
- *It also tries to change it*
 - It has a humanist concern
 - Stands against oppression
 - Stands for Personal and Social flourishing

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The Social-Conflict Paradigm [cont'd]

- *Karl Marx:*
- **“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”**
 - **Note: we'll get back to Marx in a couple of days. Good idea to read him in advance.**

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The Social-Conflict Paradigm Feminism

- As for feminism...
 - **The basic idea here is that feminism is a variant of conflict theory because...**
 - **It stresses that there are those powerful in society who achieve great privilege at the expense of others**

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The Social-Conflict Paradigm

Feminism

- **Except this time, the privileged are not necessarily the wealthy owners of the means of production but men in general (patriarchs);**
- **And the oppressed not working classes but women in general.**

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The Social-Conflict Paradigm

Feminism

- Feminist analysis begins from the “standpoint” of women.
 - See, for example, Dorothy Smith
 - Where standpoint simply means that women, as oppressed, know the world from that perspective.
- Just as the New Orleans IDPs (“internally displaced persons”) intimately know the world from their perspective.

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The Social-Conflict Paradigm

Feminism

- This leads to another important feature of feminist thought.
- Since there is, under patriarchy
 - (a UNIVERSAL form of oppression, unlike capitalism)
- only room at the top for the “Alpha male”



EVERYBODY ELSE is marginalized and oppressed.

That's women, children, the disabled, the elderly, visible minorities, etc., etc., etc.

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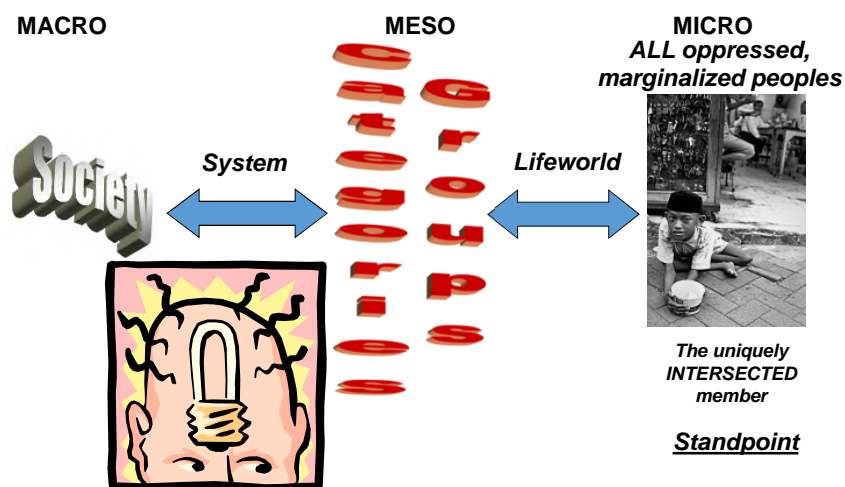
The Social-Conflict Paradigm

Feminism

- And that's why we find feminism aligning itself with ALL MINORITIES EVERYWHERE.
- Further, since minority status can be **embodied** in various ways within any one member,
- this translates into a very sophisticated form of sociological imagination...

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The Social-Conflict Paradigm Feminism



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The Social-Conflict Paradigm

Feminism

- Social conflict: critical evaluation
 - ***The focus on conflict means that shared values and interdependence -- those things that unify a society -- tend to get overlooked.***
 - ***Social conflict is also a very political approach***
 - Is scientific objectivity possible?
 - But isn't everything political?

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The Symbolic-Interaction Paradigm

- A “bridging” criticism of both S-F & SC
- *Typically, for these two schools of thought, everything is painted in terms of categories; that is, with a broad brush*
- ***SI asks: Where are the individual human beings, the living, breathing, sighing, laughing folk LIVING IN GROUPS?***

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The Symbolic-Interaction Paradigm [cont'd]

- Symbolic interactionists see things from a micro-meso perspective
- They theorize that society is the product of the everyday **meaningful interaction** of unique members of groups.
- How can this be?

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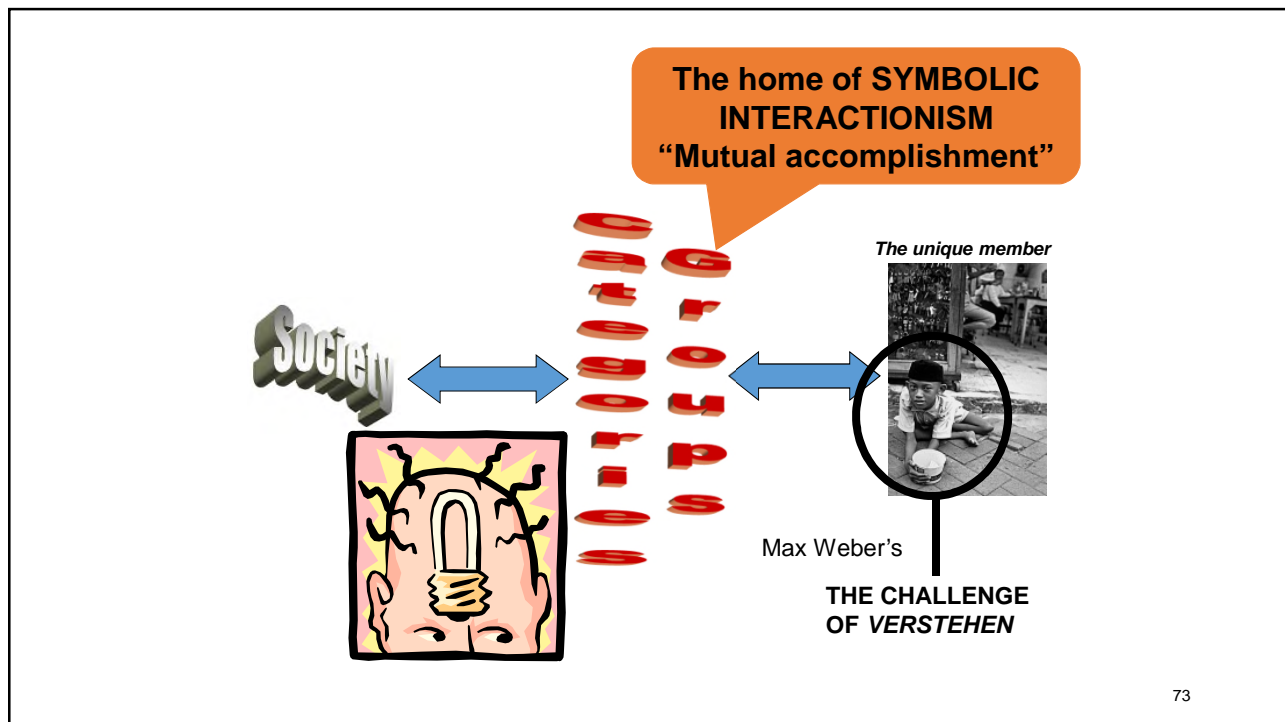
The Symbolic-Interaction Paradigm [cont'd]

- From the S I perspective, social reality results from our shared interpretations of the world
- How we (mutually) define our
 - Surroundings
 - Obligations
 - Selves
- *This makes the world what it is.*

The THOMAS THEOREM → (“situations that are defined as real become real in their consequences”)

the SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

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The Symbolic-Interaction Paradigm [cont'd]

- In the past...
 - *Max Weber* – **“verstehen”**
 - Sociologist tries to understand a person or people by understanding her/his/their point(s) of view and meaning making.
 - Georg Simmel – fascinating...
- More recently....
 - For example, Erving Goffman showed how “personality” – as it interprets the world and orients us to it – is often conditioned by our everyday social/group experiences [and our mutual histories – Simmel & Durkheim].
 - So, to prioritize, understand “how” before “why”!

The Symbolic-Interaction Paradigm [cont'd]

- SI: critical evaluation
 - **The emphasis in symbolic interactionism is about how people interact with each other**
 - **So symbolic interactionism is therefore about**
 - **how individuals actually experience society**
 - **The risk is that by bringing things down to such a micro perspective, the broad effects of culture and other factors such as class, gender, and race become lost.**
 - **But not if you really exercise your sociological imagination.**