

# Macrosociology: The Scientific Study of Societies

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# Diversity

Though not unlimited, the degree of diversity in human social life is quite remarkable.

- ➡ Simple Vs. Complex Societies
- ➡ Capitalism Vs. Socialism
- ➡ Democratic Vs. Totalitarian
- ➡ A tremendous diversity of marriage forms; sex roles, and on and on.



# Common Characteristics

Despite the great range of variation in human thought and action, however, there are a number of characteristics common to all.

- ☞ economic systems
- ☞ marriage and family
- ☞ religious belief and ritual
- ☞ prohibit incest



# Social Change

Another noteworthy feature of social life is the degree to which societies change



# Why?

What accounts for these phenomena?

- ☞ Why similar in certain broad respects?
- ☞ Why do they differ in important ways?
- ☞ Why do some change with great magnitude and speed, while others change so little and so slowly?



# Why?

These questions and others are the central focus of this course, they are the central questions to the science of sociology.



# Sociology

Sociology is the scientific study of human social life. Sociologists inquire into the nature and causes of regularized and repeatable *patterns* of human thought and conduct.



# Sociology

Unlike psychologists, who focus on the thoughts and actions characteristic of distinctive individuals, sociologists are interested only in those thoughts and actions that are shared by persons as members of groups or societies.





# Microsociology

Investigates the patterns of thought and behavior that occur in relatively small-scale social groups.



# Microsociology

Interested in such things as styles of verbal and nonverbal communication in face to face social relationships, the process of decision making by juries, the formation and disintegration of friendship groups, and the influence of the individuals' group membership on their outlook on the world.



# Macrosociology

The study of large-scale social patterns. It focuses on total societies and their major elements, such as the economy, the political system, the mode of family life, and the nature of the religious system.



# Macrosociology

Especially focus on interrelationships of these institutions. Many include the comparative study of different contemporary and historical societies.



# Macrosociology

This course is exclusively concerned with macrosociology in the broadest sense. It is devoted to the systematic examination of the major similarities and differences among societies, and it is concerned as well with the nature of the changes that societies undergo.



# Macrosociology

This overlaps extensively with and draws heavily upon the concepts, theories, and findings of two other social sciences, anthropology and history.



# The Role of Science

Sociology is the *scientific* study of human social life. The most distinctive characteristic of science is its *empirical* approach



# The Role of Science

All claims must be submitted to rigorous scrutiny and tested against the facts derived from observation of the world.





# The Role of Science

- ➡ A claim to truth is valid in the scientific sense not because it has an intuitive plausibility or because a person or group with prestige or authority proclaims it.
- ➡ It is valid only to the extent to which it is in agreement with observed facts.



# The Role of Science

The ultimate aim of science is explanation: the identification of the basic causes of the phenomena under investigation.



# A Theoretical Strategy

A theoretical strategy is a good one only to the extent that it generates specific theories that hold up under empirical scrutiny.



# A Theoretical Strategy

Scientific explanation in sociology proceeds through the construction of theoretical strategies and theories.



# A Theoretical Strategy

Theoretical strategies (or world views) are highly global sets of basic assumptions, concepts, and orienting principles. Their purpose is to generate specific theories and initiate lines of research to test those theories.



# A Theoretical Strategy

A theory is a specific statement or interrelated set of statements designed to explain some particular phenomenon. A theory is thus much narrower and more specific than a theoretical strategy.



# A Theoretical Strategy

- ➡ A theoretical strategy applies broadly to a great range of phenomena and is composed of a great many interrelated theories.
- ➡ While these interrelated theories apply to different phenomena, they all proceed from the same global assumptions, concepts, and principles.



# A Theoretical Strategy

We can have great confidence in a theoretical strategy that has generated and continues to generate many well-supported theories.





# A Theoretical Strategy

It is important to note that all theoretical strategies contain at least some theories that must be rejected as false. But the rejection of any particular theory is not a sufficient basis for the rejection of an entire theoretical strategy.



# A Theoretical Strategy

So long as a theoretical strategy contains many well-supported theories, continued reliance on it is justified, regardless of the fact that some of its theories are unacceptable.



# A Theoretical Strategy

- ➡ The theoretical strategy to be used in this course, sociocultural materialism, is a synthesis (or blending) of ecological materialism.
- ➡ It is a theory that borrows heavily from systems, functional analysis, conflict theory, and social evolutionary perspectives.



# A Theoretical Strategy

## ☞ Sociocultural Materialism

- Ecology
- Systems
- Functional Analysis
- Conflict
- Evolution



# Ecological Materialist Strategy

Rather than giving ideas and ideals causal priority, ecological-materialist theorists attempt to explain the basic features of social life in terms of the practical, material conditions of human existence.



# Ecological Materialist Strategy

These conditions involve such things as the nature of the physical environment, population and its composition, and the level of technology.



# Ecological Materialist Strategy

Materialists see these factors as constituting the basic prerequisites of human existence. The first concern of human life is adaptation to the natural environment, and this must be done by controlling population size and constructing technologies.



# Ecological Materialist Strategy

Once certain technologies are created, they constrain the nature of the other social patterns that humans will create. Different kinds of technologies and environments will give rise to different kinds of social patterns.





# Ecological Materialist Strategy

Materialists generally see human ideas and ideals as arising from previously created social patterns. They see ideas and ideals not as self-generating, but arise as responses to the material and social conditions already established.



# Systems Orientation

By explicitly viewing society as a system, systems theory emphasizes the inter-relationship (interactions) of the various parts of the system, as well as how the various parts fit into the whole.



# Systems Orientation

Systems theory forces one to think beyond mere causal chains. Forces one to look at more subtle possibilities of interactions between various components.



# Systems Orientation

- ☞ With a systems orientation, it is no longer “A causes B”--you are now forced to look at A and B in interaction with each other as well as with a range of other variables.
- ☞ Does not mean that you throw everything in-- just the interactions that can account for the most variation in the phenomenon under study.



# Functional Analysis

Functional analysis represents the basic methodological tactic of assuming that certain phenomena should be analyzed and understood from the point of view of their adaptive significance: from the vantage point of their usefulness in fulfilling some aim or objective.



# Functional Analysis

Marx, for example, argued that a society's ideas should be understood in terms of the purposes they serve for powerful social groups.



# Functional Analysis

Harris argues that Indians worship cows and that Aztecs practice cannibalism because these religious practices fit with basic ecological living problems each encountered.



# Functional Analysis

Interdependence of various parts of a system are the very definition of systems. Functional analysis is an integral part of a systemic view of society.





# Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists see societies as arenas in which individuals and groups struggle to satisfy their needs and desires. Such struggle produces domination and subordination, and dominant groups play a major role in the social structure of societies.



# Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists see conflict and struggle--the opposing of interests and concerns of different individuals and groups--as the prime determinants of the organization of social life.



# Conflict Theory

- ❏ In other words, the basic structure of society is mainly determined by the efforts made by individuals and groups to acquire scarce resources that will satisfy their needs and wants.
- ❏ Since these resources are always, to one degree or another, in short supply, conflict over access to them is always occurring



# Evolutionary Strategy

An evolutionary strategy is one that attempts to describe long-term social change.



# Evolutionary Strategy

Evolutionists generally argue that many societies have undergone broadly similar changes from earliest times to the present, and they are concerned to identify the nature of these changes and explain why they have occurred.



# Evolutionary Strategy

Evolutionary approaches to social life were extremely popular among both sociologists and anthropologists in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In fact, evolutionary theorizing dominated these two disciplines at that time.



# Evolutionary Strategy

An ecological-evolutionary strategy assumes that social changes are most likely to begin in the material conditions that sustain life. These changes, once they occur, set off corresponding changes in a society's social structure and in its ideas and ideals.



# A note on Eclecticism

Eclecticism is a doctrine that advocates using many diverse theoretical strategies in the search for adequate explanations.





# A note on Eclecticism

Such social scientists refuse to commit themselves to any one approach, preferring to believe that each holds a partially valid understanding of reality.



# A note on Eclecticism

- ➡ Eclectics like to think that their stance is preferable because it is open-minded and that commitment to a perspective is mere dogmatism and rigidity.
- ➡ Eclectics are committed, ironically, to the view that is it inappropriate to have commitments.



# A note on Eclecticism

The main problem with eclecticism is that it leads to severe theoretical confusion. Eclectics often employ not only different, but often contradictory assumptions and principles, to accept all of them as valid is to engage in self-contradiction.



# A note on Eclecticism

The major goal of science is to achieve a coherent and unified understanding of all relevant phenomena.



# A note on Eclecticism

Coherent and unified explanations are achieved when the explanation of one phenomenon is closely tied to the explanations of others. The fewer the number of principles used, and the greater the number and variety of phenomena these principles explain, the more powerful the perspective.



# A note on Eclecticism

This goal can only be reached when we commit ourselves to a particular strategy and test it.

