

Theories

What Is Sociology: Origin And Famous Sociologists

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Key Takeaways

- Sociology is the study of human social relationships and institutions, and bridges across topics such as race, religion, crime, economics, and the family.
- Although originally coined by Emannuel-Joseph Sieyes, the French sociologist Auguste Comte popularized sociology in the 19th century. Comte believed that human behavior could be broken down into a set of laws which, when understood, could solve social problems.
- Other notable figures in sociology include figures such as Max Weber, Emile Durheim, Georg Simmel, and Herbert Spencer.

- Sociology employs a distinct set of research methods. The most popular of these are surveys, field research, experiments, and secondary data analysis.
- Both psychology and sociology seek to understand human behavior. However, while psychology understands this at the level of the inner workings of individuals, sociology describes people's actions and beliefs in terms of external social factors.

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Definition

Sociology is the study of human social relationships and institutions. Sociologists examine topics as diverse as crime and religion, family and the state, the divisions of race and social class, the shared beliefs of cultures, and social stability and radical changes throughout entire societies.

Sociology's examination of these subjects is underlined by an emphasis on understanding how the actions of people and the way they think both shape and are shaped by surrounding social and cultural structures (Giddens & Sutton, 2006).

Sociology analyzes and explains the world both on a small and large scale. At the personal level, sociology can investigate the social causes and consequences of things such as romantic and platonic love, race and gender identity, family conflict, [deviant behavior](#), aging, and religious faith.

At the societal level, sociology examines matters like crime and law, poverty and wealth, prejudice and discrimination, education, businesses, urban structure, and social movements.

Beyond the level of individual society, sociology studies phenomena such as population growth and migration, war and peace, and economic development (Giddens & Sutton, 2006).

Origins: Auguste Comte

The first person to coin the term sociology was the French essayist Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès (Griffiths et al., 2012). However, it was not until August Comte reinvented Sieyès's term in 1838 that the word sociology came to be used as it is now.

Auguste Comte studied to be an engineer before becoming the student of the social philosopher Claude Henri de Rouvroy Comte de Saint-Simon.

Both Comte and Henri believed that social scientists could use the same scientific methods utilized in the natural sciences — like physics, or biology — to study societies. Comte believed in the potential of social scientists to better society.

That is to say, he believed that, once scholars identified the laws that governed society, sociologies could address problems as far-ranging as poor education and poverty (Griffiths et al. 2000). Comte is widely considered to be the “father” of sociology today.

Comte named his scientific study of social patterns **positivism**, and that using scientific methods to reveal the laws by which societies and individuals interact would create a “positivist” age of history.

Methods

Sociology was conceived as having methods in parallel with the natural sciences. As a result, the field has a distinct set of methods suited to different situations. There are four major kinds of sociological research methods: surveys, field research, experiments, and secondary data analysis.

Survey Method

Surveys collect data from participants who respond to a series of questions about behaviors and opinions, often in the form of a questionnaire. This allows participants anonymity in expressing their personal ideas.

One major example of a survey that sociologists have used is the U.S. census, which identifies people living in the United States based on their location, ethnicity, social status, and a number of other factors. Although surveys are flawed in capturing the ways that people actually behave in social situations, they give insight into how people say they think and feel (Giddens et al., 1991).

Field Research

Field research, on the other hand, refers to gathering primary data from the world outside of a lab experiment or survey. In conducting field research, sociologists step into new environments, and observe and participate in the world of others.

This research can take place in locations ranging from a coffee shop to a remote tribal island.

Sociological experiments can be conducted either in the lab or in the field. In a lab, experiments can be controlled in a way that produces more data in a set period of time.

Experiments

Meanwhile, in a field-based experiment, the information generated may be considered to be more accurate due to it being collected without the intervention of a researcher (Giddens et al., 1991).

In setting up experiments, sociologists create artificial situations that allow them to manipulate variables.

Sociologists typically select a group of people with similar characteristics, such as age, class, race, or education, and create an experimental and control group. While the experimental group is exposed to a variable that the researcher has and can change, the control group is not.

Secondary Data Analysis

Finally, secondary data analysis is the analysis based on work already completed by other researchers. These researchers can be historians, economists, teachers, or other sociologists, and can come from periodicals, newspapers, magazines, or some other source (Giddens et al., 1991).

Oftentimes, secondary data analysis can lead to sociologists interpreting findings in a way that was not part of the author's original purpose or attention. For example, a sociologist looking to investigate social attitudes toward propaganda in the second world war may read newspaper articles and watch briefings from the early 1940s.

Using already available data is useful for sociologists in that it is nonreactive or unobtrusive research. Because sociologists do not have direct contact with the people who created the media they are examining, they cannot alter or influence people's behaviors.

However, the sheer mass of previously existing sociological data presents its own set of challenges in finding a systematic way to sort through vast libraries of materials to glean information related to what a particular sociologist is looking to study (Giddens et al., 1991).

Notable Figures

Harriet Martineau (1802-1876)

Harriet Martineau was arguably the first female sociologist. She was an early observer of social practices such as economics, social class, religion, suicide, government, and women's rights.

Martineau was also the first to translate Comte's writings from French to English, introducing sociology to the anglosphere. She developed a systematic way to compare [social institutions](#) in her two most famous works: *Society in America* (1837) and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838).

In these works, Martineau expressed the idea that she found the structure of capitalism at odds with the moral principles that people in the United States profess. She pointed out faults in the free enterprise system, where workers were exploited and left in poverty while business owners became wealthy.

Nonetheless, Martineau's ideas were discounted by her contemporaries on virtue of the male-domination of academia.

Karl Marx (1818, 1883)

[Karl Marx](#) was a German philosopher and economist who co-wrote the *Communist Manifesto* with Friedrich Engels. In addition to being highly influential over the following centuries, Marx and Engels' book presents a theory of society that differed greatly from Comte's (Marx, 2012).

Unlike Comte, Marx believed that societies grew and changed because of the struggles of different social classes over the means of production.

Marx created his theories over the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution.

As goods became mass-produced and more and more of the working classes went to work in factories and plants, Marx noticed that the emerging 19th century economic system led to great disparities in wealth between the owners of the factories and those who worked there (Marx, 2012).

Marx believed that the inequalities of **capitalism** would become so extreme that workers would eventually revolt, leading to the collapse of capitalism.

According to Marx, from the remnants of this collapsed economic system, an equitable economic system where everything is owned communally and distributed as needed would emerge. Marx called this system communism.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903)

Herbert Spencer influenced the work of many early sociologists such as Emile Durkheim. In effect, he rejected both Comte's philosophy and Marx's theory of class struggle.

Instead, Spencer believed that the fundamental sociological division in the world was between military societies, where cooperation was secured by force, and industrial societies, where cooperation was voluntary and spontaneous.

According to Spencer, societies grow through economic and other forms of cooperation by social individuals who display a "social self-consciousness." In societies where industrial and thus peaceful social relations predominate, the principal job of the community is to protect the freedom of all citizens to adapt to circumstances.

Societies, in Spencer's view, were social organisms (Offer, 2019).

Georg Simmel (1858-1918)

George Simmel was a German art critic who wrote widely on social and political issues. Similar to Spencer, Simmel rejected Comte's positivism and investigated subjects such as social conflict, the function of money, individual identity in city life, and the fear of outsiders by Europeans.

Simmel generally focused on building theories around the interactions between individuals on a small scale. This form of relationship-focused sociology became known as methodological relationism.

Simmel became largely interested in conflicts and contradictions in the realms of the social world that he was examining.

Despite his immense work on the sociology of interactions, his contributions are often not included in academic histories, sometimes overshadowed by his contemporaries Durkheim, Mead, and Weber (Ritzer & Goodman, 2004).

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

Emile Durkheim legitimized sociology as a formal academic discipline by establishing the first European department of sociology at the University of Bordeaux in 1895, in addition to publishing numerous influential sociological works.

Durkheim laid out his theory of how societies transform from a primitive state into a capitalist, industrial society, and believed that people rise to their proper levels in society based on merit.

In a way parallel to Comte, Durkheim believed that sociologists would study objective “social facts,” and that these studies could determine whether a society was healthy or pathologically sick.

While healthy societies were stable, in his view, pathological societies experienced a breakdown in social norms between individuals and society.

Durkheim called this breakdown **anomie** and studied societal breakdown through the lens of suicide.

In his work, *Suicide*, Durkheim examined suicide statistics in different police districts as a way to research differences between catholic and Protestant communities.

From the differential rates of suicide among communities where different religions predominate that Durkheim found, he concluded that these differences corresponded to socio-religious factors rather than individual or psychological causes.

George Herbert Mead (1863-1931)

George Herbert Mead was a philosopher and sociologist who focused on the ways that the mind and the self develop as a result of social processes.

Mead concluded that the mind and the self develop as a result of social processes, and the way that individuals come to view themselves depends largely on their interactions with others.

Mead also drew a distinction between those that impacted an individual’s life directly — significant others — and the organized and generalized attitude of a social group — generalized others.

Mead’s theories largely developed the symbolic interactionist school of philosophy and sociology, which addresses the manner in which society is created and maintained through

face-to-face, repeated, meaningful interactions among individuals (Carter & Fuller, 2016).

Max Weber (1864-1920)

Max Weber was a prominent German sociologist who wrote on topics ranging from political change in Russia to the social forces that affected factory workers.

In perhaps his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber — in the view of some sociologists — argued that the beliefs of many Protestants, Calvinists in particular, lead to the creation of capitalism.

On a large level, Weber believed that standard scientific methods were largely inadequate in predicting the behavior of groups in the ways that positivists such as Auguste Comte thought they would be.

Instead, Weber argued that the influence of culture on human behavior, as well as the cultural biases that researchers themselves had, needed to be taken into account.

Sociology Vs. Psychology

Sociology and Psychology both seek to understand behavior — however, they do so on different scales. While psychology focuses on understanding the individual, sociology focuses on social groups, communities, and cultures.

Psychologists focus on researching, analyzing, and managing the factors that drive or impact the behavior of individuals. These can include mental illness, mood disorders, or relationships.

Meanwhile, sociologists tend to work with large-scale societal issues such as poverty, race and social divides, and public health concerns.

Although a sociologist may study the behavior of individuals, they more often do so in the context of understanding how outside forces influence that individual than the individual's own brain processes and possible pathologies.

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