# UNIT 2: INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY AND THEORIES OF SOCIETY

## UNIT STRUCTURE


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## 2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- define definition and meaning of sociology
- explain the fundamental concepts related to sociology
- analyze the significance of sociology in social work
- Explain what is meant by theories of society
- Discuss the theory of evolution
- Describe conflict theory, structural functionalism and action theory

## 2.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we have discussed demographic variables and complexity of Indian society, the Malthusian Theory and its significance. In

this unit let us analyze the discipline of Sociology which became one of the youngest branch of social sciences. It helped man to know their society better. In this unit we will learn and try to understand the basic meaning of sociology. We will also learn about its relationship to other social science disciplines; its significance in social work; aspect of theories of society and in this context discuss the theories on evolution, structural functionalism, conflict and theory of social action. These social theories will help us to have an in-depth understanding of how the human society has evolved, how are actions and functions of people influenced and what is the impact of conflict on the society. The basic concepts related to sociology are society, community, social groups, association, institution as well as organization. Community is smaller entity; and a person joins it voluntarily because he shares a common life with the people of the community.

## 2.3 INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIETY

When we talk about sociology, we must first begin our discussion with the question, that is, What is Sociology? Sociology tries to focus and understand the social life. Sociology is the youngest discipline among all other social sciences. It is derived from the Latin word 'societus' meaning 'society' and the Greek word 'logos' meaning 'study or science'. Sociology is often termed as the science of society.



***AUGUSTE COMTE*** coined the term 'Sociology'

Sociology is rooted in the works of philosophers like Plato, Aristotle and Confucius. Although many scholars have talked about it in a broader framework, yet it was Auguste Comte who have used the word 'sociology' for the first time in French in 1839. Hence Comte is regarded as the father of Sociology. Auguste Comte had earlier used the term 'social physics' for sociology. According to Comte, sociology should serve as a distinct science of society which should be based on the formula "To know, to predict, to control. "

Sociology emerged as a response to the forces of change caused by the Enlightenment period and the French and Industrial revolution during 19th century in Europe. These changes resulted in both internal as well as

external changes in the society as a whole. New ideas, theories, values began to emerge, people began to question everything and a new branch of study emerged which solely focussed on studying the society as a whole. This new branch of study came to be known as sociology.

Some important definitions of sociology are as follows:

Max Weber defines sociology as "the science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a casual explanation of its course and effect. "

Kingsley Davis says that "Sociology is a general science of society." Emile Durkheim defines sociology as the study of "social facts". Mac Iver and Page defines sociology as the study of social relationship.

Henry Fairchild defines sociology as "the study of man and his human environment in their relations to each other. " Morris Ginsberg defines sociology as "the study of human interactions and inter-relations, their conditions and consequences. "

According to W. F. Ogburn, "sociology is a body of learning about society. It is a description of ways to make society better. It is social ethics, a social philosophy, generally; however, it is defined as science of society."

Harry M. Johnson defines sociology as "the science that deals with social groups, their internal forms or modes of organisation, the process that tend to maintain or change these forms of organisation and relation between groups. "

After we have discussed the different definitions of sociology, we will discuss further the scope of sociology and its relationship with other social sciences.

## 2.4 SCOPE OF SOCIOLOGY

When we talk about the scope of sociology we need to look at and examine the matters or topics that sociology deals with. The scope of sociology is very wide although it is one of the youngest of all other social sciences. However sociologist and others differ regarding what should be the scope of sociology. August Comte makes us believe that sociology

should try to study social phenomena on scientific lines. He has thus laid stress on scientific approach. Another sociologist Emile Durkheim has tried to separate sociology from other social science subjects and also tried to give an independent status to this subject. Max Weber has however said that sociology should merely be an interpretative understanding of social actions and nothing beyond that. Simply we can say that sociology is the study of society.

In sociology, the concept of 'group' refers to the collection of people who interact regularly based on some shared interest and who develop some sense of belonging that sets them apart from other gatherings of people. An association has established rules of organisation and procedure, a formalised system of leadership and certain common interest among its members. The word institution means that which is established or constituted in society. In sociology, the term relates to organs that performs society's functions.



***GROUP:***
refers to a collection of people with shared interest and sense of belongingness.

Our society is a web of social institutions. These institutions are interrelated and interlinked. The interest of sociology is to explain these institutions, which is its subject matter. The sociologists who are involved in this area are constantly trying to find solutions to the existing social problems. The scope of sociology lies in identifying the backwardness of some economic institutions and also comng up with techniques for welfare of the society. After examining the scope we will now discuss the importance of sociology.

## 2.5 IMPORTANCE OF SOCIOLOGY IN SOCIAL WORK

Sociology is said to be the mother of all social sciences. Social Work as a discipline and profession, draws heavily from sociological concepts. Social work profession is based on the understanding of the society, the social institutions, social issues and problems. Without the knowledge of such sociological concepts, social work cannot establish itself as a profession.

Sociology helps us to understand the workings of the social systems. It helps us to understand the society in and around us in a more systematic manner.

Sociology throws more light on the social nature of individuals. It tells us why man is a social animal, why he lives in groups, communities and societies.

Sociology helps individuals to adapt to the changing situations in the society and improves our understanding of the society as a whole.

The study of sociology helps us to know not only our society and man but also others, their motives, aspirations, status, occupations, traditions, customs, institutions, cultures etc.

Sociology also helps in understanding the relationship of the individual with different social institutions like family, school, marriage etc.

Sociology is also beneficial to study the conditions of underdeveloped nations. It sis thus important for the economists to also combine sociological knowledge with the economic scenario of the country.

Sociology is helpful in solving social problems from the society, like beggary, poverty, prostitution, unemployment from the society. Sociology helps in carefully studying those problems, which becomes necessary for overcoming such problems.

Sociology is also important to understand the planning system of the country. An effective planning system would also help the government to promote the welfare of the tribal people as well as the other background groups in the society.

After this discussion on the relationship between sociology and other social work, we will now discuss its relationship with other social sciences.

## 2.6 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIOLOGY AND OTHER SOCIAL SCIENCES

Sociology is a social science because it tries to understand and study the society as a whole. All the social sciences like political science, history, economics, anthropology and psychology are interelated with sociology as

their area of study is sililar. However, the approach to study society in each of this discipline is different. Now let us examine the relationship between the different branches of social sciences.

i. **Anthropology and Sociology :** Anthropology focuses on the study of tribal people. They try to understand culture and people's total way of life. Sociology also studies these aspects, but it is more focused. Sociology tries to understand patterns and variations in the social structures and processes.

ii. **Psychology and Sociology :** Psychology tries to study the human behaviour, mainly concerned with the individual. Sociology on the other hand tries to study the individual and also the society in relation to it.

iii. **Economics and Sociology :** Economics is concerned with the economic aspects of society, like market, capital, labour etc. Sociology is concerned with these aspects but in relation to the social forces within society.

iv. **History and Sociology :** the disciplinbe of history studies the events of the past and relating them to one another. Sociology also studies these past events, but it tries to understand the social processes common to all those events of the past.

v. **Political Science and Sociology :** Political science deals with the voting behaviour, state and government and other related political aspects. Sociology on the other hand tries to deal with these political aspects only in relation to the larger society.After learning about the scope and relationship of sociology with other social sciences, in the next section we will discuss the theories of society.



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Q 1:** Which discipline is the youngest of all social sciences?

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**Q 2 :** Who is known as the father of sociology?

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## 2.7 THEORIES OF SOCIETY

Theories of society explain why a society exists in a particular form and analyses its consequences. Social theory is an essential tool used by scholars in the analysis of society; through the use of theoretical frameworks social structures and phenomenon are analyzed and placed in context within a particular school of thought. Spencer's theory of social evolution helps in understanding the evolution of society. This helps in getting to know the society a bit better. This again helps us to know about the dynamics of the society as such. Again this is also helpful to know about various dialectics within the society itself. This is manifested in the process of the society evolving from one stage to another.

Now in the next sub-section, let us look at the Theory of Social evolution proposed by Herbert Spencer.

### 2.7.1 THEORY OF SOCIAL EVOLUTION

Herbert Spencer put forward the theory of 'Social Darwinism'. He was an English philosopher, a biologist and a sociologist. He is best known for coming up with the concept of "survival of the fittest" which was mentioned in his text 'Principles of Biology'. According to him, as the living organism grows and develops, similarly a society also develops from a simpler to a more complex form. Herbert Spencer thus gave sociology a scientific character, because he compared society with that of a living organism.

Spencer's Theory of Social Evolution was highly inspired by the biological explanation of growth of organisms. As an organism develops from a simple to a complex form, so also, a society, according to Spencer evolves from a simple to a more complex form in the course of history.

This universal process of a society developing into a complex one was explained by applying the philosophy of Darwinism. Accordingly there

was an universal law which governed all societies and Spencer put forward that such a law would result in an inevitable order of change within societies.

According to Spencer, progress was bound to occur within societies. He believed in a progressive development in societies. He thus, differentiated between two forms of societies: militant society and industrial society. Militant society saw relationships of hierarchy and obedience and was simple and undifferentiated. Industrial societies on the other hand, were based on voluntary behaviour and were complex and undifferentiated.

## 2.7.2 STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM

Functionalist theories assume the different parts of a society each have their own role to play (their own "function"), and work together smoothly in order to form a harmonious whole. The metaphor often used to describe functionalism is that it views society as a body, with the different parts of society-government, media, religion, the family, etc., and, of course, schools-being like the different organs in a body, each contributing in a different way to keeping the entire body healthy.

Functionalism assumes that the various institutions of a society always operate so as to support that society as it is. If they didn't, the society would perish; therefore, functionalism believes, it's safe to assume that they do in any society one may encounter, for otherwise the society would no longer be here for us to study.

Emile Durkheim was a French sociologist who was more interested in a scientific approach in his study. His major works are Divisions of Labour in Society, The Rules of Sociological Method, Suicide: A Study in Sociology, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. Durkheim pioneered the early use of statistical analysis in sociology. Durkheim was an evolutionist who believed that society grew and developed like an organism.

### Mechanical and Organic Solidarity

In his book, 'Division of Labour', Durkheim mentions about two forms of solidarity: mechanical and organic form of solidarity. Mechanical solidarity is that form of solidarity which "comes from likeness". It was mostly

prevalent in the simple societies where division of labour was not present. It occurs when individuals within structural units are alike and self-sufficient. For example, in traditional societies, people grew their own food, made their own clothes, and had little need for extensive social contact with others because they did not have to rely on others for daily needs.



Organic solidarity is present in complex socitis where individuals play specialized roles.

**Organic solidarity is** when a large population is stratified into smaller structural units. There's a high level of interdependence among individuals and structures, but there's still a division of people along lines of labor or type. Organic solidarity is mainly prevalent in the complex societies where individuals play more specialised roles and responsibilites. As a society becomes more complex, individuals play more specific roles and differences amongst them leads to differences within the society at large.

**Society Structure and Social Facts**

Emile Durkheim was famous for his views on the structure of society. His work focused on how traditional and modern societies evolved and function. Durkheim's theories were founded on the concept of social facts, defined as the norms, values, and structures of a society.

This perspective of society differed from other sociologists of his era as Durkheim's theories were founded on things external in nature, as opposed to those internal in nature, such as the motivations and desires of individuals. According to Durkheim, collective consciousness, values, and rules are critical to a functional society. In this lesson, we will focus on Durkheim's theories of functionalism, anomie, and division of labor.

**Division of Labor**

Durkheim's concept of the division of labor focused on the shift in societies from a simple society to one that is more complex. He argued that traditional societies were made up of homogenous people that were more or less the same in terms of values, religious beliefs, and backgrounds. Modern societies, in contrast, are made up of complex division of labor, beliefs, and backgrounds.

In traditional societies, the collective consciousness ruled, social norms

were strong, and social behavior was well regulated. In modern societies, common consciousness was less obvious and the regulation of social behavior was less punitive and more restitutive, aiming to restore normal activity to society.

Durkheim recognized that things like increased communication, transportation, and interaction with others resulted in the social change from a mechanical solidarity to organic. If societies evolve too quickly from traditional to modern, a breakdown of norms and collective consciousness occurs. The concept of community and social constraints becomes weakened, and this leads to disorder, crisis, and anomie.

**Anomie :**

The concept of anomie refers to a condition or state in which there is a breakdown of social norms and guidance for the citizens of a society. Anomie occurs when society has little influence on individuals' propensity to follow rules and norms, and individuals are, therefore, left without moral guidance. Individuals do not feel attached to the collective society.

## 2.7.2 STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM

Structural Functionalism was especially developed by Talcott Parsons, Robert Merton and their students and followers. Talcott Parson's theoretical work on structural functionalism constitutes of the four functional imperatives of all action systems- his **AGIL scheme**. A function is said to be "a complex of activities directed towards meeting a need or needs of the system." Parsons believes that there are four functional imperatives (necessities) for all systems-

i. Adaptation (A)
ii. Goal Attainment (G)
iii. Integration (I) and
iv. Latency (L), or pattern maintenance

Together, these four functional imperatives are known as AGIL Scheme. A system must necessarily perform these four functions in order to survive.

**i. Adaptation :** A system must cope with external situational

pressure. It must adapt to its environment and adapt the environment to its needs.

ii. **Goal attainment :** A system must define and achieve its primary goals.

iii. **Integration :** A system must regulate the interrelationship of its component parts. It also must manage the relationship among the other three functional imperatives.

iv. **Latency :** It is pattern maintenance, i.e. a system must furnish, maintain and renew both the motivation of the individuals and cultural patterns that create and sustain motivation.

Parsons uses the AGIL scheme on the four action systems- the behavioural organism is the action system that handles adaptation function by adjusting to and transforming the external world. The personality system uses the goal attainment function by defining system goals and mobilizing resources to attain them. The social system copes with the integration function by controlling its component parts. The cultural function performs the latency function by providing actors with the norms and values that motivate them for action.

The functionalist perspective is based largely on the works of Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. According to functionalism, society is a system of interconnected parts that work together in harmony to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole. For example, each of the social institutions contributes important functions for society: Family provides a context for reproducing, nurturing, and socializing children; education offers a way to transmit a society's skills, knowledge, and culture to its youth; politics provides a means of governing members of society; economics provides for the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services; and religion provides moral guidance and an outlet for worship of a higher power.

The functionalist perspective emphasizes the interconnectedness of society by focusing on how each part influences and is influenced by other parts. For example, the increase in singleparent and dual-earner families has contributed to the number of children who are failing in school because

parents have become less available to supervise their children's homework. As a result of changes in technology, colleges are offering more technical programs, and many adults are returning to school to learn new skills that are required in the workplace. The increasing number of women in the workforce has contributed to the formulation of policies against sexual harassment and job discrimination. Functionalists use the terms functional and dysfunctional to describe the effects of social elements on society. Elements of society are functional if they contribute to social stability and dysfunctional if they disrupt social stability. Some aspects of society can be both functional and dysfunctional. For example, crime is dysfunctional in that it is associated with physical violence, loss of property, and fear. But according to Durkheim and other functionalists, crime is also functional for society because it leads to heightened awareness of shared moral bonds and increased social cohesion.

Sociologists have identified two types of functions: manifest and latent (Merton 1968). Manifest functions are consequences that are intended and commonly recognized. Latent functions are consequences that are unintended and often hidden. For example, the manifest function of education is to transmit knowledge and skills to society's youth. But public elementary schools also serve as babysitters for employed parents, and colleges offer a place for young adults to meet potential mates. The baby-sitting and mate-selection functions are not the intended or commonly recognized functions of education; hence they are latent functions

Robert K. Merton said that structural-functional analysis focuses on groups, organizations, societies and cultures. He believed that the focus of the structural- functionalists should be on the social functions rather than on individual motives. Merton introduced the concepts of manifest and latent functions. The manifest functions are those that are intended, whereas the latent functions are unintended. Actions have both intended and unintended consequences.

### 2.7.3 CONFLICT THEORY

In contrast to the consensus orientation of the other two perspectives,

conflict theories view society as composed of distinct groups with opposing interests, and view social change as resulting from struggle among those groups. Different varieties of conflict theory recognize different kinds of divisions, but all view society as fundamentally characterized by conflict rather than consensus. Marxist conflict theorists see society as divided into classes, with owners and workers having opposing interests; feminist conflict theorists see society as divided by gender, with women generally being less privileged than men; anti-racist conflict theorists emphasize conflict across racial lines; anti-imperialist conflict theorists emphasize global conflict between wealthy and poor nations; etc.

From the perspective of a conflict theorist, functionalism and Liberal/ Enlightenment theory both attempt to sweep social divisions under the rug. A conflict theorist would say that by claiming existing social arrangements work to everyone's benefit (functionalism), or current deficiencies will diminish automatically over time as we grow more enlightened (Liberal/ Enlightenment), the other two perspectives obscure the power imbalances between groups within the society and discourage the oppressed from recognizing their relative disadvantage and doing something about it. In short, from this perspective, rather than helping clarify how society works, the other two functions as ideologies that cloud the minds of the less powerful, inducing them to accept society as it exists.

While the functionalist perspective views society as composed of different parts working together, the conflict perspective views society as composed of different groups and interest competing for power and resources. The conflict perspective explains various aspects of our social world by looking at which groups have power and benefit from a particular social arrangement. For example, feminist theory argues that we live in a patriarchal society-a hierarchical system of organization controlled by men. Although there are many varieties of feminist theory, most would hold that feminism "demands that existing economic, political, and social structures be changed" (Weir and Faulkner 2004). The origins of the conflict perspective can be traced to the classic works of Karl Marx. Marx suggested

that all societies go through stages of economic development. As societies evolve from agricultural to industrial, concern over meeting survival needs is replaced by concern over making a profit, the hallmark of a capitalist system. Industrialization leads to the development of two classes of people: the bourgeoisie, or the owners of the means of production (e.g., factories, farms, businesses); and the proletariat, or the workers who earn wages. The division of society into two broad classes of people-the "haves" and the "have-nots"-is beneficial to the owners of the means of production. The workers, who may earn only subsistence wages, are denied access to the many resources available to the wealthy owners. According to Marx, the bourgeoisie use their power to control the institutions of society to their advantage. For example, Marx suggested that religion serves as an "opium of the masses" in that it soothes the distress and suffering associated with the working-class lifestyle and focuses the workers' attention on spirituality, God, and the afterlife rather than on such worldly concerns as living conditions. In essence, religion diverts the workers so that they concentrate on being rewarded in heaven for living a moral life rather than on questioning their exploitation.

### 2.7.4 THEORY OF SOCIAL ACTION

According to Max Weber, the main goal of sociological analysis is- 'the interpretation of action in terms of its subjective meaning'. This interpretation is reflected in his discussion on economic action, which is defined as "a conscious primary orientation to economic consideration for what matters is not the objective necessity of making economic provision, but the belief that it is necessary." Weber differentiated between action and purely reactive behavior. By behavior, it is supposed to mean automatic behavior; i.e. a behavior occurs when a stimulus is presented and where no thought process is involved. However, Weber was concerned with action that clearly involved the intervention of thought processes and the resulting 'meaningful' action. Thus, action was said to occur when individuals attached subjective meanings to their action. According to Weber the task of sociology is interpretation and analysis of action in terms of its subjective meaning, as

already mentioned in the beginning of this section. He also pointed out that in analyzing mental processes and meaningful action, it would be incorrect to regard psychology as the base of sociological interpretation of social action. It is because psychologists are interested to study mind, personality and so forth, while the sociologists are keen to understand and analyze mental processes that result in social action.

In his action theory, Weber focused on individuals, patterns, regularities of action and not on the collectivity. Thus, the sociology of action is concerned with individuals and not with collectivities. He used his ideal-type methodology to clarify the meaning of action by identifying four basic types of action. This was significant for understanding what Weber meant by action and also his concern with larger social structures and institutions.

Weber differentiated between two **basic types of rational** action and differentiated four **ideal-typical forms of action**. He believed that any given action actually involves a combination of all four ideal types of action.

- **Means-end rationality :** action that is determined by behavior of objects in the environment and other human beings. These are used as conditions or means for the attainment of the individual's rationality (wisdom) pursued and calculated (planned) objectives.
- **Value rationality :** action that is determined by some ethical, aesthetic, religious and other form of behavior, independently of its prediction for success.
- **Affectual action :** is determined by the emotional state or condition of the actor (individual).
- **Traditional action :** is determined by the actor's habitual (usual) and (traditionally) expected ways of behaving.

  Weber argued that sociologists have a much better chance of understanding action that involves the rational variety compared to understanding of action determined by tradition.



**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

**Q 3:** What are the main units of society?

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**Q 4:** What are the five primary institutions?

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## 2.8 LET US SUM UP

- Sociology emerged as a response to the forces of change caused by the Enlightenment period and the French and Industrial Revolution during 19th century in Europe. These changes resulted in both internal as well as external changes in the society as a whole.
- Theories of society explain why a society exists in a particular form and analyses its consequences. Social theory is an essential tool used by scholars in the analysis of society; through the use of theoretical frameworks social structures and phenomenon are analyzed and placed in context within a particular school of thought.
- Spencer's Theory of Social Evolution was highly inspired by the biological explanation of growth of organisms. As an organism develops from a simple to a complex form, so also, a society, according to Spencer evolves from a simple to a more complex form in the course of history.
- Functionalism assumes that the various institutions of a society always operate so as to support that society as it is. If they didn't, the society would perish; therefore, functionalism believes, it's safe

to assume that they do in any society one may encounter, for otherwise the society would no longer be here for us to study.

- Conflict theorists view society as composed of distinct groups with opposing interests, and view social change as resulting from struggle among those groups. Different varieties of conflict theory recognize different kinds of divisions, but all view society as fundamentally characterized by conflict rather than consensus.
- In his action theory, Weber focused on individuals, patterns, regularities of action and not on the collectivity. Thus, the sociology of action is concerned with individuals and not with collectivities. He used his ideal-type methodology to clarify the meaning of action by identifying four basic types of action. This was significant for understanding what Weber meant by action and also his concern with larger social structures and institutions.



## 2.9 FURTHER READING


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## 2.10 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. The discipline of Sociology is the youngest of all social sciences
2. August Comte is known as the father of sociology.

3. Individual, Groups, Community, Association are the main units of society
4. The five primary institutions are family, economy, religion, education and state.



## 2.11 MODEL QUESTIONS

**A) Very Short Questions**

**Q 1:** What are the two types of functions according to Merton?

**Q 2:** What are the types of rational action as discussed by Weber?

**B) Short Questions** (Answer each question in about 150 words)

**Q 1:** Why is conflict said to be indispensable to society?

**Q 2:** Discuss in short the theory of evolution by Herbert Spencer.

**C) Long Question** (Answer in about 300-500 words)

**Q 1:** Discuss structural functionalism.

**Q 2:** Explain Weber's interpretation of social action with example.