

Sociological Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the following area of sociology through exploration of:

1. Sociological Theory
2. Theoretical Approach
3. Macro- and Micro-Level Orientation

1. SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

A **theory** is a statement about why and how facts are related. It is helpful to explain connections between things because without explanation, these things are simply random occurrences and it is difficult to make sense of them. Therefore, the goal of theory is to make connections between different facts.

Sociology would not exist without theory, and when you do research, the goal is to build theory--to make a 'theoretical contribution'. If you're not doing that, then you're not really practicing sociology--you're simply observing things.

IN CONTEXT

There are groups of travelers who prefer to stay with other strangers in their homes when they're traveling, rather than stay in a Marriott. They are even willing to pay for this--up to \$50 to \$90 per night. What makes this trend so popular? Why are these people doing it, and why do people want to host them? Why would you want to open your home to a stranger? These are disconnected facts, and you need a theory to bridge them.

Well, you would conduct research, interview people, even possibly allow travelers to stay with you. After doing all of these things, you may find that people wanted to stay with another person, versus a Marriott, because it was a more authentic experience.

The theory that bridged the two pieces together is this notion of authenticity. People don't want to go to the Marriott where everything is the same. They want a unique, more authentic experience, achieved through staying with somebody in their home rather than in a hotel.

You start with facts that you see as unrelated and come up with a theoretical explanation for their

relation. What you did with your research is create **sociological theory**, which is an attempt to explain social behaviors--in this case, couch surfing, or staying with a stranger in their home.



TERMS TO KNOW

Theory

A statement on how and why facts are related.

Sociological Theory

Explanations for the social behavior of people in groups.

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

A **theoretical approach** is the application of an overarching view of society to each general situation.

There are three overarching theoretical approaches in sociology:

1. The **structural functional approach** states that society is a complex machine with interlocking parts that all work together to keep the system going. If one of those parts fails to function, the whole machine can break down.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** You could think of your body in this way. Your heart is in charge of pumping the blood. Your brain does the thinking. Your feet do the walking. All these separate parts work together to keep your system going. Society works in much the same way.

2. In the **social conflict approach**, conflict is the core of society. Think of all the fundamental conflicts that immediately come to mind--capitalist, laborer, rich, poor, atheist, religious, gay, straight, liberal, conservative, etc. People act based on these conflicts, and this leads to change.

3. The **symbolic interaction approach** states that society is the result of all of our interactions combined. All meaning is created through interaction with each other. Through one on one, through group interaction--that's the core of society. Society is constructed through interaction.



TERMS TO KNOW

Theoretical Approach

Applying a theory to all thinking and research.

Structural Functional Approach

An approach which sees society as a complex system with interlocking parts that each work together to maintain the system as a whole.

Social Conflict Approach

An approach to social theory that argues that society is characterized by various conflicts which cause people to act socially, producing change.

Symbolic Interaction Approach

A sociological approach which views society as the result of many individual, everyday interactions.

3. MACRO- AND MICRO-LEVEL ORIENTATION

In addition to the three theoretical approaches in sociology, there are two ways of viewing society and people in society: the macro and the micro. You can think of them as two levels of zooming in. You're zoomed out, or you're zoomed in.

The **macro-level orientation** in sociology is a broad look at society from up above. Recall the structural functional theoretical approach from above, in which society is seen as a complex system with many parts that each work together to maintain the system as a whole--this is a macro view of society. It involves looking at big structures and interlocking parts.

On the other hand, the **micro-level orientation** in sociology is a much smaller zoom. You zoom into specific situations and look at individual interactions.



HINT

The symbolic interaction approach is a micro-level orientation.



TERMS TO KNOW

Macro-level Orientation

A zoomed out look at the social structures and institutions that shape society.

Micro-level Orientation

A zoomed in focus on specific situations and individual interactions.



SUMMARY

Sociological theory explains the social behavior of people in groups by making connections between different facts. There are three **theoretical approaches** in sociology. In addition, there are two different orientations you can use to view society: the **macro-level orientation** and the **micro-level orientation**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

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