

SOC401

CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES



Course video is available on our app

- **Course code: SOC 401**
- **Course title: Contemporary Sociological Theories**
- **Course credit load: 3**

SERIES 1: Foundations and Evolution of Sociological Theory

Series outline

This Series will be organised into **four main Parts**, which conforms to the guideline for a 3-credit course.

Suggested Parts and Sub-Parts

1.1 The Meaning and Nature of Sociological Theory

- 1.1.1 Definition of **theory** and **scientific theory**
- 1.1.2 Distinction between sociological theory and everyday explanations
- 1.1.3 Importance of theory in understanding social order

1.2 Philosophical Roots of Sociological Thought

- 1.2.1 Influence of early philosophers on sociological ideas
- 1.2.2 Transition from philosophy to sociology
- 1.2.3 Debates on society and social order

1.3 Classical Foundations of Sociological Theory

- 1.3.1 Contributions of **Comte** and **Spencer**
- 1.3.2 Contributions of **Durkheim** and **Weber**
- 1.3.3 Parsons and the development of grand theories

1.4 Evolution into Contemporary Perspectives

- 1.4.1 Continuities and departures from classical theories
- 1.4.2 Emergence of functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism
- 1.4.3 The role of theory in addressing contemporary social problems



Introduction

Sociological theories provide us with structured ways of explaining how societies function, change, and maintain order. They are not simply abstract ideas but scientific tools that help us interpret everyday social events and long-term social transformations. By tracing the foundations and evolution of sociological theory, learners can appreciate how early philosophical debates gave rise to sociology as a discipline and how classical thinkers shaped the frameworks that continue to influence contemporary perspectives. This Series sets the stage for deeper engagement with the major orientations of sociological thought that will be explored later in the course.

The aim of this Series is to introduce you to the meaning and nature of sociological theory, to highlight its philosophical roots, and to examine the contributions of classical thinkers whose ideas laid the groundwork for modern sociological perspectives.

We shall commence this Series by examining the meaning and nature of sociological theory, including its definition and scientific character. Next, we will explore the philosophical roots of sociological thought, considering how early philosophers influenced debates about society and social order. Following that, we will study the classical foundations of sociological theory, focusing on the contributions of Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons. Finally, we will round off the Series by discussing how these classical foundations evolved into contemporary perspectives, showing the continuity and transformation of ideas that remain relevant in addressing social problems today.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 1.1** define the concept of sociological theory and distinguish it from everyday explanations,
- **SLO 1.2** explain the characteristics of scientific theory and its role in interpreting social order,
- **SLO 1.3** analyse the influence of early philosophers on the development of sociological thought,
- **SLO 1.4** describe the contributions of classical theorists such as Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons,
- **SLO 1.5** evaluate how classical foundations have evolved into contemporary perspectives in sociology.

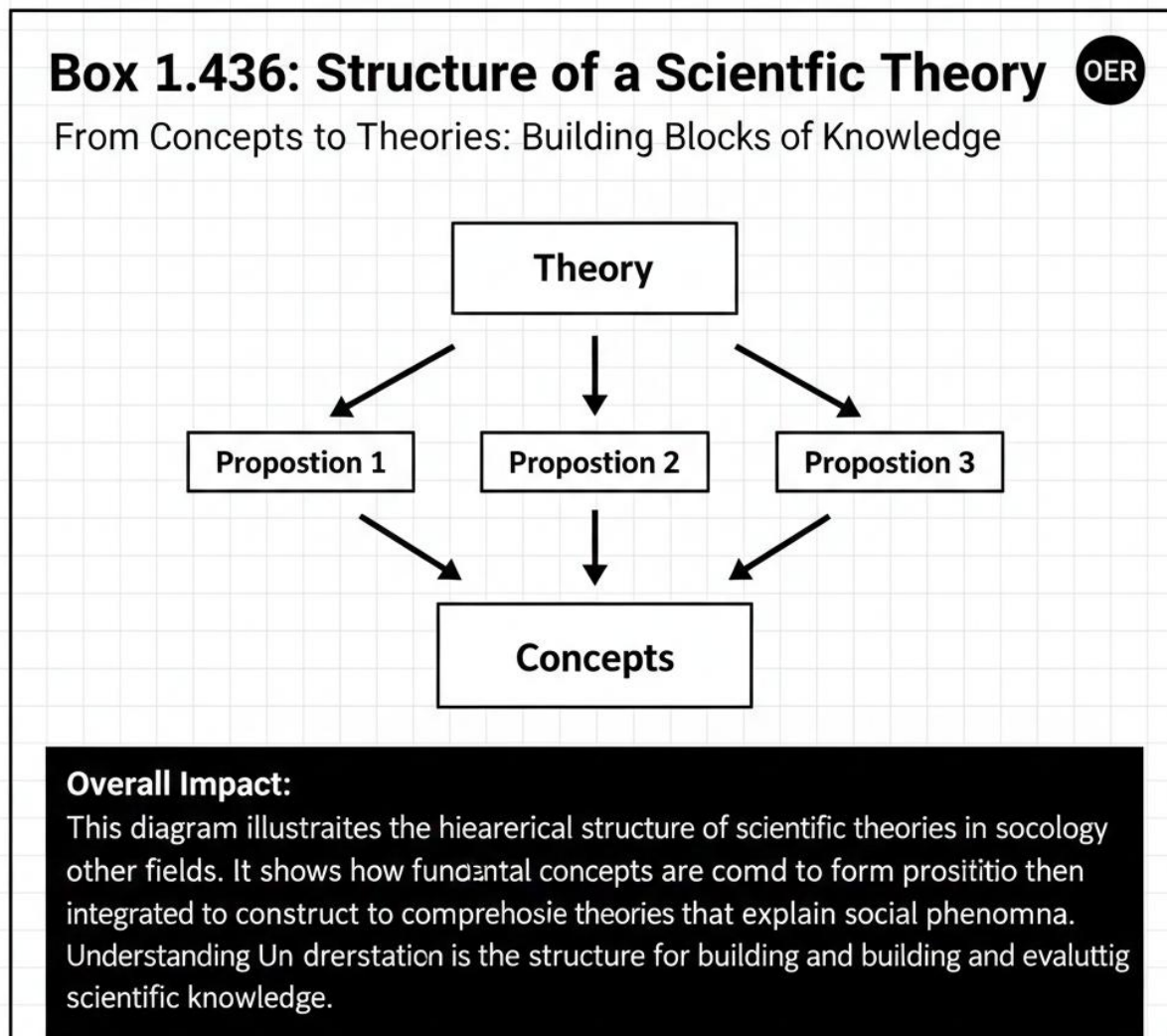
1.1 The Meaning and Nature of Sociological Theory

1.1.1 Definition of theory and scientific theory



A **theory** is a systematic explanation of observed phenomena, built upon concepts and propositions that help us make sense of reality. In sociology, theory provides a framework for interpreting social behaviour and social structures. A **scientific theory** is distinguished by its reliance on evidence, logical consistency, and testability. It is not merely speculation but a structured attempt to explain and predict social events.

Fill in the blank: A _____ is a systematic explanation of observed phenomena, built upon concepts and propositions.



OER Diagram Structure Scientific Theory Sociology
 Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:51:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing the relationship between concepts, propositions, and theory. *Figure 1.1: Structure of a scientific theory*

1.1.2 Distinction between sociological theory and everyday explanations



Everyday explanations often rely on personal opinions, cultural beliefs, or anecdotal evidence. In contrast, **sociological theory** is grounded in systematic observation and scientific reasoning. It seeks to uncover patterns and relationships that go beyond individual experiences. For example, while everyday reasoning might attribute poverty to laziness, sociological theory examines structural factors such as inequality, unemployment, and policy frameworks.

Fill in the blank: Unlike everyday explanations, sociological theory relies on _____ observation and scientific reasoning.



Box 1.437: Everyday Explanations vs. Sociological Theory

Making Sense of the Social World

	1. Everyday Explanation	2. Sociological Theory
Basis:	Personal experience, common anecdotes	Systematic research, data, established frameworks
	Individual behavior, anecdotes	Social structures, institutions patterns
Level of Analysis	Individual behavior, immediate causes	Macro (society) & Micro
Example: Poverty	Economic inequality, lack of opportunity, systemic discrimination	Social disorganization theory, inequality
Example: Crime	Bad people, moral failing	

Overall Impact:

This table compares how we explain social phenomena. Everyday explanations are based on personal views, while sociological theory is rigorous, evidence-based social constructs. Understanding this distinction is crucial for critical thinking and informed analysis in sociology.

OER Table Everyday Explanation vs Sociological Theory
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2066 at 1:52:00 AM WAT

Box 1.1: Everyday explanation versus sociological theory

1.1.3 Importance of theory in understanding social order



Theories are essential because they provide tools for analysing how societies maintain **social order**, which refers to the organised and predictable patterns of social life. Without theory, sociologists would struggle to explain why societies function as they do or how they change over time. For instance, functionalist theory explains social order by emphasising the interdependence of institutions, while conflict theory highlights power struggles and inequality.

Fill in the blank: Theories provide tools for analysing how societies maintain _____, which refers to organised and predictable patterns of social life.



Image of a busy marketplace showing social order in everyday life. *Plate 1.1: Social order in practice*



Pilot questions 1.1

1. Which of the following best defines a scientific theory? a) A personal opinion b) A systematic explanation based on evidence c) A cultural belief d) A random guess
2. Everyday explanations differ from sociological theory because they rely on: a) Systematic observation b) Anecdotal evidence c) Logical consistency d) Testability
3. Which concept refers to organised and predictable patterns of social life? a) Social change b) Social order c) Social interaction d) Social conflict
4. Which theory explains social order by emphasising interdependence of institutions? a) Conflict theory b) Functionalism c) Symbolic interactionism d) Exchange theory
5. Fill in the blank: Sociological theory seeks to uncover _____ and relationships that go beyond individual experiences.

1.2 Philosophical Roots of Sociological Thought

1.2.1 Influence of early philosophers on sociological ideas

The discipline of sociology did not emerge in isolation. It was shaped by the writings of early **philosophers**, who are thinkers concerned with fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, and society. Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and later Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau and Montesquieu provided ideas about justice, governance, and social organisation that influenced the eventual development of sociological theory. Their reflections on human nature and society laid the groundwork for systematic approaches to studying social life.

Fill in the blank: The discipline of sociology was shaped by the writings of early _____, who explored fundamental questions about society.



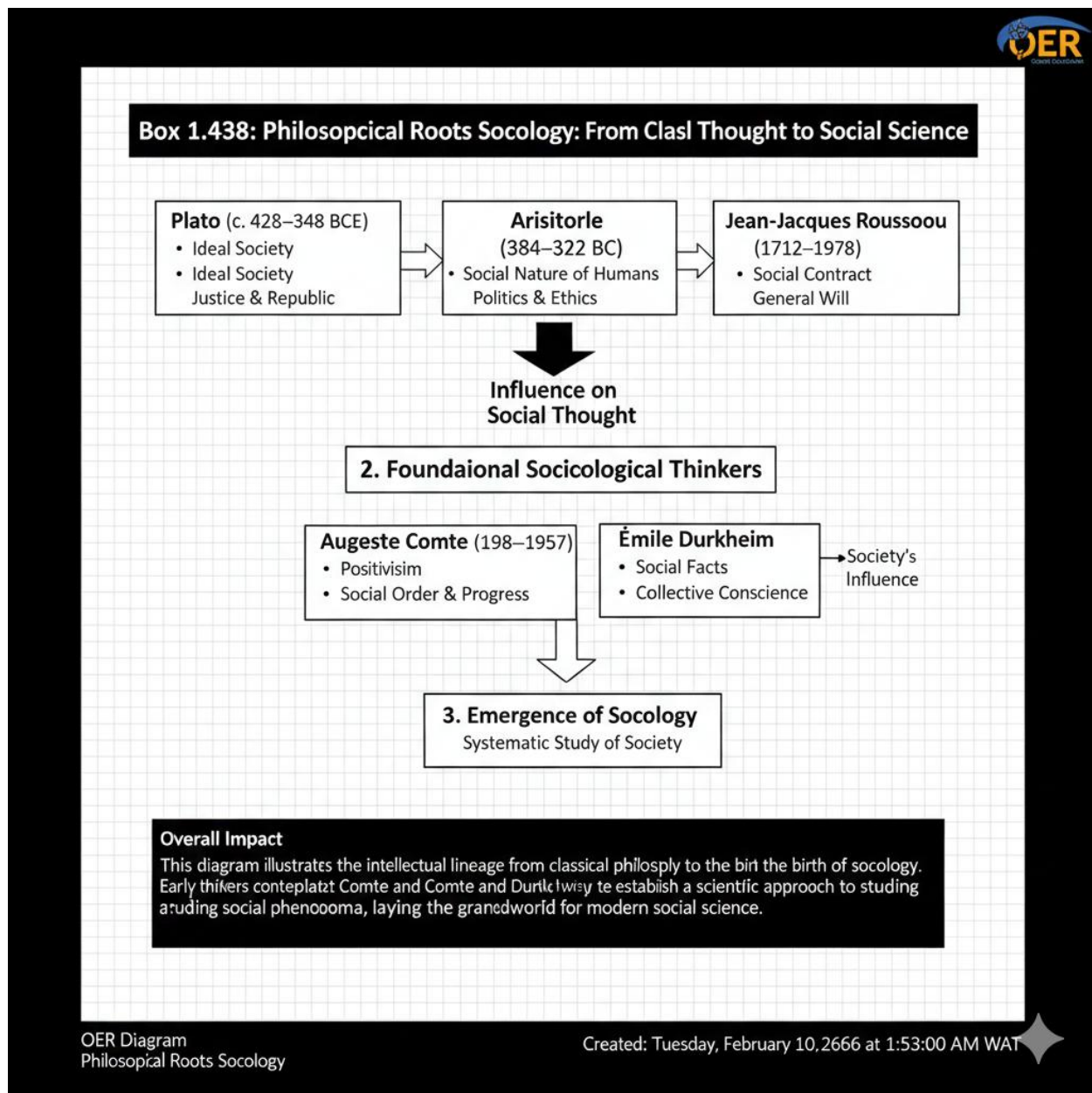


Diagram showing the transition from philosophy to sociology. *Figure 1.2: Philosophical foundations of sociology*

1.2.2 Transition from philosophy to sociology

The transition from philosophy to sociology occurred when scholars began to move from abstract speculation to systematic observation of society. **Sociology** is defined as the scientific study of social behaviour, institutions, and structures. Unlike philosophy, which often relied on reasoning alone, sociology emphasised empirical evidence and scientific methods. This shift marked the birth of sociology as a distinct discipline in the nineteenth century.

Fill in the blank: Unlike philosophy, sociology emphasises _____ evidence and scientific methods.



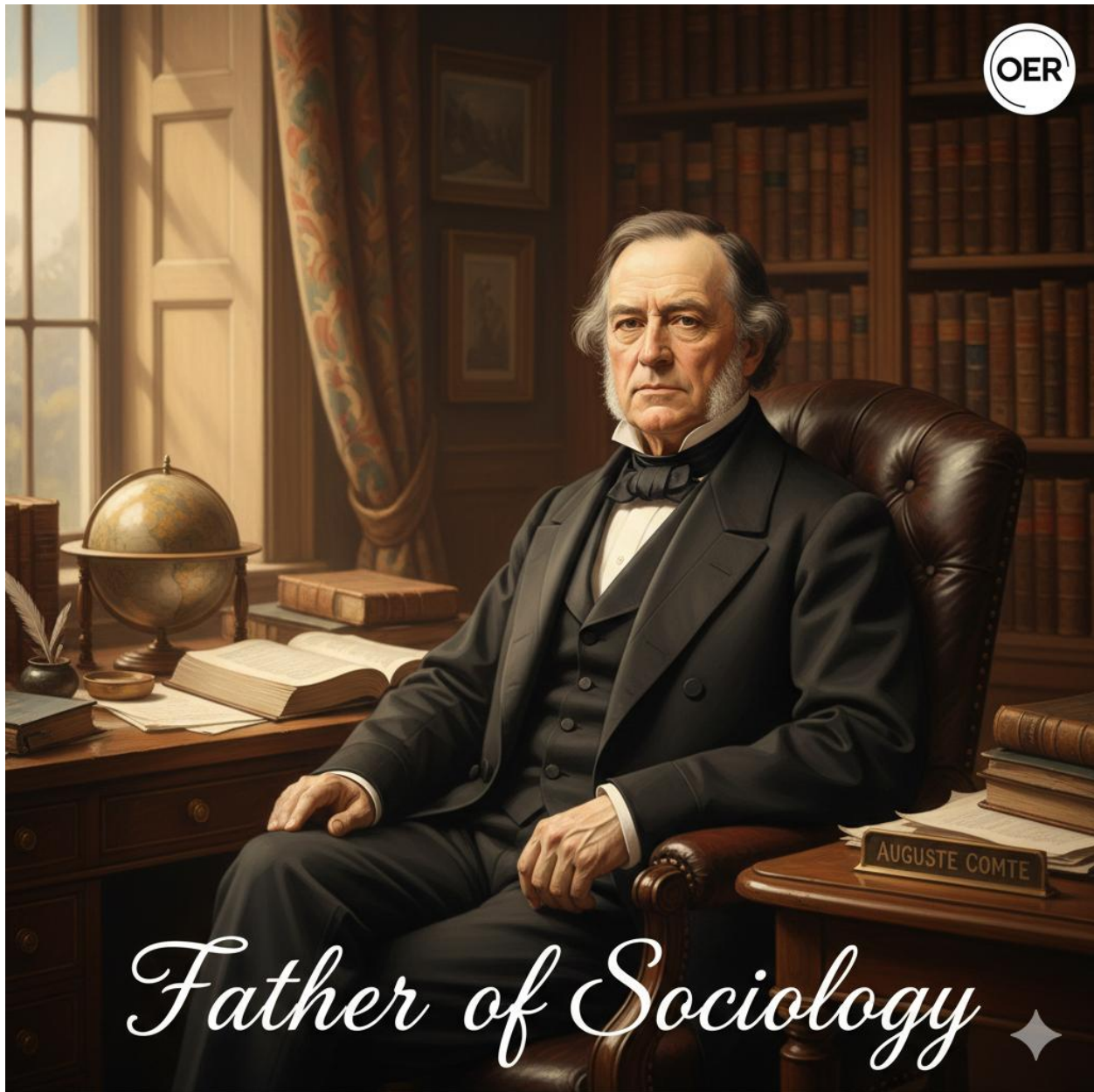


Image of Auguste Comte, often regarded as the father of sociology. *Plate 1.2: Auguste Comte and the birth of sociology*

1.2.3 Debates on society and social order

Early debates about society centred on how communities could achieve **social order**, which refers to stability and predictability in social life. Philosophers questioned whether order was best maintained through laws, morality, or collective agreements. These debates influenced sociologists, who later developed theories to explain how institutions, norms, and values contribute to social stability. For example, Rousseau's idea of the social contract inspired later sociological discussions about the relationship between individuals and society.



Fill in the blank: Early debates about society centred on how communities could achieve _____, which refers to stability and predictability in social life.

Box 1.439: Philosophical Debates on Social Order

OER

Foundational Questions in Sociology

1. Laws & Authority

- Hobbes: Leviathan, order from authority
- Plato: Philosopher-kings, rational order
- Legal Positivism: Rules enforced by state

2. Morality & Ethics

- Aristotle: Virtue ethics, moral community
- Kant:
- Utilitarianism: Greatest good for greatest number

3. Social Contract

- Locke: Consent of the governed, rights
- Rawls: Justice as Will, collective freedom, social cooperation

Overall Impact

This text box outlines central philosophical debates on the nature and basis of social order, exploring how morality and cements form the foundation for stable and just societies. These historical discussions are sociological theories of social cohesion and governance.

OER Text Box Philosophical Debates Social O666 at 1:55:00 AM WAT

Box 1.2: Selected philosophical debates on social order

Pilot questions 1.2

1. Which group of thinkers provided the earliest ideas that influenced sociology? a) Scientists b) Philosophers c) Politicians d) Economists
2. The transition from philosophy to sociology was marked by a shift towards: a) Abstract speculation b) Empirical evidence c) Cultural beliefs d) Everyday explanations



3. Who is often regarded as the father of sociology? a) Rousseau b) Montesquieu c) Auguste Comte d) Aristotle
4. Which concept refers to stability and predictability in social life? a) Social change b) Social order c) Social contract d) Social interaction
5. Fill in the blank: Rousseau's idea of the _____ inspired later sociological discussions about the relationship between individuals and society.

1.3 Classical Foundations of Sociological Theory

1.3.1 Contributions of Comte and Spencer

Auguste Comte is often regarded as the father of sociology. He introduced the term “sociology” and emphasised the use of scientific methods to study society. His idea of **positivism** refers to the belief that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena and empirical evidence. Comte argued that society progresses through stages, from theological to metaphysical, and finally to the scientific stage.

Herbert Spencer, on the other hand, applied evolutionary principles to society. He introduced the concept of **social Darwinism**, which suggested that societies evolve and adapt much like biological organisms. Spencer believed that social institutions function to maintain stability and survival, and he emphasised the importance of gradual social change rather than revolutionary upheaval.

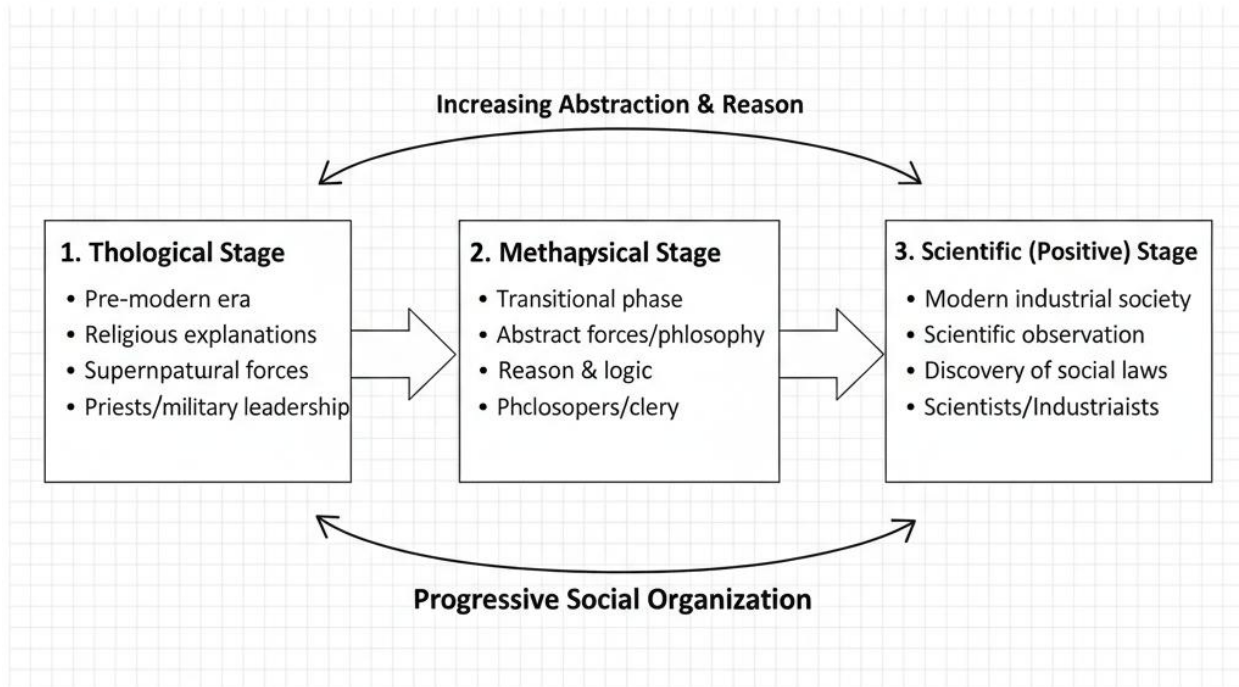
Fill in the blank: Auguste Comte introduced the term _____ and emphasised the use of scientific methods to study society.



Box 1.440: Comte's Law's a Three Stages: Societal Evolution According Auguste Comte



A Theory of Intellectual & Social Development



Overall Impact:

This diagram illustrates Comte's foundational theory of societal evolution, moving from religious to scientific understandings of the world. He argued progress through these stages, leading to more rational governance and social order. Understanding this "Law", understanding this crucial for grasping early sociology thought and the emphasis on scientific inquiry.

OER Diagram Comte Law of Three Stages Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:56:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing Comte's three stages of societal development: theological, metaphysical, scientific. *Figure 1.3: Comte's law of three stages*

1.3.2 Contributions of Durkheim and Weber

Émile Durkheim focused on the importance of social facts, which are external and constraining forces that shape individual behaviour. He studied phenomena such as religion, education, and suicide to demonstrate how social structures influence personal actions. Durkheim emphasised the role of collective conscience in maintaining social order.

Max Weber introduced the concept of **verstehen**, meaning interpretive understanding. He argued that sociologists must understand the meanings individuals attach to their actions. Weber also analysed bureaucracy, authority, and rationalisation, showing how modern societies become

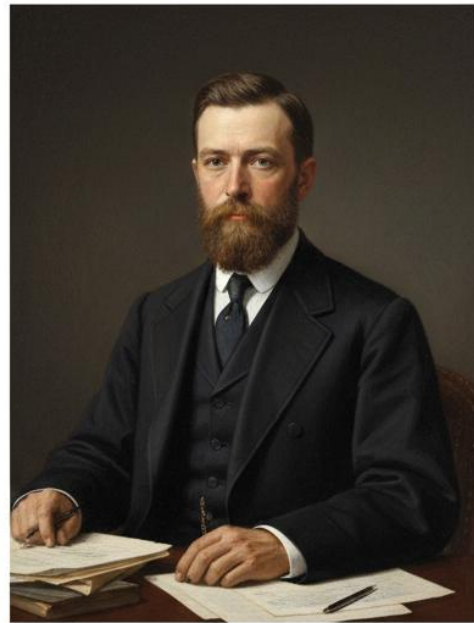


increasingly organised and rule-bound. His work highlighted the importance of values and culture in shaping social behaviour.

Fill in the blank: Max Weber introduced the concept of _____, meaning interpretive understanding of social action.



Émile Durkheim
Structural Functionalism



Max Weber
Interpretive Sociology /
Bureaucracy

OER Image Durkheim Weber Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2666 at 1:57:00 AM WAT

Image of Durkheim and Weber side by side, representing their contributions to sociology. *Plate 1.3: Durkheim and Weber as classical sociological thinkers*

1.3.3 Parsons and the development of grand theories

Talcott Parsons advanced sociology by developing **grand theories**, which are broad frameworks that attempt to explain large-scale social systems. His structural-functional approach



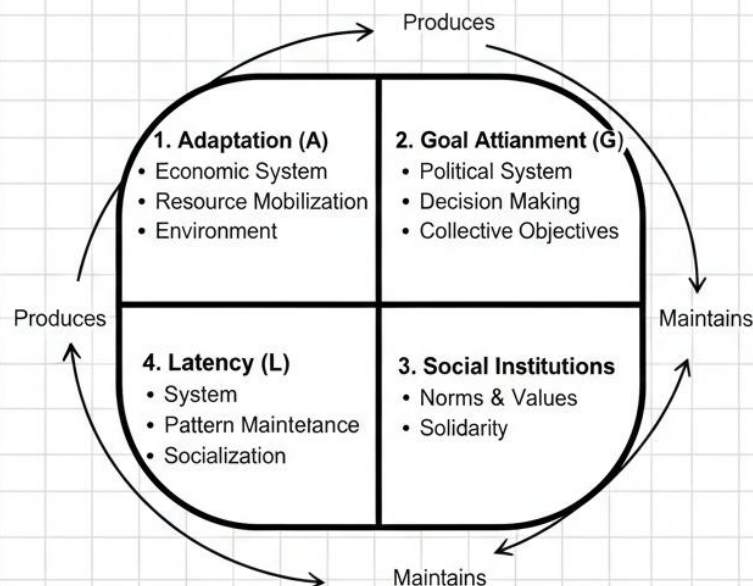
emphasised that society is made up of interrelated parts, each serving a function to maintain stability. Parsons introduced the **AGIL schema**, which identifies four functional imperatives for any social system: Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency.

Parsons' work provided a systematic way of analysing how institutions such as family, education, and religion contribute to the functioning of society. Although criticised for being overly abstract, his theories remain influential in understanding social order and institutional interdependence.

Fill in the blank: Parsons introduced the _____ schema, which identifies four functional imperatives for any social system.

Box 1.441: Parsons' AGIL Schema: Functions of Social Systems

A Structural-Functionalist Model



Overall Impact

This text box explains Talcott Parsons' AGIL schema, a grand theory in structural functionalism. It outlines functional prerequisites that any social system must meet to maintain stability and equilibrium. This analytical framework, while criticized for oversimplifying the complexity and functionalist bias, remains influential in sociology for understanding basic requisites for social order and system persistence globally.

Box 1.3: Parsons' AGIL schema explained



Pilot questions 1.3

1. Who is regarded as the father of sociology? a) Spencer b) Comte c) Durkheim d) Weber
2. Which concept refers to the belief that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena? a) Verstehen b) Positivism c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation
3. Durkheim emphasised the role of _____ in maintaining social order. a) Bureaucracy b) Collective conscience c) Rationalisation d) Evolution
4. Which sociologist introduced the concept of interpretive understanding? a) Comte b) Spencer c) Weber d) Parsons
5. Parsons' AGIL schema identifies four functional imperatives. Which of the following is NOT one of them? a) Adaptation b) Goal attainment c) Integration d) Legislation

1.4 Evolution into Contemporary Perspectives

1.4.1 Continuities and departures from classical theories

Contemporary sociological perspectives build upon the foundations laid by classical theorists, yet they also depart from them in significant ways. While Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons emphasised stability, order, and structure, modern theories often highlight diversity, inequality, and change. For example, functionalism continues to stress the importance of institutions, but conflict theory challenges this by focusing on power struggles and social divisions. These continuities and departures demonstrate how sociology evolves to remain relevant to changing societies.

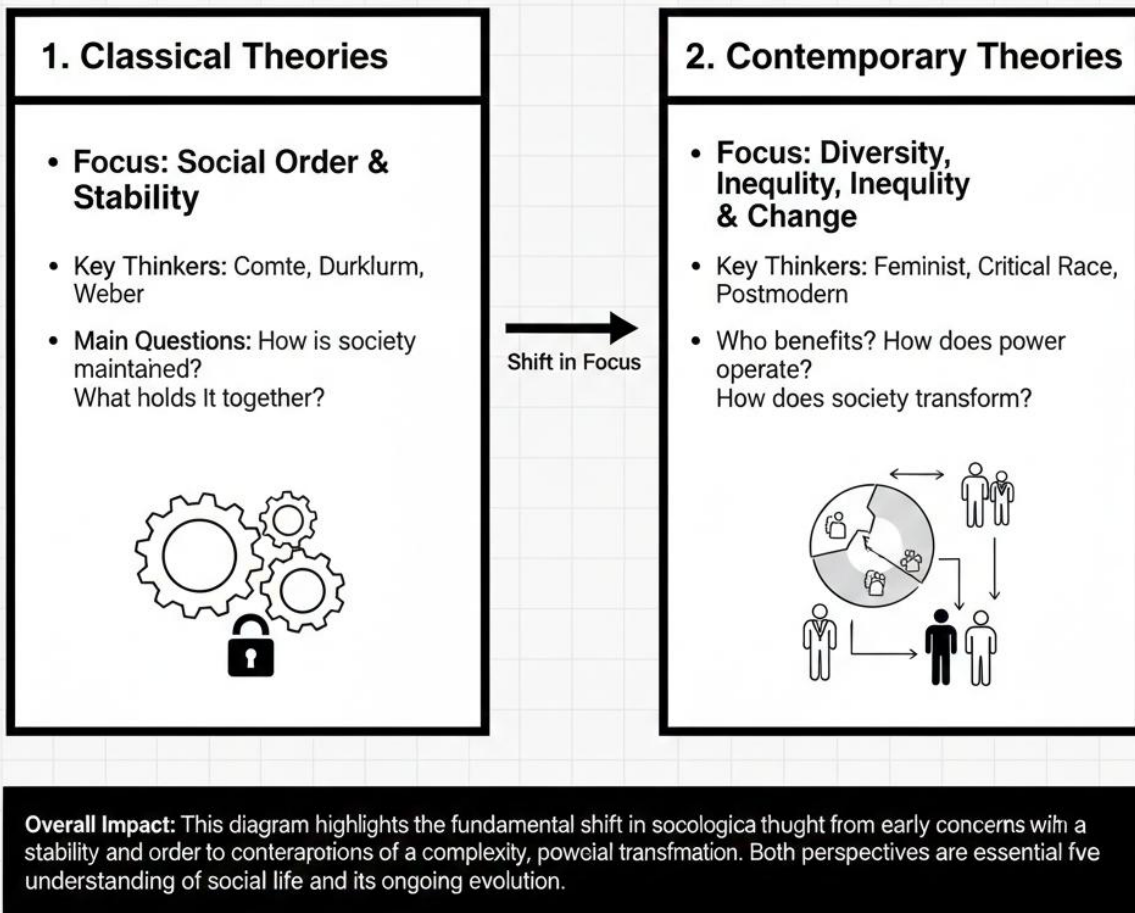
Fill in the blank: While classical theorists emphasised stability and order, modern theories often highlight _____ and change.



Box 1.442: Classical vs. Contemporary Sociological Theory

Divergent Lenses for Analyzing Society

OER



OER Diagram Classical vs Contemporary Sociological Theory
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram comparing classical and contemporary perspectives. *Figure 1.4: Continuities and departures in sociological theory*

1.4.2 Emergence of functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism

Functionalism views society as a system of interdependent parts working together to maintain stability. It emphasises institutions such as family, education, and religion. **Conflict theory**, influenced by Marx, argues that society is characterised by inequality and competition for resources. It highlights how power and wealth are distributed unequally. **Symbolic interactionism** focuses on everyday interactions and the meanings individuals attach to them. It shows how social reality is constructed through communication and shared symbols.



Fill in the blank: Conflict theory argues that society is characterised by _____ and competition for resources.

Box 1.443: Major Sociological Theories: Lense for Analying Society

OER

Functionalism, Conflict, Symbolic Interactionism

1. Functionalism

- **Defintion:** Society is a system arcs innerceted parts working to maintain stability.
- **Key Concepts:** Social order, equilibrium, knowledge (manifest) & socializes youth, latent
- **Example:** Education provides geonneed & scalizes youth, latent

2. Conflict Theory

- **Defintion:** Society is an arena of inequality generating conflict & change
- Power, inequity, inequality, social class, dominance
- **Example:** Unquale access of in resources in education perrpecutetes class divisions

3. Symbolic Interactionism

- **Society:** Society is an product of everyday interactions & shared meanings
- **Symbbs.** Symbols, meaning, interaction, self
- **Example:** Student-techer interactions shape self-identity & academic performance

Overall Impact:

This text box provides the concise overview the thre foundactiogoal theories, highlgligging distinct perspectimas. Understning paradigms is cruciul for critily analiyns, from macro-level structures to micro-level-lyel interactions, and for developing a comprehensive understading of society.

OER Text Box

Socioligoical Theories

Created: February 10, 2666 at 1:59:00 AI AM WAT

Box 1.4: Key features of functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism

1.4.3 The role of theory in addressing contemporary social problems

Sociological theories are not only academic exercises, they are practical tools for analysing and addressing contemporary social problems. Functionalism helps explain how institutions adapt to maintain order, conflict theory sheds light on issues of inequality and injustice, and symbolic interactionism provides insights into identity, culture, and everyday life. By applying these



perspectives, sociologists can evaluate policies, design interventions, and contribute to solutions for challenges such as poverty, crime, and discrimination.

Fill in the blank: Sociological theories are practical tools for analysing and addressing _____ social problems.



Image of a diverse community working together to solve social issues. *Plate 1.4: Applying sociological theories to contemporary problems*

Pilot questions 1.4



1. Which of the following is a continuity from classical to contemporary sociological theories? a) Emphasis on diversity b) Focus on institutions c) Highlighting inequality d) Stressing individual choice
2. Which theory views society as a system of interdependent parts? a) Conflict theory b) Functionalism c) Symbolic interactionism d) Exchange theory
3. Conflict theory highlights issues of _____ and injustice. a) Stability b) Inequality c) Order d) Rationalisation
4. Which theory focuses on everyday interactions and meanings? a) Functionalism b) Conflict theory c) Symbolic interactionism d) Structuralism
5. Fill in the blank: By applying sociological perspectives, sociologists can evaluate _____, design interventions, and contribute to solutions for social challenges.

Series summary

This Series has introduced you to the foundations and evolution of sociological theory, highlighting its purpose as a scientific tool for explaining social order and social events. We began by examining the meaning and nature of sociological theory, distinguishing it from everyday explanations and emphasising its scientific character. Then we explored the philosophical roots of sociological thought, showing how early philosophers influenced debates about society and order. Following that, we studied the classical foundations of sociology through the contributions of Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons. Finally, we considered how these classical ideas evolved into contemporary perspectives such as functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism, and how these theories can be applied to address modern social problems.

By completing this Series, you should now be able to define sociological theory and scientific theory, explain the philosophical influences on sociology, analyse the contributions of classical thinkers, describe Parsons' grand theories, and evaluate the continuities and departures that shaped contemporary perspectives. These achievements directly align with the Series Learning Outcomes, ensuring that you have gained both historical grounding and practical insight into the role of theory in sociology.

Glossary of terms

AGIL schema: A framework developed by Talcott Parsons identifying four functional imperatives of any social system: Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency.

Collective conscience: A concept introduced by Émile Durkheim referring to the shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society and maintain social order.

Conflict theory: A sociological perspective that emphasises inequality, competition for resources, and power struggles as central features of society.



Functionalism: A perspective that views society as a system of interdependent parts working together to maintain stability and social order.

Philosophers: Thinkers concerned with fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, and society, whose ideas influenced the development of sociology.

Positivism: A belief introduced by Auguste Comte that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena and empirical evidence rather than speculation.

Scientific theory: A structured explanation of phenomena that is based on evidence, logical consistency, and testability.

Social Darwinism: A concept introduced by Herbert Spencer suggesting that societies evolve and adapt in ways similar to biological organisms.

Social facts: External and constraining forces identified by Durkheim that shape individual behaviour, such as laws, norms, and institutions.

Social order: The organised and predictable patterns of social life that provide stability within a society.

Sociological theory: A systematic framework for explaining social behaviour, institutions, and structures, distinct from everyday explanations.

Symbolic interactionism: A perspective that focuses on everyday interactions and the meanings individuals attach to them, showing how social reality is constructed through communication and shared symbols.

Verstehen: A concept introduced by Max Weber meaning interpretive understanding, which requires sociologists to grasp the meanings individuals attach to their actions.

Concept check questions 1

Objective questions

1. Which of the following best defines a sociological theory? a) A personal opinion b) A systematic framework for explaining social behaviour c) A cultural belief d) A random guess (Linked to SLO 1.1)
2. Who is regarded as the father of sociology? a) Spencer b) Comte c) Durkheim d) Weber (Linked to SLO 1.4)
3. Which concept introduced by Weber means interpretive understanding? a) Positivism b) Verstehen c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation (Linked to SLO 1.4)
4. Parsons' AGIL schema identifies four functional imperatives. Which of the following is NOT one of them? a) Adaptation b) Goal attainment c) Integration d) Legislation (Linked to SLO 1.4)

Short-answer questions

5. Define positivism and explain its relevance to sociology. (Linked to SLO 1.1)



6. Briefly describe the difference between everyday explanations and sociological theory. (Linked to SLO 1.2)

7. What is meant by the term “social facts” as introduced by Durkheim? (Linked to SLO 1.4)

Long-answer questions

8. Analyse the contributions of Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, and Weber to the foundations of sociology. (Linked to SLO 1.4)

9. Evaluate how classical sociological theories evolved into contemporary perspectives such as functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. (Linked to SLO 1.5)

Answers to concept check questions 1

Objective questions

1. b) A systematic framework for explaining social behaviour
2. b) Comte
3. b) Verstehen
4. d) Legislation

Short-answer questions

5. Positivism is the belief that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena and empirical evidence. It is relevant to sociology because it emphasises scientific methods in studying society.

6. Everyday explanations rely on personal opinions or cultural beliefs, while sociological theory is grounded in systematic observation and scientific reasoning.

7. Social facts are external and constraining forces, such as laws, norms, and institutions, that shape individual behaviour.

Long-answer questions

8. *Basic response:* Comte introduced sociology and positivism, Spencer applied evolutionary principles through social Darwinism, Durkheim emphasised social facts and collective conscience, and Weber introduced verstehen and analysed bureaucracy and rationalisation. *Value-added response:* Beyond these basics, learners may highlight how Comte’s law of three stages influenced sociological progress, Spencer’s evolutionary approach shaped debates on gradual change, Durkheim’s empirical studies established sociology as a science, and Weber’s focus on culture and values broadened sociological analysis.

9. *Basic response:* Classical theories emphasised order and structure, while contemporary perspectives such as functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism evolved to address issues of inequality, diversity, and everyday interactions. *Value-added response:* Outstanding learners may further evaluate how functionalism retained classical emphasis on institutions, conflict theory challenged structural stability by focusing on power and inequality,



and symbolic interactionism shifted attention to micro-level interactions, thereby expanding sociology's scope to contemporary social problems.

Answers to Pilot Questions 1

Part 1.1 The Meaning and Nature of Sociological Theory

1. b) A systematic explanation based on evidence
2. b) Anecdotal evidence
3. b) Social order
4. b) Functionalism
5. Patterns

Part 1.2 Philosophical Roots of Sociological Thought

1. b) Philosophers
2. b) Empirical evidence
3. c) Auguste Comte
4. b) Social order
5. Social contract

Part 1.3 Classical Foundations of Sociological Theory

1. b) Comte
2. b) Positivism
3. b) Collective conscience
4. c) Weber
5. d) Legislation

Part 1.4 Evolution into Contemporary Perspectives

1. b) Focus on institutions
2. b) Functionalism
3. b) Inequality
4. c) Symbolic interactionism
5. Policies



References and Attributions 1

Textual sources

- Course content adapted from *SOC 401: Contemporary Sociological Theories* document provided by the institution.
- Key concepts and definitions (e.g., theory, scientific theory, social facts, positivism, verstehen, AGIL schema) were explained within the Series content based on classical sociological literature.

- **Course code: SOC 401**
- **Course title: Contemporary Sociological Theories**
- **Course credit load: 3**

SERIES 2: Classical Thinkers and Grand Theories

Series outline

This Series will be organised into **four main Parts**, each with sub-Parts to provide clarity and depth.

Suggested Parts and Sub-Parts

2.1 Auguste Comte and the Birth of Sociology

- 2.1.1 The concept of positivism
- 2.1.2 The law of three stages
- 2.1.3 Comte's vision of sociology as a science

2.2 Herbert Spencer and Evolutionary Sociology

- 2.2.1 Social Darwinism and society as an organism
- 2.2.2 Spencer's views on gradual social change
- 2.2.3 Critiques of Spencer's evolutionary approach

2.3 Émile Durkheim and Social Facts



- 2.3.1 The concept of social facts
- 2.3.2 Collective conscience and social order
- 2.3.3 Durkheim's studies on religion and suicide

2.4 Max Weber and Parsons: Grand Theories and Modern Foundations

- 2.4.1 Weber's concept of verstehen and rationalisation
- 2.4.2 Bureaucracy and authority in modern society
- 2.4.3 Parsons' structural-functionalism and the AGIL schema

Introduction

In the last Series, we explored the foundations and evolution of sociological theory, tracing its philosophical roots and examining how classical ideas developed into contemporary perspectives. Building on that foundation, this Series turns our attention to the classical thinkers themselves and the grand theories they propounded. These thinkers provided the intellectual scaffolding upon which sociology was established, and their contributions remain central to the discipline today.

The aim of this Series is to examine the major contributions of classical sociological thinkers and to analyse the grand theories they developed. By doing so, you will gain a deeper appreciation of how their ideas shaped the discipline and continue to influence sociological thought and practice.

We shall commence this Series by studying Auguste Comte and his vision of sociology as a science, focusing on positivism and the law of three stages. Next, we will move on to Herbert Spencer, who applied evolutionary principles to society and introduced social Darwinism. Following that, we will consider Émile Durkheim's emphasis on social facts, collective conscience, and his empirical studies of religion and suicide. Finally, we will wrap up by examining Max Weber's interpretive approach and Parsons' structural-functionalism, including the AGIL schema, to show how their grand theories provided modern foundations for sociology.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 2.1** define Comte's concept of positivism and explain the law of three stages,
- **SLO 2.2** analyse Spencer's application of evolutionary principles to society and evaluate the idea of social Darwinism,
- **SLO 2.3** describe Durkheim's concept of social facts and explain the role of collective conscience in maintaining social order,
- **SLO 2.4** examine Weber's interpretive approach through verstehen and rationalisation,
- **SLO 2.5** evaluate Parsons' structural-functionalism and apply the AGIL schema to the analysis of social systems.



2.1 Auguste Comte and the Birth of Sociology

2.1.1 The concept of positivism

Positivism is the belief that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena and empirical evidence rather than speculation or metaphysical ideas. Auguste Comte introduced this concept to emphasise that sociology must adopt scientific methods similar to those used in the natural sciences. By grounding knowledge in observation, sociology could provide reliable explanations of social behaviour and institutions.

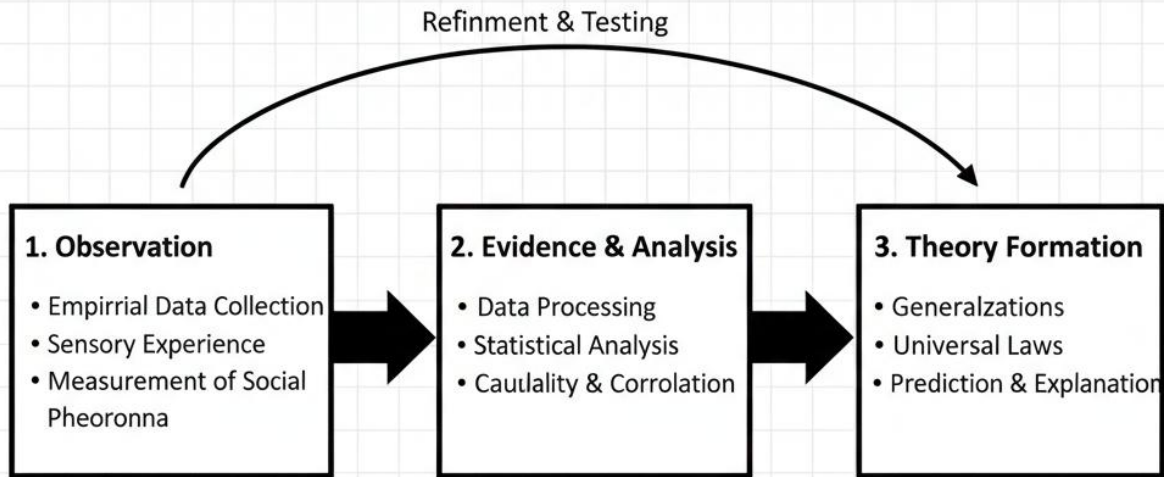
Fill in the blank: _____ is the belief that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena and empirical evidence.



Box 1.444: Positivism in Sociology: The Scientific Method for Social Science



From Empirical Observation to Theoretical Understanding



Overall Impact:

This diagram illustrates the positivist approach in sociology, emphasizing the use of scientific methods to study social life. It follows a linear progression from empirical observation to the development of testable theories, foundational to early sociological thought.

OER Diagram Positivism Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing the relationship between observation, evidence, and theory in positivism.

Figure 2.1: Positivism as the foundation of sociology

2.1.2 The law of three stages

Comte proposed the **law of three stages**, which explains the progression of human thought and society. According to this law, societies evolve through three stages:

- The **theological stage**, where phenomena are explained through religious beliefs and supernatural forces.
- The **metaphysical stage**, where abstract reasoning and philosophical speculation dominate.



- The **scientific stage**, where explanations are based on empirical observation and scientific reasoning.

This progression reflects Comte's belief that sociology, as a science, represents the highest stage of intellectual development.

Fill in the blank: According to Comte, societies evolve through the theological, metaphysical, and _____ stages.

Box 1.445: Comte's Law of Three Stages of Societal Development



A Summary of Auguste Comte's Theory of Evolution.

1. Theological Stage

- Early human history supernatural forces.
- Social order through religious authority
- Social order based religious authority
- Examples: Ancient kings
- Examples: mythologies, divine right of kings

2. Metaphysical Stage

- Transitional phase
- Abstract forces/philosophy supernatural
- Questioning of traditional traditional authority
- Examples: Enlightenment, philosophical speculation

3. Scientific (Positive) Stage

- Modern industrial society
- Scientific observation & laws
- Rational thought, empirical evidence
- Examples: Sociology, policy
- Example, physics, evidence-based policy

Overall Impact:

This text box summarizes Auguste Comte's foundational law of three stages, a theory of human intellectual evolution. It describes a progression from religious explanation to to thought, of scientific understanding. This framework crucial for sociology in the development of positivism.

OER Text Box Comte Three Stages Sociology Created: Today 10, 2022 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 2.1: Comte's law of three stages summarised

2.1.3 Comte's vision of sociology as a science



Comte envisioned **sociology** as the “queen of the sciences,” integrating insights from other disciplines to explain social phenomena. He argued that sociology should not only study society but also guide social reform. By applying scientific principles, sociology could help improve social order and progress. This vision positioned sociology as both a theoretical and practical discipline, capable of addressing the challenges of modern society.

Fill in the blank: Comte envisioned sociology as the _____ of the sciences, integrating insights from other disciplines.

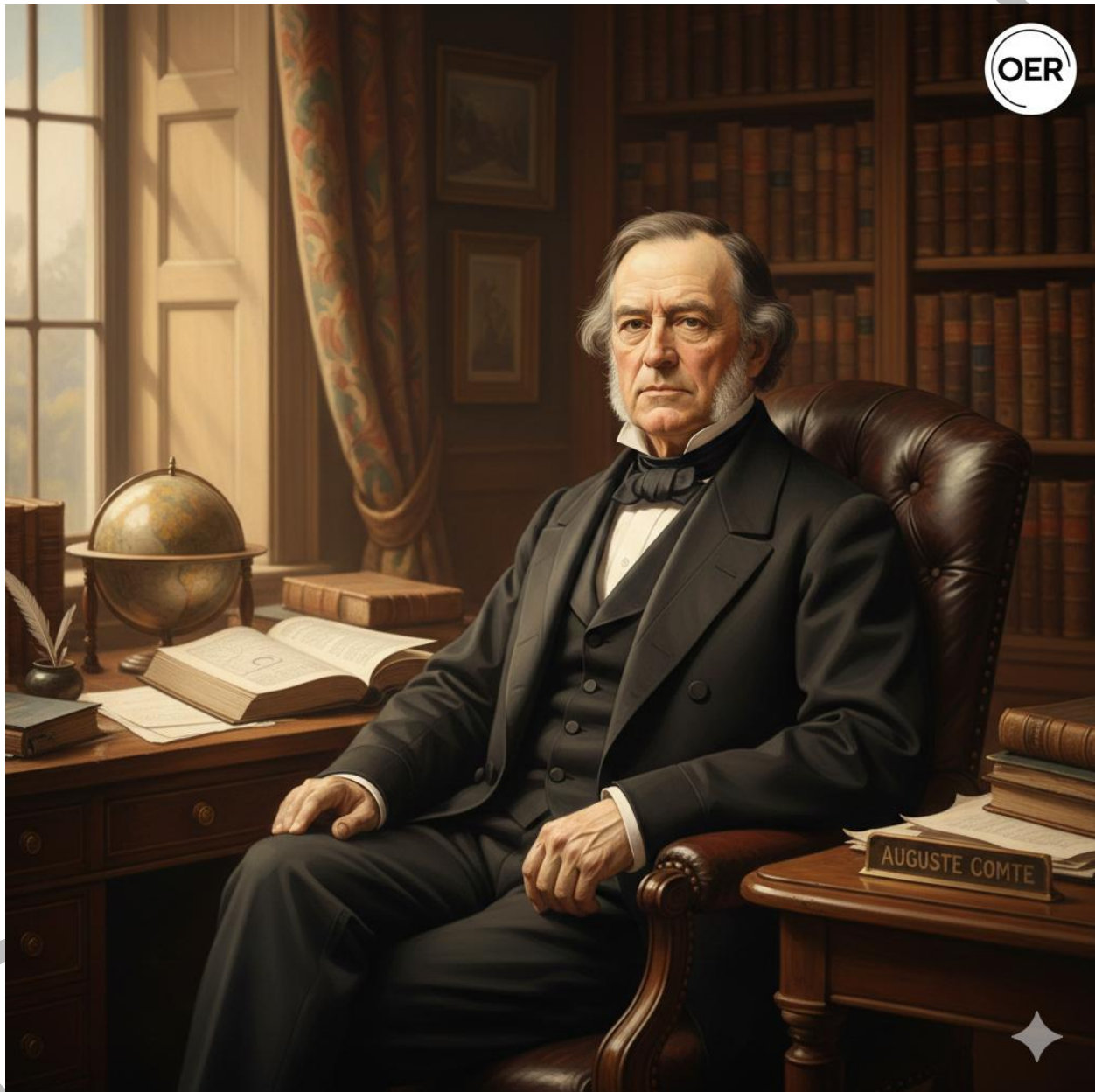


Image of Auguste Comte with his published works. *Plate 2.1: Auguste Comte and his vision of sociology*



Pilot questions 2.1

1. Which concept introduced by Comte emphasises that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena? a) Verstehen b) Positivism c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation
2. According to Comte's law of three stages, which stage is characterised by reliance on supernatural explanations? a) Scientific stage b) Metaphysical stage c) Theological stage d) Rational stage
3. Which stage in Comte's law of three stages is dominated by abstract reasoning and speculation? a) Scientific stage b) Metaphysical stage c) Theological stage d) Empirical stage
4. Comte envisioned sociology as the _____ of the sciences. a) servant b) queen c) foundation d) branch
5. Fill in the blank: By applying scientific principles, sociology could help improve _____ and progress.

2.2 Herbert Spencer and Evolutionary Sociology

2.2.1 Social Darwinism and society as an organism

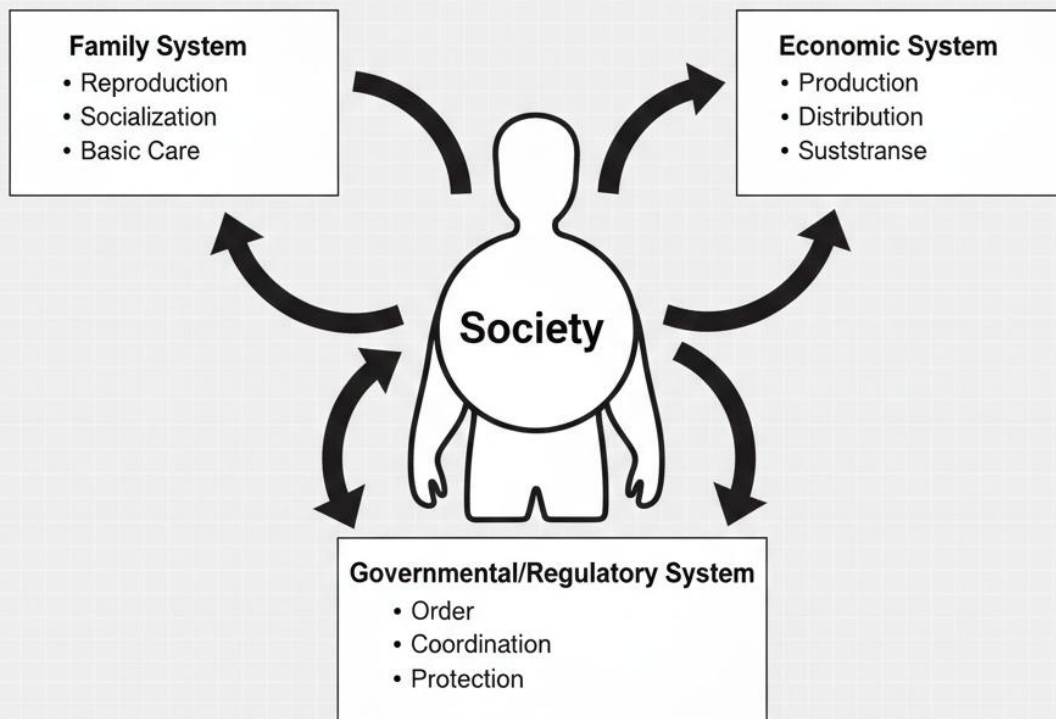
Social Darwinism is the application of evolutionary principles to society, suggesting that social institutions and structures evolve in ways similar to biological organisms. Herbert Spencer argued that societies adapt and survive through competition, with stronger institutions prevailing over weaker ones. He compared society to a living organism, where different parts such as family, economy, and government function together to maintain survival and stability.

Fill in the blank: Herbert Spencer compared society to a _____, where different parts function together to maintain survival.



Box 1.446: Herbert Spencer's Organic Analogy: Society as an Organism

An Interconnected Functional System



Overall Impact:

This diagram illustrates Herbert Spencer's organic analogy, comparing society to a biological organism. It highlights how different social institutions – like a family, economy, and government – function as interconnected organs specialized to maintain the system's health, stability, and survival. This functionalist perspective was foundational to early sociology.

OER Diagram Herbert Spencer Organic Analogy Sociology Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing society as an organism with interconnected institutions. *Figure 2.2: Society as an organism in Spencer's theory*

2.2.2 Spencer's views on gradual social change

Spencer believed that social change should occur gradually rather than through sudden revolutions. He argued that societies evolve naturally over time, adapting to new conditions and challenges. According to him, attempts to force rapid change could disrupt the balance of society and lead to instability. His emphasis on gradualism reflected his broader evolutionary outlook, where progress was seen as a slow but steady process.

Fill in the blank: Spencer argued that societies evolve naturally over time and that social change should occur _____.



Box 1.447: Herbert Spencer's Principle of Gradual Social Change

An Intersecting Function of Society



Evolutionary Development of Society

1. The Principle of Endual Evolution

- Society evolves like biological organisms.
- Simple to complex forms. progression
- Undirected, natural
- Adaption of environment
- Focus to stability & order
- Examples: Ancient authority

2. Examples of Gradual Change Change

- Early, simple tribal societies
- Development to markets/trade
- Emergence of specialized institutions (e.g., law, education)
- Technological innovation (slow, incremental over time)

Overall Impact:

This text box summarizes Auguste Comte's foundational law of three stages, a theory of slow to fast, incremental organisms. He argued that slow societies to grow, organic, societies adapt complex, to complex structured to ensure stability the functions, similar to biology in early sociology influences and evolutionary theories and all development.

OER Diagram Herbert Spencer Organic Analogy Sociology Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 2.2: Spencer's principle of gradual social change

2.2.3 Critiques of Spencer's evolutionary approach

Spencer's ideas were influential but also controversial. Critics argue that **social Darwinism** oversimplifies complex social processes and can be used to justify inequality. By suggesting that stronger institutions naturally prevail, Spencer's theory risks overlooking the role of deliberate social reform and collective action. Modern sociologists caution against applying biological analogies too rigidly to society, noting that human communities are shaped by culture, values, and cooperation as much as competition.

Fill in the blank: Critics argue that Spencer's theory of social Darwinism risks justifying





Classroom Debate's Spolutratory Socology

OER: Sociology in Action

Created: Tuebuay 10, 2666 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Image of a classroom debate on Spencer's evolutionary sociology. *Plate 2.2: Debating Spencer's evolutionary approach*

Pilot questions 2.2

1. Herbert Spencer compared society to which of the following? a) A machine b) An organism c) A contract d) A network
2. Which concept refers to the application of evolutionary principles to society? a) Positivism b) Verstehen c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation
3. Spencer argued that social change should occur: a) Suddenly b) Gradually c) Through revolution d) By force



4. Critics argue that Spencer's theory risks justifying: a) Equality b) Inequality c) Cooperation d) Reform
5. Fill in the blank: Spencer believed that societies evolve naturally over time, adapting to new _____ and challenges.

2.3 Émile Durkheim and Social Facts

2.3.1 The concept of social facts

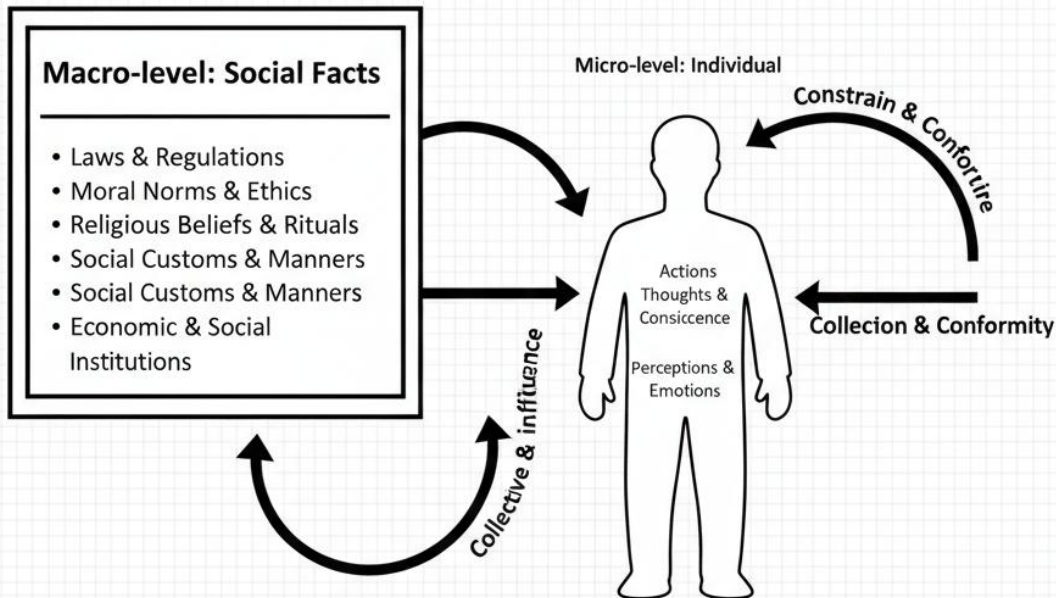
Social facts are external and constraining forces that shape individual behaviour. Émile Durkheim introduced this concept to demonstrate that society exerts influence over individuals through norms, laws, customs, and institutions. Social facts exist outside the individual yet guide and limit their actions, making them essential for understanding how societies function.

Fill in the blank: Durkheim described _____ as external and constraining forces that shape individual behaviour.



Box 1.448: Durkheim's Social Facts: Collective Influence on Individuals

Émile Durkheim: the Study of Social Phenomena



Overall Impact:

This diagram illustrates Émile Durkheim's concept social facts, highlighting how external social structures and norms shape and constrain individual behavior and consciousness. It is foundational for understanding social order and stability.

OER Diagram Durkheim Social Facts Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing examples of social facts such as laws, norms, and institutions. *Figure 2.3: Social facts as forces shaping behaviour*

2.3.2 Collective conscience and social order

Durkheim emphasised the importance of the **collective conscience**, which refers to the shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society. This collective conscience provides cohesion and ensures social order by guiding behaviour and reinforcing common norms. Without it, societies risk fragmentation and instability. Durkheim argued that the strength of the collective conscience varies across societies, being stronger in traditional communities and weaker in modern, individualistic ones.



Fill in the blank: The _____ conscience refers to the shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society.

OER

Box 1.449: Durkheim's Collective Conscience

The Shared Foundation of Social Solidarity

1. Key Features

- Shared Beliefs & Values
- Moral Attitudes & Sentiments
- Common Traditions & Rituals
- Strong Emotional Hold
- External & Coercive Power

2. Functions & Impact

- Social Solidarity & Cohesion
- Provides Moral Guidance
- Reinforces Conformity
- Punishment for Deviance (e.g., crime)
- Maintains Social Order

Overall Impact

This text box summarizes Émile Durkheim's concept of the collective conscience, the totality of shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society. It is a fundamental concept, explaining how societies maintain cohesion and stability through shared understanding and social pressure.

OER Text Box | Durkheim Collective Conscience Sociology Created: Tuesday, 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 2.3: Features of the collective conscience

2.3.3 Durkheim's studies on religion and suicide

Durkheim conducted pioneering empirical studies to demonstrate the power of social facts. In his study of **religion**, he showed how rituals and beliefs reinforce social solidarity. In his famous work on **suicide**, he revealed that even seemingly personal acts are influenced by social factors such as integration and regulation. He identified different types of suicide, including egoistic,



altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic, each linked to social conditions. These studies established sociology as a scientific discipline capable of explaining complex social phenomena.

Fill in the blank: Durkheim's study of _____ revealed that even personal acts are influenced by social factors such as integration and regulation.

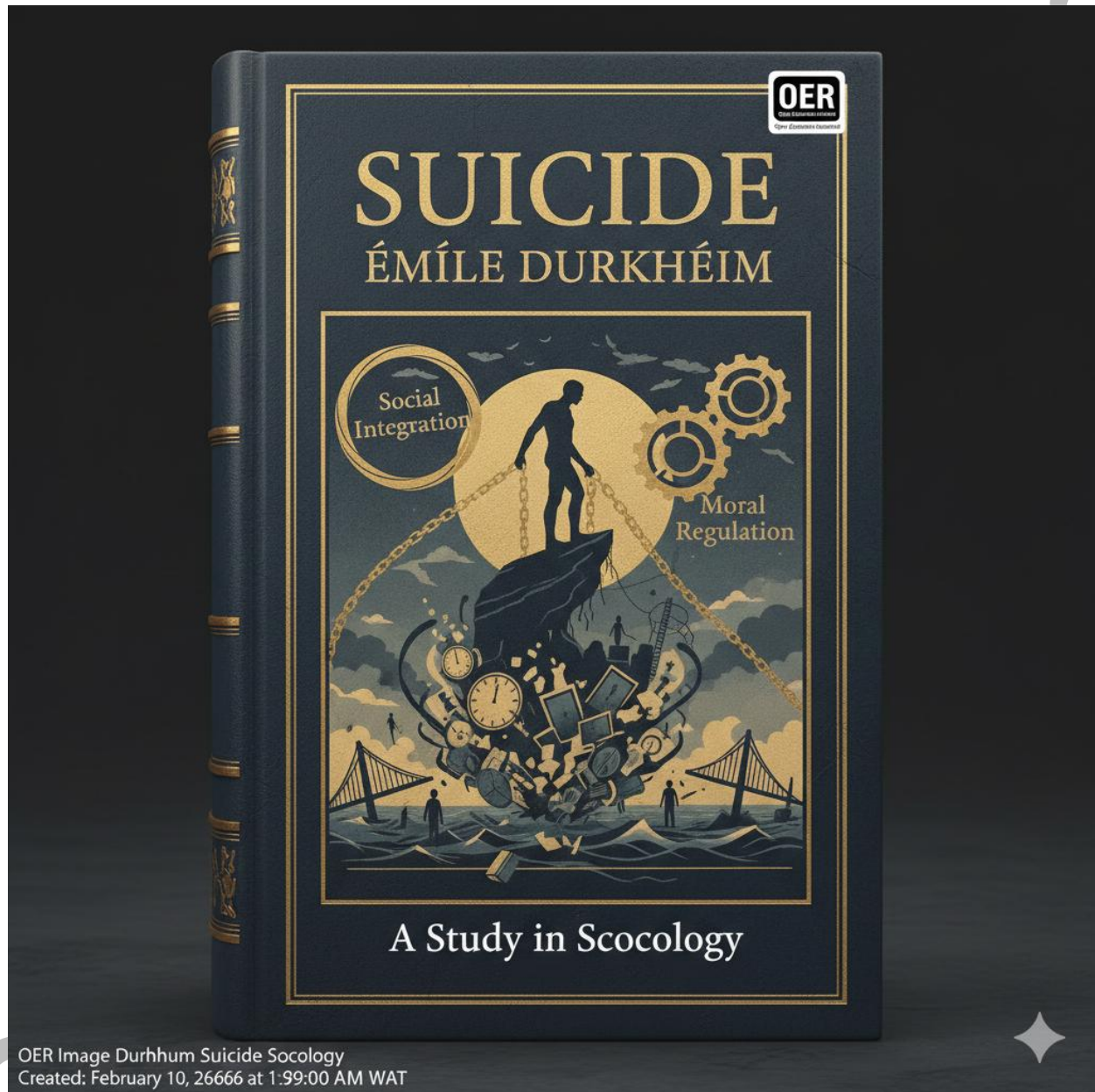


Image of Durkheim's book "Suicide" with symbolic representation of social factors. *Plate 2.3: Durkheim's study of suicide as a sociological phenomenon*

Pilot questions 2.3

1. What did Durkheim describe as external and constraining forces that shape behaviour? a) Social Darwinism b) Social facts c) Positivism d) Verstehen



2. Which concept refers to shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society? a) Rationalisation b) Collective conscience c) Bureaucracy d) Social contract
3. Durkheim's study of suicide demonstrated that personal acts are influenced by: a) Biological instincts b) Social factors c) Random chance d) Individual choice alone
4. Which type of suicide is linked to low social integration? a) Egoistic b) Altruistic c) Anomic d) Fatalistic
5. Fill in the blank: Durkheim's study of religion showed how rituals and beliefs reinforce _____.

2.4 Max Weber and Parsons: Grand Theories and Modern Foundations

2.4.1 Weber's concept of verstehen and rationalisation

Verstehen is a German term meaning interpretive understanding. Max Weber introduced this concept to emphasise that sociologists must grasp the meanings individuals attach to their actions. Rather than only observing behaviour, Weber argued that we must interpret the subjective motives behind it.

Weber also analysed **rationalisation**, which refers to the increasing reliance on rules, efficiency, and calculation in modern societies. He noted that rationalisation leads to the growth of bureaucracy, where authority is exercised through formal procedures and hierarchies. While rationalisation brings order and predictability, Weber warned that it could also trap individuals in what he called the "iron cage" of bureaucracy.

Fill in the blank: Weber's concept of _____ emphasises interpretive understanding of the meanings individuals attach to their actions.



Box 1.450: Weber's Key Concepts: Verstehen & Rationalization

Two Lenses for Understanding Modern Society



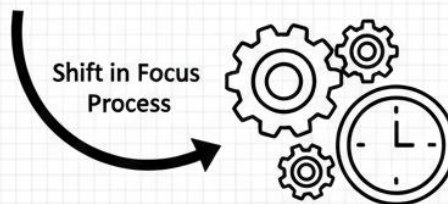
1. Verstehen (Understanding)

- Empathetic understanding
- Meaning behind 's actions
- Meaning behind social actions
- Subjective experiences
- Qualitative methods



2. Rationalization (Modernization)

- Rules & Procedures
- Efficiency & Calculability
- Bureaucracy
- Impersonal Systems



Overall Impact:

This diagram illustrates Émile Durkheim's concept of social facts, highlighting how external social structures affect individual social action, which becomes rationalized in modern society, in the "iron cage" of order and stability.

OER Diagram Durkheim Social Facts Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing Weber's concepts of verstehen and rationalisation. *Figure 2.4: Weber's interpretive and rational perspectives*

2.4.2 Bureaucracy and authority in modern society

Weber identified three types of **authority**: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. Traditional authority is based on customs and long-standing practices, charismatic authority arises from personal qualities of leaders, and rational-legal authority is grounded in formal rules and laws.

Weber argued that modern societies increasingly rely on rational-legal authority, particularly through bureaucratic organisations. Bureaucracy, according to Weber, is characterised by hierarchy, division of labour, and rule-based decision-making. While bureaucracy ensures efficiency and fairness, it can also become rigid and impersonal.



Fill in the blank: Weber identified three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and _____-legal.

Box 1.451: Weber's Three Types of Authority Sources of Legitimate Social Power

Traditional Authority

- Based on custom, history, and inherited status.
- Authority is legitimate because "it has always of that."
- Loyalty to the person, not and of office.
- Examples: Monarchies, tribal feudal systems

2. Charismatic Authority

- Based personal qualities, charm, and influence
- Leaders inspire devotion exceptional loyalty.
- Often emerges in times, cult of change
- Examples: Revolutionary figures, cult leaders, religious prophets

3. Rational-Legal Authority

- Based on rules, laws, and formal procedures.
- Authority tied office, not
- Power exercised through bureaucracy.
- Examples: Modern governments, corporations, legal systems

Overall Impact: This text summarizes Max Weber's foundational typology of legitimate social authority, explaining how power is legitimized and accepted in different societies. These ideal types provide a framework for analyzing historical and contemporary political systems and a shift toward rule-based authority in modern society.

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

OER Text Box Weber Three Types of Authority 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 2.4: Weber's three types of authority

2.4.3 Parsons' structural-functionalism and the AGIL schema

Structural-functionalism is a theoretical framework developed by Talcott Parsons, which views society as a system of interrelated parts working together to maintain stability. Parsons argued that each institution serves a function that contributes to the overall balance of society.

He introduced the **AGIL schema**, identifying four functional imperatives for any social system:

- **Adaptation:** securing resources and adjusting to the environment.



- **Goal attainment:** setting and achieving objectives.
- **Integration:** maintaining cohesion among different parts of society.
- **Latency:** preserving cultural patterns and values over time.

Parsons' grand theory provided a systematic way of analysing how institutions such as family, education, and religion contribute to social order.

Fill in the blank: Parsons' _____ schema identifies four functional imperatives for any social system: Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency.

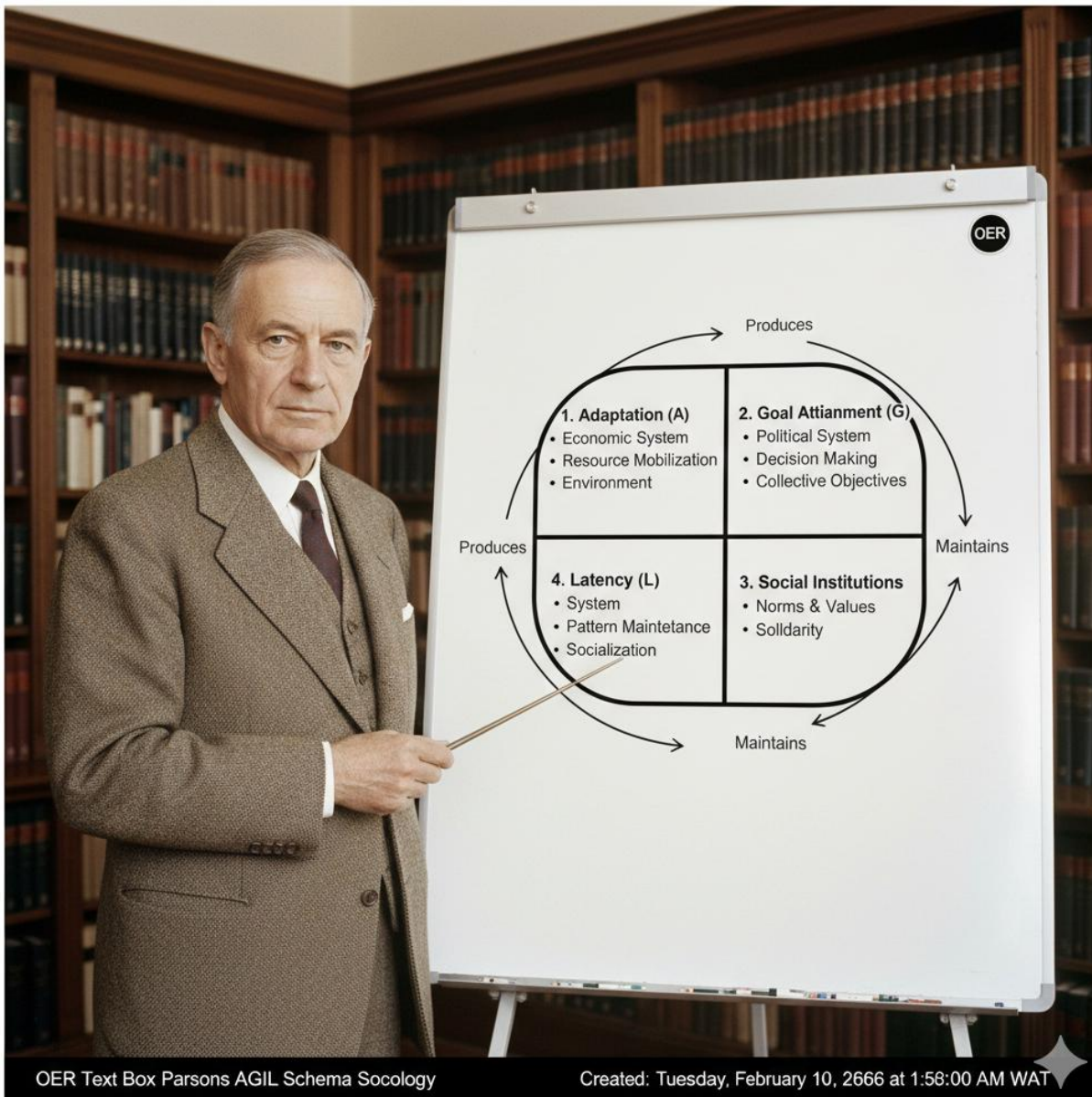


Image of Talcott Parsons with a diagram of the AGIL schema. *Plate 2.4: Parsons and the AGIL schema*



Pilot questions 2.4

1. Which concept introduced by Weber emphasises interpretive understanding? a) Positivism b) Verstehen c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation
2. Rationalisation in modern society leads to the growth of: a) Bureaucracy b) Charisma c) Tradition d) Revolution
3. Which type of authority is based on customs and long-standing practices? a) Rational-legal b) Charismatic c) Traditional d) Bureaucratic
4. Parsons' AGIL schema identifies four functional imperatives. Which of the following is one of them? a) Legislation b) Adaptation c) Revolution d) Competition
5. Fill in the blank: Parsons' structural-functionalism views society as a system of _____ parts working together to maintain stability.

Series summary

This Series has examined the classical thinkers and grand theories that provided the intellectual foundations of sociology, showing how their ideas continue to shape the discipline. We began with Auguste Comte, focusing on his concept of positivism, the law of three stages, and his vision of sociology as the “queen of the sciences.” We then moved on to Herbert Spencer, who applied evolutionary principles to society, introduced social Darwinism, and emphasised gradual social change. Following that, we explored Émile Durkheim's contributions, including his concept of social facts, the collective conscience, and his empirical studies of religion and suicide. Finally, we studied Max Weber's interpretive approach through verstehen and rationalisation, his analysis of authority and bureaucracy, and Parsons' structural-functionalism with the AGIL schema.

By completing this Series, you should now be able to define Comte's positivism and law of three stages, analyse Spencer's evolutionary sociology, describe Durkheim's social facts and collective conscience, examine Weber's interpretive and rational perspectives, and evaluate Parsons' structural-functionalism using the AGIL schema. These outcomes align directly with the Series Learning Outcomes, ensuring that you have gained a clear and structured understanding of how classical thinkers shaped sociology and how their grand theories continue to inform modern sociological analysis.

Glossary of terms

AGIL schema: A framework developed by Talcott Parsons that identifies four functional imperatives of any social system: Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency.

Bureaucracy: A system of organisation characterised by hierarchy, division of labour, and rule-based decision-making, often associated with efficiency but also with rigidity.

Collective conscience: A concept introduced by Émile Durkheim referring to the shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society and maintain social order.



Law of three stages: Auguste Comte's theory that human thought and society progress through theological, metaphysical, and scientific stages.

Positivism: A belief introduced by Comte that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena and empirical evidence rather than speculation.

Rationalisation: Max Weber's idea describing the increasing reliance on rules, efficiency, and calculation in modern societies, often linked to the growth of bureaucracy.

Social Darwinism: Herbert Spencer's application of evolutionary principles to society, suggesting that stronger institutions prevail over weaker ones.

Social facts: External and constraining forces identified by Durkheim, such as laws, norms, and institutions, which shape individual behaviour.

Structural-functionalism: A theoretical framework developed by Parsons that views society as a system of interrelated parts working together to maintain stability.

Traditional authority: A type of authority identified by Weber, based on customs and long-standing practices.

Charismatic authority: A type of authority identified by Weber, arising from the personal qualities and leadership of an individual.

Rational-legal authority: A type of authority identified by Weber, grounded in formal rules and laws, typical of modern bureaucratic systems.

Verstehen: A concept introduced by Weber meaning interpretive understanding, requiring sociologists to grasp the meanings individuals attach to their actions.

Concept check questions 2

Objective questions

1. Which concept introduced by Comte emphasises that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena? a) Verstehen b) Positivism c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation (Linked to SLO 2.1)
2. Herbert Spencer compared society to which of the following? a) A machine b) An organism c) A contract d) A network (Linked to SLO 2.2)
3. What did Durkheim describe as external and constraining forces that shape behaviour? a) Social Darwinism b) Social facts c) Positivism d) Rationalisation (Linked to SLO 2.3)
4. Which concept introduced by Weber means interpretive understanding? a) Positivism b) Verstehen c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation (Linked to SLO 2.4)
5. Parsons' AGIL schema identifies four functional imperatives. Which of the following is NOT one of them? a) Adaptation b) Goal attainment c) Integration d) Legislation (Linked to SLO 2.5)



Short-answer questions

6. Define Comte's law of three stages. (Linked to SLO 2.1)
7. Explain Spencer's principle of gradual social change. (Linked to SLO 2.2)
8. What is meant by Durkheim's concept of the collective conscience? (Linked to SLO 2.3)
9. Briefly describe Weber's three types of authority. (Linked to SLO 2.4)
10. State the four functional imperatives in Parsons' AGIL schema. (Linked to SLO 2.5)

Long-answer questions

11. Analyse the contributions of Comte and Spencer to the foundations of sociology. (Linked to SLO 2.1 and SLO 2.2)
12. Evaluate Durkheim's studies of religion and suicide in demonstrating the role of social facts. (Linked to SLO 2.3)
13. Examine Weber's concepts of verstehen and rationalisation, and assess their relevance to modern sociology. (Linked to SLO 2.4)
14. Evaluate Parsons' structural-functionalism and apply the AGIL schema to explain how institutions maintain social order. (Linked to SLO 2.5)

Answers to Concept Check Questions [Series 2]

Objective questions

1. b) Positivism
2. b) An organism
3. b) Social facts
4. b) Verstehen
5. d) Legislation

Short-answer questions

6. Comte's law of three stages explains that societies progress through theological, metaphysical, and scientific stages of thought.
7. Spencer argued that social change should occur gradually, as societies evolve naturally over time, adapting to new conditions.
8. The collective conscience refers to the shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society and maintain social order.
9. Weber identified three types of authority: traditional (based on customs), charismatic (based on personal qualities), and rational-legal (based on formal rules and laws).
10. The four functional imperatives are Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency.



Long-answer questions

11. *Basic response:* Comte introduced positivism and the law of three stages, while Spencer applied evolutionary principles to society and introduced social Darwinism. *Value-added response:* Learners may further discuss how Comte's vision of sociology as the "queen of the sciences" shaped its scientific identity, and how Spencer's analogy of society as an organism influenced debates on gradual change and adaptation.
12. *Basic response:* Durkheim's studies of religion and suicide demonstrated that social facts influence even personal acts, reinforcing the importance of social integration and regulation. *Value-added response:* Outstanding learners may highlight how Durkheim's typology of suicide (egoistic, altruistic, anomic, fatalistic) provided a systematic framework for linking social conditions to individual behaviour.
13. *Basic response:* Weber's concept of verstehen emphasised interpretive understanding, while rationalisation explained the increasing reliance on rules and bureaucracy in modern societies. *Value-added response:* Learners may assess how these ideas remain relevant today, for example in understanding cultural diversity through interpretive methods and analysing the challenges of bureaucratic systems in contemporary governance.
14. *Basic response:* Parsons' structural-functionalism views society as a system of interrelated parts, and the AGIL schema identifies four imperatives that sustain social order. *Value-added response:* Learners may apply the AGIL schema to institutions such as education or family, showing how each fulfils adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency, thereby maintaining stability in society.

Answers to Pilot Questions 2

Part 2.1 Auguste Comte and the Birth of Sociology

1. Positivism
2. Theological stage
3. Metaphysical stage
4. Queen
5. Social order

Part 2.2 Herbert Spencer and Evolutionary Sociology

1. An organism
2. Social Darwinism
3. Gradually
4. Inequality
5. Conditions



Part 2.3 Émile Durkheim and Social Facts

1. Social facts
2. Collective conscience
3. Social factors
4. Egoistic
5. Social solidarity

Part 2.4 Max Weber and Parsons: Grand Theories and Modern Foundations

1. Verstehen
2. Bureaucracy
3. Traditional
4. Adaptation
5. Interrelated

References and Attributions 2

Textual sources

- Course content adapted from *SOC 401: Contemporary Sociological Theories* document provided by the institution.
- Key concepts and definitions (e.g., positivism, law of three stages, social Darwinism, social facts, collective conscience, verstehen, rationalisation, bureaucracy, authority types, structural-functionalism, AGIL schema) were explained within the Series content based on classical sociological literature.

- **Course code: SOC 401**
- **Course title: Contemporary Sociological Theories**
- **Course credit load: 3**

SERIES 2: Classical Thinkers and Grand Theories



Series outline

This Series will be organised into **four main Parts**, each with sub-Parts to provide clarity and depth.

Suggested Parts and Sub-Parts

2.1 Auguste Comte and the Birth of Sociology

- 2.1.1 The concept of positivism
- 2.1.2 The law of three stages
- 2.1.3 Comte's vision of sociology as a science

2.2 Herbert Spencer and Evolutionary Sociology

- 2.2.1 Social Darwinism and society as an organism
- 2.2.2 Spencer's views on gradual social change
- 2.2.3 Critiques of Spencer's evolutionary approach

2.3 Émile Durkheim and Social Facts

- 2.3.1 The concept of social facts
- 2.3.2 Collective conscience and social order
- 2.3.3 Durkheim's studies on religion and suicide

2.4 Max Weber and Parsons: Grand Theories and Modern Foundations

- 2.4.1 Weber's concept of verstehen and rationalisation
- 2.4.2 Bureaucracy and authority in modern society
- 2.4.3 Parsons' structural-functionalism and the AGIL schema

Introduction

In the last Series, we explored the foundations and evolution of sociological theory, tracing its philosophical roots and examining how classical ideas developed into contemporary perspectives. Building on that foundation, this Series turns our attention to the classical thinkers themselves and the grand theories they propounded. These thinkers provided the intellectual scaffolding upon which sociology was established, and their contributions remain central to the discipline today.

The aim of this Series is to examine the major contributions of classical sociological thinkers and to analyse the grand theories they developed. By doing so, you will gain a deeper appreciation of how their ideas shaped the discipline and continue to influence sociological thought and practice.



We shall commence this Series by studying Auguste Comte and his vision of sociology as a science, focusing on positivism and the law of three stages. Next, we will move on to Herbert Spencer, who applied evolutionary principles to society and introduced social Darwinism. Following that, we will consider Émile Durkheim's emphasis on social facts, collective conscience, and his empirical studies of religion and suicide. Finally, we will wrap up by examining Max Weber's interpretive approach and Parsons' structural-functionalism, including the AGIL schema, to show how their grand theories provided modern foundations for sociology.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 2.1** define Comte's concept of positivism and explain the law of three stages,
- **SLO 2.2** analyse Spencer's application of evolutionary principles to society and evaluate the idea of social Darwinism,
- **SLO 2.3** describe Durkheim's concept of social facts and explain the role of collective conscience in maintaining social order,
- **SLO 2.4** examine Weber's interpretive approach through verstehen and rationalisation,
- **SLO 2.5** evaluate Parsons' structural-functionalism and apply the AGIL schema to the analysis of social systems.

2.1 Auguste Comte and the Birth of Sociology

2.1.1 The concept of positivism

Positivism is the belief that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena and empirical evidence rather than speculation or metaphysical ideas. Auguste Comte introduced this concept to emphasise that sociology must adopt scientific methods similar to those used in the natural sciences. By grounding knowledge in observation, sociology could provide reliable explanations of social behaviour and institutions.

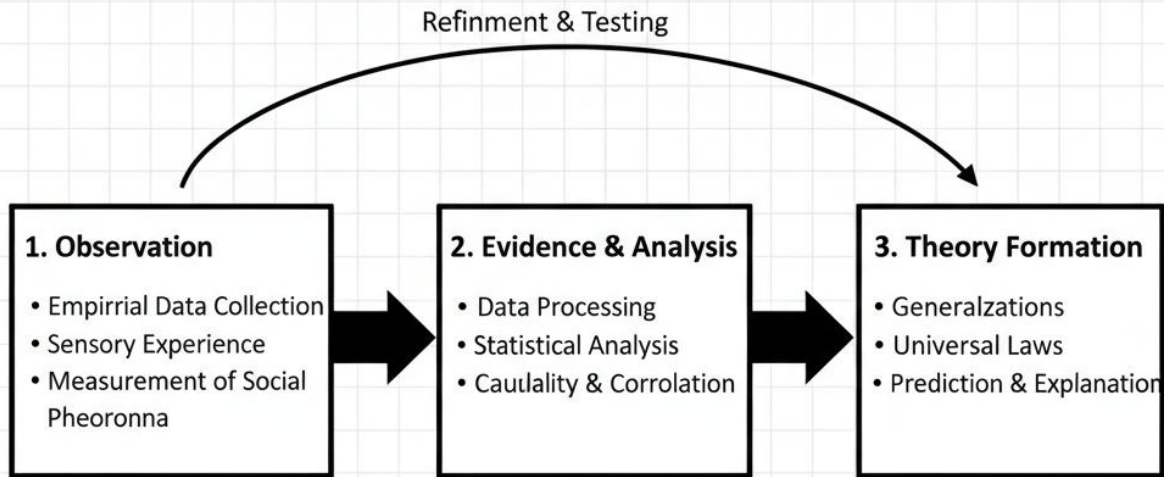
Fill in the blank: _____ is the belief that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena and empirical evidence.



Box 1.444: Positivism in Sociology: The Scientific Method for Social Science



From Empirical Observation to Theoretical Understanding



Overall Impact:

This diagram illustrates the positivist approach in sociology, emphasizing the use of scientific methods to study social life. It follows a linear progression from empirical observation to the development of testable theories, foundational to early sociological thought.

OER Diagram Positivism Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing the relationship between observation, evidence, and theory in positivism.

Figure 2.1: Positivism as the foundation of sociology

2.1.2 The law of three stages

Comte proposed the **law of three stages**, which explains the progression of human thought and society. According to this law, societies evolve through three stages:

- The **theological stage**, where phenomena are explained through religious beliefs and supernatural forces.
- The **metaphysical stage**, where abstract reasoning and philosophical speculation dominate.



- The **scientific stage**, where explanations are based on empirical observation and scientific reasoning.

This progression reflects Comte's belief that sociology, as a science, represents the highest stage of intellectual development.

Fill in the blank: According to Comte, societies evolve through the theological, metaphysical, and _____ stages.

Box 1.445: Comte's Law of Three Stages of Societal Development



A Summary of Auguste Comte's Theory of Evolution.

1. Theological Stage

- Early human history supernatural forces.
- Social order through religious authority
- Social order based religious authority
- Examples: Ancient kings
- Examples: mythologies, divine right of kings

2. Metaphysical Stage

- Transitional phase
- Abstract forces/philosophy supernatural
- Questioning of traditional traditional authority
- Examples: Enlightenment, philosophical speculation

3. Scientific (Positive) Stage

- Modern industrial society
- Scientific observation & laws
- Rational thought, empirical evidence
- Examples: Sociology, policy
- Example, physics, evidence-based policy

Overall Impact:

This text box summarizes Auguste Comte's foundational law of three stages, a theory of human intellectual evolution. It describes a progression from religious explanation to to thought, of scientific understanding. This framework crucial for sociology in the development of positivism.

OER Text Box Comte Three Stages Sociology Created: Today 10, 2666 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 2.1: Comte's law of three stages summarised

2.1.3 Comte's vision of sociology as a science



Comte envisioned **sociology** as the “queen of the sciences,” integrating insights from other disciplines to explain social phenomena. He argued that sociology should not only study society but also guide social reform. By applying scientific principles, sociology could help improve social order and progress. This vision positioned sociology as both a theoretical and practical discipline, capable of addressing the challenges of modern society.

Fill in the blank: Comte envisioned sociology as the _____ of the sciences, integrating insights from other disciplines.

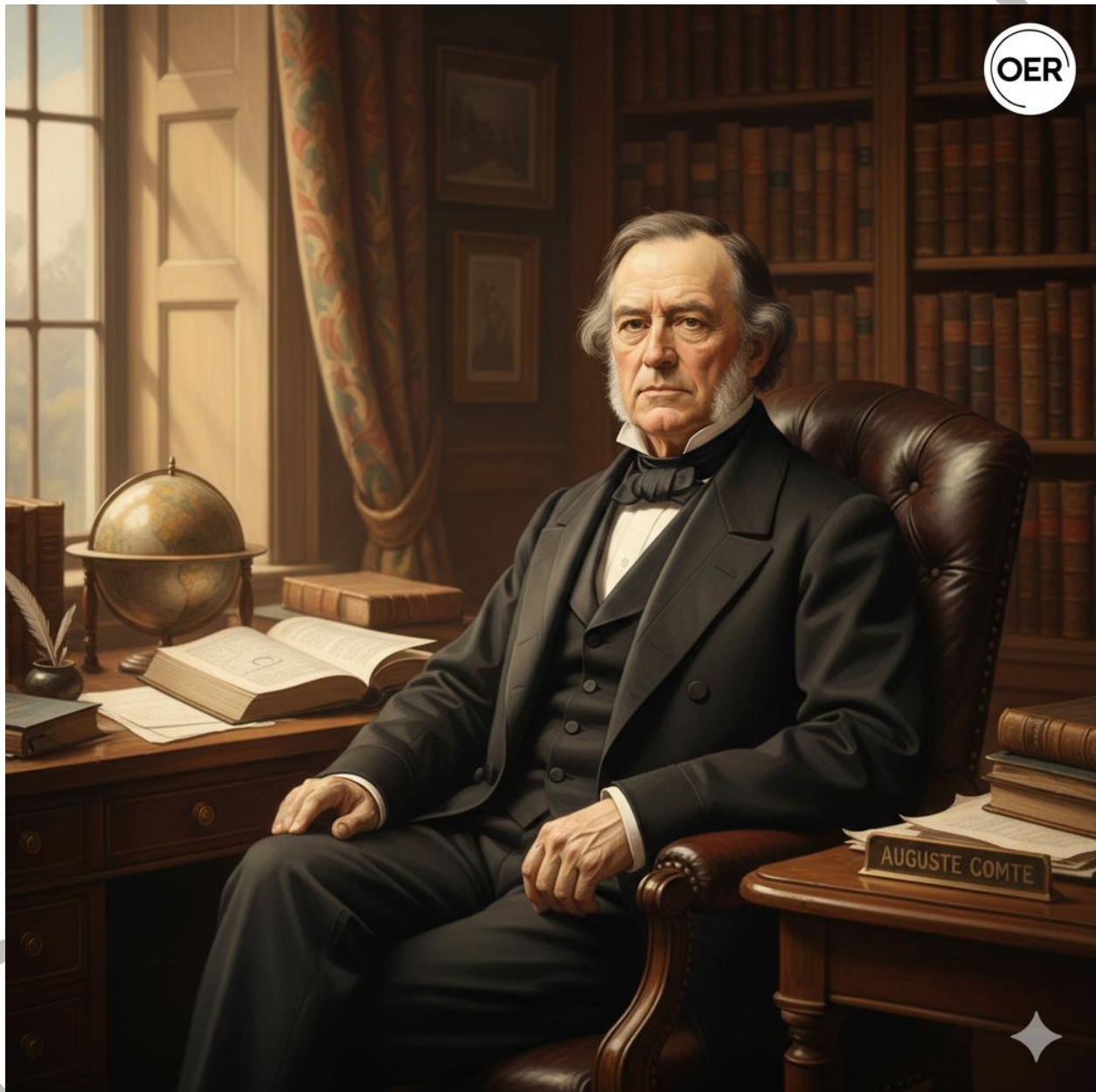


Image of Auguste Comte with his published works. *Plate 2.1: Auguste Comte and his vision of sociology*



Pilot questions 2.1

1. Which concept introduced by Comte emphasises that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena? a) Verstehen b) Positivism c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation
2. According to Comte's law of three stages, which stage is characterised by reliance on supernatural explanations? a) Scientific stage b) Metaphysical stage c) Theological stage d) Rational stage
3. Which stage in Comte's law of three stages is dominated by abstract reasoning and speculation? a) Scientific stage b) Metaphysical stage c) Theological stage d) Empirical stage
4. Comte envisioned sociology as the _____ of the sciences. a) servant b) queen c) foundation d) branch
5. Fill in the blank: By applying scientific principles, sociology could help improve _____ and progress.

2.2 Herbert Spencer and Evolutionary Sociology

2.2.1 Social Darwinism and society as an organism

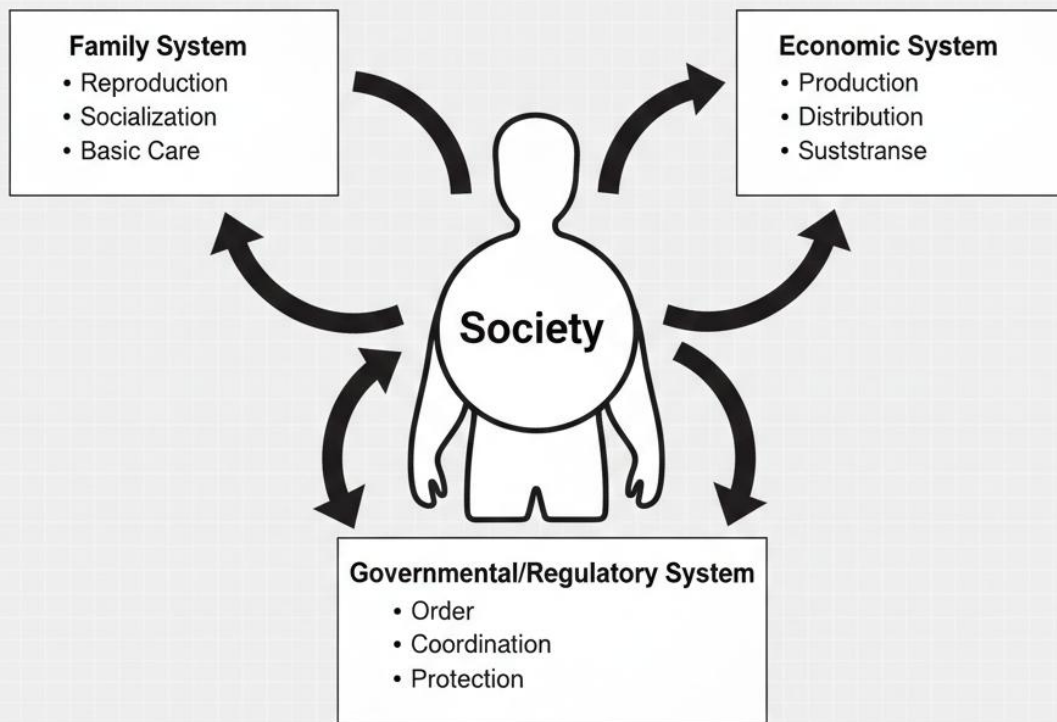
Social Darwinism is the application of evolutionary principles to society, suggesting that social institutions and structures evolve in ways similar to biological organisms. Herbert Spencer argued that societies adapt and survive through competition, with stronger institutions prevailing over weaker ones. He compared society to a living organism, where different parts such as family, economy, and government function together to maintain survival and stability.

Fill in the blank: Herbert Spencer compared society to a _____, where different parts function together to maintain survival.



Box 1.446: Herbert Spencer's Organic Analogy: Society as an Organism

An Interconnected Functional System



Overall Impact:

This diagram illustrates Herbert Spencer's organic analogy, comparing society to a biological organism. It highlights how different social institutions – like a family, economy, and government – function as interconnected organs specialized to maintain the system's health, stability, and survival. This functionalist perspective was foundational to early sociology.

OER Diagram Herbert Spencer Organic Analogy Sociology Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing society as an organism with interconnected institutions. *Figure 2.2: Society as an organism in Spencer's theory*

2.2.2 Spencer's views on gradual social change

Spencer believed that social change should occur gradually rather than through sudden revolutions. He argued that societies evolve naturally over time, adapting to new conditions and challenges. According to him, attempts to force rapid change could disrupt the balance of society and lead to instability. His emphasis on gradualism reflected his broader evolutionary outlook, where progress was seen as a slow but steady process.

Fill in the blank: Spencer argued that societies evolve naturally over time and that social change should occur _____.



Box 1.447: Herbert Spencer's Principle of Gradual Social Change

An Intersecting Function of Society



Evolutionary Development of Society

1. The Principle of Gradual Evolution

- Society evolves like biological organisms.
- Simple to complex forms. progression
- Undirected, natural
- Adaptation of environment
- Focus to stability & order
- Examples: Ancient authority

2. Examples of Gradual Change

- Early, simple tribal societies
- Development to markets/trade
- Emergence of specialized institutions (e.g., law, education)
- Technological innovation (slow, incremental over time)

Overall Impact:

This text box summarizes Auguste Comte's foundational law of three stages, a theory of slow to fast, incremental organisms. He argued that slow societies to grow, organic, societies adapt complex, to complex structured to ensure stability the functions, similar to biology in early sociology influences and evolutionary theories and all development.

OER Diagram Herbert Spencer Organic Analogy Sociology Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 2.2: Spencer's principle of gradual social change

2.2.3 Critiques of Spencer's evolutionary approach

Spencer's ideas were influential but also controversial. Critics argue that **social Darwinism** oversimplifies complex social processes and can be used to justify inequality. By suggesting that stronger institutions naturally prevail, Spencer's theory risks overlooking the role of deliberate social reform and collective action. Modern sociologists caution against applying biological analogies too rigidly to society, noting that human communities are shaped by culture, values, and cooperation as much as competition.

Fill in the blank: Critics argue that Spencer's theory of social Darwinism risks justifying





Classroom Debate's Spolutratory Socology

OER: Sociology in Action

Created: Tuebuay 10, 2666 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Image of a classroom debate on Spencer's evolutionary sociology. *Plate 2.2: Debating Spencer's evolutionary approach*

Pilot questions 2.2

1. Herbert Spencer compared society to which of the following? a) A machine b) An organism c) A contract d) A network
2. Which concept refers to the application of evolutionary principles to society? a) Positivism b) Verstehen c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation
3. Spencer argued that social change should occur: a) Suddenly b) Gradually c) Through revolution d) By force



4. Critics argue that Spencer's theory risks justifying: a) Equality b) Inequality c) Cooperation d) Reform
5. Fill in the blank: Spencer believed that societies evolve naturally over time, adapting to new _____ and challenges.

2.3 Émile Durkheim and Social Facts

2.3.1 The concept of social facts

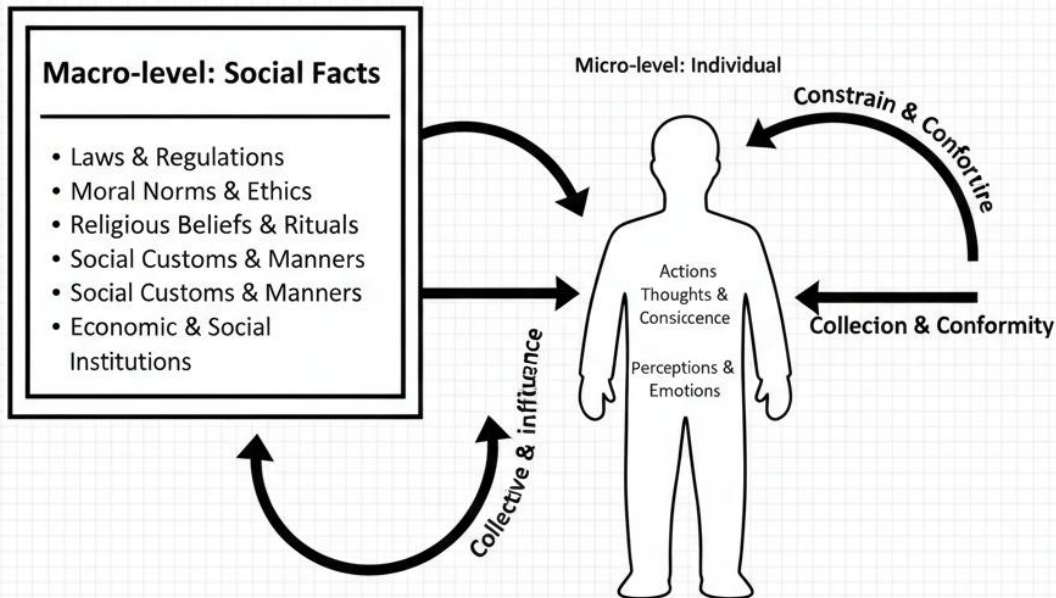
Social facts are external and constraining forces that shape individual behaviour. Émile Durkheim introduced this concept to demonstrate that society exerts influence over individuals through norms, laws, customs, and institutions. Social facts exist outside the individual yet guide and limit their actions, making them essential for understanding how societies function.

Fill in the blank: Durkheim described _____ as external and constraining forces that shape individual behaviour.



Box 1.448: Durkheim's Social Facts: Collective Influence on Individuals

Émile Durkheim: the Study of Social Phenomena



Overall Impact:

This diagram illustrates Émile Durkheim's concept social facts, highlighting how external social structures and norms shape and constrain individual behavior and consciousness. It is foundational for understanding social order and stability.

OER Diagram Durkheim Social Facts Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing examples of social facts such as laws, norms, and institutions. *Figure 2.3: Social facts as forces shaping behaviour*

2.3.2 Collective conscience and social order

Durkheim emphasised the importance of the **collective conscience**, which refers to the shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society. This collective conscience provides cohesion and ensures social order by guiding behaviour and reinforcing common norms. Without it, societies risk fragmentation and instability. Durkheim argued that the strength of the collective conscience varies across societies, being stronger in traditional communities and weaker in modern, individualistic ones.



Fill in the blank: The _____ conscience refers to the shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society.

OER

Box 1.449: Durkheim's Collective Conscience

The Shared Foundation of Social Solidarity

1. Key Features

- Shared Beliefs & Values
- Moral Attitudes & Sentiments
- Common Traditions & Rituals
- Strong Emotional Hold
- External & Coercive Power

2. Functions & Impact

- Social Solidarity & Cohesion
- Provides Moral Guidance
- Reinforces Conformity
- Punishment for Deviance (e.g., crime)
- Maintains Social Order

Overall Impact

This text box summarizes Émile Durkheim's concept of the collective conscience, the totality of shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society. It is a fundamental concept, explaining how societies maintain cohesion and stability through shared understanding and social pressure.

OER Text Box | Durkheim Collective Conscience Sociology Created: Tuesday, 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 2.3: Features of the collective conscience

2.3.3 Durkheim's studies on religion and suicide

Durkheim conducted pioneering empirical studies to demonstrate the power of social facts. In his study of **religion**, he showed how rituals and beliefs reinforce social solidarity. In his famous work on **suicide**, he revealed that even seemingly personal acts are influenced by social factors such as integration and regulation. He identified different types of suicide, including egoistic,



altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic, each linked to social conditions. These studies established sociology as a scientific discipline capable of explaining complex social phenomena.

Fill in the blank: Durkheim's study of _____ revealed that even personal acts are influenced by social factors such as integration and regulation.

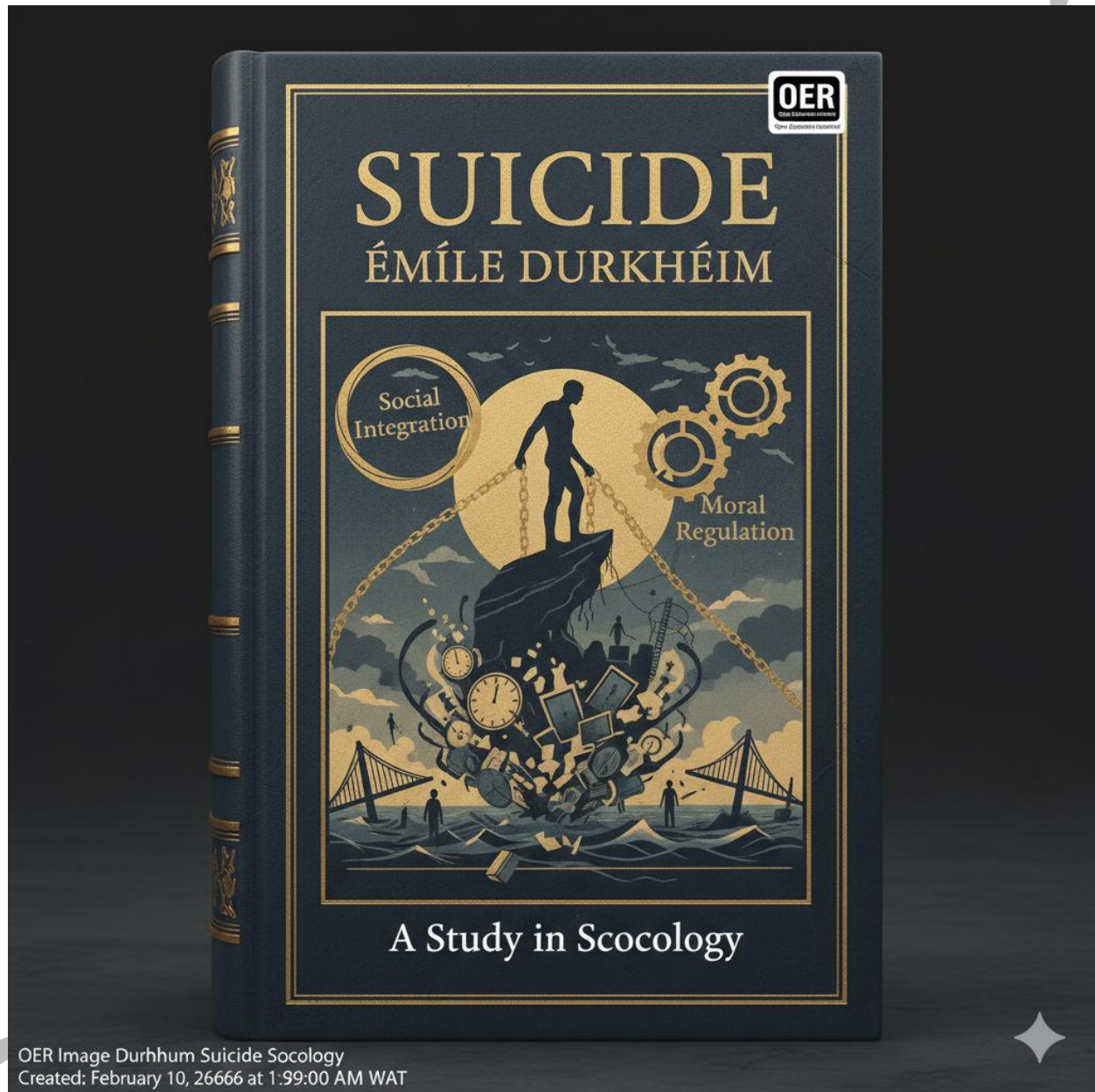


Image of Durkheim's book "Suicide" with symbolic representation of social factors. *Plate 2.3: Durkheim's study of suicide as a sociological phenomenon*

Pilot questions 2.3

1. What did Durkheim describe as external and constraining forces that shape behaviour? a) Social Darwinism b) Social facts c) Positivism d) Verstehen



2. Which concept refers to shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society? a) Rationalisation b) Collective conscience c) Bureaucracy d) Social contract
3. Durkheim's study of suicide demonstrated that personal acts are influenced by: a) Biological instincts b) Social factors c) Random chance d) Individual choice alone
4. Which type of suicide is linked to low social integration? a) Egoistic b) Altruistic c) Anomic d) Fatalistic
5. Fill in the blank: Durkheim's study of religion showed how rituals and beliefs reinforce _____.

2.4 Max Weber and Parsons: Grand Theories and Modern Foundations

2.4.1 Weber's concept of verstehen and rationalisation

Verstehen is a German term meaning interpretive understanding. Max Weber introduced this concept to emphasise that sociologists must grasp the meanings individuals attach to their actions. Rather than only observing behaviour, Weber argued that we must interpret the subjective motives behind it.

Weber also analysed **rationalisation**, which refers to the increasing reliance on rules, efficiency, and calculation in modern societies. He noted that rationalisation leads to the growth of bureaucracy, where authority is exercised through formal procedures and hierarchies. While rationalisation brings order and predictability, Weber warned that it could also trap individuals in what he called the "iron cage" of bureaucracy.

Fill in the blank: Weber's concept of _____ emphasises interpretive understanding of the meanings individuals attach to their actions.



Box 1.450: Weber's Key Concepts: Verstehen & Rationalization

Two Lenses for Understanding Modern Society



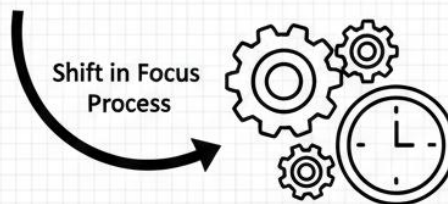
1. Verstehen (Understanding)

- Empathetic understanding
- Meaning behind 's actions
- Meaning behind social actions
- Subjective experiences
- Qualitative methods



2. Rationalization (Modernization)

- Rules & Procedures
- Efficiency & Calculability
- Bureaucracy
- Impersonal Systems



Overall Impact:

This diagram illustrates Émile Durkheim's concept of social facts, highlighting how external social structures affect individual social action, which becomes rationalized in modern society, leading to the "iron cage" of order and stability.

OER Diagram Durkheim Social Facts Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing Weber's concepts of verstehen and rationalisation. *Figure 2.4: Weber's interpretive and rational perspectives*

2.4.2 Bureaucracy and authority in modern society

Weber identified three types of **authority**: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal. Traditional authority is based on customs and long-standing practices, charismatic authority arises from personal qualities of leaders, and rational-legal authority is grounded in formal rules and laws.

Weber argued that modern societies increasingly rely on rational-legal authority, particularly through bureaucratic organisations. Bureaucracy, according to Weber, is characterised by hierarchy, division of labour, and rule-based decision-making. While bureaucracy ensures efficiency and fairness, it can also become rigid and impersonal.



Fill in the blank: Weber identified three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and _____-legal.

Box 1.451: Weber's Three Types of Authority Sources of Legitimate Social Power

Traditional Authority

- Based on custom, history, and inherited status.
- Authority is legitimate because "it has always of that."
- Loyalty to the person, not and of office.
- Examples: Monarchies, tribal feudal systems

2. Charismatic Authority

- Based personal qualities, charm, and influence
- Leaders inspire devotion exceptional loyalty.
- Often emerges in times, cult of change
- Examples: Revolutionary figures, cult leaders, religious prophets

3. Rational-Legal Authority

- Based on rules, laws, and formal procedures.
- Authority tied office, not
- Power exercised through bureaucracy.
- Examples: Modern governments, corporations, legal systems

Overall Impact: This text summarizes Max Weber's foundational typology of legitimate social authority, explaining how power is legitimized and accepted in different societies. These ideal types provide a framework for analyzing historical and contemporary political systems and a shift toward rule-based authority in modern society.

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

OER Text Box Weber Three Types of Authority 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 2.4: Weber's three types of authority

2.4.3 Parsons' structural-functionalism and the AGIL schema

Structural-functionalism is a theoretical framework developed by Talcott Parsons, which views society as a system of interrelated parts working together to maintain stability. Parsons argued that each institution serves a function that contributes to the overall balance of society.

He introduced the **AGIL schema**, identifying four functional imperatives for any social system:

- **Adaptation:** securing resources and adjusting to the environment.



- **Goal attainment:** setting and achieving objectives.
- **Integration:** maintaining cohesion among different parts of society.
- **Latency:** preserving cultural patterns and values over time.

Parsons' grand theory provided a systematic way of analysing how institutions such as family, education, and religion contribute to social order.

Fill in the blank: Parsons' _____ schema identifies four functional imperatives for any social system: Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency.

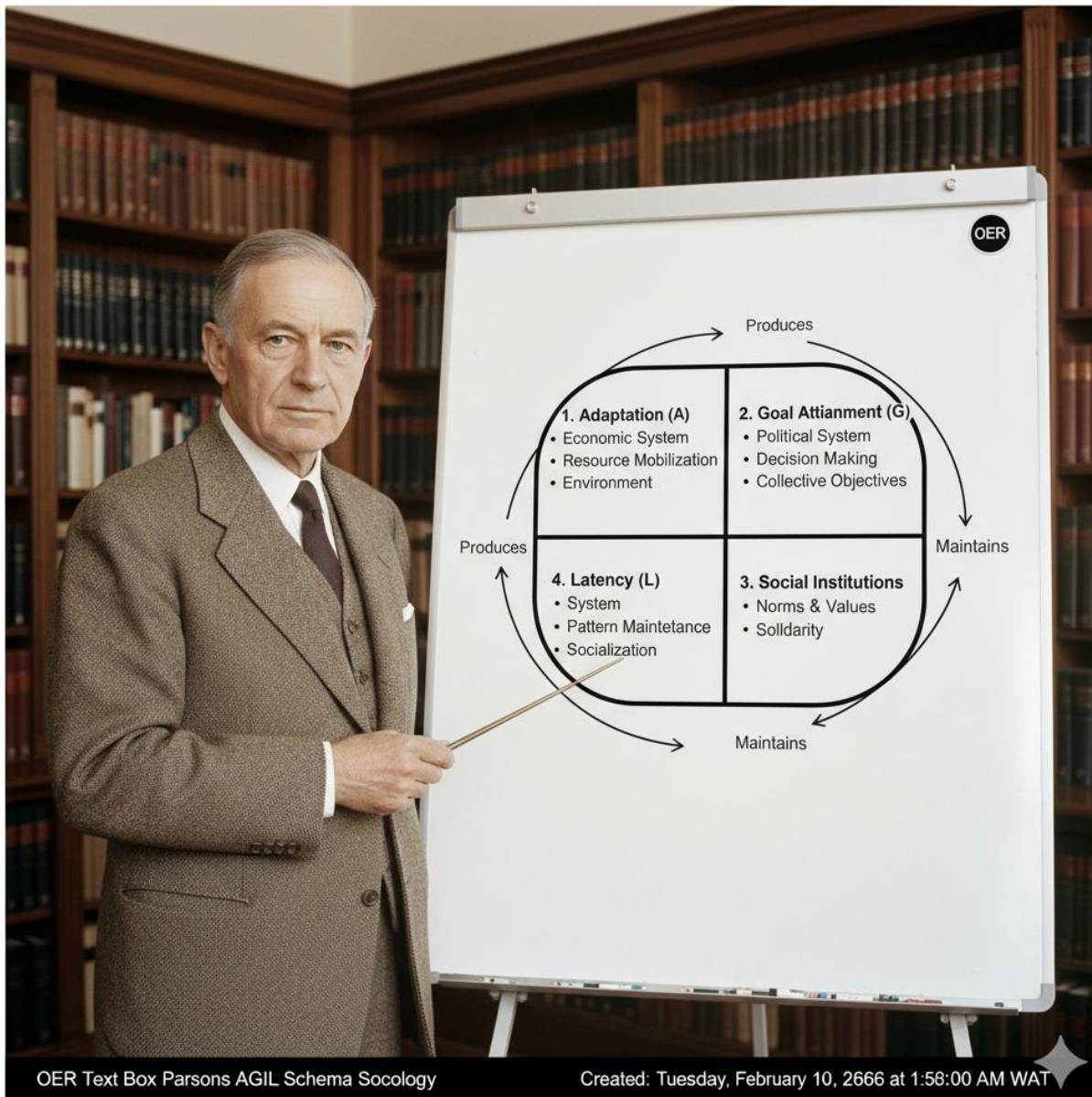


Image of Talcott Parsons with a diagram of the AGIL schema. *Plate 2.4: Parsons and the AGIL schema*



Pilot questions 2.4

1. Which concept introduced by Weber emphasises interpretive understanding? a) Positivism b) Verstehen c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation
2. Rationalisation in modern society leads to the growth of: a) Bureaucracy b) Charisma c) Tradition d) Revolution
3. Which type of authority is based on customs and long-standing practices? a) Rational-legal b) Charismatic c) Traditional d) Bureaucratic
4. Parsons' AGIL schema identifies four functional imperatives. Which of the following is one of them? a) Legislation b) Adaptation c) Revolution d) Competition
5. Fill in the blank: Parsons' structural-functionalism views society as a system of _____ parts working together to maintain stability.

Series summary

This Series has examined the classical thinkers and grand theories that provided the intellectual foundations of sociology, showing how their ideas continue to shape the discipline. We began with Auguste Comte, focusing on his concept of positivism, the law of three stages, and his vision of sociology as the “queen of the sciences.” We then moved on to Herbert Spencer, who applied evolutionary principles to society, introduced social Darwinism, and emphasised gradual social change. Following that, we explored Émile Durkheim's contributions, including his concept of social facts, the collective conscience, and his empirical studies of religion and suicide. Finally, we studied Max Weber's interpretive approach through verstehen and rationalisation, his analysis of authority and bureaucracy, and Parsons' structural-functionalism with the AGIL schema.

By completing this Series, you should now be able to define Comte's positivism and law of three stages, analyse Spencer's evolutionary sociology, describe Durkheim's social facts and collective conscience, examine Weber's interpretive and rational perspectives, and evaluate Parsons' structural-functionalism using the AGIL schema. These outcomes align directly with the Series Learning Outcomes, ensuring that you have gained a clear and structured understanding of how classical thinkers shaped sociology and how their grand theories continue to inform modern sociological analysis.

Glossary of terms

AGIL schema: A framework developed by Talcott Parsons that identifies four functional imperatives of any social system: Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency.

Bureaucracy: A system of organisation characterised by hierarchy, division of labour, and rule-based decision-making, often associated with efficiency but also with rigidity.

Collective conscience: A concept introduced by Émile Durkheim referring to the shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society and maintain social order.



Law of three stages: Auguste Comte's theory that human thought and society progress through theological, metaphysical, and scientific stages.

Positivism: A belief introduced by Comte that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena and empirical evidence rather than speculation.

Rationalisation: Max Weber's idea describing the increasing reliance on rules, efficiency, and calculation in modern societies, often linked to the growth of bureaucracy.

Social Darwinism: Herbert Spencer's application of evolutionary principles to society, suggesting that stronger institutions prevail over weaker ones.

Social facts: External and constraining forces identified by Durkheim, such as laws, norms, and institutions, which shape individual behaviour.

Structural-functionalism: A theoretical framework developed by Parsons that views society as a system of interrelated parts working together to maintain stability.

Traditional authority: A type of authority identified by Weber, based on customs and long-standing practices.

Charismatic authority: A type of authority identified by Weber, arising from the personal qualities and leadership of an individual.

Rational-legal authority: A type of authority identified by Weber, grounded in formal rules and laws, typical of modern bureaucratic systems.

Verstehen: A concept introduced by Weber meaning interpretive understanding, requiring sociologists to grasp the meanings individuals attach to their actions.

Concept check questions 2

Objective questions

1. Which concept introduced by Comte emphasises that knowledge should be based on observable phenomena? a) Verstehen b) Positivism c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation (Linked to SLO 2.1)
2. Herbert Spencer compared society to which of the following? a) A machine b) An organism c) A contract d) A network (Linked to SLO 2.2)
3. What did Durkheim describe as external and constraining forces that shape behaviour? a) Social Darwinism b) Social facts c) Positivism d) Rationalisation (Linked to SLO 2.3)
4. Which concept introduced by Weber means interpretive understanding? a) Positivism b) Verstehen c) Social Darwinism d) Rationalisation (Linked to SLO 2.4)
5. Parsons' AGIL schema identifies four functional imperatives. Which of the following is NOT one of them? a) Adaptation b) Goal attainment c) Integration d) Legislation (Linked to SLO 2.5)



Short-answer questions

6. Define Comte's law of three stages. (Linked to SLO 2.1)
7. Explain Spencer's principle of gradual social change. (Linked to SLO 2.2)
8. What is meant by Durkheim's concept of the collective conscience? (Linked to SLO 2.3)
9. Briefly describe Weber's three types of authority. (Linked to SLO 2.4)
10. State the four functional imperatives in Parsons' AGIL schema. (Linked to SLO 2.5)

Long-answer questions

11. Analyse the contributions of Comte and Spencer to the foundations of sociology. (Linked to SLO 2.1 and SLO 2.2)
12. Evaluate Durkheim's studies of religion and suicide in demonstrating the role of social facts. (Linked to SLO 2.3)
13. Examine Weber's concepts of verstehen and rationalisation, and assess their relevance to modern sociology. (Linked to SLO 2.4)
14. Evaluate Parsons' structural-functionalism and apply the AGIL schema to explain how institutions maintain social order. (Linked to SLO 2.5)

Answers to Concept Check Questions [Series 2]

Objective questions

1. b) Positivism
2. b) An organism
3. b) Social facts
4. b) Verstehen
5. d) Legislation

Short-answer questions

6. Comte's law of three stages explains that societies progress through theological, metaphysical, and scientific stages of thought.
7. Spencer argued that social change should occur gradually, as societies evolve naturally over time, adapting to new conditions.
8. The collective conscience refers to the shared beliefs, values, and moral attitudes that unify a society and maintain social order.
9. Weber identified three types of authority: traditional (based on customs), charismatic (based on personal qualities), and rational-legal (based on formal rules and laws).
10. The four functional imperatives are Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latency.



Long-answer questions

11. *Basic response:* Comte introduced positivism and the law of three stages, while Spencer applied evolutionary principles to society and introduced social Darwinism. *Value-added response:* Learners may further discuss how Comte's vision of sociology as the "queen of the sciences" shaped its scientific identity, and how Spencer's analogy of society as an organism influenced debates on gradual change and adaptation.
12. *Basic response:* Durkheim's studies of religion and suicide demonstrated that social facts influence even personal acts, reinforcing the importance of social integration and regulation. *Value-added response:* Outstanding learners may highlight how Durkheim's typology of suicide (egoistic, altruistic, anomic, fatalistic) provided a systematic framework for linking social conditions to individual behaviour.
13. *Basic response:* Weber's concept of verstehen emphasised interpretive understanding, while rationalisation explained the increasing reliance on rules and bureaucracy in modern societies. *Value-added response:* Learners may assess how these ideas remain relevant today, for example in understanding cultural diversity through interpretive methods and analysing the challenges of bureaucratic systems in contemporary governance.
14. *Basic response:* Parsons' structural-functionalism views society as a system of interrelated parts, and the AGIL schema identifies four imperatives that sustain social order. *Value-added response:* Learners may apply the AGIL schema to institutions such as education or family, showing how each fulfils adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and latency, thereby maintaining stability in society.

Answers to Pilot Questions 2

Part 2.1 Auguste Comte and the Birth of Sociology

1. Positivism
2. Theological stage
3. Metaphysical stage
4. Queen
5. Social order

Part 2.2 Herbert Spencer and Evolutionary Sociology

1. An organism
2. Social Darwinism
3. Gradually
4. Inequality
5. Conditions



Part 2.3 Émile Durkheim and Social Facts

1. Social facts
2. Collective conscience
3. Social factors
4. Egoistic
5. Social solidarity

Part 2.4 Max Weber and Parsons: Grand Theories and Modern Foundations

1. Verstehen
2. Bureaucracy
3. Traditional
4. Adaptation
5. Interrelated

References and Attributions 2

Textual sources

- Course content adapted from *SOC 401: Contemporary Sociological Theories* document provided by the institution.
- Key concepts and definitions (e.g., positivism, law of three stages, social Darwinism, social facts, collective conscience, verstehen, rationalisation, bureaucracy, authority types, structural-functionalism, AGIL schema) were explained within the Series content based on classical sociological literature.

- **Course code: SOC 401**
- **Course title: Contemporary Sociological Theories**
- **Course credit load: 3**

SERIES 3: Major Contemporary Orientations in Sociology



Series outline

This Series will be organised into **four main Parts**, each with sub-Parts to provide clarity and depth.

Suggested Parts and Sub-Parts

3.1 Functionalist perspectives in contemporary sociology

- 3.1.1 Key principles of functionalism in modern contexts
- 3.1.2 Applications to institutions such as education and family
- 3.1.3 Critiques and limitations of functionalist perspectives

3.2 Conflict perspectives and critical sociology

- 3.2.1 Marxist foundations and contemporary adaptations
- 3.2.2 Power, inequality, and social change
- 3.2.3 Neo-Marxist and critical approaches in sociology

3.3 Symbolic interactionism and micro-sociological orientations

- 3.3.1 The role of symbols and meanings in everyday life
- 3.3.2 Dramaturgy and social interaction (Goffman)
- 3.3.3 Applications to identity, communication, and socialisation

3.4 Emerging orientations and integrative approaches

- 3.4.1 Feminist sociology and gender perspectives
- 3.4.2 Postmodern and global sociology
- 3.4.3 Integrative frameworks combining macro and micro perspectives

Introduction

In the last Series, we examined the classical thinkers and grand theories that laid the foundations of sociology. Building on that knowledge, this Series turns to the major contemporary orientations that have shaped sociology in the modern era. These perspectives provide tools for analysing current social issues and help us understand how societies function, change, and interact in today's complex world.

The aim of this Series is to introduce you to the principal contemporary orientations in sociology and to equip you with the ability to apply these perspectives to both theoretical debates and practical social problems.

We shall commence this Series by exploring functionalist perspectives in contemporary sociology, considering their applications and limitations. Next, we will move on to conflict perspectives and critical sociology, focusing on power, inequality, and social change. Following



that, we will examine symbolic interactionism and micro-sociological orientations, with attention to everyday meanings and identity. Finally, we will wrap up by studying emerging orientations such as feminist sociology, postmodern approaches, and integrative frameworks that combine macro and micro perspectives.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 3.1** explain the key principles of functionalist perspectives in contemporary sociology,
- **SLO 3.2** analyse how functionalist approaches apply to institutions such as education and family,
- **SLO 3.3** evaluate the main critiques and limitations of functionalist perspectives,
- **SLO 3.4** describe the Marxist foundations of conflict perspectives and their contemporary adaptations,
- **SLO 3.5** examine the role of power and inequality in shaping social change within conflict and critical sociology,
- **SLO 3.6** assess neo-Marxist and critical approaches in contemporary sociological analysis,
- **SLO 3.7** define the principles of symbolic interactionism and explain the role of symbols and meanings in everyday life,
- **SLO 3.8** apply dramaturgical analysis to social interaction using Goffman's framework,
- **SLO 3.9** analyse how symbolic interactionism contributes to the study of identity, communication, and socialisation,
- **SLO 3.10** evaluate feminist sociology and its contributions to understanding gender perspectives,
- **SLO 3.11** discuss postmodern and global orientations in sociology, and
- **SLO 3.12** apply integrative frameworks that combine macro and micro perspectives to contemporary social issues.

3.1 Functionalist Perspectives in Contemporary Sociology

3.1.1 Key principles of functionalism in modern contexts

Functionalism is a sociological perspective that views society as a system of interrelated parts working together to maintain stability and order. In contemporary sociology, functionalism emphasises how institutions such as family, education, and religion contribute to the smooth

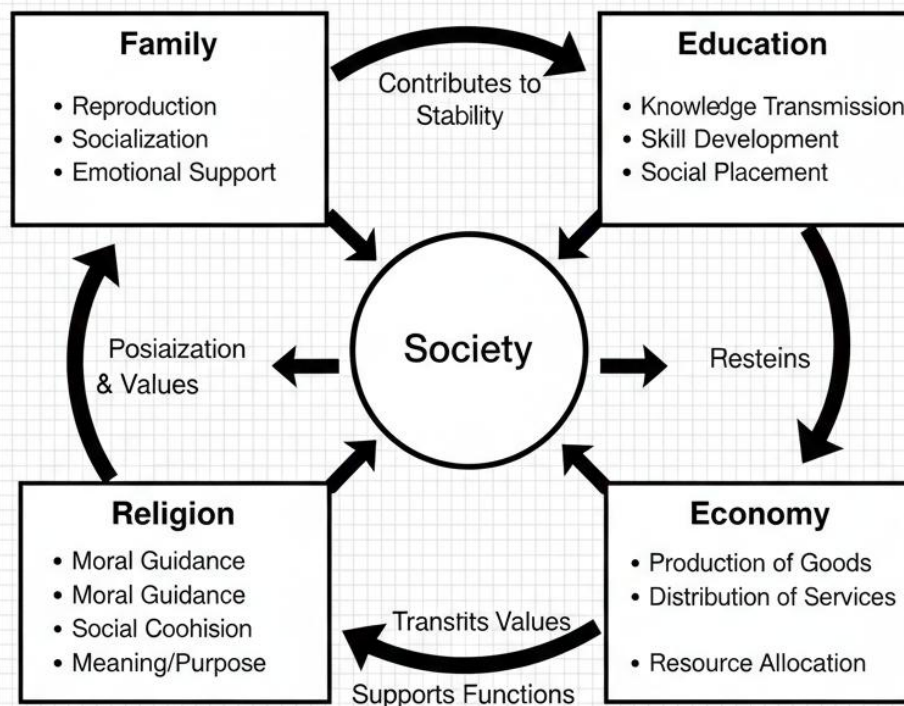


functioning of society. Each institution performs specific roles that support social cohesion and balance.

Fill in the blank: _____ is a sociological perspective that views society as a system of interrelated parts working together to maintain stability.

Box 1.452: Functionalism in Sociology

Society as an Internnoredted System



Overall Impact: This diagram illustrates perspective, comparing society to a biological organism where each interconnects together to maintain social order and equilibrium. Functionalism emphasizes interdependence and the manifest & latent functions of social structures.

OER Diagram Functionalism Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing society as a system with institutions like family, education, and religion contributing to stability. *Figure 3.1: Functionalist view of society as a system*

3.1.2 Applications to institutions such as education and family

Functionalist perspectives highlight the role of institutions in meeting social needs. For example, the **family** provides socialisation and emotional support, while **education** transmits knowledge



and cultural values. These institutions help individuals integrate into society and prepare them for participation in economic and civic life. Functionalists argue that when institutions perform their roles effectively, society remains stable and cohesive.

Fill in the blank: According to functionalists, the _____ provides socialisation and emotional support, while education transmits knowledge and cultural values.

Open Educational
Resources



Box 1.453: Functionalist Roles of Family & Education

Two Key Social Institutions & Their Functions

1. The Family Institution



- Primary Socialization
- Teaches norms, values, language
Develops sense of self
- Emotional Support & Security
- Provides love, care, stability
Reduces stress, fosters well-being
- Reproduction & Regulation
- Procreation of new members
Social control of sexuality

2. The Education Institution



- Secondary Socialization
- Transmits culture, history, skills
Prepares for adult roles
- Social Placement
- Sorts & ranks individuals
Allocates to roles/careers
- Social Control & Innovation
- Generates new knowledge,
technology

Overall Impact:

This text box summarises the functionalist perspective on the family and education, highlighting their essential roles in maintaining social order, stability, and consensus. Both institutions are successful in the integration of individuals into society and the perpetuation of cultural values.

OER Text Box Functionalism Family Education Sociology Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM M WAT

Box 3.1: Functionalist roles of family and education

3.1.3 Critiques and limitations of functionalist perspectives

Although functionalism provides valuable insights, it has been criticised for overlooking conflict and inequality. Critics argue that functionalism tends to assume that all institutions contribute



positively to society, ignoring how some may reinforce social divisions or privilege certain groups. For instance, education may reproduce class inequalities rather than simply transmit knowledge. Contemporary sociologists caution that functionalism must be balanced with perspectives that highlight power and change.

Fill in the blank: Critics argue that functionalism overlooks _____ and inequality in society.



Box 1.454: Functionalist Theory: Strengths & Critiques

Strengths	Critiques
• Macro-level analysis • Social order/stability • Social cohesiveness • Highlights interdependence • Institutionalization	• Ignores social change • Conflict/inequality • Teleological/historical

Classroom Debate's Strengths & Critiques of Functionalism

OER: Sociology in Action

Created: Tuesday 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Image of a classroom discussion highlighting both strengths and critiques of functionalism. *Plate 3.1: Debating functionalist perspectives in sociology*

Pilot questions 3.1



1. Which sociological perspective views society as a system of interrelated parts working together to maintain stability? a) Conflict theory b) Functionalism c) Symbolic interactionism d) Postmodernism
2. According to functionalists, which institution provides socialisation and emotional support? a) Education b) Family c) Religion d) Economy
3. Which institution transmits knowledge and cultural values according to functionalist perspectives? a) Family b) Education c) Government d) Media
4. Critics argue that functionalism tends to overlook: a) Stability b) Conflict and inequality c) Socialisation d) Cultural values
5. Fill in the blank: Functionalists argue that when institutions perform their roles effectively, society remains _____ and cohesive.

3.2 Conflict Perspectives and Critical Sociology

3.2.1 Marxist foundations and contemporary adaptations

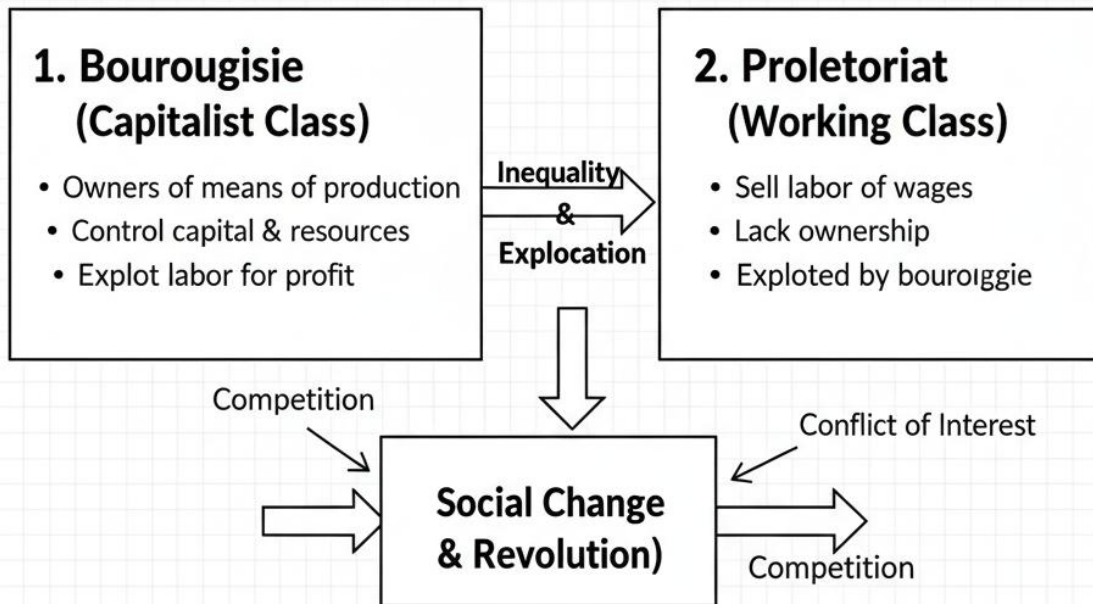
Conflict theory is a sociological perspective rooted in the ideas of Karl Marx. It emphasises that society is characterised by inequality and competition over scarce resources. Marx argued that the economic structure, particularly the division between the bourgeoisie (owners of production) and the proletariat (workers), shapes social relations and institutions. In contemporary sociology, conflict perspectives have been adapted to examine issues beyond class, including race, gender, and global inequalities.

Fill in the blank: Conflict theory emphasises that society is characterised by _____ and competition over scarce resources.



Box 1.455: Marx's Conflict Theory: Inequality & Struggle

The Struggle Between Social Classes



Overall Impact: This diagram illustrates Karl Marx's foundational conflict theory, highlighting inherent antagonism between the capitalist and working classes. It emphasizes economic inequality as the driving force behind the social struggle ultimately leading to the revolution and the eventual collapse of capitalism. This perspective is foundational to critical sociology and theories of social justice.

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing Marx's class division between bourgeoisie and proletariat. *Figure 3.2: Marxist foundations of conflict theory*

3.2.2 Power, inequality, and social change

Conflict perspectives highlight the role of **power** in maintaining inequality. Institutions such as law, education, and media may serve the interests of dominant groups, reinforcing their control. However, conflict theory also stresses the potential for social change through resistance and collective action. By challenging existing power structures, marginalised groups can push for reforms and greater equality.

Fill in the blank: Conflict perspectives highlight the role of _____ in maintaining inequality.



Box 1.456: Conflict Theory: Power & Inequality in Society

Examples Across Social Institutions

OER

1. Law & Justice System

- Biased enforcement
- Incarceration rates (racial/class) disproportion
- Access to legal representation
- Laws favoring corporations

2. Education System

- Funding disparities
- Unequal access
- Unequal access of resources
- Hidden curriculum (conformity)
- Credentialism & Elitism

3. Media & Information

- Ownership & Control
- Portrayal of social groups
- Bias in news coverage
- Agenda-setting & Omission
- Agenda-setting & Omission

Overall Impact: This text box summarizes conflict theory's application to social, highlighting how power imbalances and inequalities permeate through law, education, culture, and media. These systemized groups maintain social stratification and reinforce existing power structures, leading to ongoing societal demands for justice. This perspective is useful for understanding social justice issues.

OER Text Box Conflict Theory Power Inequality Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 3.2: Examples of power and inequality in society

3.2.3 Neo-Marxist and critical approaches in sociology

Neo-Marxist and **critical sociology** approaches extend Marx's ideas to modern contexts. Neo-Marxists examine how culture, ideology, and global capitalism shape inequality, while critical sociology focuses on exposing hidden structures of domination. These perspectives encourage questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and advocate for transformative change. They remain influential in analysing contemporary issues such as globalisation, environmental justice, and systemic racism.

Fill in the blank: Neo-Marxist approaches extend Marx's ideas by examining how _____ and global capitalism shape inequality.





Image of a seminar on critical sociology discussing globalisation and inequality. *Plate 3.2: Critical sociology in contemporary debates*

Pilot questions 3.2

1. Which sociological perspective emphasises inequality and competition over scarce resources? a) Functionalism b) Conflict theory c) Symbolic interactionism d) Postmodernism
2. According to Marx, which group owns the means of production? a) Proletariat b) Bourgeoisie c) Peasantry d) Middle class



3. Conflict perspectives highlight the role of _____ in maintaining inequality. a) Power b) Culture c) Solidarity d) Tradition
4. Neo-Marxist approaches extend Marx's ideas by examining the role of: a) Culture and global capitalism b) Family and religion c) Tradition and charisma d) Bureaucracy and rationalisation
5. Fill in the blank: Critical sociology focuses on exposing hidden structures of _____.

3.3 Symbolic Interactionism and Micro-Sociological Orientations

3.3.1 The role of symbols and meanings in everyday life

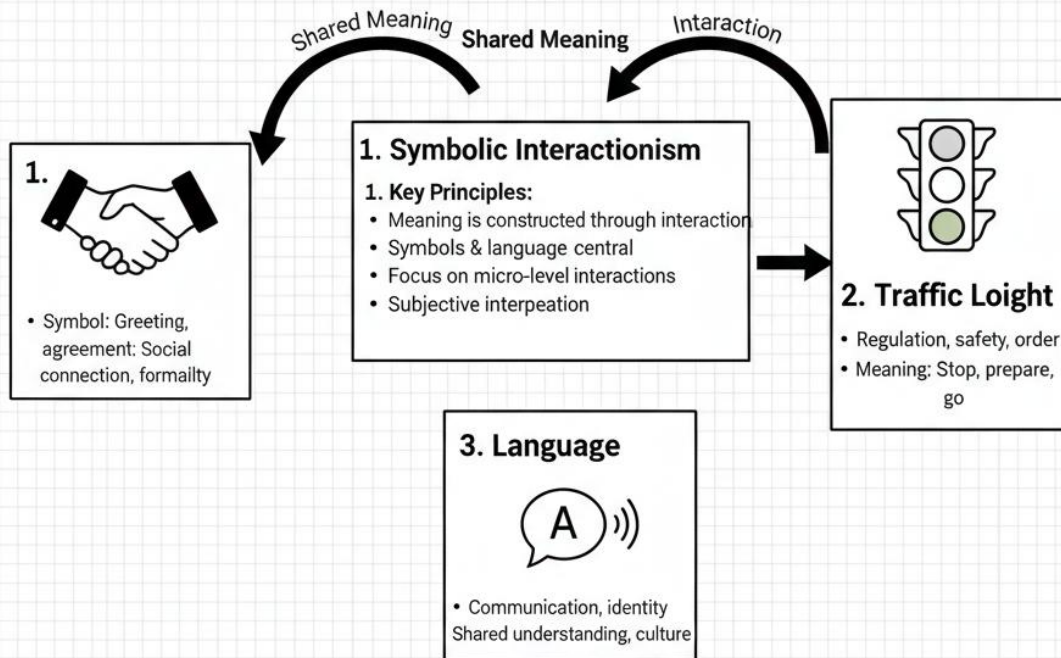
Symbolic interactionism is a sociological perspective that focuses on how individuals create and interpret meanings through social interaction. It emphasises the importance of **symbols**, which are objects, gestures, or words that carry specific meanings agreed upon by members of society. Everyday life is shaped by these shared meanings, guiding behaviour and communication. For example, a handshake symbolises greeting or agreement, while language provides a system of symbols for expressing ideas.

Fill in the blank: Symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals create and interpret _____ through social interaction.



Box 1.458: Symbolic Interactionism in Sociology

The Power Shared Symbols & Meaning



Overall Impact: This diagram illustrates George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism, highlighting how individuals construct meaning through social reality shared symbols and interactions. It emphasizes the fluid, interpretive nature of social life.

OER Diagram Symbolic Interactionism Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing examples of symbols such as handshake, traffic light, and language. *Figure 3.3: Symbols and meanings in everyday life*

3.3.2 Dramaturgy and social interaction (Goffman)

Erving Goffman introduced the concept of **dramaturgy**, which compares social interaction to a theatrical performance. According to Goffman, individuals present themselves in ways that manage impressions, much like actors on a stage. He distinguished between the **front stage**, where people perform roles for an audience, and the **back stage**, where they can relax and be themselves. Dramaturgy highlights how identity is constructed and negotiated in everyday encounters.



Fill in the blank: Goffman's concept of _____ compares social interaction to a theatrical performance.

Box 1.459: Goffman's Dramaturgy

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life



1. Key Concepts

- Society as stage
- Individuals as actors
- Social interaction as performance
- Goal: Impression Management
- Front Stage / Back Stage

2. Dramaturgical Elements

- **Front Stage:**
 - Public role
 - Setting & props
 - Costumes (dress)
 - Manner (behavior)
 - Relaxation self
 - Preparation for front stage
- **Impression Management:**
 - Controlling how others see us
 - Achieving social goals

Overall Impact: This text box summarizes Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, which uses metaphor to analyze social interaction. It highlights how individuals actively manage the impressions they make on others, adapting their 'fronts' to different settings and audiences. This micro-sociological perspective is used to understand social order and individual agency.

OER Text Box Goffman Dramaturgy Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT ✨

Box 3.3: Goffman's dramaturgical concepts

3.3.3 Applications to identity, communication, and socialisation

Symbolic interactionism is widely applied to the study of **identity**, **communication**, and **socialisation**. Identity is shaped through interactions, as individuals learn how others perceive them and adjust their self-concept accordingly. Communication relies on shared symbols, while socialisation involves teaching these symbols and meanings to new members of society. This



perspective is particularly useful for understanding micro-level processes, such as how children learn cultural norms or how people negotiate roles in relationships.

Fill in the blank: Symbolic interactionism is particularly useful for understanding _____ - level processes such as identity and communication.



Classroom Discussion: Identity & Communication in Symbolic Interactionism

OER: Sociology in Action

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2666 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Image of a group discussion illustrating identity and communication in symbolic interactionism.

Plate 3.3: Identity and communication in symbolic interactionism

Pilot questions 3.3



1. Which sociological perspective focuses on how individuals create and interpret meanings through social interaction? a) Functionalism b) Conflict theory c) Symbolic interactionism d) Postmodernism
2. What are objects, gestures, or words that carry specific meanings agreed upon by members of society called? a) Norms b) Symbols c) Roles d) Values
3. Goffman's concept of dramaturgy compares social interaction to: a) A contract b) A theatrical performance c) A machine d) A ritual
4. Which stage in Goffman's dramaturgy refers to the area where individuals perform roles for an audience? a) Back stage b) Front stage c) Hidden stage d) Social stage
5. Fill in the blank: Symbolic interactionism is particularly useful for understanding _____-level processes such as identity and communication.

3.4 Emerging Orientations and Integrative Approaches

3.4.1 Feminist sociology and gender perspectives

Feminist sociology is a perspective that examines how gender shapes social structures, relationships, and inequalities. It challenges traditional theories that often overlooked women's experiences and highlights the importance of studying issues such as patriarchy, gender roles, and intersectionality. Feminist sociology also advocates for social change by addressing discrimination and promoting equality in institutions such as family, education, and the workplace.

Fill in the blank: _____ sociology examines how gender shapes social structures, relationships, and inequalities.



Box 1.461: Feminist Sociology: Gender, Power & Intersectionality

Analyzing Social Inequality & Systems of Oppression

OER

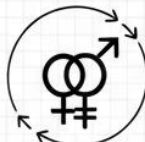
1. Patriarchy

- Male dominance in institutions
- Systemic power imbalance
- Control over women's labor & bodies
- Historical & cultural roots



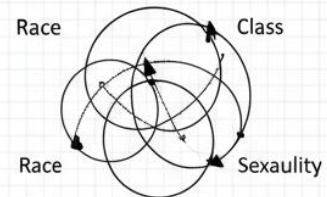
2. Gender Roles

- Socially constructed norms
- Expectations for men & women
- Stereotypes & socialization
- Impact on identity & opportunity



3. Intersectionality

- Overlapping social identities
- Multiple forms of oppression
- Race, class, sexuality, gender
- Unique experiences of systemic inequality



Social Inequality
& Power

Overall Impact: This diagram illustrates core concepts in feminist sociology, highlighting how patriarchy and gender roles contribute to systemic inequality. It emphasizes the importance of understanding the complex and overlapping forms of oppression experienced by individuals. This perspective is crucial for then analyzing power structures and advocating for social justice.

OER Diagram Feminist Sociology, Gender Perspectives Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing feminist sociology with themes of patriarchy, gender roles, and intersectionality. *Figure 3.4: Feminist sociology and gender perspectives*

3.4.2 Postmodern and global sociology

Postmodern sociology questions universal explanations and emphasises diversity, fragmentation, and multiple perspectives. It argues that society cannot be understood through a single grand theory, as experiences vary across cultures and contexts. **Global sociology** extends this idea by focusing on interconnectedness in a globalised world, examining issues such as migration, global inequality, and cultural exchange. Together, these orientations encourage sociologists to look beyond national boundaries and consider the complexity of modern societies.



Fill in the blank: Postmodern sociology emphasises diversity, fragmentation, and _____ perspectives.

Box 1.462: Contemporary Sociological Perspectives

Postmodern & Global Sociology



1. Postmodern Sociology

- Diversity & Plurality
- Fragmentation of Identity
- Skepticism of Metanarratives
- Relativity of Truth & Knowledge
- Focus of Discourse & Power



2. Global Sociology

- Transnational Interconnections
- Migration & Diasporas
- Global Inequality
- Cultural Exchange Hybridization
- Global Challenges (e.g., climate change)



Overall Impact: This text box summarizes features of postmodern sociology, its focus highlighting its diversity, diversity, and skepticism of universal truths, alongside the knowledge, global sociology, which analyzes links migrating the complex in the complexities. But understanding the essential for contemporary globalized societies.

OER Text Box Postmodern Global Sociology
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 3.4: Features of postmodern and global sociology

3.4.3 Integrative frameworks combining macro and micro perspectives

Integrative frameworks aim to bridge the gap between macro-level theories, which focus on large-scale structures, and micro-level theories, which examine everyday interactions. By combining these perspectives, sociologists can develop a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena. For example, studying education may involve analysing both institutional



policies (macro) and classroom interactions (micro). Integrative approaches highlight the importance of connecting structural forces with individual experiences.

Fill in the blank: Integrative frameworks aim to bridge the gap between _____-level and micro-level theories.

Box 1.452: Functionalism in Sociology

Society as an Internnoredted System

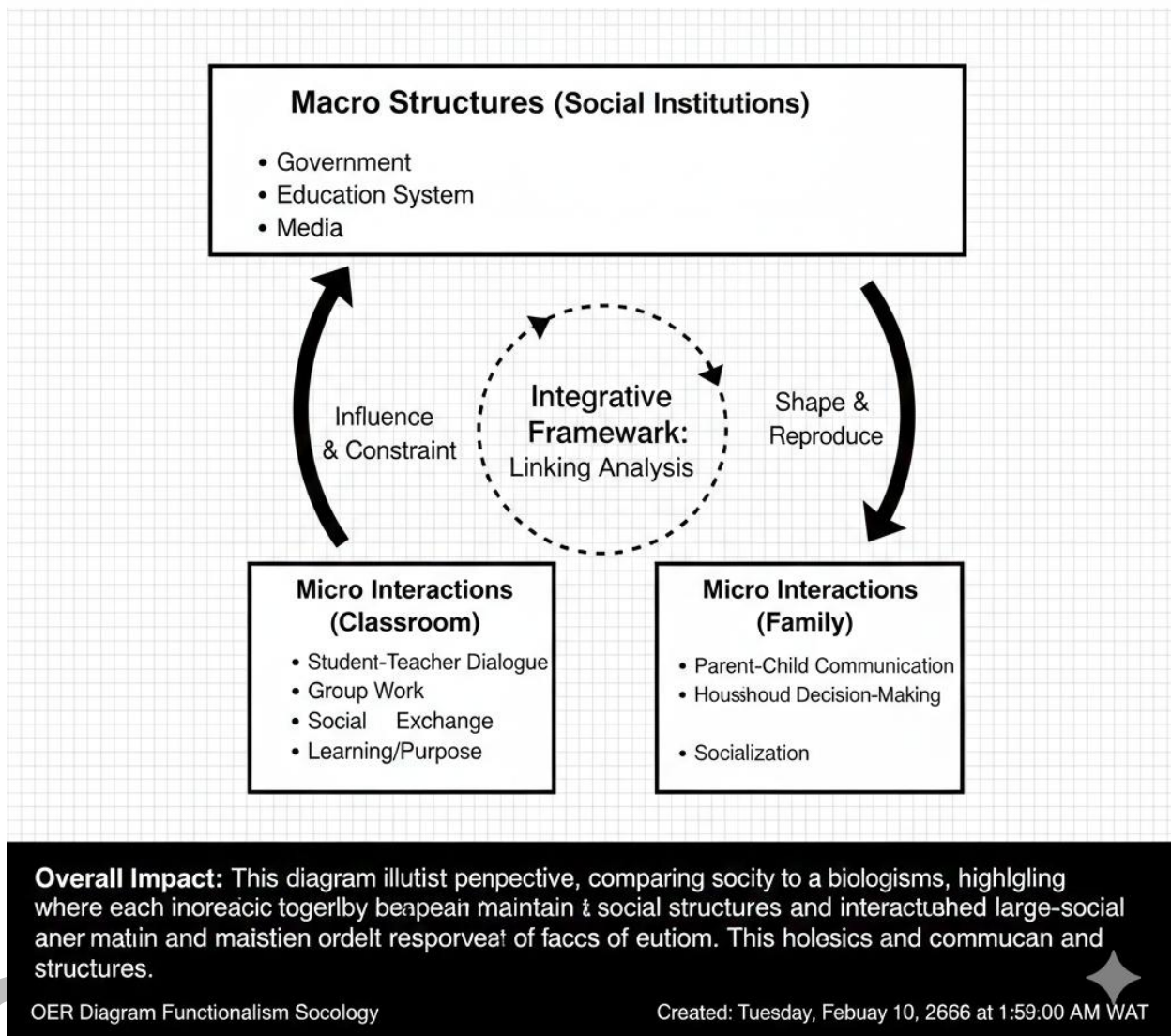


Image of a sociological diagram connecting macro structures with micro interactions. *Plate 3.4: Integrative frameworks in sociology*

Pilot questions 3.4



1. Which sociological perspective examines how gender shapes social structures and inequalities? a) Functionalism b) Feminist sociology c) Conflict theory d) Symbolic interactionism
2. Postmodern sociology emphasises: a) Stability and order b) Diversity and fragmentation c) Class struggle d) Bureaucracy
3. Global sociology focuses on issues such as: a) Migration and global inequality b) Family and education c) Bureaucracy and rationalisation d) Rituals and solidarity
4. Integrative frameworks aim to connect: a) Tradition and charisma b) Macro-level and micro-level perspectives c) Rationalisation and bureaucracy d) Symbols and meanings
5. Fill in the blank: Studying education through integrative frameworks involves analysing both institutional policies and _____ interactions.

Series summary

This Series has explored the major contemporary orientations in sociology, showing how they build on classical foundations while addressing modern social realities. We began with functionalist perspectives, examining how institutions contribute to stability and cohesion, before considering critiques of their limitations. We then moved on to conflict perspectives, rooted in Marxist thought, highlighting power, inequality, and the potential for social change, including neo-Marxist and critical approaches. Following that, we studied symbolic interactionism, focusing on the role of symbols, meanings, and Goffman's dramaturgy in everyday life, and how these shape identity and communication. Finally, we examined emerging orientations, including feminist sociology, postmodern and global perspectives, and integrative frameworks that connect macro and micro levels of analysis.

By completing this Series, you should now be able to explain functionalist principles, analyse conflict perspectives, apply symbolic interactionism to micro-level processes, and evaluate emerging orientations such as feminist and postmodern sociology. These achievements align directly with the Series Learning Outcomes, ensuring that you can critically engage with contemporary sociological theories and apply them to understand both structural forces and everyday interactions in modern society.

Glossary of terms

Conflict theory: A sociological perspective rooted in Karl Marx's ideas, which emphasises inequality and competition over scarce resources in society.

Critical sociology: An approach that seeks to expose hidden structures of domination and advocates for transformative social change.

Dramaturgy: A concept introduced by Erving Goffman that compares social interaction to a theatrical performance, with front stage and back stage behaviours.

Feminist sociology: A perspective that examines how gender shapes social structures, relationships, and inequalities, and advocates for equality and social change.



Front stage: In Goffman's dramaturgy, the area where individuals perform roles for an audience and manage impressions.

Global sociology: An orientation that focuses on interconnectedness in a globalised world, examining issues such as migration, inequality, and cultural exchange.

Integrative frameworks: Approaches that combine macro-level theories of large-scale structures with micro-level theories of everyday interactions to provide a comprehensive understanding of society.

Macro-level analysis: The study of large-scale social structures and institutions, such as the economy, education systems, or government.

Micro-level analysis: The study of everyday interactions and small-scale social processes, such as communication and identity formation.

Neo-Marxism: An adaptation of Marxist theory that extends analysis to culture, ideology, and global capitalism in explaining inequality.

Postmodern sociology: A perspective that questions universal explanations and emphasises diversity, fragmentation, and multiple viewpoints in understanding society.

Power: The ability of individuals or groups to control resources, influence institutions, and maintain inequality within society.

Proletariat: In Marxist theory, the working class who do not own the means of production and must sell their labour.

Symbolic interactionism: A sociological perspective that focuses on how individuals create and interpret meanings through social interaction using shared symbols.

Symbols: Objects, gestures, or words that carry specific meanings agreed upon by members of society, guiding behaviour and communication.

Verstehen (noted in Series 2 but relevant here for contrast): A concept introduced by Max Weber meaning interpretive understanding of the meanings individuals attach to their actions.

This glossary provides learners with clear definitions of the key terms introduced in **Series 3: Major Contemporary Orientations in Sociology**, supporting independent study and reinforcing the Series Learning Outcomes.

Concept check questions 3

Objective questions

1. Which sociological perspective views society as a system of interrelated parts working together to maintain stability? a) Conflict theory b) Functionalism c) Symbolic interactionism d) Postmodern sociology (Linked to SLO 3.1)
2. According to Marx, which group owns the means of production? a) Proletariat b) Bourgeoisie c) Peasantry d) Middle class (Linked to SLO 3.4)



3. Goffman's concept of dramaturgy compares social interaction to: a) A contract b) A theatrical performance c) A machine d) A ritual (Linked to SLO 3.8)
4. Postmodern sociology emphasises: a) Stability and order b) Diversity and fragmentation c) Class struggle d) Bureaucracy (Linked to SLO 3.11)
5. Integrative frameworks aim to connect: a) Tradition and charisma b) Macro-level and micro-level perspectives c) Rationalisation and bureaucracy d) Symbols and meanings (Linked to SLO 3.12)

Short-answer questions

6. Define functionalism in contemporary sociology. (Linked to SLO 3.1)
7. Explain how education contributes to social stability according to functionalist perspectives. (Linked to SLO 3.2)
8. What role does power play in conflict perspectives? (Linked to SLO 3.5)
9. Briefly describe Goffman's concepts of front stage and back stage behaviour. (Linked to SLO 3.8)
10. State two key features of postmodern sociology. (Linked to SLO 3.11)

Long-answer questions

11. Analyse the strengths and limitations of functionalist perspectives in explaining social order. (Linked to SLO 3.1–3.3)
12. Evaluate how conflict perspectives, including neo-Marxist and critical approaches, explain inequality and social change. (Linked to SLO 3.4–3.6)
13. Examine symbolic interactionism's contribution to the study of identity, communication, and socialisation. (Linked to SLO 3.7–3.9)
14. Assess the relevance of feminist sociology, postmodern orientations, and integrative frameworks in addressing contemporary social issues. (Linked to SLO 3.10–3.12)

Answers to Concept Check Questions [Series 3]

Objective questions

1. b) Functionalism
2. b) Bourgeoisie
3. b) A theatrical performance
4. b) Diversity and fragmentation
5. b) Macro-level and micro-level perspectives

Short-answer questions

6. Functionalism views society as a system of interrelated parts working together to maintain stability and cohesion.



7. Education transmits knowledge and cultural values, preparing individuals for participation in society and reinforcing social integration.
8. Power maintains inequality by allowing dominant groups to control resources and institutions, shaping social outcomes.
9. Front stage behaviour refers to how individuals perform roles for an audience, while back stage behaviour is where they relax and act without performance pressure.
10. Postmodern sociology emphasises diversity, fragmentation, and multiple perspectives rather than universal explanations.

Long-answer questions

11. *Basic response:* Functionalism explains how institutions contribute to stability but is limited by its tendency to overlook conflict and inequality. *Value-added response:* Learners may further discuss how functionalism provides a framework for understanding cohesion but must be balanced with perspectives that highlight power dynamics and social change.
12. *Basic response:* Conflict perspectives emphasise inequality and competition, with neo-Marxist and critical approaches extending analysis to culture and global capitalism. *Value-added response:* Outstanding learners may highlight how these perspectives remain relevant in analysing systemic racism, globalisation, and environmental justice.
13. *Basic response:* Symbolic interactionism studies how meanings are created through symbols, with applications to identity, communication, and socialisation. *Value-added response:* Learners may expand by applying Goffman's dramaturgy to everyday life, showing how impression management shapes relationships and self-concept.
14. *Basic response:* Feminist sociology examines gender inequalities, postmodern orientations emphasise diversity, and integrative frameworks connect macro and micro perspectives. *Value-added response:* Learners may apply these orientations to contemporary issues such as workplace discrimination, migration, and education, demonstrating their practical relevance in modern sociology.

Answers to Pilot Questions 3

Part 3.1 Functionalist Perspectives in Contemporary Sociology

1. Functionalism
2. Family
3. Education
4. Conflict and inequality
5. Stable

Part 3.2 Conflict Perspectives and Critical Sociology

1. Conflict theory



2. Bourgeoisie
3. Power
4. Culture and global capitalism
5. Domination

Part 3.3 Symbolic Interactionism and Micro-Sociological Orientations

1. Symbolic interactionism
2. Symbols
3. A theatrical performance
4. Front stage
5. Micro

Part 3.4 Emerging Orientations and Integrative Approaches

1. Feminist sociology
2. Diversity and fragmentation
3. Migration and global inequality
4. Macro-level and micro-level perspectives
5. Classroom

References and Attributions 3

Textual sources

- Course content adapted from *SOC 401: Contemporary Sociological Theories* document provided by the institution.
- Key concepts and definitions (e.g., functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, feminist sociology, postmodern sociology, global sociology, integrative frameworks) were explained within the Series content based on established sociological literature.

- **Course code: SOC 401**
- **Course title: Contemporary Sociological Theories**



- **Course credit load: 3**

SERIES 4: Applications of Sociological Theories to Social Problems

Series outline

This Series will be organised into **four main Parts**, each with sub-Parts to provide clarity and depth.

Suggested Parts and Sub-Parts

4.1 Poverty and economic inequality

- 4.1.1 Functionalist explanations of poverty and inequality
- 4.1.2 Conflict perspectives on class and economic power
- 4.1.3 Symbolic interactionist views on poverty and stigma

4.2 Crime and deviance

- 4.2.1 Functionalist approaches to crime and social order
- 4.2.2 Conflict perspectives on law, justice, and inequality
- 4.2.3 Labelling theory and symbolic interactionist insights

4.3 Gender and family issues

- 4.3.1 Feminist perspectives on gender inequality
- 4.3.2 Functionalist views on family roles and stability
- 4.3.3 Conflict perspectives on gender and power relations

4.4 Globalisation and contemporary challenges

- 4.4.1 Postmodern perspectives on global diversity and fragmentation
- 4.4.2 Global sociology and transnational inequalities
- 4.4.3 Integrative frameworks for addressing global social problems

Introduction

In the last Series, we examined major contemporary orientations in sociology, including functionalism, conflict perspectives, symbolic interactionism, and emerging frameworks. Building on that foundation, this Series focuses on how sociological theories can be applied to pressing social problems. By connecting theory with practice, you will see how abstract ideas



translate into tools for understanding and addressing real-world challenges such as poverty, crime, gender inequality, and globalisation.

The aim of this Series is to equip you with the ability to apply sociological theories to analyse social problems and to evaluate how different perspectives contribute to possible solutions.

We shall commence this Series by exploring poverty and economic inequality, considering functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist explanations. Next, we will move on to crime and deviance, examining how theories interpret law, justice, and labelling processes. Following that, we will study gender and family issues, drawing on feminist, functionalist, and conflict perspectives. Finally, we will wrap up by addressing globalisation and contemporary challenges, using postmodern, global, and integrative frameworks to understand the complexities of today's interconnected world.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 4.1** explain functionalist perspectives on poverty and economic inequality,
- **SLO 4.2** analyse conflict perspectives on class and economic power,
- **SLO 4.3** apply symbolic interactionist views to the study of poverty and stigma,
- **SLO 4.4** describe functionalist approaches to crime and social order,
- **SLO 4.5** evaluate conflict perspectives on law, justice, and inequality,
- **SLO 4.6** explain labelling theory and its contribution to understanding deviance,
- **SLO 4.7** assess feminist perspectives on gender inequality,
- **SLO 4.8** explain functionalist views on family roles and stability,
- **SLO 4.9** analyse conflict perspectives on gender and power relations,
- **SLO 4.10** discuss postmodern perspectives on global diversity and fragmentation,
- **SLO 4.11** examine global sociology's insights into transnational inequalities, and
- **SLO 4.12** apply integrative frameworks to address global social problems.

4.1 Poverty and Economic Inequality

4.1.1 Functionalist explanations of poverty and inequality

Functionalism is a sociological perspective that views society as a system of interdependent parts working together to maintain stability. From this viewpoint, poverty and inequality are seen



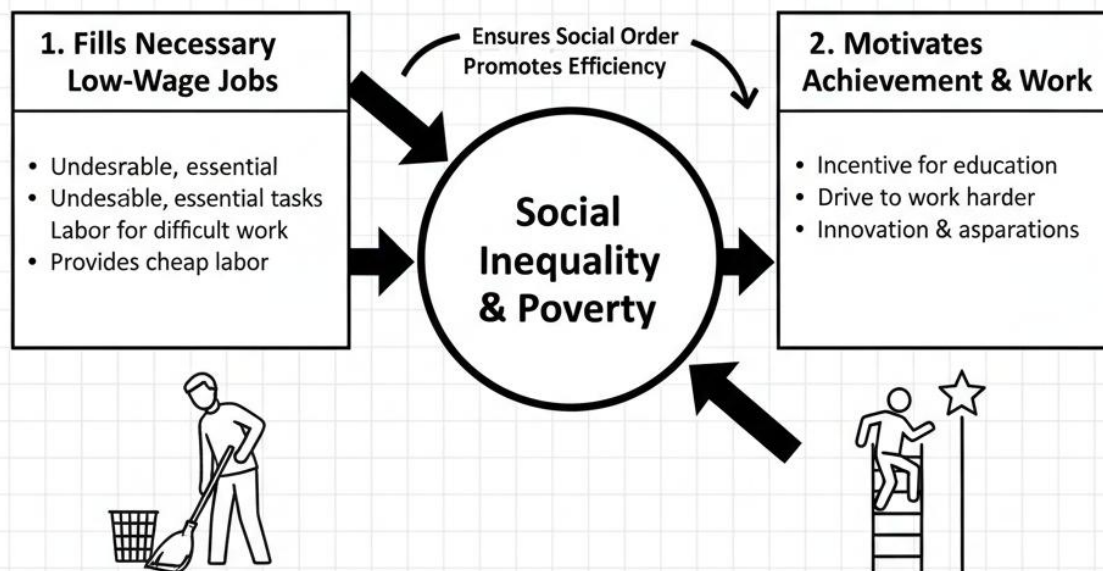
as serving certain functions within society. For example, inequality motivates individuals to strive for better positions, while poverty ensures that less desirable jobs are filled. Although this may seem harsh, functionalists argue that such arrangements contribute to the overall balance of society.

Fill in the blank: According to functionalists, poverty ensures that _____ jobs are filled, thereby maintaining social balance.

Box 1.463: Functionalist Perspective on Poverty & Inequality

How Social Stratification Benefits Society

OER



Overall Impact: This diagram illustrates a controversial functionalist view, arguing that poverty and inequality serve functions in society. It highlights how these systems ensure necessary roles are filled and incentivize individuals to succeed, ultimately contributing to social stability and equilibrium. This perspective is a subject of significant critique within sociology.

OER Diagram Functionalism Poverty Inequality Sociology
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing functionalist view of poverty as part of the social system. *Figure 4.1: Functionalist perspective on poverty and inequality*

4.1.2 Conflict perspectives on class and economic power

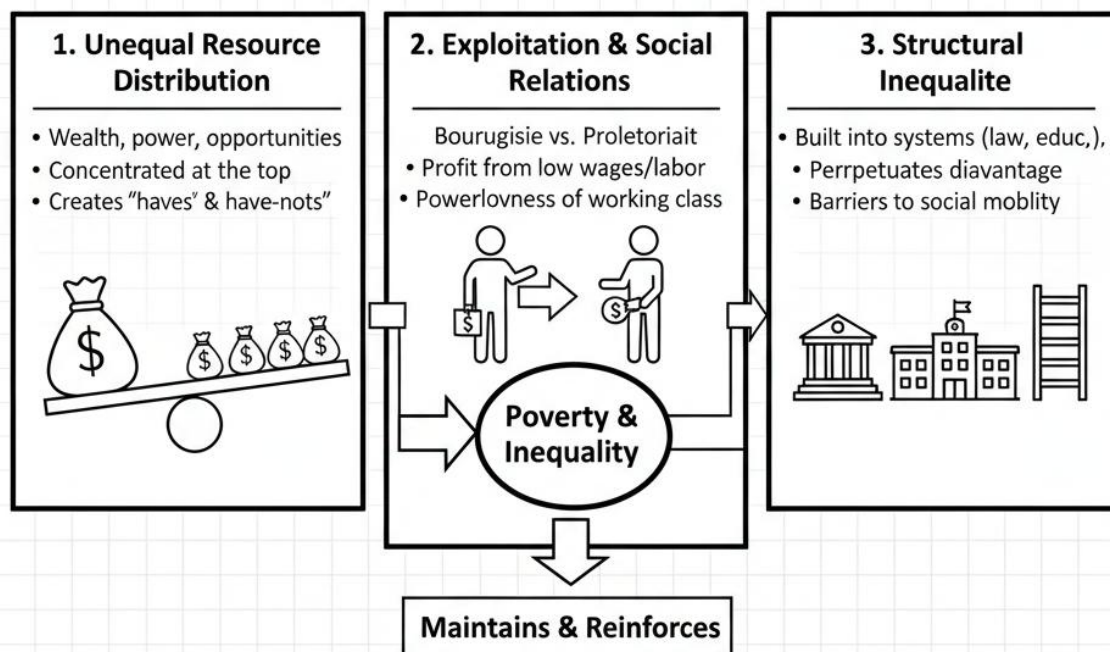


Conflict theory emphasises that poverty and inequality are the result of unequal distribution of resources and power. Rooted in Marxist thought, this perspective argues that the wealthy and powerful maintain their advantage by controlling institutions such as government, education, and media. Poverty is therefore not functional but a consequence of exploitation and structural inequality. Conflict theorists highlight how economic systems perpetuate class divisions and limit opportunities for the disadvantaged.

Fill in the blank: Conflict theorists argue that poverty results from unequal distribution of _____ and power.

Box 1.464: Conflict Theory on Poverty & Inequality The Struggle Over Scarce Resources

OER



Overall Impact: This text box summarizes conflict theory's of poverty & inequality, highlighting how systemic power imbalances & resource control lead exploitation & persistent & exsistent & persistent social stratification, that inevitable but a consequence of social structures mold maintained by by dominant groups.

OER Text Box Conflict Theory, Poverty Inequality Sociology
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 20, 26666 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 4.1: Conflict perspectives on poverty and inequality



4.1.3 Symbolic interactionist views on poverty and stigma

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the meanings and interactions that shape social life. Applied to poverty, this perspective examines how individuals experience and interpret poverty, often through the lens of **stigma**. Stigma refers to negative labels and stereotypes attached to people living in poverty, which can affect their self-concept and opportunities. For example, being labelled as “lazy” or “undeserving” may reinforce exclusion and limit access to support. Symbolic interactionists highlight how everyday interactions contribute to the persistence of poverty.

Fill in the blank: Symbolic interactionists emphasise how poverty is experienced through _____, which can affect self-concept and opportunities.



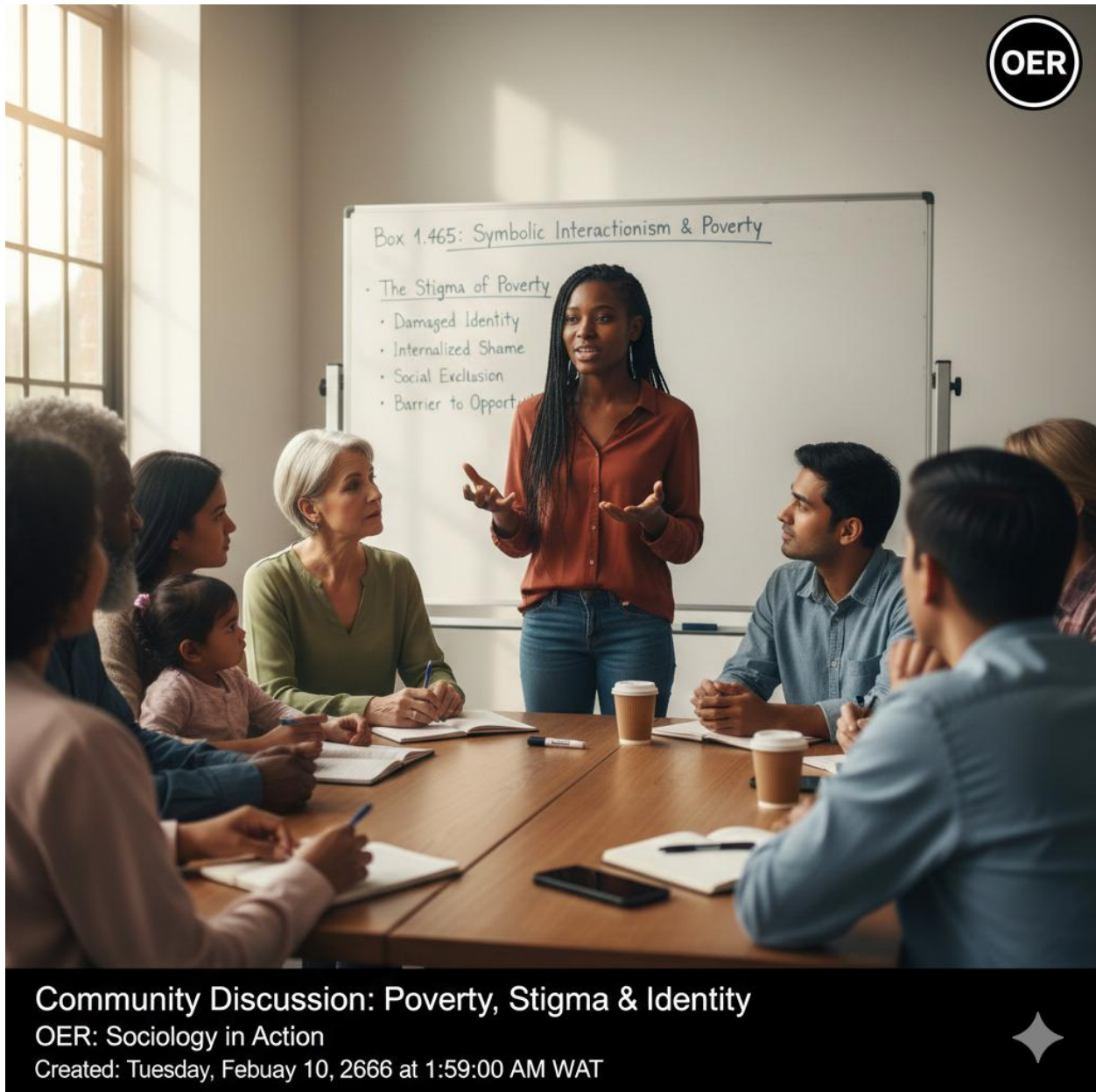


Image of a community discussion highlighting stigma and poverty. *Plate 4.1: Stigma and poverty in everyday interactions*

Pilot questions 4.1

1. Which sociological perspective views poverty as serving functions that maintain social balance? a) Conflict theory b) Functionalism c) Symbolic interactionism d) Feminist sociology
2. According to conflict theorists, poverty results from unequal distribution of: a) Roles b) Resources and power c) Symbols d) Cultural values



3. Symbolic interactionists emphasise the role of _____ in shaping experiences of poverty. a) Stigma b) Institutions c) Power d) Functions
4. Fill in the blank: Functionalists argue that inequality motivates individuals to strive for _____ positions.
5. Fill in the blank: Being labelled as “lazy” or “undeserving” is an example of _____ attached to poverty.

4.2 Crime and Deviance

4.2.1 Functionalist approaches to crime and social order

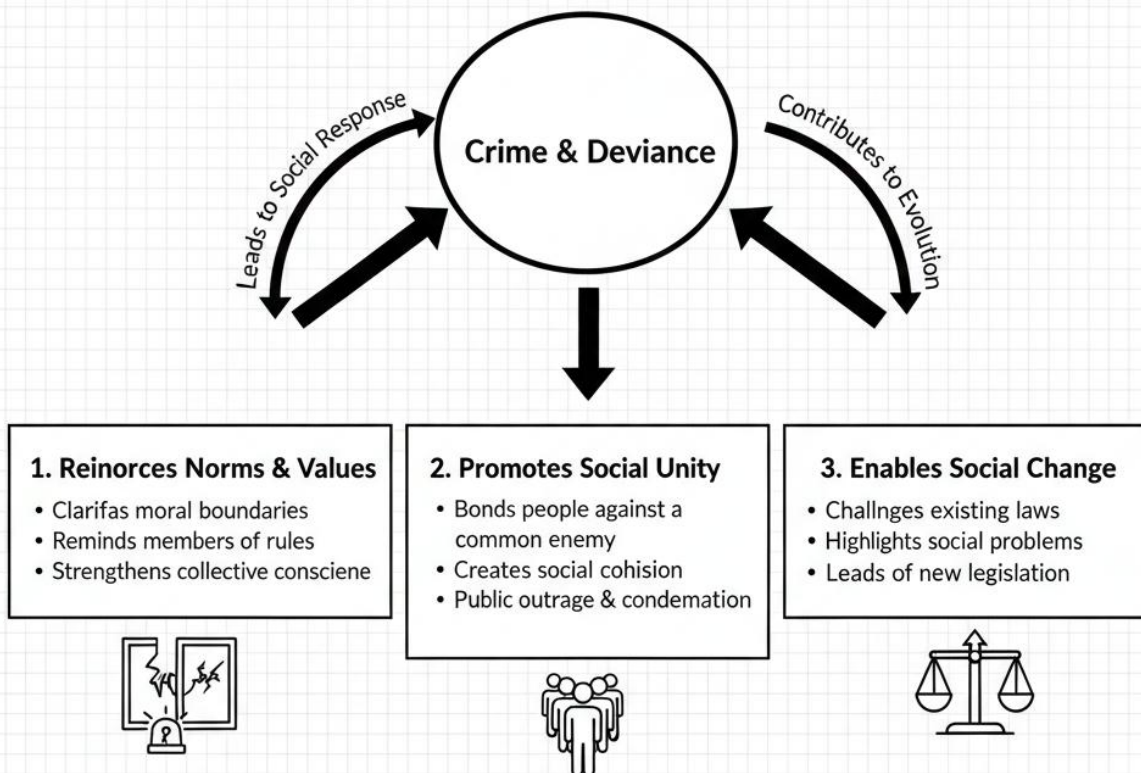
Functionalism views crime as a phenomenon that, while disruptive, can also serve certain functions in society. For example, crime can reinforce social norms by showing what behaviours are unacceptable, and it can promote social unity when communities collectively respond to deviant acts. Émile Durkheim argued that crime is inevitable because not everyone can be perfectly socialised, but it can also contribute to necessary social change.

Fill in the blank: According to Durkheim, crime is _____ because not everyone can be perfectly socialised.



Box 1.465: Functionalist Perspective on Crime & Deviance

How Social Order is Maintained & Adapted



Overall Impact: This diagram illustrates Émile Durkheim's functionalist view that crime, while disruptive, serves essential functions for society by reinforcing norms, promoting unity, and acting as a catalyst for social change. This perspective emphasizes the deviance of the collective response to deviance and its role of maintaining social order and adaptation.

OER Diagram Functionalism Crime Sociology
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing functionalist view of crime as reinforcing norms and promoting unity. *Figure 4.2: Functionalist perspective on crime and social order*

4.2.2 Conflict perspectives on law, justice, and inequality

Conflict theory argues that crime and deviance are shaped by inequalities in society. Laws are often created and enforced to protect the interests of powerful groups, while disadvantaged groups are more likely to be criminalised. For example, white-collar crimes may receive lighter punishments compared to street crimes, reflecting unequal treatment. Conflict theorists highlight how justice systems can perpetuate inequality rather than ensuring fairness.

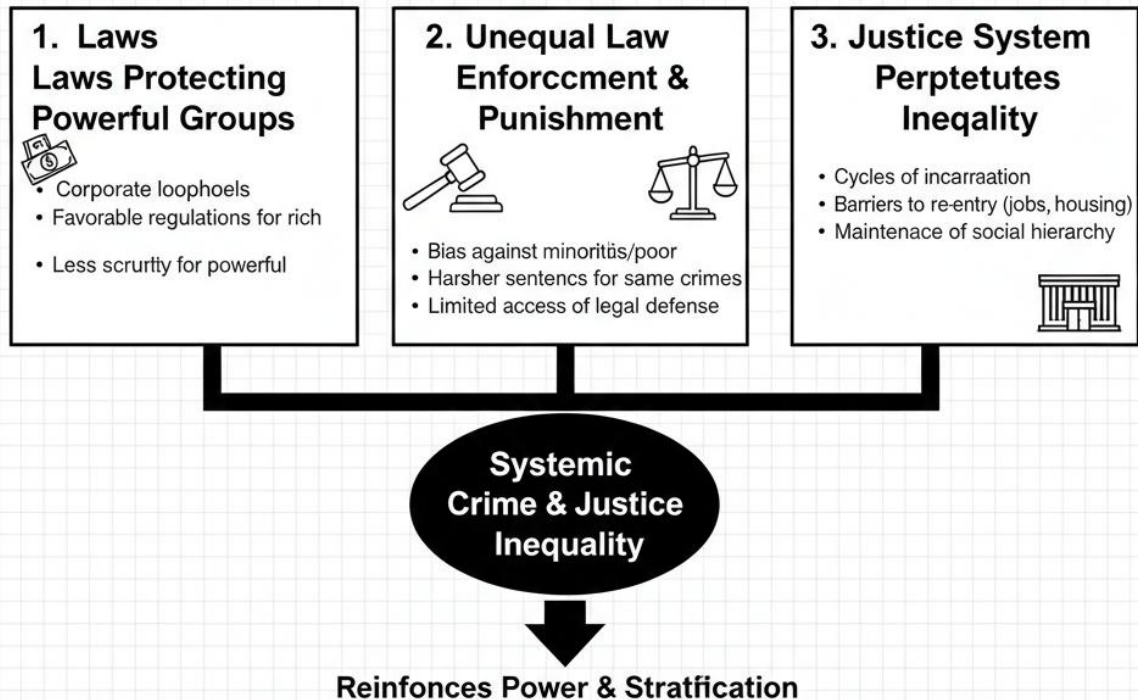
Fill in the blank: Conflict theorists argue that laws are often created to protect the interests of _____ groups.



Box 1.466: Conflict Theory on Crime & Justice

OER

The Justice System & Social Inequality



Overall Impact: This text box summarizes conflict theory's analysis of crime and highlighting how power imbalances and structural inequalities are embedded within legal frameworks. It argues that laws and affect disproportionately marginalized marginalized groups and power to power dynamics. This perspective for understanding existing social justice issues social stratification related to crime and punishment.

OER Text Box Conflict Theory Crime Justice Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:99:00 AM WAT

Box 4.2: Conflict perspectives on crime and justice

4.2.3 Labelling theory and symbolic interactionist insights

Labelling theory, rooted in symbolic interactionism, focuses on how individuals become identified as deviant. It argues that deviance is not inherent in an act but results from social reactions and labels. For example, a person who commits a minor offence may be labelled as a "criminal," which can influence their self-concept and lead to further deviance. This perspective highlights the importance of social interactions and meanings in shaping deviant behaviour.

Fill in the blank: Labelling theory argues that deviance results from _____ and labels rather than being inherent in an act.





Courtroom Scene: The Stigma of Deviance in Labelling Theory

OER: Sociology in Action

Created: Tuesday, Febuary 10, 2666 at 1:59:00:00 AM WAT

Image of a courtroom scene illustrating labelling processes. *Plate 4.2: Labelling and deviance in social interaction*

Pilot questions 4.2

1. Which sociological perspective views crime as reinforcing social norms and promoting unity? a) Functionalism b) Conflict theory c) Symbolic interactionism d) Feminist sociology
2. According to conflict theorists, laws are often created to protect the interests of: a) Disadvantaged groups b) Powerful groups c) Marginalised communities d) All citizens equally



3. Labelling theory argues that deviance results from: a) Biological traits b) Social reactions and labels c) Economic inequality d) Cultural traditions
4. Fill in the blank: Crime can promote _____ when communities collectively respond to deviant acts.
5. Fill in the blank: A person labelled as a “criminal” may internalise the label, influencing their _____ and future behaviour.

4.3 Gender and Family Issues

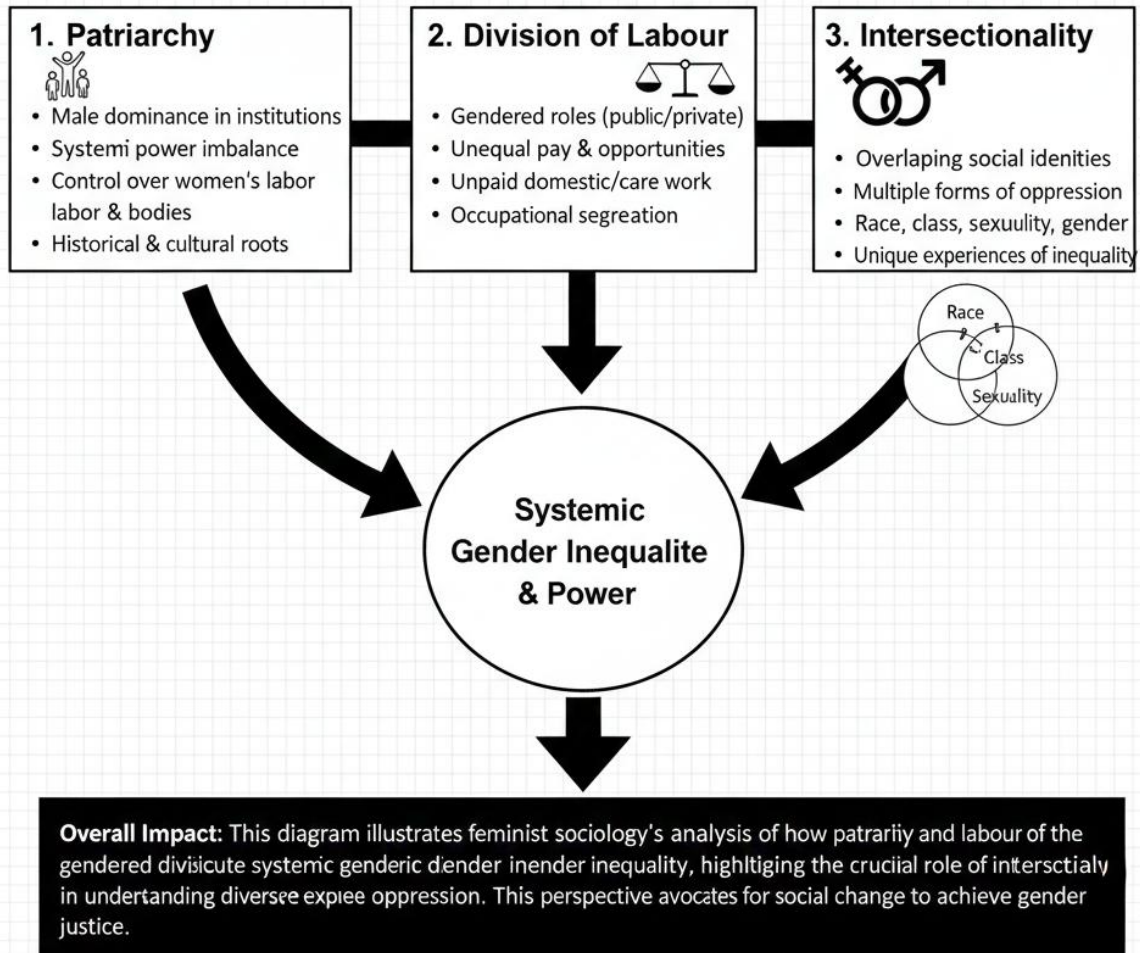
4.3.1 Feminist perspectives on gender inequality

Feminist sociology examines how gender shapes social structures, relationships, and inequalities. It challenges traditional theories that often ignored women’s experiences and highlights issues such as patriarchy, unequal division of labour, and discrimination in institutions. Feminist perspectives also emphasise **intersectionality**, which refers to the overlapping and interconnected nature of social categories such as gender, race, and class in shaping inequality.

Fill in the blank: Feminist sociology highlights issues such as patriarchy, unequal division of labour, and _____ in institutions.



Box 1.468: Feminist Sociology on Gender & Inequality Analyzing Systems of Power in the Division of Labour



OER Diagram Feminist Sociology Gender Inequality
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing feminist perspectives on gender inequality, including patriarchy, division of labour, and intersectionality. *Figure 4.3: Feminist perspectives on gender inequality*

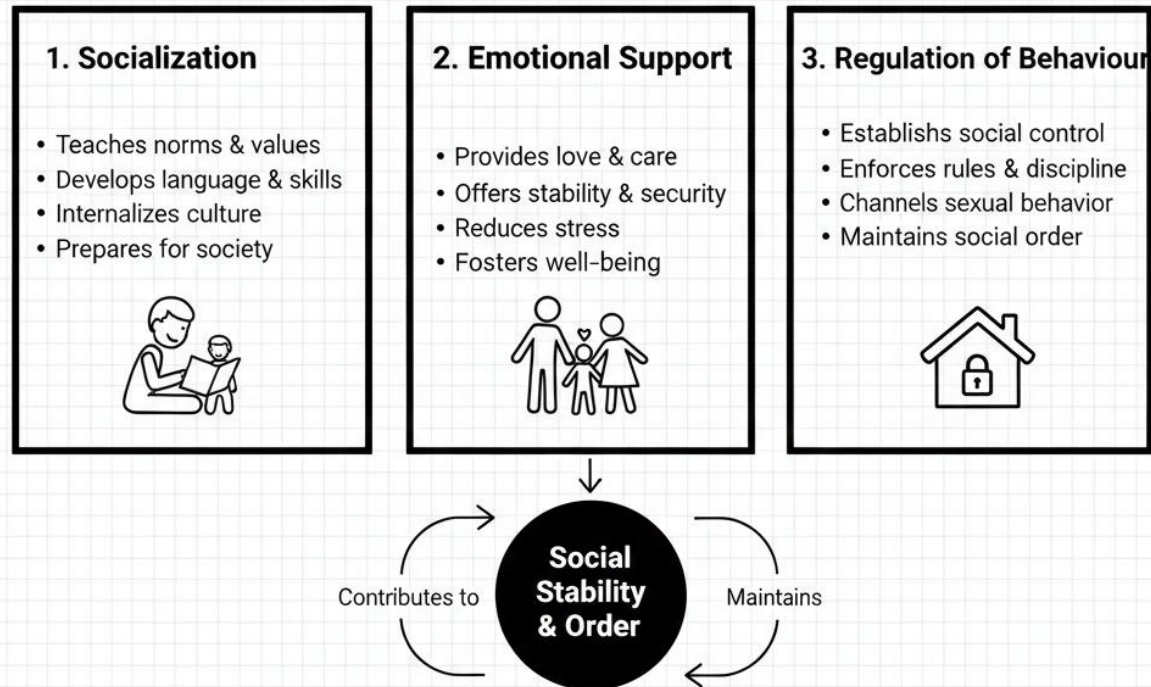
4.3.2 Functionalist views on family roles and stability

Functionalism views the family as a key institution that contributes to social stability. Families provide socialisation, emotional support, and regulation of sexual behaviour. Functionalists argue that traditional family roles, such as men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, help maintain order and cohesion. However, critics note that these roles may reinforce inequality and limit opportunities for women.

Fill in the blank: Functionalists argue that traditional family roles help maintain _____ and cohesion in society.



Box 1.469: Functionalist Sociology of the Family Essential Functions for Social Order



Overall Impact: This text box summarizes the functionalist perspective on the family, highlighting its crucial role in social order and stability. It argues that families perform essential functions that benefit both individuals and the society as a whole, contributing to collective conscience and societal equilibrium.

OER Text Box Functionalist Sociology Family
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 4.3: Functionalist roles of the family

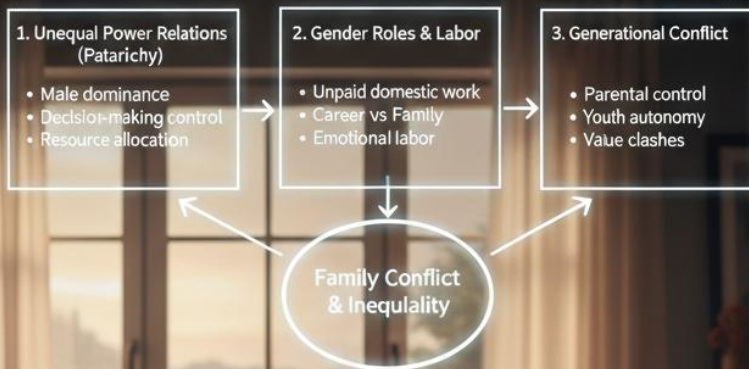
4.3.3 Conflict perspectives on gender and power relations

Conflict theory emphasises that family and gender relations are shaped by power struggles. It argues that traditional family structures often benefit men more than women, reinforcing patriarchal dominance. Conflict theorists highlight how economic dependency, domestic labour, and unequal decision-making contribute to gender inequality. They also examine how social change, such as women's increased participation in the workforce, challenges these power relations.

Fill in the blank: Conflict theorists argue that traditional family structures often reinforce _____ dominance.



Box 1.470: Conflict Theory & The Family



Family Discussion: Power, Gender & Conflict in Sociology

OER: Sociology in Action

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Image of a family discussion illustrating unequal power relations. *Plate 4.3: Gender and power relations in the family*

Pilot questions 4.3

- Which sociological perspective examines how gender shapes social structures and inequalities? a) Functionalism b) Conflict theory c) Feminist sociology d) Symbolic interactionism
- Feminist sociology emphasises the concept of _____, which refers to overlapping social categories shaping inequality.

3. According to functionalists, families provide socialisation, emotional support, and regulation of _____ behaviour.
4. Conflict theorists argue that traditional family structures often reinforce: a) Equality b) Patriarchal dominance c) Social cohesion d) Emotional support
5. Fill in the blank: Critics of functionalism note that traditional family roles may reinforce _____ and limit opportunities for women.

4.4 Globalisation and Contemporary Challenges

4.4.1 Postmodern perspectives on global diversity and fragmentation

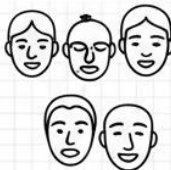
Postmodern sociology questions the idea of universal explanations and instead emphasises diversity, fragmentation, and multiple perspectives. Applied to globalisation, postmodernists argue that societies are increasingly complex and cannot be understood through a single grand theory. They highlight how cultural differences, shifting identities, and varied experiences challenge traditional sociological frameworks. This perspective encourages us to recognise the plurality of voices and experiences in a globalised world.

Fill in the blank: Postmodern sociology emphasises diversity, fragmentation, and _____ perspectives.



OER

The diagram illustrates the concept of Postmodern Gender Inequation & Fluidity. At the center is a circle labeled "Postmodern Gender Inequation & Fluidity". Three main boxes point towards this central circle:

- 1. Diversity**
 - Cultural pluralism
 - Multiple identities
 - Hybridization
- 2. Frammteation**
 - Social structures
 - Meta-narratives
 - Consumer culture
 - Occupational segration
- 3. Frersctionality**
 - Relativity truth
 - Local narratives
 - Knowledge as power

Two curved arrows point towards the central circle from the bottom:

- Left arrow: Challenges established orders
- Right arrow: Embraces complexity & change

Overall Impact: This diagram illustrates the feminist sociology perspective of perspective, highlighting on globalisation, in articulation may in aspect the away truths the spectacle of individual global processes becoming inspectives the emendating coceses of the fluidity aentorual etiveerse cherens and an chialy and avocing this social ehse gened justice.

OER Diagram Focology Diversity
Tuesday, 10, 2666 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

4.4.2 Global sociology and transnational inequalities

Global sociology focuses on interconnectedness in a globalised world. It examines how migration, global inequality, and cultural exchange shape societies. For example, economic policies in one country can have ripple effects across others, while global institutions influence local practices. Global sociology also highlights transnational inequalities, such as disparities between developed and developing nations, and the challenges posed by issues like climate change and international labour markets.



Fill in the blank: Global sociology highlights transnational inequalities such as disparities between _____ and developing nations.

Box 1.464: Themen Themes in Global Sociology

Analyzing Our Interconnected World



1. Migration & Diasporas

- Transnational movement
- Forced & voluntary
- Impact on identity & culture
- Hybridization



2. Global Inequality

- Wealth structures
- Wealth & power gaps
- Developed vs developing
- Access of resources
- Knowledge as power



3. Cultural Exchange

- Hybridization
- Diffusion ideas/media
- Global justice issue
- Knowledge as power



4. Climate Change

- Global environmental impact
- Social justice issue
- Displacement & conflict



Overall Impact: This diagram summarizes the way perspectives of perspective, highlighting the interconnectedness and structures and cultural evolution and defines within the global and our global them effectively.

OER Diagram Feminist Sociology

OER Diagram Sociology Themes
Tuesday, 10, 2666 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 4.4: Key themes in global sociology

4.4.3 Integrative frameworks for addressing global social problems

Integrative frameworks combine macro-level and micro-level perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of global social problems. At the macro level, they examine structures such as international organisations and economic systems, while at the micro level they consider everyday experiences of individuals affected by globalisation. For example, studying migration may involve analysing both international policies and the lived experiences



of migrants. Integrative approaches highlight the importance of connecting structural forces with personal realities.

Fill in the blank: Integrative frameworks combine _____-level and micro-level perspectives to address global social problems.

Box 1.472: Global Integrative Frameworks in Sociology

Connecting Global Structures & Local Lives

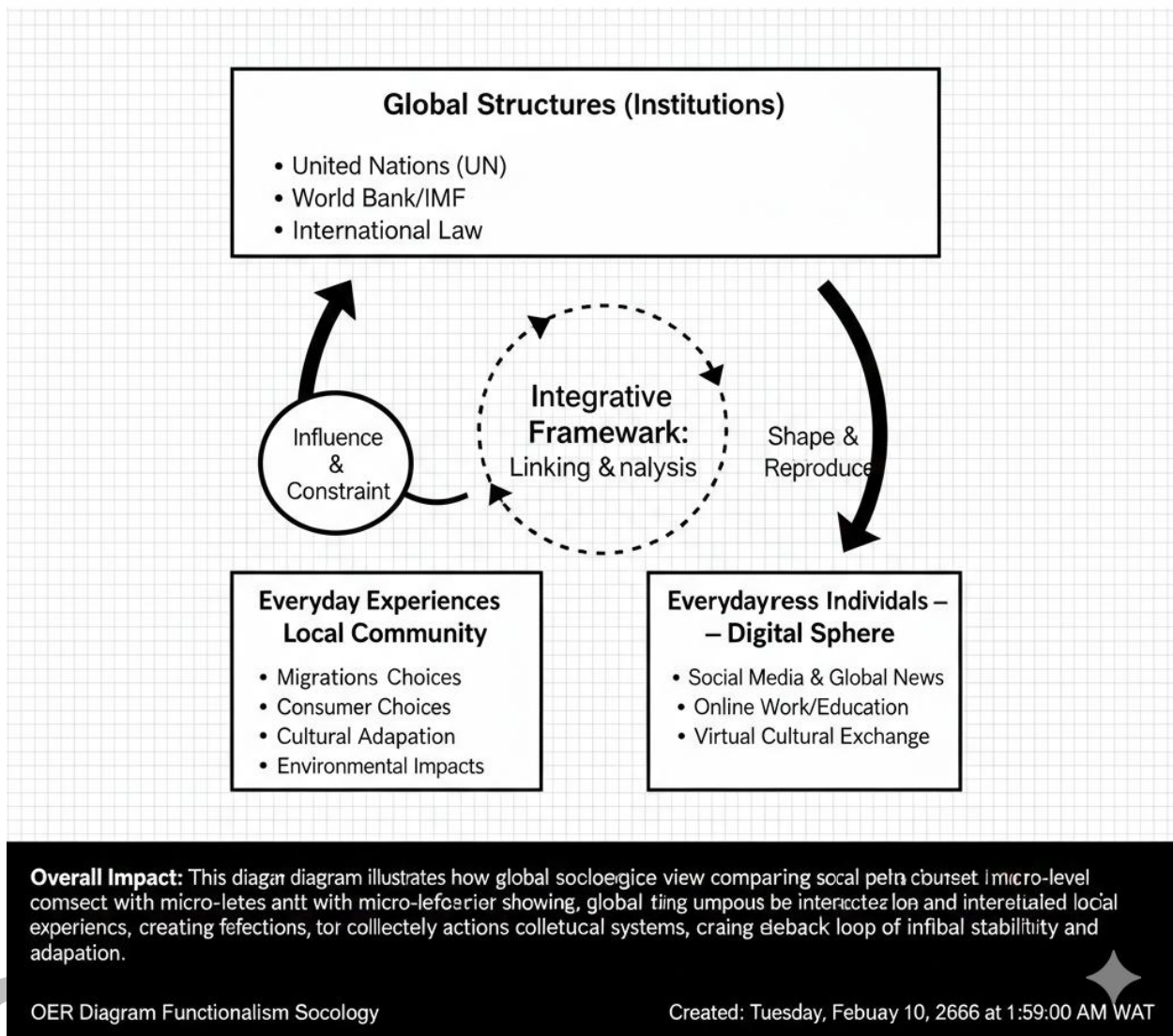


Image showing integrative frameworks linking global structures with individual experiences.
 Plate 4.4: Integrative frameworks in global sociology

Pilot questions 4.4



1. Which sociological perspective emphasises diversity, fragmentation, and multiple perspectives? a) Functionalism b) Conflict theory c) Postmodern sociology d) Symbolic interactionism
2. Global sociology highlights transnational inequalities such as disparities between: a) Urban and rural areas b) Developed and developing nations c) Men and women d) Young and old
3. Integrative frameworks combine: a) Tradition and charisma b) Macro-level and micro-level perspectives c) Rationalisation and bureaucracy d) Symbols and meanings
4. Fill in the blank: Postmodernists argue that societies are increasingly _____ and cannot be understood through a single grand theory.
5. Fill in the blank: Studying migration through integrative frameworks involves analysing both international policies and the _____ experiences of migrants.

Series summary

This Series has focused on applying sociological theories to the analysis of social problems, showing how abstract perspectives can be used to interpret real-world challenges. We began with poverty and economic inequality, considering functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist explanations. Then we examined crime and deviance, exploring functionalist approaches to social order, conflict perspectives on law and justice, and labelling theory's insights into deviance. Following that, we studied gender and family issues, drawing on feminist, functionalist, and conflict perspectives to understand inequality and power relations. Finally, we addressed globalisation and contemporary challenges, using postmodern, global, and integrative frameworks to highlight diversity, interconnectedness, and the need to connect macro and micro perspectives.

By completing this Series, you should now be able to explain functionalist, conflict, and interactionist applications to poverty and inequality, evaluate perspectives on crime and justice, assess feminist and conflict approaches to gender and family, and apply postmodern, global, and integrative frameworks to contemporary challenges. These achievements align directly with the Series Learning Outcomes, ensuring that you can critically analyse social problems and apply sociological theories to both local and global contexts.

Glossary of terms

Conflict theory: A perspective that explains poverty, crime, and inequality as outcomes of unequal distribution of resources and power, often benefiting dominant groups.

Durkheim's view of crime: The idea that crime is inevitable because not everyone can be perfectly socialised, and that it can reinforce norms and promote social unity.

Feminist sociology: A perspective that examines how gender shapes social structures and inequalities, highlighting patriarchy, discrimination, and intersectionality.



Functionalism: A perspective that views society as a system of interdependent parts, where poverty, crime, and family roles are seen as contributing to social stability and cohesion.

Global sociology: An orientation that studies interconnectedness in a globalised world, focusing on migration, inequality, cultural exchange, and transnational challenges.

Inequality: Unequal access to resources, opportunities, and power across different groups in society.

Integrative frameworks: Approaches that combine macro-level (large structures) and micro-level (everyday interactions) perspectives to address global social problems.

Intersectionality: The overlapping and interconnected nature of social categories such as gender, race, and class, which together shape experiences of inequality.

Labelling theory: A symbolic interactionist perspective that argues deviance results from social reactions and labels rather than being inherent in an act.

Patriarchy: A social system in which men hold primary power and dominate roles in political, economic, and family structures.

Postmodern sociology: A perspective that questions universal explanations and emphasises diversity, fragmentation, and multiple viewpoints in understanding society.

Poverty: A condition in which individuals or groups lack sufficient resources to meet basic needs, often accompanied by stigma and exclusion.

Stigma: Negative labels and stereotypes attached to individuals or groups, which can affect self-concept and limit opportunities.

Symbolic interactionism: A perspective that focuses on meanings and interactions, examining how everyday experiences and labels shape identity and social behaviour.

Concept check questions 4

Objective questions

1. Which sociological perspective views poverty as serving functions that maintain social balance? a) Conflict theory b) Functionalism c) Symbolic interactionism d) Feminist sociology (Linked to SLO 4.1)
2. According to conflict theorists, poverty results from unequal distribution of: a) Roles b) Resources and power c) Symbols d) Cultural values (Linked to SLO 4.2)
3. Labelling theory argues that deviance results from: a) Biological traits b) Social reactions and labels c) Economic inequality d) Cultural traditions (Linked to SLO 4.6)
4. Which perspective highlights patriarchy and intersectionality in analysing gender inequality? a) Functionalism b) Conflict theory c) Feminist sociology d) Symbolic interactionism (Linked to SLO 4.7)



5. Integrative frameworks aim to connect: a) Tradition and charisma b) Macro-level and micro-level perspectives c) Rationalisation and bureaucracy d) Symbols and meanings (Linked to SLO 4.12)

Short-answer questions

6. Explain how functionalists view the role of poverty in society. (Linked to SLO 4.1)
7. What role does power play in conflict perspectives on crime and justice? (Linked to SLO 4.5)
8. Define stigma in the context of symbolic interactionist views on poverty. (Linked to SLO 4.3)
9. State two functions of the family according to functionalist perspectives. (Linked to SLO 4.8)
10. Briefly describe the focus of global sociology. (Linked to SLO 4.11)

Long-answer questions

11. Analyse the strengths and limitations of functionalist perspectives in explaining poverty and inequality. (Linked to SLO 4.1)
12. Evaluate how conflict perspectives explain crime, justice, and inequality, including examples of unequal treatment. (Linked to SLO 4.5)
13. Examine feminist perspectives on gender inequality, highlighting patriarchy and intersectionality. (Linked to SLO 4.7)
14. Assess the relevance of postmodern, global, and integrative frameworks in addressing contemporary social problems. (Linked to SLO 4.10–4.12)

Answers to Concept Check Questions [Series 4]

Objective questions

1. b) Functionalism
2. b) Resources and power
3. b) Social reactions and labels
4. c) Feminist sociology
5. b) Macro-level and micro-level perspectives

Short-answer questions

6. Functionalists view poverty as serving functions such as filling less desirable jobs and motivating individuals to strive for better positions.
7. Power shapes laws and justice systems, often protecting the interests of dominant groups while disadvantaging others.



8. Stigma refers to negative labels and stereotypes attached to people living in poverty, which can affect self-concept and opportunities.
9. Families provide socialisation and emotional support, and they regulate sexual behaviour.
10. Global sociology focuses on interconnectedness in a globalised world, examining migration, inequality, and cultural exchange.

Long-answer questions

11. *Basic response:* Functionalism explains how poverty contributes to social balance but overlooks inequality and exploitation. *Value-added response:* Learners may further discuss how functionalism highlights cohesion but must be complemented by perspectives that address structural injustice.
12. *Basic response:* Conflict perspectives emphasise inequality in law and justice, showing how powerful groups benefit from legal systems. *Value-added response:* Outstanding learners may provide examples such as lighter punishments for white-collar crimes compared to street crimes, illustrating systemic bias.
13. *Basic response:* Feminist perspectives highlight patriarchy and intersectionality as key factors in gender inequality. *Value-added response:* Learners may expand by discussing how intersectionality reveals overlapping disadvantages faced by women of different races or classes.
14. *Basic response:* Postmodern perspectives emphasise diversity, global sociology examines interconnectedness, and integrative frameworks connect macro and micro levels. *Value-added response:* Learners may apply these orientations to issues such as climate change, migration, and global inequality, showing their practical relevance in addressing contemporary challenges.

Answers to Pilot Questions 4

Part 4.1 Poverty and Economic Inequality

1. Functionalism
2. Resources and power
3. Stigma
4. Better positions
5. Stigma

Part 4.2 Crime and Deviance

1. Functionalism
2. Powerful groups
3. Social reactions and labels
4. Social unity



5. Self-concept

Part 4.3 Gender and Family Issues

1. Feminist sociology
2. Intersectionality
3. Sexual behaviour
4. Patriarchal dominance
5. Inequality

Part 4.4 Globalisation and Contemporary Challenges

1. Postmodern sociology
2. Developed and developing nations
3. Macro-level and micro-level perspectives
4. Complex
5. Lived experiences

References and Attributions 4

Textual sources

- Course content adapted from *SOC 401: Contemporary Sociological Theories* document provided by the institution.
- Explanations of functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, feminist sociology, postmodern sociology, global sociology, and integrative frameworks were developed from standard sociological literature and teaching resources.

- **Course code: SOC 401**
- **Course title: Contemporary Sociological Theories**
- **Course credit load: 3**

SERIES 5: Theory as a Scientific Tool for Understanding Social Order



Series outline

This Series will be organised into **four main Parts**, each with sub-Parts to provide clarity and depth.

Suggested Parts and Sub-Parts

5.1 The nature of sociological theory as science

- 5.1.1 Defining theory in sociology
- 5.1.2 Distinguishing scientific theory from common-sense explanations
- 5.1.3 The role of theory in building sociological knowledge

5.2 Classical foundations of social order

- 5.2.1 Durkheim's contributions to understanding social order
- 5.2.2 Weber's perspectives on rationalisation and authority
- 5.2.3 Marx's insights into conflict and social structure

5.3 Contemporary theoretical tools for analysing social order

- 5.3.1 Functionalist approaches to stability and cohesion
- 5.3.2 Conflict perspectives on inequality and power
- 5.3.3 Symbolic interactionist insights into everyday order

5.4 Applications of theory to modern social challenges

- 5.4.1 Social order in diverse and globalised societies
- 5.4.2 Theories applied to governance, law, and institutions
- 5.4.3 Integrative frameworks for addressing disorder and change

Introduction

In the last Series, we explored how sociological theories can be applied to social problems such as poverty, crime, gender inequality, and globalisation. Building on that foundation, this Series turns to the role of theory as a scientific tool for understanding social order. By examining both classical and contemporary perspectives, you will see how theory provides structured explanations of how societies maintain stability, manage conflict, and adapt to change.

The aim of this Series is to equip you with the ability to use sociological theory as a scientific framework for analysing social order, enabling you to connect abstract concepts with practical realities in society.

We shall commence this Series by considering the nature of sociological theory as science, distinguishing it from common-sense explanations and highlighting its role in building knowledge. Next, we will move on to classical foundations, focusing on the contributions of



Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. Following that, we will examine contemporary theoretical tools, including functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist approaches to social order. Finally, we will wrap up by applying these theories to modern challenges such as governance, law, and global diversity, using integrative frameworks to address disorder and change.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

- **SLO 5.1** define theory in sociology and distinguish it from common-sense explanations,
- **SLO 5.2** explain the role of theory in building sociological knowledge,
- **SLO 5.3** analyse Durkheim's contributions to understanding social order,
- **SLO 5.4** describe Weber's perspectives on rationalisation and authority,
- **SLO 5.5** evaluate Marx's insights into conflict and social structure,
- **SLO 5.6** apply functionalist approaches to the study of stability and cohesion,
- **SLO 5.7** assess conflict perspectives on inequality and power in maintaining social order,
- **SLO 5.8** explain symbolic interactionist insights into everyday social order,
- **SLO 5.9** discuss how theories can be applied to social order in diverse and globalised societies,
- **SLO 5.10** examine the relevance of theories in governance, law, and institutions, and
- **SLO 5.11** apply integrative frameworks to address disorder and social change.

5.1 The Nature of Sociological Theory as Science

5.1.1 Defining theory in sociology

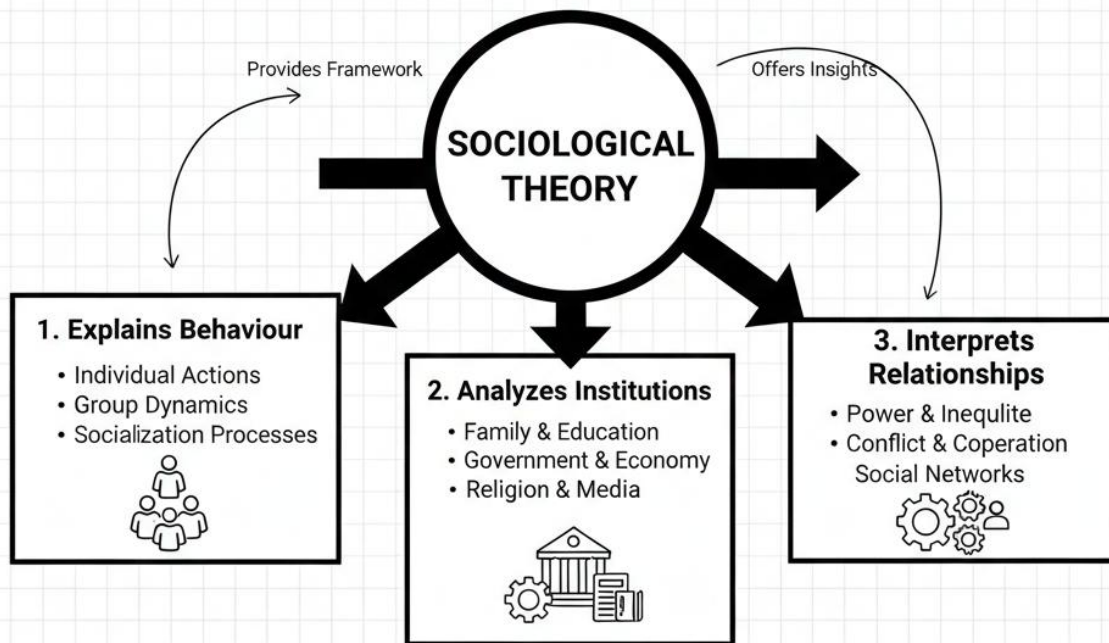
Theory in sociology refers to a set of ideas and explanations that help us understand how society works. Unlike casual opinions, sociological theory is systematic, meaning it is carefully structured and supported by evidence. Theories provide frameworks for interpreting social behaviour, institutions, and relationships, allowing us to move beyond surface-level observations.

Fill in the blank: In sociology, a theory is a set of _____ and explanations that help us understand how society works.



Box 1.473: What is Sociological Theory? Systematic Ideas Explaining Society

OER



Overall Impact: Defines sociological theory as a set of interconnected ideas and frameworks used to explain and interpret social phenomena. It highlights how we systematically analyze in social human behaviour, the complex web of social relationships that constitute society, providing a deeper understanding of social order and change.

OER Diagram Definition of Sociology
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing the definition of theory in sociology, with branches for behaviour, institutions, and relationships. *Figure 5.1: Defining theory in sociology*

5.1.2 Distinguishing scientific theory from common-sense explanations

A **scientific theory** is based on systematic research, evidence, and logical reasoning. It is testable and subject to revision when new evidence emerges. In contrast, **common-sense explanations** are everyday beliefs or assumptions that may lack evidence and consistency. For example, the idea that crime happens simply because people are “bad” is a common-sense view, whereas sociological theories examine structural, cultural, and interactional factors that contribute to crime.

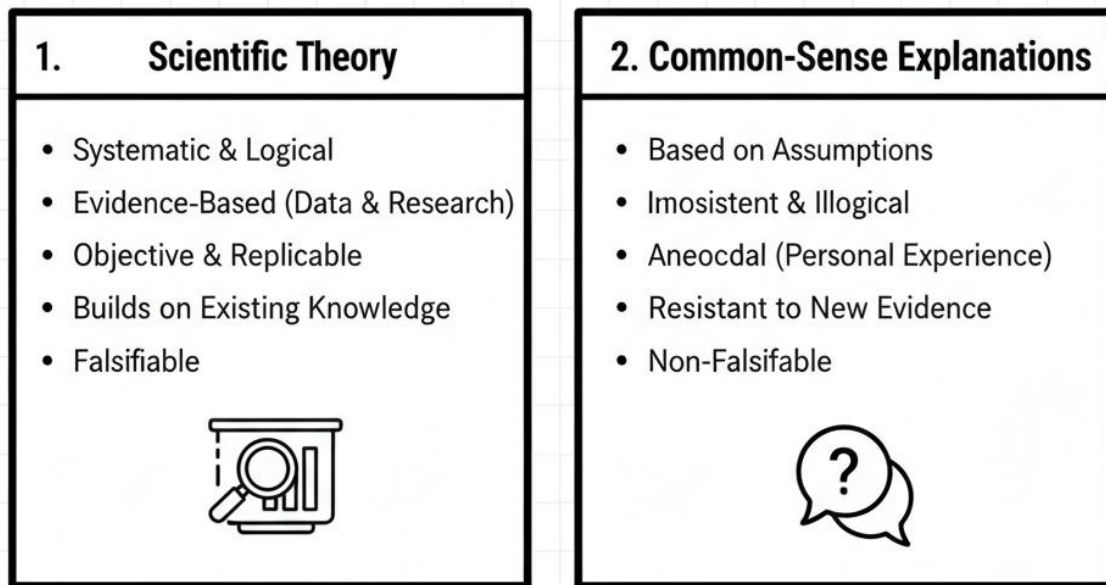


Fill in the blank: Unlike common-sense explanations, scientific theories are _____ and supported by evidence.



Box 1.474: Scientific Theory vs. Common Sense

Two Ways of Understanding the Social World



Overall Impact: This text box contrasts scientific sociological theory, characterized by its systematic, and objective approach to understanding phenomena, with common-sense explanations, and subjective, with subjective, and personal biases. It highlights a using to rigorous scientific methods analysis to study society, rather relying on untested assumptions, to develop a more accurate and reliable understanding of human behavior and social structures.

OER Diagram Scientific Theory vs Commonsense Created: Tuebruary 10, 2666 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 5.1: Differences between scientific theory and common-sense explanations

5.1.3 The role of theory in building sociological knowledge

Theories are essential tools for building **sociological knowledge**, which refers to the organised body of insights about society. They guide research by shaping the questions we ask, the methods we use, and the interpretations we make. For instance, a functionalist theory may lead us to study how institutions contribute to stability, while a conflict theory may focus on



inequality and power struggles. By providing direction and coherence, theories help sociology develop as a scientific discipline.

Fill in the blank: Theories guide research by shaping the _____ we ask, the methods we use, and the interpretations we make.

Box 1.475: The Role of Theory in Sociological Research
Guiding Questions, Methods & Interpretations

The diagram shows a central circle labeled **Sociological Theory** connected to three boxes in a clockwise cycle:

- 1. Guides Research Questions**
 - Defines Scope
 - Highlights Variables
 - Formulates Hypotheses
- 2. Shapes Research Methods**
 - Qualitative (Interviews, Surveys, Data Analysis)
 - Determines Approach
- 3. Influences Interpretations**
 - Framework for Analysis
 - Connects Findings Concepts
 - Provides Meaning

Arrows indicate an **Iterative Process** between the boxes, with labels like "provides a Lens" and "Iterative Process" connecting them back to the central theory.

Role of Theory in Sociological Research: A Collaborative Inquiry
OER: Sociology in Action
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Image of researchers discussing sociological theories guiding their study design. *Plate 5.1: The role of theory in sociological research*

Pilot questions 5.1

1. In sociology, a theory is defined as: a) A casual opinion b) A set of ideas and explanations c) A random assumption d) A personal belief



2. Which of the following distinguishes scientific theory from common-sense explanations?
a) It is based on assumptions b) It is systematic and evidence-based c) It is anecdotal d) It is inconsistent
3. Theories guide research by shaping the _____ we ask, the methods we use, and the interpretations we make.
4. Fill in the blank: Common-sense explanations may lack _____ and consistency.
5. Fill in the blank: A functionalist theory may lead us to study how institutions contribute to _____.

5.2 Classical Foundations of Social Order

5.2.1 Durkheim's contributions to understanding social order

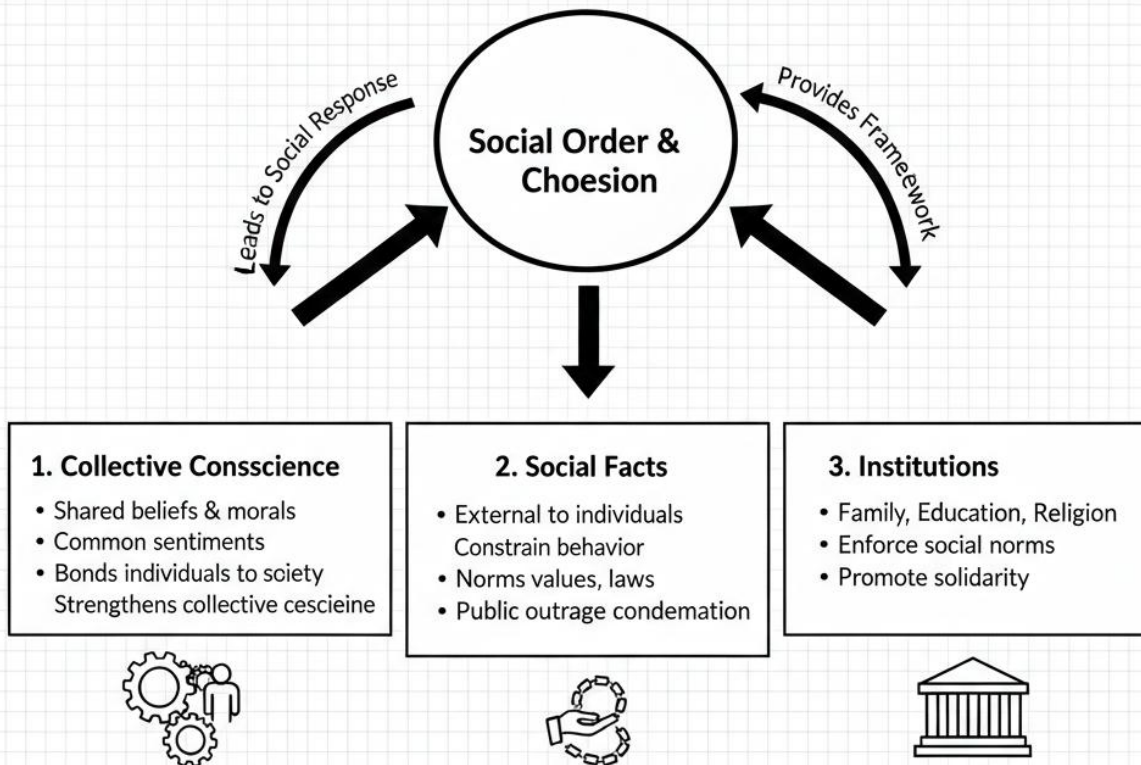
Émile Durkheim is often regarded as one of the founding figures of sociology. He argued that social order is maintained through shared values, norms, and collective conscience. Durkheim introduced the concept of **social facts**, which are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside the individual but exert control over them. He also emphasised the importance of institutions such as religion and education in promoting cohesion.

Fill in the blank: Durkheim described _____ as ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside the individual but exert control over them.



Box 1.476: Durkheim's Theory of Social Order

Collective Conscience & Social Cohesion



Overall Impact: This diagram illustrates Émile Durkheim's functionalist view that social order is maintained through the collective conscience and social facts. These elements provide a framework for social behavior and lead to social response, which in turn reinforces the social order and facilitates adaptation.

OER Diagram Functionalism Crime Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing Durkheim's view of social order through collective conscience and social facts. *Figure 5.2: Durkheim's contributions to social order*

5.2.2 Weber's perspectives on rationalisation and authority

Max Weber contributed significantly to the study of social order by examining rationalisation and authority. Rationalisation refers to the increasing reliance on rules, efficiency, and logic in modern societies. Weber also identified three types of authority: **traditional authority** (based on customs), **charismatic authority** (based on personal qualities), and **legal-rational authority** (based on formal rules and laws). These forms of authority explain how societies organise and maintain order.



Fill in the blank: Weber identified three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and _____ authority.

OER

Box 1.477: Weber's Three Types of Authority

Sources of Power & Legitimation in Sociology

1. Traditional Authority • Custom & History • Inherited Status (e.g., Monarchy) • Sacred, Changing Laws E.g., Feudal Systems, Tribal Chiefs 	2. Charismatic Authority • Personality & Charm • Exceptional Qualities • Devotion of Followers • E.g., Revolutions, Prophets 	3. Legal-Rational Authority • Rules & Regulations • Formal Procedures • Bureaucracy, Impersonal • Bureaucratic E.g., Modern Governments, CEOs 
--	--	--

Overall Impact: This text box summarizes Max Weber's typology of authority, highlighting how different societies legitimize power. It contrasts the stability of traditional and legal systems with the disruptive nature of charismatic leadership, which relies on personal qualities of a leader for its legitimacy. This framework is fundamental to understanding political and social organization.

OER Text Box Weber Types of Authority Sociology
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 5.2: Weber's types of authority

5.2.3 Marx's insights into conflict and social structure

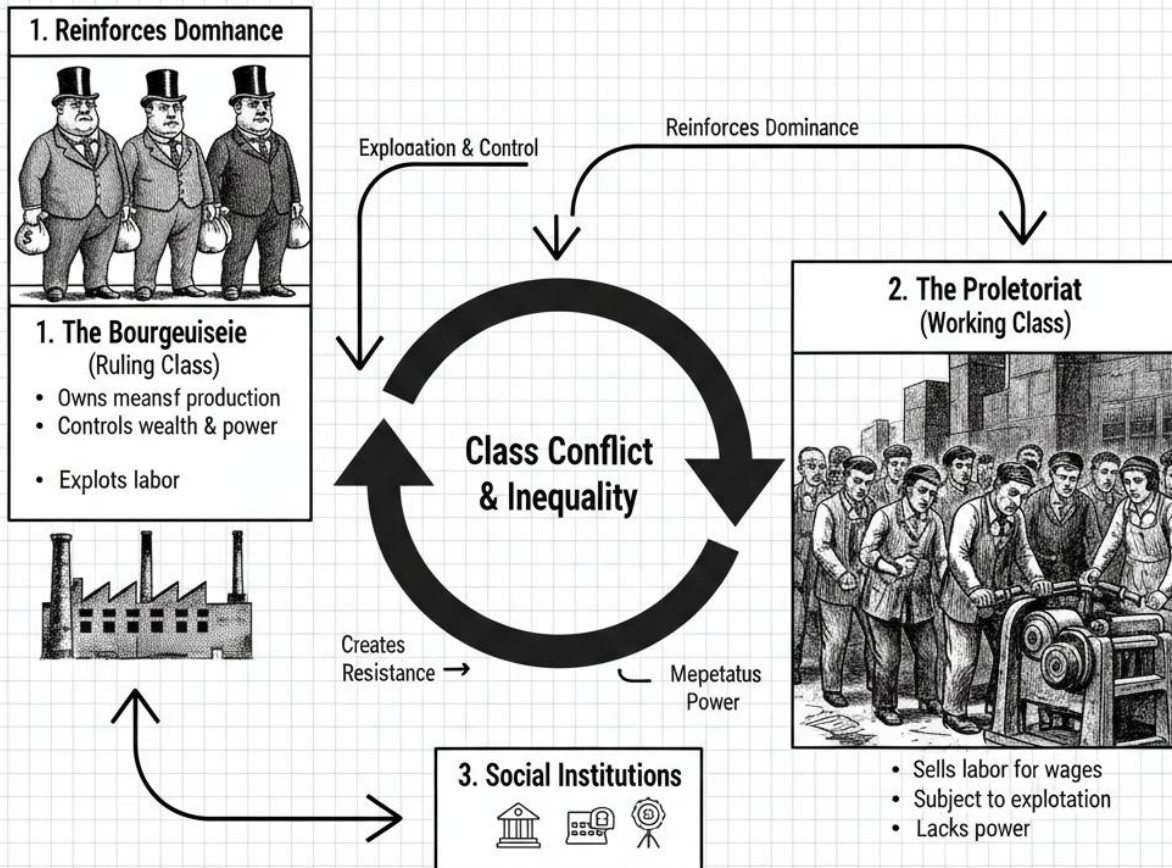
Karl Marx viewed social order through the lens of conflict and inequality. He argued that society is divided into classes, with the ruling class controlling resources and exploiting the working class. According to Marx, social order is maintained not through consensus but through domination and coercion. His concept of **class struggle** highlights how tensions between groups



drive social change. Marx's ideas remain influential in analysing inequality and power relations in modern societies.

Fill in the blank: Marx argued that social order is maintained through domination and _____ rather than consensus.

Marx's Conflict Theory: Class Struggle & The Maintenance of Social Order



Overall Impact: This visual summarizes Karl Marx's conflict theory, highlighting how the inherent class struggle and thus power and exploitation drives social inequality. It illustrates how social institutions are used to maintain control, perpetuating the existing system to understand the relationship between class relations, power, and historical change.

OER Image: Marx Conflict Sociology

Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Image showing Marx's view of class struggle between ruling and working classes. *Plate 5.2: Marx's insights into conflict and social structure*

Pilot questions 5.2

1. Durkheim introduced the concept of _____, which are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside the individual.



2. Which sociologist identified three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational?
3. Fill in the blank: Rationalisation refers to the increasing reliance on _____, efficiency, and logic in modern societies.
4. According to Marx, social order is maintained through domination and _____.
5. Which classical theorist emphasised the role of institutions such as religion and education in promoting cohesion?

5.3 Contemporary Theoretical Tools for Analysing Social Order

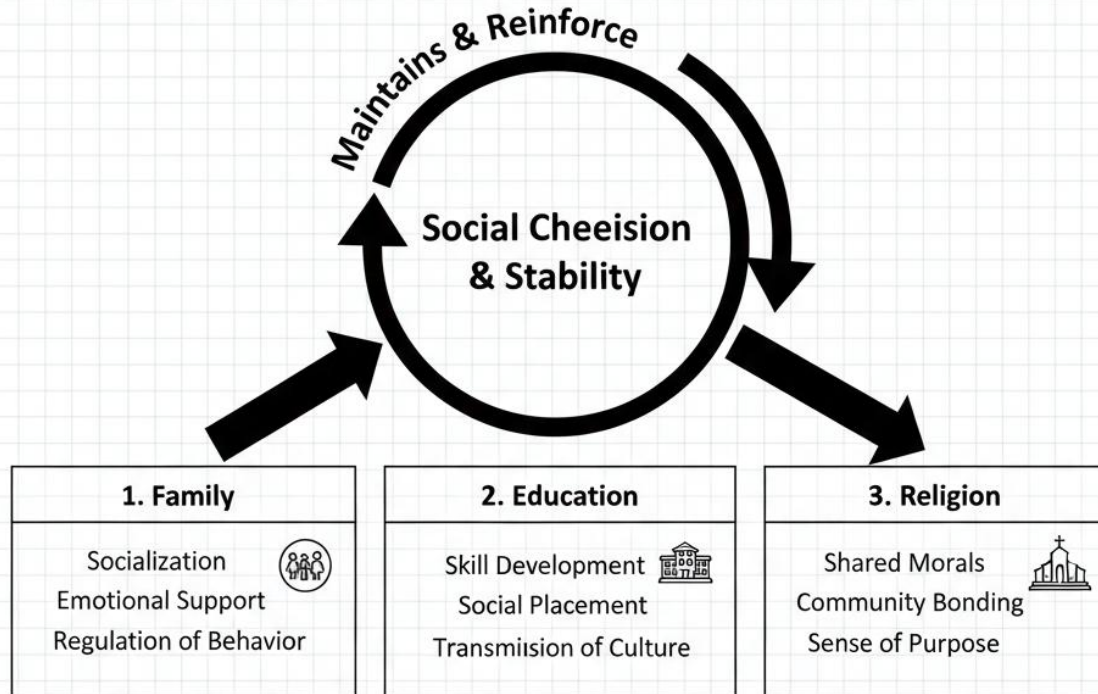
5.3.1 Functionalist approaches to stability and cohesion

Functionalism views society as a system in which each part contributes to overall stability. From this perspective, institutions such as family, education, and religion are seen as essential for maintaining **social cohesion**, meaning the bonds that hold society together. Functionalists argue that when institutions perform their roles effectively, society remains orderly and balanced. However, when institutions fail, disorder and instability may arise.

Fill in the blank: Functionalists argue that institutions such as family and education are essential for maintaining _____ in society.



Functionalist Sociology of Social Cohesion: Maintaining Social Order



Overall Impact: This diagram illustrates Émile Durkheim's view that social institutions like the family, education, and religion are essential for maintaining social cohesion and stability. They fulfill critical functions in socialization, skill development, shared morals, and community bonding, which collectively contribute to a stable social order. This framework highlights how these interconnected institutions ensure the well-being and continuation of society.

OER Diagram Functionalism Social Cohesion Sociology Created: February 10, 2022 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

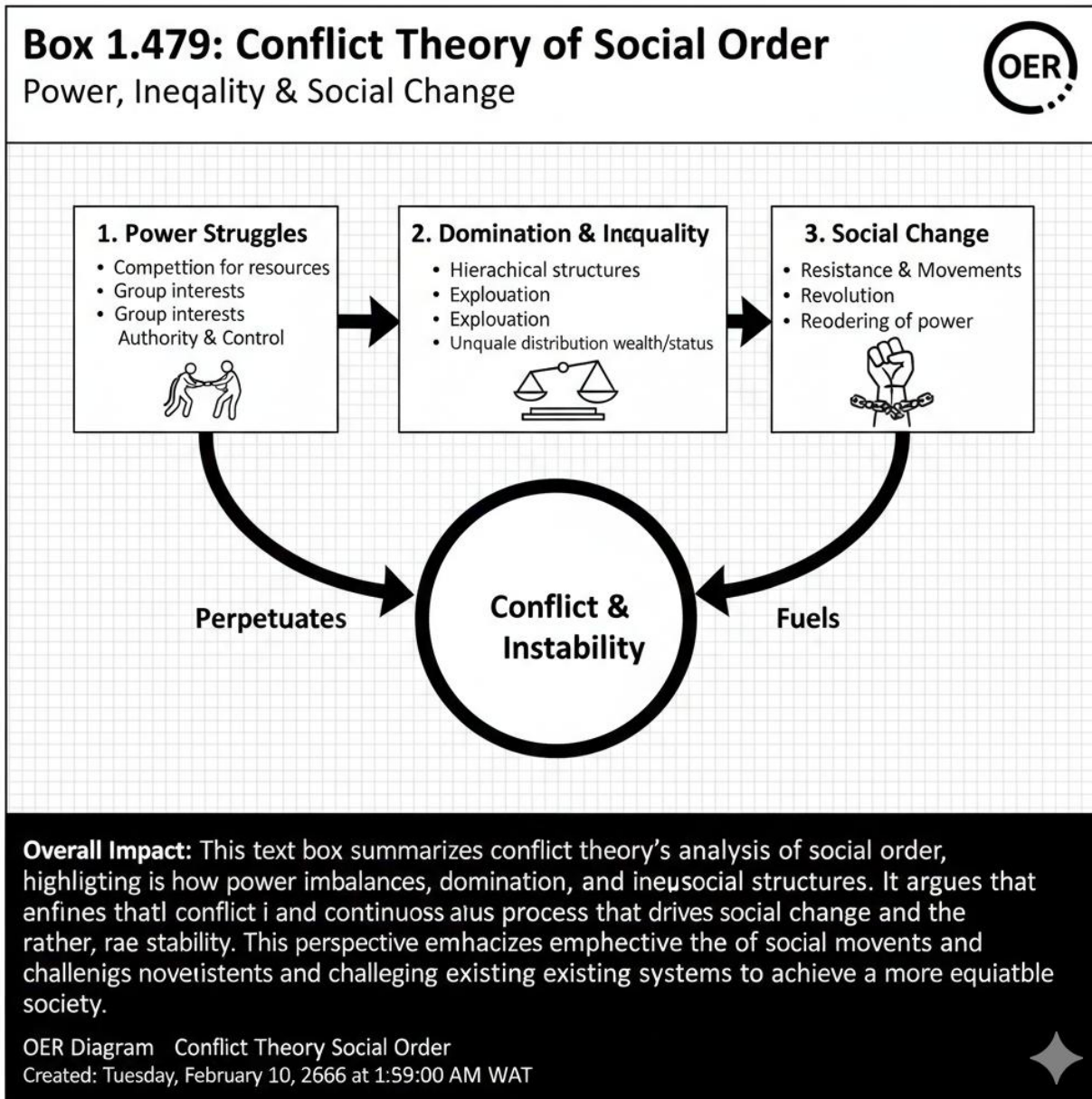
Diagram showing functionalist view of institutions contributing to social cohesion. *Figure 5.3: Functionalist approaches to stability and cohesion*

5.3.2 Conflict perspectives on inequality and power

Conflict theory emphasises that social order is shaped by struggles over resources and power. Rather than seeing order as consensus, conflict theorists argue that it is maintained through domination by powerful groups. For example, laws and policies may serve the interests of elites while marginalising disadvantaged groups. This perspective highlights inequality as a central feature of social order, showing how power imbalances can create tension and drive social change.



Fill in the blank: Conflict theorists argue that social order is maintained through domination by _____ groups.



Box 5.3: Conflict perspectives on inequality and power

5.3.3 Symbolic interactionist insights into everyday order

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the micro-level of society, examining how everyday interactions create and sustain social order. It highlights the importance of **symbols**, which are shared meanings attached to objects, behaviours, or words. For example, greetings, dress codes, or professional titles all help structure interactions and reinforce expectations. By studying these



small-scale processes, symbolic interactionists show how order is continuously negotiated and reproduced in daily life.

Fill in the blank: Symbolic interactionists emphasise the role of _____ in shaping everyday social order.

Box 1.480: Symbolic Interactionism in the Workplace: Maintaining Social Order Through Everyday Symbols

```
graph TD; A["1. Symbols & Meanings  
(Greetings, Titles)"] --> B["2. Interaction & Performance  
(Rituals, Roles)"]; B --> C["3. Sustains Social Order  
(Hierarchy, Predictability)"];
```

Executive Offices

MR. HARRISON, CEO

Team Lead

Project Manager

Conference Room A: Weekly Briefing

Workplace Interactions: The Symbolic Construction of Order
OER: Sociology in Action
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Image showing people interacting in a workplace, illustrating how symbols and meanings sustain order. *Plate 5.3: Everyday social order through interaction*

Pilot questions 5.3



1. Which sociological perspective views institutions as essential for maintaining social cohesion? a) Functionalism b) Conflict theory c) Symbolic interactionism d) Postmodern sociology
2. According to conflict theorists, social order is maintained through domination by: a) Disadvantaged groups b) Powerful groups c) Equal groups d) Religious groups
3. Symbolic interactionists emphasise the role of _____ in shaping everyday social order.
4. Fill in the blank: Functionalists argue that when institutions fail, _____ may arise.
5. Fill in the blank: Laws and policies may serve the interests of _____ while marginalising disadvantaged groups.

5.4 Applications of Theory to Modern Social Challenges

5.4.1 Social order in diverse and globalised societies

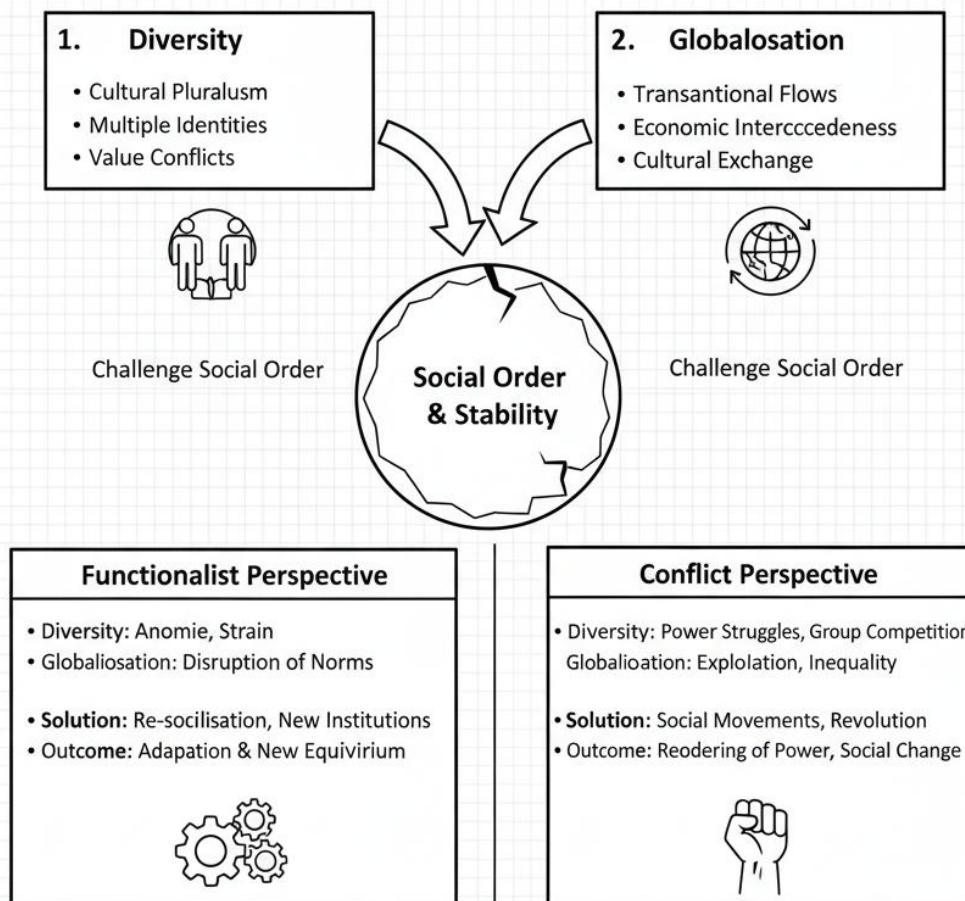
In today's interconnected world, maintaining **social order** requires understanding diversity and globalisation. Diversity refers to the presence of different cultural, ethnic, and social groups within a society, while globalisation describes the increasing interconnectedness of societies across the globe. Theories help us explain how societies manage differences and adapt to global influences. For example, functionalist perspectives highlight how institutions promote cohesion, while conflict perspectives draw attention to inequalities that may arise in diverse settings.

Fill in the blank: Globalisation refers to the increasing _____ of societies across the globe.



Box 1.481: Diversity & Globalisation: Challenges to Social Order Functionalist & Conflict Perspectives

OER



Overall Impact: This diagram illustrates how diversity and globalisation challenge social order, contrasting functionalist and conflict perspectives. While functionalism sees these as temporary disruptions leading to new equilibrium, conflict theory views them as sources of social power through adaptation, though it views them as power struggles, social conflict, potentially fueling existing power structures.

OER Diagram Diversity Globalisation Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2020 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Diagram showing diversity and globalisation as challenges to social order. *Figure 5.4: Social order in diverse and globalised societies*

5.4.2 Theories applied to governance, law, and institutions

Theories also provide tools for analysing governance, law, and institutions. Functionalists see these structures as essential for maintaining stability and regulating behaviour. Conflict theorists, however, argue that governance and law often reflect the interests of powerful groups, reinforcing inequality. Symbolic interactionists focus on how everyday interactions within institutions, such as courts or schools, shape perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Together, these perspectives show how theory can be applied to understand the functioning and challenges of institutions.



Fill in the blank: Conflict theorists argue that governance and law often reflect the interests of _____ groups.



Box 1.482: Sociological Theories on Governance, Law & Institutions

OER

Comparing Major Perspectives

1. Functionalism



Purpose: Maintain social order & stability



Law & Governance: Enforce norms, resolve disputes



Institutions: Interdependent, fulfill societal needs



Key Concept: Social cohesion

2. Conflict Theory



Purpose: Perpetuate inequality & power



Law & Governance: Tools of elite control, reinforce dominance



Institutions: Sites of struggle, maintain stratification



Key Concept: Power struggles

3. Symbolic Interactionism



Purpose: Create shared meanings & reality



Law & Governance: Socially constructed, symbolic



Institutions: Everyday interactions, shaped by Symbols



Key Concept: Shared meanings & symbols

Overall Impact: This text box contrasts the three major sociological perspectives on governance, law and institutions, highlighting their differences on the nature of social structures, and the impact and impact on frameworks frameworks into crucial institutions. Understand the complexities of social order and change.

OER Text Box Sociological Theories Governance Law Institutions
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT



Box 1.482: Sociological Theories on Governance, Law & Institutions

OER

Comparing Major Perspectives

1. Functionalism



Purpose: Maintain social order & stability



Law & Governance: Enforce norms, resolve disputes



Institutions: Interdependent, fulfill societal needs



Key Concept: Social cohesion

2. Conflict Theory



Purpose: Perpetuate inequality & power



Law & Governance: Tools of elite control, reinforce dominance



Institutions: Sites of struggle, maintain stratification



Key Concept: Power struggles

3. Symbolic Interactionism



Purpose: Create shared meanings & reality



Law & Governance: Socially constructed, symbolic



Institutions: Everyday interactions, shaped by Symbols



Key Concept: Shared meanings & symbols

Overall Impact: This text box contrasts the three major sociological perspectives on governance, law and institutions, highlighting their differences on the nature of social structures, and the impact and impact on impact on frameworks frameworks into crucial institutions. Understand the complexities of social order and change.

OER Text Box Sociological Theories Governance Law Institutions
Created: Tuesday, February 10, 2026 at 1:59:00 AM WAT

Box 5.4: Theories applied to governance, law, and institutions

5.4.3 Integrative frameworks for addressing disorder and change

Integrative frameworks combine macro-level and micro-level perspectives to provide a fuller understanding of disorder and change. At the macro level, they examine structures such as governments, economies, and international organisations. At the micro level, they consider everyday experiences of individuals and communities. For example, studying migration involves analysing both international policies and the lived experiences of migrants. Integrative approaches are particularly useful for addressing complex challenges such as climate change, political instability, and social movements.



Fill in the blank: Integrative frameworks combine macro-level and _____-level perspectives to address social challenges.

Box 1.483: Global Integrative Frameworks & Social Change: Analyzing Global Structures & Local Lives

OER

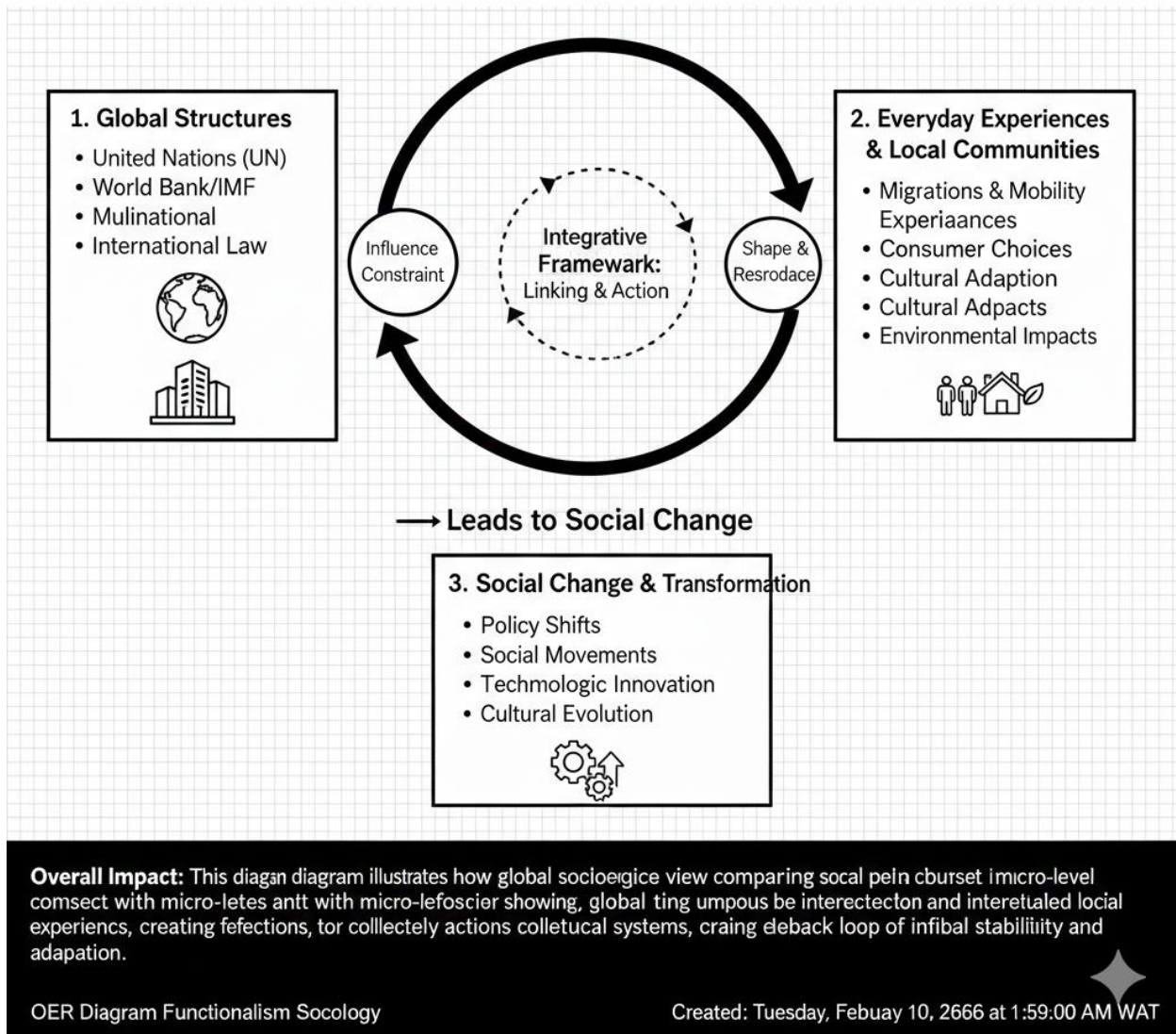


Image showing integrative frameworks linking global institutions with individual experiences.
Plate 5.4: Integrative frameworks for addressing disorder and change

Pilot questions 5.4

1. Globalisation refers to the increasing _____ of societies across the globe.
2. Which perspective sees governance and law as essential for maintaining stability? a) Functionalism b) Conflict theory c) Symbolic interactionism d) Postmodern sociology



3. Conflict theorists argue that governance and law often reflect the interests of _____ groups.
4. Fill in the blank: Integrative frameworks combine macro-level and _____-level perspectives.
5. Which sociological perspective focuses on everyday interactions within institutions such as courts or schools?

Series summary

This Series has explored how sociological theory functions as a scientific tool for understanding social order, showing how abstract ideas can be applied to explain stability, conflict, and everyday interactions. We began by defining theory in sociology, distinguishing scientific theory from common-sense explanations, and highlighting its role in building sociological knowledge. Then we examined classical foundations, focusing on Durkheim's collective conscience and social facts, Weber's rationalisation and authority, and Marx's insights into conflict and class struggle. Following that, we studied contemporary theoretical tools, including functionalist approaches to cohesion, conflict perspectives on inequality and power, and symbolic interactionist insights into everyday order. Finally, we applied these theories to modern challenges such as diversity, globalisation, governance, law, institutions, and integrative frameworks for disorder and change.

By completing this Series, you should now be able to define and explain sociological theory as science, analyse the contributions of classical theorists, apply functionalist, conflict, and interactionist perspectives to social order, and evaluate how theories can be used to address contemporary challenges. These achievements align directly with the Series Learning Outcomes, ensuring that you can use theory both as a scientific framework and as a practical tool for interpreting and responding to issues of social order in diverse and globalised contexts.

Glossary of terms

Authority: A recognised source of power or legitimacy in society. Weber identified three types: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational.

Class struggle: Marx's concept describing the ongoing conflict between ruling and working classes, which drives social change.

Collective conscience: Durkheim's idea of shared values and norms that bind individuals together and maintain social order.

Conflict theory: A perspective that views social order as shaped by inequality and domination, with powerful groups maintaining control over resources and institutions.

Diversity: The presence of different cultural, ethnic, and social groups within a society.

Functionalism: A perspective that sees society as a system where institutions contribute to stability and cohesion.



Globalisation: The increasing interconnectedness of societies across the world through economic, cultural, and political exchange.

Integrative frameworks: Approaches that combine macro-level (large structures) and micro-level (everyday interactions) perspectives to address complex social challenges.

Legal-rational authority: Weber's type of authority based on formal rules, laws, and procedures.

Macro-level: Large-scale structures and processes in society, such as governments, economies, and institutions.

Micro-level: Small-scale interactions and everyday experiences of individuals and groups.

Rationalisation: Weber's concept describing the growing reliance on rules, efficiency, and logic in modern societies.

Scientific theory: A systematic, evidence-based explanation that is testable and subject to revision, distinguishing it from common-sense assumptions.

Social cohesion: The bonds and connections that hold society together, often reinforced by institutions.

Social facts: Durkheim's term for ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside the individual but exert control over them.

Social order: The organised and stable patterns of behaviour and relationships that allow societies to function.

Symbolic interactionism: A perspective that focuses on everyday interactions and the role of symbols in creating and sustaining social order.

Concept check questions 5

Objective questions

1. In sociology, a theory is defined as: a) A casual opinion b) A set of ideas and explanations c) A random assumption d) A personal belief (Linked to SLO 5.1)
2. Which of the following distinguishes scientific theory from common-sense explanations? a) It is based on assumptions b) It is systematic and evidence-based c) It is anecdotal d) It is inconsistent (Linked to SLO 5.2)
3. Durkheim introduced the concept of _____, which are ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside the individual. (Linked to SLO 5.3)
4. Weber identified three types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and _____ authority. (Linked to SLO 5.4)
5. According to Marx, social order is maintained through domination and _____ rather than consensus. (Linked to SLO 5.5)



Short-answer questions

6. Explain how functionalists view the role of institutions in maintaining social cohesion. (Linked to SLO 5.6)
7. What do conflict theorists emphasise about inequality and power in shaping social order? (Linked to SLO 5.7)
8. Define the role of symbols in symbolic interactionist perspectives on everyday social order. (Linked to SLO 5.8)
9. Briefly describe how globalisation challenges social order. (Linked to SLO 5.9)
10. State one way theories can be applied to governance and law. (Linked to SLO 5.10)

Long-answer questions

11. Analyse Durkheim's contributions to understanding social order, focusing on collective conscience and social facts. (Linked to SLO 5.3)
12. Evaluate Weber's perspectives on rationalisation and authority, explaining their relevance to modern institutions. (Linked to SLO 5.4)
13. Assess Marx's insights into conflict and social structure, highlighting the concept of class struggle. (Linked to SLO 5.5)
14. Discuss how integrative frameworks combine macro-level and micro-level perspectives to address disorder and change. (Linked to SLO 5.11)

Answers to Concept Check Questions [Series 5]

Objective questions

1. b) A set of ideas and explanations
2. b) It is systematic and evidence-based
3. Social facts
4. Legal-rational authority
5. Coercion

Short-answer questions

6. Functionalists argue that institutions such as family, education, and religion are essential for maintaining social cohesion by reinforcing shared values and norms.
7. Conflict theorists emphasise that inequality and power imbalances shape social order, with powerful groups dominating resources and institutions.
8. Symbols provide shared meanings that structure everyday interactions, helping to sustain order through expectations and behaviours.
9. Globalisation challenges social order by introducing diverse cultural influences and interconnected economic and political systems.



10. Theories can be applied to governance and law by explaining how institutions regulate behaviour and maintain legitimacy.

Long-answer questions

11. *Basic response:* Durkheim highlighted collective conscience and social facts as key elements in maintaining social order. *Value-added response:* Learners may expand by discussing how institutions such as religion and education reinforce cohesion and stability.

12. *Basic response:* Weber explained rationalisation and three types of authority as mechanisms for organising society. *Value-added response:* Outstanding learners may connect these ideas to modern bureaucracies, showing how rules and efficiency shape institutions today.

13. *Basic response:* Marx argued that social order is maintained through domination and class struggle between ruling and working classes. *Value-added response:* Learners may further analyse how Marx's ideas remain relevant in examining inequality in capitalist societies.

14. *Basic response:* Integrative frameworks combine macro-level structures and micro-level experiences to address disorder and change. *Value-added response:* Learners may illustrate this with examples such as migration, climate change, or political instability, showing how both global institutions and individual experiences must be considered.

Answers to Pilot Questions 5

Part 5.1 The Nature of Sociological Theory as Science

1. A set of ideas and explanations
2. Systematic and evidence-based
3. Questions
4. Evidence
5. Stability

Part 5.2 Classical Foundations of Social Order

1. Social facts
2. Max Weber
3. Rules
4. Coercion
5. Durkheim

Part 5.3 Contemporary Theoretical Tools for Analysing Social Order

1. Functionalism
2. Powerful groups



3. Symbols
4. Disorder
5. Elites

Part 5.4 Applications of Theory to Modern Social Challenges

1. Interconnectedness
2. Functionalism
3. Powerful groups
4. Micro
5. Symbolic interactionism

References and Attributions 5

Textual sources

- Course content adapted from *SOC 401: Contemporary Sociological Theories* document provided by the institution.
- Explanations of Durkheim, Weber, Marx, functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, globalisation, and integrative frameworks were developed from standard sociological literature and teaching resources.

