



1

Sociological Theory and Research Methods

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter 1 of this textbook introduces you to the history, founders, and theorists of sociology who have shaped our understanding and appreciation of the social sciences. Along with the major theorists, you should also take from this chapter the basic principles and perspectives that are vital in order to better understand our discipline.

Sociology as a discipline rose in the time of the Enlightenment, when science and reason were brought to light. The rationale was that science would be able to explain the way in which society functions better than mysticism and religion. The early (or classical) theorists such as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx introduced the basic schools of thought and explanations of how society functions. Functionalists, conflict theorists, and symbolic interactionists each understood society to be structured and functioning in different ways for different reasons.

For the functionalists such as Durkheim, society can best be understood like a body. Each part of society acted like an organ, and has its own unique function to contribute to the maintenance and survival of the body.

Conflict theorists, like Marx, argued that society is unequal. There are those with power and economic means, and those without. Society is comprised of different classes, sexes, and races. Each of these different groups in the capitalist system are competing for their interests and attempting to maximize benefits. In doing so, there is always an unequal balance that favours one group over another.

For the symbolic interactionists such as George Herbert Mead, society is structured upon social interactions. These constant interactions, coupled with personal perception and interpretation, are what allow society to continue functioning and develop in unique ways.

Moving away from theory and onto the research methods, the chapter introduces you to the ways in which sociologists do sociology. The need behind using various methods to collect data and analyze events is to achieve a scientific (objective) understanding of society. All research will begin with theories and concepts, which are then operationalized into hypotheses and variables and tested through empirical means.

Lastly, several different research techniques are presented in this chapter. Qualitative methods such as surveys and field research are noted, as are quantitative methods such as secondary data analysis, the use of statistics, and content analysis. Each method provides the researcher with a different set of options and data for understand more fully how society works and identifying any patterns that may yield from the research.

KEY TERMS

Agency	Matrix of domination	Social constructionism
Anomie	New Left	Stratified
Capitalism	Objective	Structural functionalism
Concept	Operationalization	Subjective
Conflict theory	Patriarchy	Surplus
Cultural capital	Post-modernism	Symbolic interactionism
Enlightenment	Post-structuralism	Transgression
Feminism	Power	Variable
Hypotheses	Sample	
Intersubjectivity	Social capital	

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What is the difference between objective facts and our subjective understanding of them? (p. 12)
2. Who are the three most important classical theorists? (p. 13)
3. What does Karl Marx mean when he says that, economically, what distinguished traditional from modern society was the rise of capitalism? (p. 15)
4. What is a variable? What is the “value” of a variable? Provide an example of each. (p. 22)
5. What is secondary data analysis and why has it grown in relation to the development of computers and statistical software? (p. 27)
6. In contrast to liberal feminism, radical feminism demands more than an equal chance to gain unequal power. What is the key power structure they are struggling against? (p. 19)
7. What is a hypothesis? (p. 22)

8. Why do sociologists need to operationalize their theories? (p. 22)
9. Why would researchers have to develop sample sizes to study a group or population? (p. 24)
10. What is the difference between quantitative data and qualitative data? (p. 25)

READINGS AND WEBSITES

Ridener, Larry R. (1999) *Dead Sociological Index*. Retrieved from <http://media.pfeiffer.edu/lridener/DSS/>

The Dead Sociologist Index provides detailed information on 16 classical theorists, including biographies, commentary, and links to original works.

Khan, Sal. *Correlation and Causality*. [Video]. Retrieved from <https://www.khanacademy.org/math/probability/scatterplots-a1/creating-interpreting-scatterplots/v/correlation-and-causality>

This short video highlights the difference between correlation and causation and the issues associated with assuming one instead of the other.

Mills, C. Wright (1959). *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.

C.W. Mills's book is perhaps the best starting point for sociologists, as it captures the basic and necessary components to understand how the individual and society has interlocked throughout time to establish a social force. The title of the book itself is very telling, as it shows the reader how to see things in a sociological manner.

IBM. (2015) *SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*. [Software]. Available from <http://www-01.ibm.com/software/analytics/spss/>

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences is very popular software by social scientists for statistical analysis. Secondary data analysis through the use of statistics and numbers is done easily with this program. Statistics Canada and the US Census Bureau are just a few organizations that use SPSS, as well as students in the social sciences.

Wollstonecraft, Mary (1995[1792]). *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wollstonecraft's book is one of the earlier works of a feminist ideology. Writing in a time when women's rights were virtually non-existent, Wollstonecraft provides insights and arguments beyond her time in response to eighteenth-century political theorists who argued that women should not have an education. Rather than accepting these claims, Wollstonecraft's book shows how women are equal to men and should be treated as such.