

ENGAGING SOCIOLOGY

Micro-Meso-Macro

The distinctions between levels of analysis are gray rather than precise. Levels of analysis should be viewed as a continuum—from micro to macro social units. Clear criteria help identify groups at each level. One criterion is size (number of people) of the group. A second is the geographic range of influence:

1. intimate or very close personal relationships (micro);
2. social units in the local community (micro);
3. social units that cover a large geographic region (like a state or commonwealth) and even nationwide groups that—despite size—are still a small portion of the entire nation (meso);
4. the nation itself (macro); and
5. units with global reach (macro).

A third criterion is degree of separation. If you know someone personally, that is one degree of separation. If you do not know the mayor of your town, but you know someone who knows the mayor, that is two degrees of separation. If you have a friend or a relative who knows someone who is a friend or relative of the governor in your state or province, that is three degrees of separation. Some research indicates that every person on the planet is within seven degrees of separation from every other human being. Let us see what these mean for various levels of analysis in our social world

Micro-level groups are small, local-community social units, such as families and school classrooms, within which everyone knows everyone else or knows someone who also knows another member. So the degree of separation is usually not more than two degrees.

Meso-level groups are social units of intermediate size, such as state governments (with limited

geographic range), ethnic groups, and religious denominations (with large geographic range but population sizes that make them a minority of the entire nation). Typically, the group is large enough that members have never heard the names of many other members. Many members may have little access to the leaders, yet the group is not so large as to make the leaders seem distant or unapproachable. Almost anyone within the social unit is only three or four degrees of separation apart. Everyone in the unit knows someone who is an acquaintance of yours.

Macro-level groups are large social units, usually quite bureaucratic, that operate at a national or a global level, such as national governments or international organizations. Most members are unlikely to know or have communicated with the leaders personally or know someone who knows the leaders. The “business” of these groups is of international importance and implication. A macro-level system is one in which most of the members are at least five degrees of separation from one another—that is, they know someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows the person in question.

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Engaging With Sociology

1. Micro social units

2. Meso social units

3. Macro social units

(Continued)