Lecture Notes

# Chapter 2: Examining The Social World: How Do We Know?

## Learning Objectives

1. Outline the milestones.
2. Describe key points of these perspectives.
3. Explain the scientific approach.
4. List the basic steps of the scientific research process.

## Chapter Overview

Chapter two focuses primarily on the development, methods, and primary theories of sociology. The chapter begins with a discussion of the foundations of sociology and assumptions of science. Then the major theories of sociology (including symbolic interaction, rational choice theory, the structural-functionalist perspective, conflict perspective, and feminist theory) and their criticisms are explained. Finally, the process of conducting empirical research is discussed, with a focus on the primary methodologies of sociology. Here, ethical issues in sociological research are addressed.

## Lecture Outline

I. Assumptions of Science

A. The scientific approach is based on the following core assumptions:

i. There is a real physical and social world that can be studied scientifically

ii. There is order in the world resulting from causes and effects

1. This produces identifiable patterns that can be understood and predicted

2. The world is not random, but rather made up of causally related and patterned events

iii. Empirical tests are the way to gain knowledge of the world

1. *Empirical knowledge* – something that can be objectively observed and carefully measured using the five senses (sometimes enhanced with scientific instruments)

2. The reality of empirically measured facts would be the same regardless of who repeated the observations

iv. Scientific knowledge must be based on measurable phenomena

v. Science is rooted in objectivity

1. The methods used should not contaminate ones findings

2. Personal opinions and biases should be absent from research

3. Scientists may not distort their findings to promote their personal views

4. Research is conducted in a way that tests whether assumptions support OR disprove what is being tested

5. *Scientific evidence* – facts and information that are confirmed through systematic testing using the five senses

II. Empirical Research and Social Theory

A. Sociologists use the scientific method to examine views of society

B. They assume that there are predictable social relations in the world, that social situations recur in patterns, and social situations have understandable causes

C. Personal assumptions about the world lead sociologists to develop preferences for different sociological theories

D. *Theories* – statements regarding how and why facts are related to each other, and the connection between those facts

i. The theory used depends upon the part of the social world that is studied

ii. The level of analysis and theory help determine the method used to study a certain phenomenon

iii. Theories explain the relationships between social variables

iv. Theories must be empirically tested

v. Theories that are not supported by the research must be discarded or modified

E. Scientific Inquiry: Deductive and Inductive Reasoning

i. *Deductive reasoning* – investigations begin with general theories of behavior, then specific patterns are hypothesized using logical reasoning

1. *Hypotheses* – educated guesses based on theories which have not yet been empirically tested

ii. *Inductive reasoning* – investigations begin with specific facts, then develops a theory to explain the facts

1. Inductive reasoning begins without specific hypotheses

2. The study does not begin with a theory about casual relationships, but the data are used to create an explanation of causality

3. The next step is that a generalization – a theory – would emerge from the data itself

B. The Development of Sociology as a Science

a. Prior to the 19th century, the way individuals thought about the world was strongly influenced by religion

i. Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) was the first to suggest a systematic approach to studying the world

ii. Prior to the 19th century, social philosophers used a strong moral tone when describing the nature of the world

b. 19th-century philosophers helped create the modern way of scientifically studying society

i. Numerous conditions led to the rise of sociology

1. *The Industrial Revolution*

2. The French Revolution

3. Imperialism by European nations (which helped expose people to other cultures)

4. Advances in the natural sciences

ii. These conditions encouraged scientists like Henri Saint-Simon and *Auguste Comte* to call for systematic data collection and objective analysis to describe the changes that were going on around them

1. Both were the first to suggest that a science of society could help control the revolutions occurring during their time

2. Comte coined the term “sociology”

3. Comte argued that religion and philosophy were not enough to discover solutions to the world’s problems

4. Comte wanted to answer two basic questions:

a. What holds society together?

b. Why is there change in society?

c. These questions are still being asked by sociologists today

d. *Social statics or structure* – aspects of society that give rise to order, stability, and harmony

e. *Social dynamics or process* – change and evolution in the parts of society and society itself over time

5. Comte had a philosophical bias toward order and stability, despite the fact that stability might reinforce inequality and oppression

6. Two of Comte’s contributions persist today

a. The social world can and should be studied scientifically

b. The knowledge gained from sociology can and should be used to improve humanity

c. These changes stimulated other social scientists like Durkheim, Marx, Martineau, Weber, and Du Bois to study the social world

i. Their work set the stage for two things:

1. *Sociological theories* – statements of how facts are related to one another

2. *The scientific method* – systematic gathering and recording of reliable and accurate data to test ideas

III. Sociology’s Major Theoretical Perspectives

A. *Theoretical perspective* – a basic view of society that:

i. Guides sociologists’ ideas and research

ii. Helps them understand social behavior and social understanding

iii. Helps develop explanations of organized social patterns and the relationships between those patterns

iv. Can be micro- or macro-level

1. Either type can be used on the meso-level

2. The distinction does not always persist

B. Micro-to-meso-level theories

i. *Symbolic interaction* (also called social construction or interpretative theory) – concerned with how people give meaning to their everyday experiences and how they define and respond to events

1. People form groups from interacting individuals

2. Through interactions we learn what to expect and how to share common understandings through symbols (like language)

3. Through symbols, people actively *socially construct* a meaningful world

a. Based on communication, we interpret our interactions with others and create responses based on those interpretations

4. Human agency in creating the social environment stressed in this approach

5. *George Hebert Mead* – humans have the ability to decide how to act based on their definition of the situation

a. Emphasized how we learn our social roles

b. Emphasized human interpretation of symbols

6. *The Iowa School Approach* – links more explicitly to the meso-level so less focus on individual choice

a. Individual identities are relatively stable because people are connected to roles and positions within groups and organizations

b. *Core self* – we interpret new situations in light of our important social positions

7. Principles of symbolic interactionism

a. Human thoughts are shaped by social interaction

b. Through interactions, people learn the meanings and symbols that allow them to exercise thought and participate in human action

c. People modify the meanings and symbols as they make sense of their situations and events

d. Interpreting the situation involves seeing things from more than one perspective, examining possible courses of action, assessing the advantages and disadvantages of each, and then choosing one course of action;

e. Patterns of action and interaction make up groups and societies

f. Our positions or memberships in those groups and organizations may influence the way we define ourselves and lead to fairly stable patterns of interpretation of our experiences and of social life

8. *Critique of the symbolic interaction perspectiv*e

a. Neglects the macro-structures

b. Difficulty in studying concepts like “the mind” and “the self”

ii. *Rational choice theory (also called exchange theory)* – people make their choices based on utilitarian factors

1. *Utilitarian* – maximizes rewards and minimizes costs

a. *Human beings are mostly self-centered and* motivated by *self-interest*

b. Humans calculate costs and benefits when making decisions

c. Humans are rational, weigh choices to maximize their own benefit

d. Reciprocity, a balance in the exchange of benefits, is considered

e. People keep track of who they owe and who owes them

2. *Critique of the rational choice perspectiv*e

a. Macro-level and internal mental processes given little attention

b. Challenge of the idea that human behavior is always self-centered and utilitarian

c. Cannot easily explain charitable or altruistic behavior

d. People do not always act in a way that maximizes their self-interest

e. People do not always think about the costs before they make decisions

C. Meso- and macro-level theories

i. *Structural-functional perspective* (also called functional theory) – assume that social structure, culture, and social processes work together to ensure that society runs smoothly and harmoniously

1. Rooted in Comte, whose ideas are still vital today

a. as societies grow and change, so do the purposes they serve (*functions*)

b. To understand why a structure exists we must understand what needs it meets in society

2. *Emile Durkheim*

a. Society is made up of necessary parts which make up a whole

b. Individuals conform to the rules of society because of a *collective conscience*—shared beliefs in the values of a group

c. Shared beliefs become internalized

d. Because people need groups for survival, they adhere to the group’s rules in order to fit in

3. *Robert Merton*

a. *Manifest functions* – planned outcome of social patterns or institutions

b. *Latent functions* – unplanned outcome of social patterns or institutions

c. *Dysfunctions* – actions that undermine the stability of society

4. *Critique of the structural-functional perspective*

a. Some functionalists’ theories are so abstract they are difficult to test

b. Functionalism fails to explain changes in society

c. Assumes conflict is harmful, even though it can actually lead to greater stability

d. Feminists argue that just because a system seems stable does not mean that it is fair or equitable

ii. *Conflict theory*

1. Key ideas

a. Conflict and potential for conflict underlie all social relations

b. Social change is desirable, particularly if it can lead to greater equality

c. The existing social order reflects the powerful imposing their values and beliefs on the weaker

d. Inequality and injustice are the sources of conflict

2. *Karl Marx*

a. Saw the plight of underclass workers due to capitalism

1.*Capitalism* – a system in which the equipment for producing goods is privately owned by the wealthy and the market system (supply and demand) determines the distribution of resources

b. Conflict would occur until the workers (Proletariat or “have nots”) shared more equally in the profits of their labor for the capitalists (Bourgeoisie)

3. *Harriet Martineau*

a. Considered first female sociologist

b. Wrote several books contributing to understanding of modern research methods

c. Provided a critique of America’s failure to live up to its democratic principles, especially in relation to women

d. Life is guided by general laws, which are influenced by population, and what is happening in the natural physical environment.

e. Foundation for feminist conflict theories

4. *W.E.B. Du Bois*

a. First African American to receive doctorate from Harvard

b. The goal of sociology should be social improvement

c. Saw the U.S. conflict between haves and have-nots as being based on race, not just class

d. Cofounded the NAACP

5. *Ralf Dahrendorf*

a. Explained that Marx’s revolution never occurred because of changes in working conditions that led to the development of the middle class

b. Added several categories to the “haves” and “have-nots”

1. *Quasi-groups* – individuals who have little power because they are similar, but not part of an organized group

2. *Interest groups* – emerge from quasi-groups to seek the power to solve problems

3. *Conflict groups* – emerge from interest groups to fight for change

c. The conflict over resources is a conflict along many dimensions (race, religion, age, ability, sex, etc.)

6. *Georg Simmel* – conflict can hold together groups in a society

7. *Lewis Coser* – conflict can strengthen societies and the organizations within them

8. *Critique of the conflict perspective*

a. Micro-level not examined

b. Difficult to test conflict propositions empirically

c. Not effective in explaining cohesion and cooperation

d. Many theorists not convinced that self-interest is the ultimate motivator of behavior

iii. *Feminist sociological theory*

1. Women are disadvantaged by the hierarchal way society is organized and men are advantaged

2. Sociology has been dominated by the male perspective

3. Rooted in conflict and symbolic interactionist perspectives

4. Men’s explanation of women’s lives have not presented women in a way that is authentic for women themselves

a. The lives of women of color are even less understood

5. Women’s experiences involve interdependence while men are taught to be competitive

6. *Feminist* – someone who believes men and women should be given equal standing and opportunities in society

7. *Intersectionality* – individuals have multiple identities (e.g., race, class, and gender) that intersect and impact their life chances

8. *Critique of feminist theory* – feminist theory should represent the intersection of race, class, and gender

iv. *Multi-Level Analysis: Max Weber’s Contributions*

a. Fits into both micro and macro approaches

b. *Verstehen* (understanding) – actions that occur affect our interpretation of the social world and our actions

c. Thought the social world was more complex than just conflict between the “haves” and “have-nots” over economic resources and that numerous social institutions help explain conflict and power

d. Focused on *bureaucracies* – goal-oriented, efficient organizations

v. *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

a. Weber asked how capitalists understood the world around them.

b. Believed Marx’s view was too narrow, society is far more complex than conflict between the haves and the have-nots

c. Felt politics, economics, religion, psychology and people’s ideas were interdependent—affected each other

IV. Using Different Theoretical Perspectives

A. Each theory makes a contribution, but also leaves some questions unanswered

B. No one theory is “right” or “wrong”, but may be more or less useful in examining some level or aspect of society

V. How Sociologists Study the Social World

A. Sociologists use the scientific method in their research

i. Step 1: Define a topic or problem that can be investigated scientifically

ii. Step 2: Review relevant research and theory to refine the topic and define variables

iii. Step 3: Formulate hypotheses/research questions and operationalize variables

iv. Step 4: Design the research method which specifies how the data will be gathered

v. Step 5: Select a sample of people or groups from the population

vi. Step 6: Collect the data using appropriate research methods

vii. Step 7: Analyze the data, figuring out exactly what the study tells us about the question(s)

viii. Step 8: Draw conclusions and present the final report, including suggestions for future research

B. Steps in the research process include planning, designing, analysis, and conclusion

i. Planning a research study

1. *Define the problem clearly* – clearly state the topic to be investigated

2. *Find out what is already known about the topic* – find out how past research was conducted, what the findings were, how terms were defined, and the strengths and weaknesses

3. Formulate hypotheses

a. Identify *key concepts* – the ideas used in the hypotheses that are to be measured

4. Operationalize definitions of variables

a. *Operationalization* – determining exactly how to measure concepts

b. *Variables* – concepts or ideas that vary in frequency of occurrence across people, times, or places

c. Must be measurable

d. Hypotheses predict the relationship between two or more variables and explain how those variables are related

5. Ways that two concepts can be related

a. *Correlation* – a change in one variable is associated with a change in the other

b. *Cause and effect relationship* – a change in the independent variable results in a change in the dependent variable

c. *Independent variable* – the cause of the change

d. *Dependent variable* – the variable that changes as the independent variable is altered

e. *Time dimension* – it is necessary that the independent variable always precede the dependent variable

f. *Spurious relationships* – no real relationship exists between the independent and dependent variables, but they vary together, often due to a third variable that changes both of them

g. *Control variables* – used to eliminate the effect of all variables except those in the hypothesis

ii. Designing the research methods and collecting the data

1. Methods depend upon the level of analysis and research question

2. The value of the study findings depends upon the quality of the data collected

3. *The survey method* – gathers information directly about how people think or feel or what they do

a. *Interview* – conducted by directly talking to *respondents* in person or by phone

b. *Questionnaire* – questions that respondents answer in writing

c. Interviews are more costly and time consuming than questionnaires, but allow for more depth

1.*Open ended questions* – allow the respondent to answer however they wish

2.*Close ended questions* – force the respondent to choose from among predetermined answers

4. *Field studies/observational methods* – systematic, planned observations of social interaction

a. Observation – the systematic viewing and recording of interactions in natural settings

b. Detached/nonparticipant observations – the researcher does not participate in what (s)he is observing

c. Participant observation – the researcher participates in the activities of the group being studied

d. Particularly useful for illegal or deviant activities

e. Qualitative (vs. quantitative)

f. Research effects – the group may be altered by the presence of a researcher

g. Researchers may become too involved in the group to be objective

h. Researchers’ interpretations of the data is both interesting and bias-prone

i. Ethnography – a form of field study that includes self-reflection

1.May be multi-method

2.The findings guide the observations and research

5. *Controlled experiments* – control all variables except the one being studied

a. *Control group* – subjects who are not exposed to the variable the researcher wants to test

b. *Experimental group* – subjects who are exposed to the variable being tested

c. Controlled experiments are good because they allow for the best test of cause and effect

d. Controlled experiments also have drawbacks

1.Cannot be used for many sociological questions that focus on meso- and macro-level social forces

2.The laboratory setting may affect participants (research effects)

3.Social scientists cannot ethically introduce many variables into the laboratory

6. *Existing sources* – using materials that already exist in a new way or to understand a new pattern

a. *Secondary analysis* – a common way of using data that has already been collected in other studies

1.Potential weaknesses: data sets may not be representative of the total population being studied, the “human side” is not measured, data sets may not directly answer the researcher’s questions, any problems that are in the original data will exist in the secondary analysis

b. *Content analysis* – systematic categorizing and recording of information from written or recorded sources

1.Often completed with printed materials

2.*Unobtrusive* – the researcher does not influence the subject with direct contact

3.Inexpensive and easy to do

7. *Triangulation* – the use of multiple methods of research to enhance the accuracy of the findings

8. Selecting a *sample* – a small, manageable group of people systematically chosen to represent a larger group

a. Should represent the entire population being studied as closely as possible

b. *Representative sample* – accurately reflects the group being studied

1.Results of the study can be *generalized* – applied to the larger population

c. *Random sample* – every person in the population has an equal chance of being selected for the study

d. *Unrepresentative sample* – cannot be generalized to the larger population being studied

iii. Making sense of the Data Analysis

1. Results are discussed and conclusions are drawn about whether the hypotheses are supported or not

2. Interpretation of data often involves judgment and opinion based on the guiding theory. This can lead to criticism from other researchers

a. These challenges help sociology and sociologists grow and develop

3. Research must be *replicable* – capable of being repeated

4. Since findings are almost never absolute, hypotheses are “supported” or “rejected” rather than “proven”

5. Each study gets us closer to an accurate understanding the social world

6. A report is developed outlining the research project and analysis of the data collected

VI. Ethical Issues in Social Research

A. Sociologists and other scientists are bound by ethical codes of conduct governing research

B. How will research findings be used? Could they hurt individuals, communities, or nations? In whose interest is the research carried out?

C. How can the researcher protect subject confidentiality? Is the risk to subjects worth the anticipated benefits?

D. Do subjects provide informed consent? What does informed consent mean? How much should the researcher reveal to the subject about the study?

E. Will there be any harm to subjects?

F. How much privacy violation is acceptable? How much disclosure of confidential information is acceptable?

G. How can results be disseminated to the public to be useful for public policy and everyday life

H. Human subjects review boards at most universities and research organizations help protect subjects

VII. Public Sociology

i. A third tradition is called *Public Sociology* which sees the role of the discipline as improving the society:

1. Public sociologists want to move the focus of sociology from the classrooms and labs into communities where they can have a direct impact on social change

2. One way to do this is through *applied sociology.* These sociologists use sociological knowledge and research skills to address organizational needs or problems in government, etc. They focus on pragmatic ways to improve organizations or society. These careers are generally not within academia

VIII. What Have We Learned?

A. Outlined the process of research that describes how social scientists “know”

B. What makes a discipline scientific is not the subject matter but how we conduct our research and what we consider valid evidence while remember the core features of science

i. Commitment to empirically validated evidence. Confirming through a systematic process of testing using the five senses

ii. Efforts to disprove whatever we think is true, allowing us to be convinced by the evidence rather than by our preconceived ideas

iii. Absolute integrity and objectivity in reporting and conducting research

iv. Continual openness to having our findings re-examined and new interpretations proposed

C. To have credible findings, we always consider the possibility that we have overlooked alternative explanations of the data and alternative ways to view the problem

D. Science is a process that is made possible by a social exchange of ideas, a clash of opinions, and a continual search for truth

E. Theories serve as lenses to help us make sense of the data that we gather with various research strategies

i. Because data can be used to test theories, there is an ongoing reciprocal relationship between theory and research