

Understanding Sociology

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Chapter 1 · Based on Richard T. Schaefer, *Sociology: A Brief Introduction*, 14th ed.

What Is Sociology?

- **Sociology** — the scientific study of social behavior and human groups
- It focuses on social relationships and how they influence people's behavior
- And on how societies — the sum of those relationships — develop and change
- Scope: from peer pressure and friendship to suicide and global economic patterns

The Sociological Imagination

Two Habits of Mind

The sociological perspective is really two habits you can practice —

- **Seeing the general in the particular** — placing one person's behavior inside the wider pattern it belongs to
- **Seeing the strange in the familiar** — looking at your own everyday world as though you had arrived here yesterday

Private Choices and Social Patterns

Three questions to hold onto:

- Why do students return to the **same seat** in a classroom, with no seating chart?
- Why do so many people marry someone with a **similar level of education**?
- Why does a baby name go suddenly **everywhere**, and then vanish?

Social Influence Reaches Private Choices

Picture yourself completely alone in your room, playing music, no one else in sight. Society is nowhere to be found.

- Except: someone composed the song, and someone introduced you to it
- Every object in the room that you did not make yourself came from somewhere
- Even your *taste* has a history — what you heard as a child, what your friends play, where you grew up

The Phone Pattern: Individual Explanations

- Look around any public place — the mall, a family gathering, a restaurant. So many people are staring at their phones
- First instinct: *“people are addicted”*, *“people are rude”* — these are individual-level explanations



The Phone Pattern: Social Explanations

What social conditions—not only personal choices—help produce this pattern?

- Apps are designed to hold attention
- Work and family obligations have moved onto the phone
- News and books have moved onto the phone
- A new social norm where being unreachable is seen as rude

Sociology as a Social Science

- **Science** — the body of knowledge obtained by methods based on systematic observation
- **Natural science** — the study of the physical features of nature and how they interact and change
- **Social science** — the study of the social features of humans and how they interact and change

Four Levels of Analysis

- **Microsociology** — stresses the study of small groups, often through experimental means
- **Mesosociology** — an intermediate level of analysis: formal organizations and social movements
- **Macrosociology** — concentrates on large-scale phenomena or entire civilizations
- **Global sociology** — makes comparisons among nations, using entire societies as units of analysis



The Founders

Durkheim, Weber, and Marx lived through the same period of upheaval. Each tried to understand a different part of it.

Industrialization and the Origins of Sociology

Sociology was not invented in a calm century. It was invented by people watching their world come apart.

- Factories multiply; cities swell faster than at any point in human history
- Kings fall; mass democracy and the nation-state arrive
- People leave villages where everyone knew them for cities where nobody does
- **Auguste Comte** coins the word *sociology* — a science of behavior to repair a damaged society
- **Harriet Martineau** translates Comte, writes the first book on sociological methods, and argues that scholars must *act* on their convictions
- **Herbert Spencer** applies “survival of the fittest” to societies, and wants only to understand society, not improve it

Every founder we meet is answering the same emergency with a different question.

Work in Feudal and Industrial Society



Peasants at work before the gates of a town. Miniature painting from the *Breviarium Grimani*, c. late 15th century.



Adolph Menzel, *The Iron Rolling Mill (Modern Cyclopes)*, 1872–75 · Public domain

Roughly four centuries apart. Look at where the work happens, who is watching over it, and what is lighting the sky.

Durkheim, Weber, and Marx: Order, Meaning, and Power

- **Émile Durkheim** — What holds society together when traditional ties weaken?
- **Max Weber** — How can meanings shape action—and become organized into modern institutions?
- **Karl Marx** — Who owns productive resources, whose labor creates the result, and who controls the return?

Three starting points: **social order · meaning · power**

A Handmade Greeting Card



She chooses the paper, the border, the design... and she does every step



Her mother with the finished card

Her mother will keep this for years. Why? It is a folded piece of paper.

Division of Labor in the Card Workshop



The design sells. A workshop takes it on.

- Six people, six steps: **cut** · **fold** · **border** · **flowers** · **heart** · **pack**
- Nobody designs anything. The design is on the wall
- Output rises many times over

Ask the woman who paints the flowers: *what did you make today?*

Ownership and Returns in the Card Workshop



- The six do the work
- Every finished card belongs to the workshop
- The wage is the same whether the line makes eighty cards or two hundred
- What is left over stays with the person who owns the workshop

Nobody in that picture is cruel. So what is producing the difference?

Rules and Quality Control in the Card Workshop



Now every card must match the approved model.

- Border unbroken · fold within 3 mm · flowers in the corner
- Approved cards go in the green tray
- Rejected cards go in the red tray, and are not corrected

The inspector did not design the card and cannot say why the rule is 3 mm. Why does her decision still count?

Comparing Four Forms of Card Production

Before we move on, compare what changed as the card moved from one person's desk to the workshop.

The handmade card

What did she have that the workshop does not?

The line

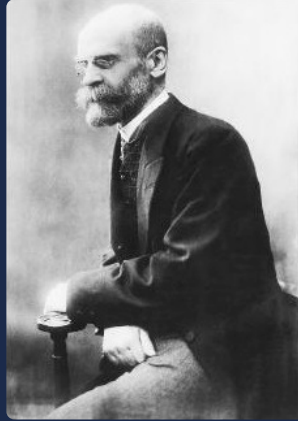
What did the workshop gain? What did it cost?

The owner and the rulebook

Nothing changed but the arrangement. Why does that change everything?

Durkheim, Weber, and Marx will help us understand these changes in three different ways.

Durkheim



The question: how do people remain connected when society changes rapidly?

Émile Durkheim · 1858–1917 · Wikimedia Commons · Public domain

Durkheim: Behavior in Social Context

Durkheim's defining move was simple:

Behavior must be understood within a **larger social context**, not only through individual motives or personality.

He lived through rapid industrialization, urban growth, political upheaval, and weakening traditional ties.

His question: how do people remain connected when society changes rapidly?

Durkheim: Social Facts

Social facts are social patterns, rules, and institutions that:

- exist beyond any one person;
- are learned through group life;
- exert pressure on how people act.

Examples include greeting rules, school calendars, legal systems, language, currency, and suicide rates.

Hospitality Norms as Social Facts

In many Kuwaiti homes, a guest is offered coffee, tea, or food almost as soon as they arrive. Offering nothing may be read as rude, even during a brief visit.

In some Dutch families, a child visiting a friend is expected to go home or wait in a different room when the family has dinner.

To many Arabs, that sounds rude. The Dutch family may see it differently: dinner was planned for the household, and the child's family may be expecting them home.

- No single host invented this expectation
- People learn it from family and community
- Approval and disapproval give it force

What is another hosting or greeting rule that people know without seeing it written?

A shared rule can feel like personal common sense because it has become part of a community's moral world.

From Private Acts to Social Patterns

Individual motives can vary. Sociology asks whether behavior also forms a pattern across groups or societies.

Individual question

Why did this person act?

Sociological question

Why does the **rate** differ across social settings?

A stable difference in rates is a clue that social conditions may be involved.

Durkheim's Comparison of Suicide Rates

Durkheim rejected untested explanations of suicide, such as inherited tendencies or cosmic forces.

He changed the question. Instead of asking why one person died, he compared **reported rates** across societies.

Country, 1869	Reported suicides per million
England	67
France	135
Denmark	277

What social differences could explain Denmark?

Durkheim: Social Integration and Suicide Rates

- Durkheim compared religious, marital, occupational, and national groups
- He concluded that suicide rates reflected the extent to which people were **integrated into group life**
- This was a claim about variation in **rates**, not a diagnosis of any individual

Theory — a set of statements that seeks to explain problems, actions, or behavior

A strong theory connects observations and gives researchers expectations they can test.

Specialization Creates Interdependence

Back to the card workshop:

- The handmade card maker could complete the whole product alone
- On the line, each person performed one specialized task
- Output rose, but nobody could complete a card without everyone else

The **division of labor** makes people different in their work and more dependent on one another.

Durkheim called cohesion through specialization **organic solidarity**. The technical contrast with mechanical solidarity is optional depth.

Anomie: When Regulation Weakens

Anomie is the loss of direction that occurs when social regulation becomes ineffective, often during profound social change.

rapid change → familiar rules weaken → guidance becomes unclear → loss of direction

- Anomie concerns weakened social guidance
- It is not a synonym for sadness, isolation, or Marx's alienation

Social change can expand possibilities while also weakening the rules people use to orient themselves.

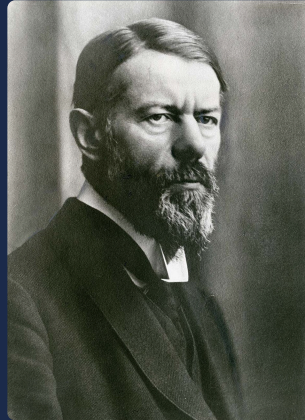
Durkheim: Intermediate Groups and Social Belonging

Durkheim proposed new groups between the family and the state that could provide belonging in large, impersonal societies.

- Occupational associations
- Unions
- Other groups that connect individuals to a wider community

Durkheim teaches us to look past an isolated individual and ask whether social ties, shared rules, and social conditions produce a measurable pattern.

Weber



The question: how can sociology explain what actions mean—and what those meanings build?

Max Weber · 1864–1920 · Wikimedia Commons · Public domain

Weber: Social Action and Verstehen

- **Social action** — conduct to which people attach meaning and which takes account of others
- Measurement can reveal a pattern; explanation must also ask what the action *means* to the people acting
- **Verstehen** — learning the subjective meanings people attach to their actions. German for “understanding” or “insight”
- The same diwaniya attendance may mean friendship, family duty, networking, or political activity
- Interviews, observation, and context provide evidence; *verstehen* is not mind reading

- **Durkheim:** What social pattern can we observe?
- **Weber:** What does the action mean to the actor—and what does that meaning help explain?

Weber's Comparative Tool: The Ideal Type

An **ideal type** is a construct or model used to evaluate specific cases.

- It is a deliberately clear model, not a description of any one real case
- “Ideal” does **not** mean good, desirable, average, or perfect
- Its value lies in comparison: where does the real case fit, and where does it depart?

Think of it as a ruler. A ruler is not a claim about how long things ought to be. It is only useful because it never varies.

Verstehen investigates subjective meaning. An **ideal type** gives the investigation a consistent point of comparison.

Bureaucracy and the Ideal Type in the Card Workshop

A clear bureaucratic model

- A specialized role applies the standard
- Written rules and records guide decisions
- The same procedure applies to every card

The actual workshop

- The inspector did not write the 3 mm rule
- Her decision counts because her role applies it
- The model lets us ask where practice fits—or departs

Rationalization organizes action through calculation, written rules, records, and specialized roles.

Rationalization and the Iron Cage in the Card Workshop

The workshop gains:

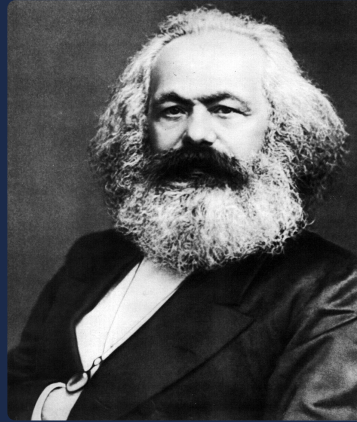
- **consistency** — every card is judged by the same standard
- **predictability** — workers know what will pass
- **coordination** — specialized roles can produce at scale

The same arrangement narrows discretion: the inspector applies a rule she did not write, and the workers cannot correct a card in their own way.

Even if the 3 mm rule improves consistency, who is free to work differently?

Rationalized systems increase predictability, but they also make people depend on rules that limit their autonomy. Weber called this constraint the **iron cage**.

Marx



Who owns productive resources, whose labor creates the result, and who controls the return?

Karl Marx · 1818–1883 · John Mayall / Wikimedia Commons · Public domain

Marx and Engels: *The Communist Manifesto*

Marx did not present himself primarily as a sociologist. Sociology treats him as a major figure because his analysis of class, ownership, conflict, and institutional power shaped the field.

In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote a manifesto for the Communist League.

“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.”

- Marx and Engels argued that capitalist society divided owners and workers into classes with opposing interests
- The *Manifesto* urged the **proletariat**—workers whose principal resource was their labor—to unite and overthrow the capitalist class system
- Marx analyzed capitalism as a revolutionary socialist who wanted to replace it

Marx: Capitalism Divides Owners and Workers



Adolph Menzel, *The Iron Rolling Mill*, 1875 · Public domain

- The **means of production** are the resources used to produce goods: factories, machinery, land, and capital
- The **bourgeoisie** owns and controls those resources and the products made with them
- The **proletariat** works for wages; its main resource is their labor
- These positions create conflicting interests over wages, conditions, output, control, and profit

Class is a social position within production—not a judgment about individual character.

Marx: Exploitation Is Built into the Relationship

In the card workshop, the workers supplied the labor. The owner controlled the cards and the return from their sale.

- The workers' wages did not rise when output rose
- Ownership gave the owner control over the product and its return
- The positions therefore carried conflicting interests, even if everyone behaved kindly

For Marx, **exploitation** is structural. Owners benefit from workers' labor because of how production is organized.

Marx: Alienation—Work Without Ownership or Control

Alienation occurs when the organization of work separates workers from ownership, control, connection, or creative activity.

The handmade card

- One maker chooses the design
- She controls the whole process
- The finished card is hers to give

The workshop line

- Each worker repeats one assigned task
- No worker controls or completes the whole card
- The finished cards belong to the workshop

Marx's alienation concerns the organization and ownership of work—not a general feeling of unhappiness.

Marx: Class Power Extends Beyond the Factory

Marx described a system of **economic, social, and political relationships** that maintained owners' power over workers.

- Ownership provides control over productive resources and the products of labor
- Institutions and laws can protect the existing arrangement
- Widely accepted assumptions can make that arrangement appear natural or inevitable

Marx teaches us to ask: **who owns productive resources, whose labor creates the result, who controls it, and how do those positions produce conflict and power?**
How do effects of these positions permeate in society?

The Founders Together

The same workshop looks different when the question changes.

Durkheim, Marx, and Weber on the Card Workshop

Return to the card workshop:

	What you saw	What they called it	The question
Durkheim	The line: nobody could finish a card alone any more	The division of labor creates interdependence	What ties and social conditions produce the pattern?
Marx	The owner: the workers made it, but he kept it	Alienation and unequal control	Who owns, who works, who benefits, and who controls?
Weber	The rulebook, the trays, the inspector	Bureaucracy and rationalization	What does the action mean, and how do procedures shape it?

The organization produced interdependence, predictability, and unequal control without requiring cruel individuals.

Studying Social Media Use with Durkheim, Weber, and Marx

Why do people spend hours a day on social media?

	Durkheim	Weber	Marx
Asks	Does use rise where integration is weaker?	What does posting <i>mean</i> to the user, and how does that meaning sustain use? (verstehen)	Who owns the platform, and who profits?
Collects	Usage <i>rates</i> across groups	Interviews; an ideal type to compare users against	Ownership, revenue, who is paid
Could find	Screen time tracks offline ties	Many meanings: income, duty, boredom	Alienation: users make it, owners keep the value

Durkheim, Weber, and Marx on Industrialization

Europe went from villages and fields to cities and factories. All three examined the same industrial transformation. Each explained a part that the others tended to overlook.

	What drove the change?	What to look at
Marx	Conflict between classes over ownership and who keeps what is left over	Who owns, who works, who benefits
Weber	A change in how people think . Calculation and impersonal rules became organizing principles	Procedures, records, offices, measurement
Durkheim	Specialization changed how people depend on one another	Ties, integration, interdependence

Different questions reveal different parts of the same social transformation.

W. E. B. Du Bois: Evidence Against Prejudice



1900 Paris Exposition • Library of Congress,
LOT 11931

- In-depth studies in **Philadelphia and Atlanta** used systematic research to separate opinion from fact
- The **Atlanta Sociological Laboratory** joined research, student training, and public purpose
- **Double consciousness** — identity divided across two or more social realities; developed to describe Black life in white America

Evidence can challenge accepted beliefs and contribute to social change.

Two Ways the Field Expanded

Smaller settings

Charles Horton Cooley

studied intimate, face-to-face groups such as families and friendship networks.

Research for reform

Jane Addams combined systematic inquiry, social service, and reform through Hull House.

Sociology expanded by changing both its scale and its practical purpose.

Contemporary Specialties and Methods in Sociology

Specialties

- **Medical sociology** studies how social relationships and institutions shape health, illness, and health care
- **Environmental sociology** studies relationships between societies and the physical environment

A medical-sociology study: *Are older heart-attack patients with emotional support more likely to survive the next six months?*

Methods

- **Social network analysis** studies who is connected to whom and how information or behavior moves between people
Applied question: Which trusted community members should health educators train to share accurate HIV-prevention information?
- **Computational social research** uses computers to find patterns in very large collections of social data
Applied question: What are the effects of algorithmic choice on social media behavior?

New subjects and methods expand sociology while preserving its main goal of explaining how social relationships produce patterned outcomes.

The Three Perspectives

The founders gave sociology several starting points.
Later sociologists developed them into broader perspectives.

Where the Three Perspectives Come From

- **Functionalism:** Durkheim's concern with cohesion strongly influenced this perspective; Parsons became a key developer
- **Conflict theory:** Marx's analysis of class conflict supplied a major foundation; later sociologists widened the lens beyond class
- **Interactionism:** Mead is its principal founder; Weber contributes to sociology's broader concern with subjective meaning

The perspectives grew through many scholars. They are not one theorist's ideas under three new names.

Functionalism: Stability and Connected Parts

- **Functionalist perspective** — examines how the parts of society are structured to maintain stability
- Society is understood as a system of connected parts
- A practice may contribute to the larger system even when that contribution is not intended

What does this practice or institution do for the larger social system?

What agricultural and household functions does the Hindu prohibition against slaughtering cattle serve in rural Indian communities?

When a community punishes someone for breaking a rule, what does everyone else learn about the group's ideas of right and wrong?

Merton: Manifest Functions, Latent Functions, and Dysfunctions

Use the university as one case:

- **Manifest functions** — these are open, conscious, and stated. e.g., teaching and certifying competence
- **Latent functions** — unintended or less visible. e.g., friendships, networks, and meeting future spouses
- **Dysfunctions** — consequences that disrupt the system or reduce its stability. e.g., cheating can weaken trust in a degree

What is one other latent function or dysfunction of a university?

Conflict Theory: Power and Unequal Resources

- **Conflict perspective** — explains social behavior through tension between groups over power and resources
- Conflict need not be violent; groups can seek different outcomes through ordinary rules and negotiations
- Ask: *Who benefits? Who bears the costs? Who has the power to shape the rules?*

Delivery-app case: the platform, restaurant, courier, and customer gain different benefits, carry different costs, and have unequal influence over the rules.

Interactionism: Meaning in Everyday Life

- **Interactionist perspective** — studies everyday interaction and uses it to explain society more broadly
- George Herbert Mead is widely regarded as its founder
- People act in a world of meaningful objects and **symbols**
- **Nonverbal communication** includes gestures, facial expressions, and postures

What does this action mean here, and how does repeated interaction create social order?

Same Gesture, Different Social Meaning

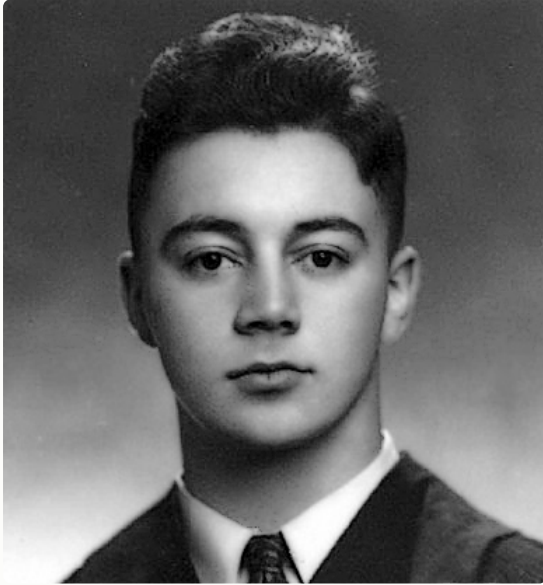


Noto Emoji / Wikimedia
Commons

- **In Italy:** often *“What do you want?”* or *“What are you saying?”* — sometimes confrontational
- **In Kuwait:** *“Wait”* or *“Be patient”*

The movement does not explain itself. People learn and interpret its meaning.

Goffman's Dramaturgical Approach



- **Dramaturgical approach** — people are seen as performers who present some features of themselves while keeping others out of view
 - A student may appear serious in class and relaxed at a family gathering
 - Different settings bring different audiences, expectations, and roles
-
- Your Instagram grid is the performance; your camera roll is backstage

Functionalism, Conflict Theory, and Interactionism Compared

	Functionalist	Conflict	Interactionist
Starting point	Connected parts and stability	Unequal resources and competing interests	Shared meanings and everyday interaction
Main question	What does this do for the larger system?	Who benefits, bears costs, and shapes the rules?	What does this mean, and how does interaction create order?
Often begins at	Macro, meso, or global level	Macro, meso, or global level	Micro level
Key concepts	Functions and dysfunctions	Power, resources, inequality	Symbols and nonverbal communication

Blind Spots of the Three Perspectives

A perspective directs attention. It also leaves something less visible.

- **Functionalism** can understate conflict and change or treat a harmful arrangement as justified because it serves a function. E.g., it can end up defending arrangements that harm people — if poverty guarantees a supply of willing workers, is poverty “functional”?
- **Conflict theory** can understate cooperation, cohesion, and the routine production of social order. E.g., If society were only a struggle, why does most of daily life run smoothly?
- **Interactionism** can overlook the larger institutions and inequalities that shape the setting. E.g., it can describe a queue in perfect detail and never ask who built the system people are queueing for

No single perspective answers every sociological question.

Apply the Three Perspectives to a Diwaniya

Analyze the same **diwaniya** three ways:

- **Functionalism:** What does this gathering do for its members and for the wider community?
- **Conflict:** How are status, influence, and access distributed?
- **Interactionism:** What shared meanings and unwritten rules organize greetings, seating, conversation, and serving?

Optional alternative: apply the same questions to a traditional Kuwaiti wedding.

Opening Questions: Seats, Marriage, and Baby Names

- **Returning to the same seat in every lecture** — habit, friendship, arrival time, sightlines, and repeated interaction can create a stable pattern without assigned seats
- **Marrying someone with similar education** — universities, workplaces, families, cultural/gender norms, and expectations shape whom people meet and consider a suitable partner
- **Baby names spreading and fading** — family, media, and social networks make names familiar or fashionable across many private decisions

What looked like a private choice also followed a social pattern.

Basic, Applied, and Clinical Sociology

- **Basic (pure):** seeks deeper knowledge of social phenomena
Example: studying how university students form friendship groups
- **Applied:** uses sociology for a practical purpose
Example: investigating why commuters avoid a new bus route and recommending changes
- **Clinical:** facilitates and implements social change
Example: helping a university redesign and implement its advising system

The purpose of the work—not the topic alone—determines the category.

Sociology in Your Major

- **Medicine:** How do trust, family, work, and access shape responses to the same medical advice?
- **Engineering:** How do school and work schedules produce traffic—and how does a new road design reshape behavior?
- **Business:** How do organizations, status, and social networks shape teamwork and consumer choices?
- **Computer science:** How does platform design change interaction, and what social context is missing from behavioral data?

Sociological Imagination and Three Perspectives

- The **sociological imagination** connects individual experience to a wider social context
- **Functionalism**: What contributes to stability—and what disrupts it?
- **Conflict theory**: Who benefits, who bears the costs, and who shapes the rules?
- **Interactionism**: What meanings and repeated interactions organize everyday life?

Next week: **Research methods.**