

Module : Humanities and Social Sciences

Lecture 3: Sociology

Etymology

'Socio' comes from the Latin 'socius', meaning 'companion' or 'ally'. In modern terms, 'socio' has evolved to mean 'society' or 'relating to society'. The suffix '-logy' comes from the Greek meaning 'the study of'. Quite literally, 'sociology' means 'the study of society'.

Definition

Sociology is the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies and how people interact within these contexts. Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile crowd; from organized crime to religious traditions; from the divisions of race, gender and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture.

A brief history and background of human sociology

The study of society and human behaviour within society is not new; in fact, ancient philosophers began asking sociological questions long before sociology became an independent academic discipline. Ancient philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Confucius were interested in human behaviour within their societies and produced theories explaining social conflict and power structures.

In the 18th century, philosophers such as Locke, Kant and Hobbes used their philosophical perspectives and theories to suggest social reforms for common social problems. In the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution brought about many changes to socio-economic structures, mobility (including global mobility), politics and religion. These developments helped people understand societal structures and changes affecting their own lives and also exposed them to other societies and cultures.

The academic discipline of sociology

In 1838, French philosopher Auguste Comte, often referred to as the father of modern Sociology used the term sociology to describe the study of the social world. He acknowledged that it was a discipline in its own right. However, this term was first coined by French writer Emmanuel Sieyès in 1780. Comte rediscovered and defined it.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, some key thinkers became 'pioneers' in Sociology and developed theories to help bring about social change. These included Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber; their knowledge of other disciplines, such as history, economics, philosophy and psychology, contributed to their sociological research.

Non-western sociology

It is important to note the value of non-western Sociology. A notable example of Eastern sociological research is the work of Ibn Khaldun on the social phenomena of Arab-Muslim civilisations. He explains 'how and why' societies were the way they were using detailed accounts and historical insights. French geographer Yves Lacoste and English historian Arnold Toynbee considered his work the greatest of its kind.

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Research types in sociology

Sociologists examine the social world, see a problem or interesting pattern, and set out to study it. They use research methods to design a study. Sociologists generally choose from widely used methods of social investigation: primary source data collection such as survey, participant observation, ethnography, case study, observations, experiment, and secondary data analysis, or use of existing sources. The types of methods are divided into:

- **Qualitative Research:** used when a researcher wants to understand people's opinions, idiosyncratic responses to an event, motivations, or underlying reasons for actions or decisions.
- **Quantitative Research:** used when a researcher wants to examine trends and compare populations. It is carried through collecting numerical data or converted into numerical data and examined using statistical methods of analysis.

Sociology topics and learning objectives

Sociology can help us understand society, societal structures and processes and how they affect human behaviour. Sociology can be studied through the following topics:

- **Education with methods in context**

Education is an important topic in sociology as it looks at how education varies depending on social policies, external and internal processes and individual factors such as social class, race and gender.

- **Cultural identity**

Cultural identity looks at the impact of culture on our identities. Cultures include global culture, mass culture, subcultures and the cultures of different backgrounds in society. This topic looks at how culture and socialisation form our identities.

- **Families and households**

The topic of families and households looks at how families and households have changed over time. It studies demographic changes in different types of families and explores why these changes could have occurred. The concept of childhood is also discussed as a sociological construct.

- **Health**

The topic of health discusses how health and illnesses may be social constructs. It also examines trends and patterns in the social distribution of healthcare and how medical access varies in social groups.

- **Work, poverty and welfare**

The issues of poverty, welfare and the labour process are discussed in this topic. In particular, the distribution of wealth in Algeria, the Welfare State, and how work and poverty have changed over time.

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- **Beliefs in society**

Religion, ideologies and religious movements are discussed in this topic with relation to their roles in society. The topic also considers contemporary issues and changes in religion, such as the impact of secularisation.

- **The media**

This topic looks at the role and impact of media on society. It looks at representations in the media of different social groups and considers how audiences interact with the media.

- **Crime and deviance**

The topic of crime and deviance looks at the social distribution of crime, the causes of crime, and effective punishments. A key focus of this topic is on the sociological theories on crime.

Importance of Sociology

The study of society not only has a value in modern complex society, it becomes indispensable. Roles of sociology can be summarized in the following:

1. Sociology studies the role of the institutions in the development of the Individual.
2. The study of Sociology is indispensable for understanding and planning of society.
3. Sociology is of great importance in the solution of social problems.
4. Sociology has drawn our attention to the essential worth and dignity of man.
5. Sociology has changed outlook with regard to the problems of crime etc.
6. Sociology has made great contribution to enrich human culture.

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