Lori Peek, Ph.D.
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Co-Director, Center for Disaster and Risk Analysis
Colorado State University
What is sociology anyway?
Sociology is the study of human life.
Sociology is the study of human life.

Sociology is the study of society.
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Sociology is the systematic study of human behavior, social interaction, social institutions, and society.
“The fact is that most sociologists regard their field as an approach rather than as a subject matter, a perspective rather than a body of knowledge. What differentiates us from other observers of the human scene is how we look out at the world – the way our eyes are focused, the way our intellectual reflexes are set, the way our imaginations are tuned.” –Kai T. Erikson, Yale University
What is a sociological perspective?
What is a sociological perspective?
What *is* a sociological perspective?
“vivid awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society”
—C. Wright Mills (1916-1962)
Why do people become homeless?
Why do people become homeless?

Biography
Why do people become homeless?

Biography

History

Social Structure
Why do people become homeless?

History

Biography

Social Structure
Why do people become homeless?

Biography

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History
Why do people become homeless?

Biography

History

Social Structure
“When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual.”

~C. Wright Mills, 1959
History and Emergence of Sociology
August Comte (1798-1857)

- French Philosopher
- Founder of Sociology
- Argued that the methods used in the natural sciences should also be applied to the objective study of society
- Social Laws: Social Statics + Social Dynamics
Emile Durkheim (1855-1917)

- French Sociologist
- **Functionalist** theoretical tradition
- **Social Facts**
  - Patterned ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that exist outside any one individual, but that exert social control over each person
- **Social Solidarity**
  - *Mechanical Solidarity* – traditional societies where people share beliefs and values and perform common activities
  - *Organic Solidarity* – diverse division of labor in society
  - *Anomie*: condition in which social control becomes ineffective as a result of the loss of shared values and of a sense of purpose in society
Karl Marx (1818-1883)

- German Economist and Philosopher
- Conflict perspective
- Unlike Durkheim (whose focus was on social order), Marx believed that it was the economic conflict between the capitalist class (bourgeoisie) and the working class (proletariat) that would lead to social change.
- Alienation
  - A feeling of powerlessness and estrangement from one’s work, from other people, and from oneself
Max Weber (1864-1920)

- German Social Scientist
- Emphasized that sociology should be value free—research should be conducted in a scientific manner and should exclude the researcher’s personal values and economic interests.
- Believed that bureaucracies were becoming increasingly oriented toward routine administration and a specialized division of labor.
- For Weber, rational bureaucracy (and not class struggle) was the most significant factor in determining the social relationships between people in industrialized societies.
## Major Theoretical Approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspective</th>
<th>Level of Analysis</th>
<th>View of Society</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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George Herbert Mead (1863-1931)

- American philosopher, psychologist, and sociologist
- Generalized Other
  - The norms, values, attitudes, and expectations of people “in general.”
- Role Taking
- The “I” and the “Me”
  - “I” = active, spontaneous, creative
  - “Me” = attitudes and demands of others and the awareness of those demands
# Major Theoretical Approaches

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<td>Symbolic Interactionist</td>
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<td>Society is a sum of interactions of people and groups. Behavior is learned in interaction with other people; how people define a situation becomes the foundation for how they behave.</td>
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Comparing Major Theoretical Paradigms

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**Core Questions**

- What keeps society functioning smoothly?
- What are the parts of society and how do they relate?
- What are the intended and unintended outcomes of an event?
- How are wealth and power distributed in society?
- How do people with wealth and power keep them?
- Are there groups that get ahead in this society and why?
- How are society’s resources and opportunities divided?
- How do people co-create the society?
- How does social interaction influence, create, and sustain human relationships?
- Do people change behavior from one setting to another, and if so, why?
Meso or Mid-Range Theoretical Orientation

- Focus on organizations, companies, social institutions, laws, and groups of people organized around similar interests.
### Core Areas of Sociology

The American Sociological Association (ASA) currently has 52 sections

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<td>Ethnomethodology</td>
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Methodological Approaches

• **Quantitative Research**
  – Based on the goal of scientific objectivity and focused on data that can be measured numerically

• **Qualitative Research**
  – Uses interpretive description rather than statistics to analyze underlying meanings and patterns of social relationships

Kendall 2006
Research Methods

- Surveys
- Secondary data analysis
- Content analysis
- Field research
  - Interviews
  - Participant observation
  - Focus groups
  - Photovoice
- Experiments
- Spatial analysis/GIS
Structure/Agency

- An important debate in sociology that highlights to what extent an individual's life is determined by social forces
- **Agency**
  - The ability to act independent of structure
- **Structure**
  - Pre-existing social arrangements that shape and constrain behavior
Social Stratification

The hierarchical arrangement of large social groups based on their control over basic resources (Feagin and Feagin 2003). Social structural inequality is often based on class, race, gender, age, and other attributes on which society places value.
Present / Future of Sociology

- Focus on “wicked problems”
- Increased multi- and interdisciplinary work
- More sophisticated methodological approaches + “big data”
- Threats to credibility / legitimacy of social sciences
Thank You!

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