

Lecture 1:

**What is social theory?**

- Modern social theory is inspired by advancing human freedom to the benefit of all humanity – the study of people in groups
- A belief that it can make a better world is at the heart of modern social theory
- It's about inventing new and imaginative ways of understanding the meaning of the social world
- Theories simplify reality – they are imperfect.

**Sociological theories:**

- High Level theories: focus on trying to explain how and why society is ordered – functionalism, Marxism, interactionism, feminism...
- Mid-range theories: focus on trying to explain some general aspect of social behaviour
- Low level theories: focus on trying to explain a specific aspect of social behaviour

**Social Dilemmas:** Sociology is the search for solutions of social dilemmas. Social dilemmas are perplexing questions that don't have obvious answers – or the obvious answers are wrong, simplistic or unquestioned.

**Views of social theory:** Since the enlightenment, the very meaning of social theory has been a debate – scientific, philosophical, and moral.

**Scientific Social theory:**

- Science – reliable social knowledge
- Sciences reveals what is real and true
- Scientific theorists discover laws or principles – apply to human behaviour in all societies, past and present.
- Sciences of physics or biology serve as models
- True knowledge requires that observations, research and facts be organised as general principles or laws that are proven or falsified through repeated testing.

**Philosophical Social Theory:**

- Share with scientific theorists the aim to reveal timeless social truths
- Are even more ambitious than scientific ones
- Believe that research must be preceded by conceptual thinking
  - Do we focus on the individual or on social groups? Are individuals agents who shape society or do individuals mostly adapt to social forces? And which social forces? Religion, the economy, class or bureaucracy – are the most important in shaping social life?
- Aim to establish what are the core categories and ideas about human behaviour and social life
- Provide the foundational concepts and ideas that will guide the work of researchers and social analysts

**Moral (critical practice) Social Theory:**

- Emphasise a moral vision of social theory
- Social knowledge is valuable – has potential to make the world a better place
- Approaching theory as a moral or critical practice has been a key part of modern social thinking
- Theorists have proposed stories of class conflict, male dominance, and the decline of religious faith, the crisis of solidarity and the bureaucratisation of society. The aim is to alert the public to a social danger in order to prompt or guide social and political action.
- Doesn't mean giving up a commitment to truth or empirical knowledge
- Sceptical of scientific theories as capable of producing hard and fast truths, rather social analysis as a type of social criticism.

**Styles:**

- The styles of scientific and philosophical theorists are different

- Scientific theorists aim to organise empirical research into a set of social principles or laws
- Philosophical theorists think about ideas of other thinkers as they develop their own views about human behaviour and social life.

### Two levels of problems:

- **Macro level:**
  - Large scale, broad structures of society
  - Interactions between nations, communities, organisation and other large social units
- **Micro Level**
  - Small scale social interactions that occur between small groups, families, couples and individuals
  - Reference groups.

### Auguste Comte: (1798 – 1857):

- Coined the term sociology
- Believed society could be studied like any other science
- Key concepts: positivism, sociology the queen of sciences, social engineering.

### Harriet Martineau (1802 – 1876):

- Concerned with social change and the plight of women and children in English factories during the early phases of industrialisation.
- First acknowledged female sociologist

### Theories:

- Functionalism (and variations)
  - Structuralism
- Symbolic Interactionism
- Social Conflict theory
  - Gender theory (feminist theory)

### Conflict Theory:

#### Connected Assumptions:

- People have basic interests, things they want and want to acquire that are not defined by societies rather are common to all (bit unclear)
- An emphasis on power as the core to social relationships
- Values and ideas are seen as weapons to be used by different groups to advance their own ends rather than the whole of society.

### We have a moral obligation to critique society:

- All people have natural and defined interests
- Focused on historical and contemporary societies in terms of conflicts between social groups
- Emphasised link between ideologies and interests of those who develop them
- Emphasised primacy of technology and patterns of property ownership in determining people's lives and conflict

### Sociological Imagination:

#### Often thinkers combine these styles:

- C Wright Mills asked us to distinguish between personal troubles and public issues (think about unemployment, poverty, education, global warming)
  - Conscious of the impact of social forces on our lives
  - The personal is political
- The need to move away from viewing problems as personal troubles and towards recognising them as public issues
- An important part of learning to think sociologically is to gain and utilise the sociological imagination.

### Why is it important?

- Social Theory informs policy practice and action

- Social scientists are change agents
- The skills gained in this course provide us with the means to understand and or change things

**What is sociology?** Sociology is the study of human social life, groups and societies. Sociology can be considered a science because it uses systematic methods of empirical investigation to study a phenomenon. According to the theoretical position developed by Karl Marx, the engine of social change in every society is conflict between social groups.

**What is the sociological imagination?** – The ability to “think ourselves away” from the familiar routines of our daily lives in order to look at them anew.

## Lecture 2:

### Sex/ Gender Distinction:

- Sex = biological and physiological differences that distinguish men from women
- Gender: a social distinction between roles and expectations linked to a sex or a social construct that consists of a set of social arrangements that are built around sex.

**Sociobiology:** the systematic study of the biological basis of social behaviour (genetics, functional psychology)

- Structural functionalist school of sociology
- Gender roles are considered predictable because they are organised around biological reproductive characteristics – biological differences
- Gender roles such as masculinity and femininity are considered natural and normative because these roles are based in biology
- The maintenance of gender roles ensures social order and order in intimate relations.
- Women – are naturally suited to mothering and homemaking roles
- Men – are naturally suited to the role of breadwinner

**Social Construction:** Emphasises the situational aspects of gender identity and practice.

### Challenging Biological Essentialism:

- Gender roles are different in different societies, and they change within societies
- Not all men act in ways that are aggressive and not all women are soft and nurturing
- Gender is policed, which wouldn't happen if it was inevitable

**Essentialism:** biological accounts of gender differences are essentialist because they ground gender in the structure of the body and brain or in biologically determined roles such as insemination and pregnancy. Hence, women cannot compete with men in some fields because they don't have the same innate abilities as men or have not evolved to perform the same roles.

### Social Constructionism:

- Gender is the social transformation of a biological difference, sex, into a social difference.
- Gender norms are the rules of appropriate behaviour and roles for men and women
- Emphasises the situational aspects of gender identity and practice
- Social learning: learn gender roles from society, our environment

**Identity is a social construct:** When a child is imagining itself as a grown up, the child will make use of images, stories, advice and recommendations, and role models available in its surroundings. When a child develops an identity that challenges the norm, he or she may be shunned.

**Nature/ nurture debate:** The study of gender involves looking very closely at the relationship between nature and nurture and not assuming that one overshadows the other or that there is a clear line separating the two.

**Thinking Structurally:** you need to think about gender as a social structure.

### Structure:

- Has a pattern, an order
- Persists over time
- Is made by humans, but stands up by itself
- Usually involves hierarchy

### Social:

- Something humans do collectively
- Involves ways of doing (policy) and talking (discourse)

Gender is one of those central organising principles around which social life revolves. It is produced, represented and consumed in popular culture – gender identities are constructed. Gender structures social relations on unequal ground, thus power is fundamentally at play when we talk about gender differences.

**Gender is contextual:**

- Gender identity is formed in relation to its social and cultural context
- Masculine and feminine roles depend upon their context
- Gender cannot be understood when removed from the different context bodies operate in

**Gender is Social:** although gender is not fixed or natural, it has become so ingrained that it informs our very sense of ourselves as human beings. In order to be recognised by others, we must conform to a particular gender. Gender is not a role we put on, it is a norm which permits us to appear as humans.

**Social Institutions:** - an institution is a set of relationships and or practices which are expressions of mainstream social values and beliefs and have the support – explicit and implicit – of other social and cultural institutions.

**Gender Binary:** one term needs the other to make meaning – we understand things through what they are not – one term is privileged over the other.

**Michael Kimmel** – masculinity is often invisible within patriarchal societies. Power and privilege are invisible to those who have them. Invisibility provides status and privilege to white men. There are multiple competing masculinities – male power is not simply held by individual men, but is institutionalised in social structures and ideologies that support the gender order in favour of men.

**Traditional Western Masculinity** – heterosexual, strong, rational, in control, objective, unemotional, patriarchal

**Masculine Socialisation – masculinity in crisis:** men as a problem:

- Elevated negative health outcomes overall
- Educational performance – workforce participation
- Violence, accidents and risk taking
- Sexual difficulties
- Drug and alcohol use
- Specific difficulties for indigenous, social class, racial or minority ethnic populations.

**Homophobia:** more than the irrational fear of gay men, more than the fact that we might be perceived as gay – homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, and reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. We are afraid to let other men see that fear.

- Men's fear of not being man enough
- Keeping distance from any effeminate behaviour