

Foundation of Sociology

August Comte created the word Sociology 200 years ago, but what Sociology have we amassed in these 200 years? We know humans live in groups: first small groups like the family and then larger groups, like peer groups, work groups, and political parties. People need groups or they are not people. Humans take longer to 'raise' than any other species; we need the most protection and coaching to develop into who we are. A king in the old days decided to raise some abandoned infants and have no one talk with them—ever. The children died! Groups provide identity and purpose. The human is nothing without a group, and that is why we have this field called Sociology which is the study of ourselves as we ply the craft of being human. Sociology is about the social nature of the human animal.

One year I taught a class called "Childhood Socialization." On Day One, a happy girl student confidently announced when called upon that she was in this class because she wanted to learn more about how to socialize. I did not want to laugh at her (nor at the thought that college would these days be teaching a class on how to socialize). I tried instead to take the innocent comment to heart: Sociology in a certain way *is* to teach us how we socialize. To socialize is the main thing that humans do—we socialize each other into being in our groups—and if they do not get socialized, we ban them or punish them if we can catch them. What are groups and what else can we assume is true of them—other than that we socialize ourselves and each other to be in them and that we try to see to it that our socialization "works"?

To keep our thinking in order, we return to the model of the cube and examine what is on the "floor" of Sociology itself. We can ask the "floor"—the foundational belief systems support individuals and groups—but first, what floor does Sociology have? What are the foundation beliefs within Sociology? After 200 years, can we take some things for granted about human groups?

I say that we need to huddle as the astronomers did a few years back to re-assess what a planet is so that they could strengthen their understanding of what holds a solar system together and makes it

go. At that conference, the astronomers threw out little Pluto! What do we Sociologists want to keep in and throw out of the solar system of Sociology? One way to determine what Sociologists think is primal is to look at course titles in Sociology Departments or chapter headings in Introduction to Sociology books. What we find there is what gave the impetus to write this book. Course and chapter titles do not (at least for me) create a picture of a solid, unified field that agrees upon a vision and a mission. Course titles and Chapter headings read like this: Theory, Methods, Statistics, Sociology of Law, Deviance and Control, Violence, Aging, Gender, Urban Sociology, Rural Sociology, Socialization, Introductory, Comparative Sociology, Culture, Terrorism, Modernity, Formal Organizations, and so on. What does that add up to? Why does each theory book and introductory book start all over again? Can we not plant our feet on a foundation and stop sifting through the foundational silt? Why do we name Marx a father of Sociology when he scoffed at academics? And do we want to assume that exploitation and violence is inherent in society—or hope for communism? How many times do we need to read about the three main “theories” of sociology as if they are in a contest to win something: conflict “theory”, consensus “theory”, and symbolic interactionism? Are conflict and consensus theories, points of view, or substance?

Groups are held together over time by conflict and consensus. Conflict and consensus are not “theories”; they are dynamics in groups. We can have theories about them and their interrelationships, but they are not theories. That these two are called “theories” and are still argued over as if one is right and the other wrong or one more right than the other shows how much political ideology has taken hold in the field of Sociology. To present them as alternatives makes the mistake that the function of Sociology is to advocate and stir up or calm down social problems more than that the function is simply to understand human behavior. Radicals cotton to the conflict view, wherein they see oppression of one group by another (workers by owners, women by men, gays by straights, people of color by whites, or young by old), and Conservatives veer towards the consensus view, which holds that the group

functions and serves the individuals in it. All groups—even friendship groups—have both conflict and consensus. The questions we have about conflict and consensus should not be which one is “right” or “correct” but, rather, how do conflict and consensus work to sustain, transform, or dismantle the group over time. Conflict and consensus are parts of groups as individuals are, as thought systems are, as networks are, as structure is—they are dynamics—substantive—not a way to understand substance.

Conflict “theory” has a wishful edge—as if there should not be conflict some day; therefore it insinuates that the theoretical question is: when will this conflict ever be over? When will one not be ‘above’ the other? This stems from Marx who had a messianic belief that there would come the revolution to end all revolutions and bring on the commune wherein I could be a “fisherman in the morning, a hunter in the afternoon, and a literary critic at night.” It is a wish, not a theory. Conflict is not something that “should not be”; it simply is. Consensus “theory”, on the other hand, has a presumption equally out of bounds in that it maintains that consensus holds a group together when the sociological fact is that consensus IS the group, it does not hold the group together. Durkheim heads up this contingent of hearts and minds, as Marx does the other. For Durkheim, articulated regulation and integration *is* a group. It is not something that makes a group hold together; it *is* the substance of human grouping. Within consensus, there is conflict when regulation and integration do not “fit.” Take a household with domestic violence: that they continue to live under the same roof is the consensus. If there were no consensus, there would not be a group; when the abused and the abuser disband it is no longer a group. Together conflict and consensus are the breath and blood of groups.

And how does the third “theory”—symbolic interactionism (SI) —come into play? Does it adhere at level as conflict and consensus. Groups *are* consensus and conflict. And, too, groups are made of individuals. Individuals process conflict and consensus into ... consensus and conflict and then more conflict and consensus. Individuals are the grinder, the mix master, the blender, the chef of conflict and consensus. SI is that channel of the individual and group whereby both conflict and

consensus get strained – as if by a colander, to continue the cooking metaphor – through the individual and back out again.

There are three types of SI, but, like consensus and conflict, the three are things to look at, not theories with which to look; they are all *components* of groups, not theories of group. First, some SI thinkers look at forces in the “encounter” between people, following Erving Goffman; Goffman taught that the “situation” or “encounter” is like a stage with lines, costumes, cues, props; there is backstage and there are actors populating the stage and the backstage areas. This is not a theory; this is an invitation to use the rich language of theater to superimpose on encounters in order better to see them. The dramaturgic language might assist us in developing theoretical questions, but the language is not itself a theory.

The second type of SI thinking is to see social power differentials flowing into the situation and influencing the interaction; for example, if women are taught that women are submissive and men taught that men are valiant, we can look for that substance as men and women chew and digest what comes at them and, ‘scuse my French, watch them spit it out again to create more of the same. Gender “theorists” call this “doing gender.” Again, this is not a theory, it is substance, a discovery: it is what we are looking at, not with. That we “do” gender is not a theory, it is an observation. To create a theory out of it might be something like: what are the conditions under which women cast off “doing gender” or what are the conditions under which men “do gender” with fervency. Then we might find some interesting variation, but just to look and see that it is there is—just to look and see it.

The third type of SI is the observation that power differentials emerge from encounters among people and build (or fortify) social structures of inequality—or break them down and reconstitute the structures of inequality. This focus is on what *transpires from* groupings rather than what shapes the social psychological filters *going into* those groupings. Power outcomes provide the fuel for the next moments’ consensus and conflict. Into each encounter, consensus and conflict go, get processed, and

come out. Each encounter is a cauldron of a larger social reality, taking from the larger reality (SI2), operating with its own encounter rules (SI1), and then re-creating the larger reality which consists of consensus and conflict, trickled through the individual participants' expectations and negotiations (SI3).

While Goffman is credited with being the father of Type I SI, focusing on the rules of encounters themselves, Peter Blau could be credited with spearheading the interest in Type 3 SI with his look at power outcomes that recreate structures of power. James Coleman might be seen as leading the interest in what socialization and structural influences impact how we experience and filter what is given to us in social situations (Type 2 SI). The Zimmerman and West "doing gender" contingent combine SI 1, 2, and 3 by saying we get gender roles socialized into us, thereby we "do" it at the encounter level, and thus we recreate it. Pierre Bourdieu, with his concepts of social field, capital, and habitus, straddles the three types as well, with his view that we live in our little habitus, with our modicum of capital, acting in our fields with what our situation has granted us. Yes, we do. Again, that is naming things; it is not positing a proposition or hypothesis to count or measure the conditions under which this or that occurs within those named data. They are fine names, but let's call them what they are: names, not theories.

Conflict and consensus require an individual to process them. SI is a process within conflict or consensus: the rules of interaction strain conflict and strain consensus through the heads and meaning systems of the actors involved. If a social group were a body, conflict and consensus could be oxygen and platelets; interactionism would be the veins that convey the oxygen and platelets. Or, to use a different but similarly positioned metaphor from the body, conflict and consensus could be considered the skeleton and muscles and interactionism the instance of the actual use of the bones and sinews.

So the first thing we posit as a premise to social groups is that they are composed of a mix of conflict and consensus, as strained through individual members. Conflict does not explain social organization; it runs through it. Consensus does not explain social organization; it is social organization.

Groups have conflict and consensus and individuals process what goes on in groups, accepting and rejecting it, fortifying it or breaking it down.

What else can we say is true of all groups?