Introduction to
Sociology

Sociology; Perspective, Theory and Method

Sociology is *the systematic study of human society*. At the heart of sociology is a special point of view called the ***sociological perspective.***

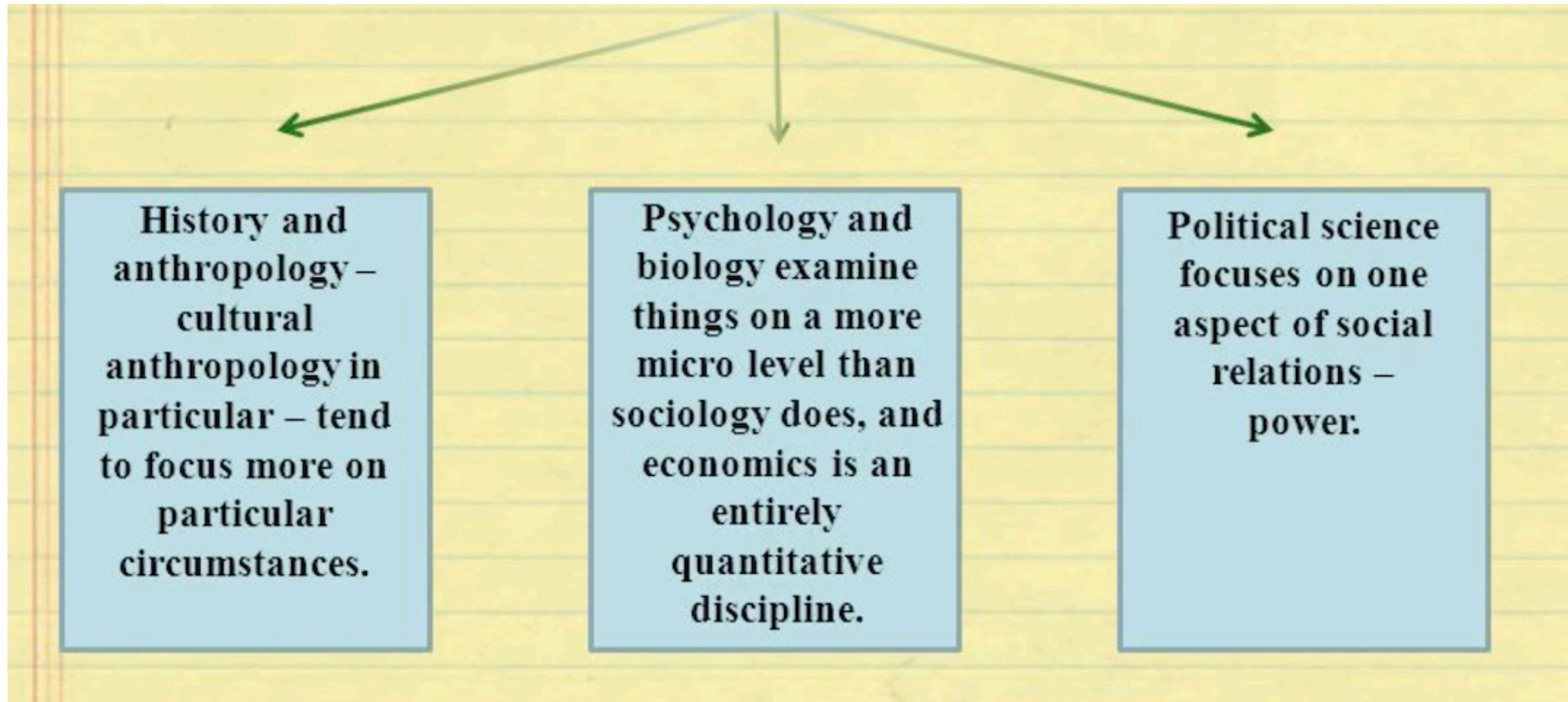*Sociology is also the study reifications or social constructs.*

What Do Sociologists Study?

Sociologists study all things human, from the interactions between two people to the complex relationships between nations or multinational corporations.

While sociology assumes that human actions are patterned, individuals still have room for choices.

Becoming aware of the social processes that influence the way humans think, feel, and behave plus having the will to act can help individuals to shape the social forces they face.

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| History and anthropology – cultural anthropology in particular – tend to focus more on particular circumstances. | Psychology and biology examine things on a more micro level than sociology does, and economics is an entirely quantitative discipline. | Political science focuses on one aspect of social relations – power. |

How sociology differs from other fields of humanities

The Origins of Sociology

Three revolutions took place, before sociological imagination took hold:

The Scientific revolution (16th century): Encouraged the use of evidence to substantiate theories

The Democratic Revolution (18th century): Encouraged the view that human action can change society

The Industrial Revolution (19th century) Gave sociologists their subject matter.

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Divisons within Sociology and Levels of analysis

Microsociology - Understands local international contexts, focusing on face to face encounters, Small group interactions/everyday interactions, in order to understand how they affect larger patterns and institutions of society.

Relies on interviews, participant observations

Eg Symbolic Interactionism

Macrosociology - looks at social dynamics across whole societies or large parts of them, It is the level of analysis that studies large scale social structures in order to determine how they affect the lives of groups and individuals.

Relies on Statistical Data

Eg Functionalism, conflict theory.

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What is society?

A society is a large social grouping that shares the same geographical territory and is subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectations.

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What is a social institution

Social institutions are networks of structures in society that work to socialise a group of people within them.

Eg: Family, Marriage, labour market, education system, class system

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What is social identity?

The way individusals define themselves in relationship to groups they are a part of or in relation to groups they choose to be a part of

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The Sociological Imagination

Coined by C. Wright Mills, this tool helps us to:

Connect our personal experiences to society at large and greater historical forces.

Make the familiar strange or question habits, customs that seem natural to us

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Important Thinkers

August Compte - coined the term sociology in 1789-1857 - Claimed that like all sciences even sociology aimed to uncover universal laws governing particular phenomenon and operated on in an overall framework of logic and method.

Harriet Martineau - First to translate Comte's written works to English, one of the earliest feminist social scientists

Prévoir pour pouvoir - to be able to predict is to be able to control
Eg: We predict social anarchy or cvivl war at a time of crisis

Emilie Durkhiem - 1858-1917 one of the most influential figures on sociology, continued on Comte's theories - he concluded that sociology is concerned with social facts which can be approached in the same objective way as the facts with which natural sciences are approached.

Max Weber established the sociology department in Germany in 1919, best known for his work on capitalism its origins and the class system.
Laid an emphasis on subjectivity

The Sociological Perspective

*Seeing the general
in the particular*

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A good way to define the **sociological perspective** is *seeing the general in the particular* (Berger, 1963). This definition tells us that sociologists look for general patterns in the behavior of particular people.

Although every individual is unique, a society shapes the lives of people in patterned ways that are evident as we discover how various categories (such as children and adults, women and men, the rich and the poor) live very differently. We begin to see the world sociologically by realizing how the general categories into which we fall shape our particular life experiences.

This topic explores the power of society to guide our actions, thoughts, and feelings. We may think that marriage results simply from the personal feelings of love. Yet the sociological perspective shows us that factors such as age, sex, race, and social class guide our selection of a partner. It might be more accurate to think of love as a feeling we have for others who match up with what society teaches us to want in a mate.

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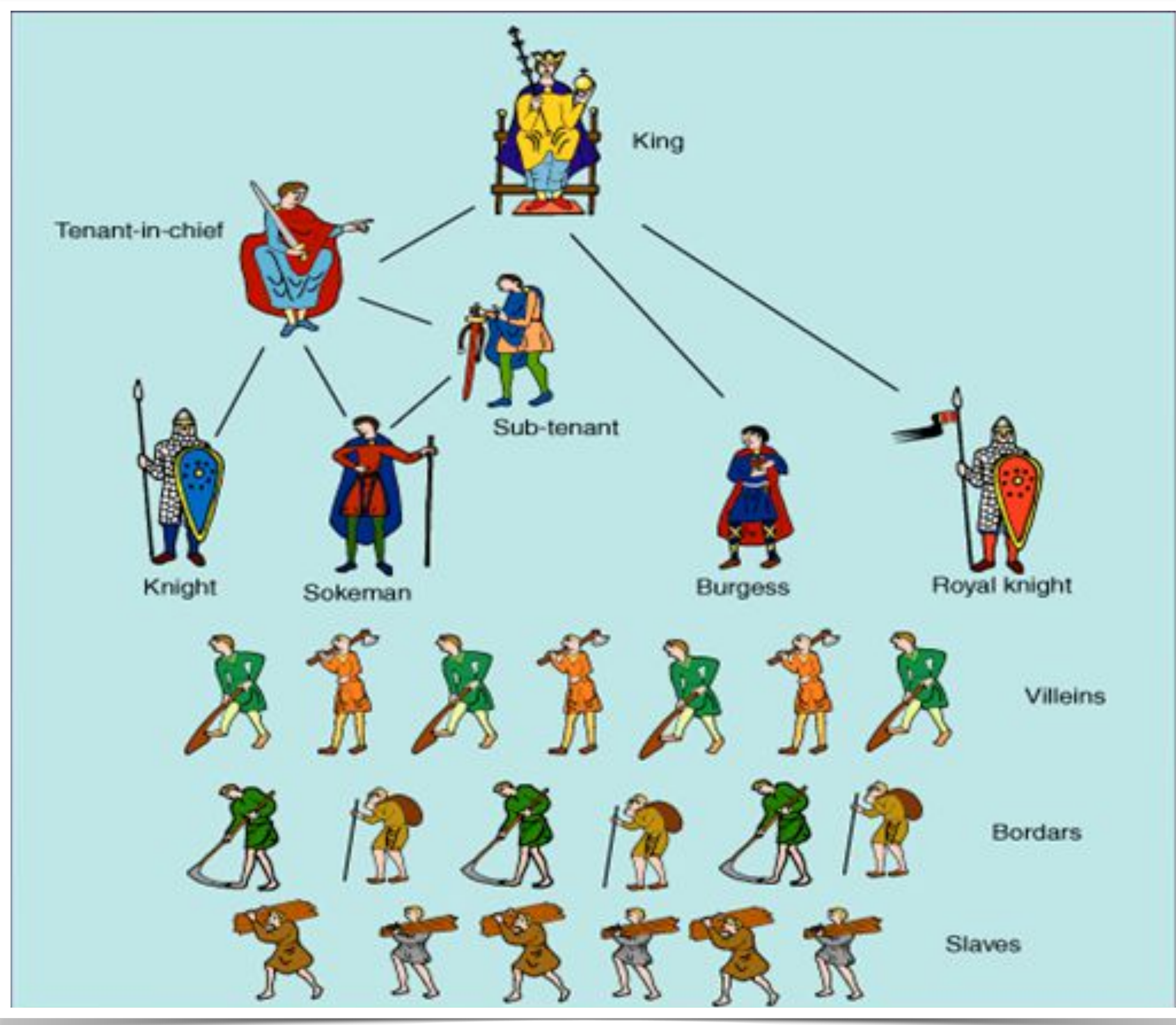
These images depict how the class system has changed over time, with respect to the European context. While capitalism claims to treat all individuals as free and equal, we observe in fig .2. that as time progresses, society becomes more complex and nuanced.

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CASE STUDY:

For example, **does social class position affect what women look for in a spouse?**

In a classic study of women's hopes for their marriages, Lillian Rubin (1976) found that higher-income women typically expected the men they married to be sensitive to others, to talk readily, and to share feelings and experiences.

Lower-income women, she found, had very different expectations and were looking for men who did not drink too much, were not violent, and held steady jobs. Obviously, what women expect in a marriage partner has a lot to do with social class position.

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1. **Understand** the sociological perspective and how it differs from what we think of as "common sense". What is the importance of a global perspective?

2. **Apply** sociology's theoretical approaches to specific social patterns. What are the benefits of sociological thinking to your personal experiences as an individual in society?

3. **Analyze** sociology in terms of when, where, and why the discipline developed.

4. **Evaluate** everyday assumptions and common stereotypes, using sociological evidence.

5. **Create** a more complex understanding of your own personal experiences and social surroundings by using sociological thinking?

6. Can you **imagine** new and different social arrangements that might develop in our society or in the world at large?

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CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES:

Three classical theoretical perspectives remain popular and applicable to various societies and the interactions within them.

These are-
structural functionalism,

symbolic interactionism,

and conflict theory

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STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM:

Social change has been seen in structural-functionalism to be an adaptive reaction to some of society's difficulties. If one element of the interwoven social structure **changes**, friction is produced which is addressed by the change in the other areas between this and other aspects of the system.

According to **the sociologist Durkheim, social cohesion** was brought about by the interrelationship between the various components present in society, which is a complex system that has its own dynamic traits, external to people, but that influences their actions.

According to this perspective, different institutions, structures, and processes have a particular purpose, one that is beneficial to the members of society. This includes education contributing to the development of society, the legal systems check the deviations in society, the government governs people and protects citizens, families contribute to reproduction and many others

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STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM:

For example: A criminal is someone who is normally thought to be harmful to society, but structural functionalists believe that criminals motivate people to behave morally and keep the justice system running.

Even processes that others may regard through a negative lens have a purpose from the functionalist's perspective.

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SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

The symbolic interactionist perspective, also called symbolic interactionism, **encourages researchers to explore symbols and nuances, their meanings, and their influence on the interactive relationships of daily life.**

The symbolic interactionist perspective stems from **Max Weber's** idea that humans have an interpretation of their world and its meaning and their actions are influenced by such meanings.

Symbolic interactionism, **focuses on commonalities,** helps people understand each other's view points.

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CONFLICT THEORY:

Conflict theory argues that when assets, power and social reputations are divided unfairly across sections of society, then disputes develop and these conflicts form the source of social change.

The theory of conflict emerges from **Karl Marx's writings,** which concentrated on the determinants and consequences of the bourgeois-proletarian class conflict in a capitalist society.

This perspective has evolved from Marx and includes a wide array of conflicts and disputes that contribute to social change in society.

For example: Even wars between nations are perceived to be caused by material or ideological differences and the settlement of these leads to structural change. **Sociological perspectives like Marxism and Feminism are derived from conflict theory and they both focus on particular conflicts, differences, and their impacts on society.**

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Major Theoretical Approaches

	Structural-Functional Approach	Social-Conflict Approach	Symbolic-Interaction Approach
What is the level of analysis?	Macro-level	Macro-level	Micro-level
What image of society does the approach have?	Society is a system of interrelated parts that is relatively stable. Each part works to keep society operating in an orderly way. Members generally agree about what is morally right and morally wrong.	Society is a system of social inequalities based on class (Marx), gender (feminism and gender-conflict approach), and race (race-conflict approach). Society operates to benefit some categories of people and harm others. Social inequality causes conflict that leads to social change.	Society is an ongoing process. People interact in countless settings using symbolic communications. The reality people experience is variable and changing.
What core questions does the approach ask?	How is society held together? What are the major parts of society? How are these parts linked? What does each part do to help society work?	How does society divide a population? How do advantaged people protect their privileges? How do disadvantaged people challenge the system seeking change?	How do people experience society? How do people shape the reality they experience? How do behavior and meaning change from person to person and from one situation to another?

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CASE STUDY: Farming and Locavores: How Sociological Perspectives Might View Food Consumption

The consumption of food is a commonplace, daily occurrence, yet it can also be associated with important moments in our lives. Eating can be an individual or a group action, and eating habits and customs are influenced by our cultures. In the context of society, our nation's food system is at the core of numerous social movements, political issues, and economic debates. Any of these factors might become a topic of sociological study.

A **structural-functional** approach to the topic of food consumption might be interested in the role of the agriculture industry within the nation's economy and how this has changed from the early days of manual-labor farming to modern mechanized production. Another examination might study the different functions that occur in food production: from farming and harvesting to flashy packaging and mass consumerism.

A **conflict theorist** might be interested in the power differentials present in the regulation of food, by exploring where people's right to information intersects with corporations' drive for profit and how the government mediates those interests. Or a conflict theorist might be interested in the power and powerlessness experienced by local farmers versus large farming conglomerates, such as the documentary Food Inc. depicts as resulting from Monsanto's patenting of seed technology. Another topic of study might be how nutrition varies between different social classes.

A sociologist viewing food consumption through a **symbolic interactionist** lens would be more interested in micro- level topics, such as the symbolic use of food in religious rituals, or the role it plays in the social interaction of a family dinner. This perspective might also study the interactions among group members who identify themselves based on their sharing a particular diet, such as vegetarians (people who don't eat meat) or locavores (people who strive to eat locally produced food).

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Sociological Theory Today

These three approaches are still the main foundation of modern sociological theory, but there has been some evolution in these approaches..

Structural-functionalism was a dominant force after World War II and until the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, sociologists began to feel that structural-functionalism did not sufficiently explain the rapid social changes happening in the United States at that time.

Conflict theory then gained prominence, as there was renewed emphasis on institutionalized social inequality. Critical theory, and the particular aspects of feminist theory and critical race theory, focused on creating social change through the application of sociological principles, and the field saw a renewed emphasis on helping ordinary people understand sociology principles, in the form of public sociology.

Postmodern social theory attempts to look at society through an entirely new lens by rejecting previous macro-level attempts to explain social phenomena. Generally considered as gaining acceptance in the late 1970s and early 1980s, postmodern social theory is a micro-level approach that looks at small, local groups and individual reality. Its growth in popularity coincides with the constructivist aspects of symbolic interactionism.