Sociology

by Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur

Sociology is the academic discipline concerned with studying human society and social change, including everything from small-scale interactions (microsociology) to interactions of world governments (macrosociology).

The roots of sociology were planted in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. In the midst of rapid technological and social changes, including the industrial revolution and mass urbanization, some thinkers began to write and do research on social institutions and interactions. Early theorists who either participated in the birth of sociology or were claimed by sociology as founding fathers include Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel. Early topics of writing and research were religion, capitalism, political organization, bureaucracy, and small-group relations.

Social Research

Sociology employs a number of different research methods. These are generally grouped into two main categories: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research is conducted primarily through statistical analysis of large-scale survey data, often using sophisticated computer programs. This method is strongest for testing theoretical models, examining trends over time, and unlocking the way different variables interact. It assumes that social relationships can be rendered in numerical terms.

Qualitative research focuses on in-depth explorations of individual lives or situations. Types of qualitative research include personal interviews, field observation, and written questionnaires. Qualitative research assumes a greater role for interpretation and for the agency of the research subject and is strongest in developing theoretical models and understanding how variables work out in real life. Additionally, there are some social situations that would be impossible to study quantitatively because of the difficulty of collecting proper survey data.

Other types of research performed by sociologists include experimental and comparative-historical research. Sociologists can and do conduct experiments, though there are ethical and/or practical difficulties in examining most social phenomena this way. Experimental research is best suited to understanding the way small groups interact. Comparative-historical research aims to uncover the social world of the past by examining historical documents ranging from published books to ancient statistics, from diaries unearthed in attics to last century's city newspapers.

Since each research method has its own strengths and weaknesses, some sociologists combine multiple methods to arrive at a richer and more detailed understanding of the world. For instance, a researcher might conduct a large-scale survey to ask people whether they think violent movies lead to violent reactions, and then do an experiment by showing people violent movies and measuring their responses. Or researchers might comb historical archives for information about how people responded to natural disasters in the past, and then interview some senior citizens who lived through those natural disasters.

Most early sociologists did not study sexuality, thinking it a topic for other fields (primarily biology, medicine, and psychology). Freud, who was not a sociologist but some of whose writings have been adopted as sociological texts, was the first social thinker to bring sexuality into the world of the social. He wrote that people develop diverse sexual urges early in childhood (often including inclinations to homosexuality and/or bisexuality) but that these inclinations are controlled and subjugated by society.

Sociology and Homosexuality

Sociology began to come into its own as an academic field in the United States in the early to mid-twentieth century. Though the field as a whole has usually been socially liberal and accepting of diversity, the early years of sociology in the United States did not include any particular acceptance of homosexuality.

During that time, the dominant theoretical paradigm in sociology was functionalism. This paradigm emphasizes the idea that all social phenomena serve a function in society, and if a phenomenon is "dysfunctional" it will soon disappear from society. Functionalist understandings of sexuality and family life usually focused on the need for a social institution to control sexual behavior and reproduction and provide an environment for socializing new members of society (that is, children). Since homosexuality did not fit into this picture of the world, it was assumed to be dysfunctional.

The fact that early functionalism believed homosexuality was dysfunctional does not mean that all functionalists must believe this way. For instance, an understanding that homosexuality exists to provide extra adults to help raise children, as in certain bird species, would be a functionalist explanation.

Until a subfield of sociology specifically concerned with studying sexuality developed in the 1990s, what little sociological study of sexuality existed was primarily conducted within the subfield of the sociology of deviance. The word "deviance" does not have the same negative connotations within sociology as it does in everyday life--the sociology of deviance is merely the study of behavior that differs from accepted norms in society. Therefore, homosexuality is still an appropriate subject of study by scholars of deviance.

The first significant research into homosexual activity in the United States was conducted by Alfred Kinsey, a researcher at the University of Indiana, in his *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948). Kinsey was not a sociologist--he was a zoologist--but his groundbreaking research has influenced generations of sociological research into homosexual activity. He found that 37% of men had engaged in sex with other men. However, the research methods that he used had significant flaws. For instance, his sample was not representative of the United States population. He interviewed only white men, and these respondents were disproportionately from lower socioeconomic classes.

In 1994, sociologist Edward Laumann tried to recreate the Kinsey study by interviewing a nationally representative sample of men and women. It was, and still is, the most comprehensive study of its kind. Laumann's results differed significantly from Kinsey's, as Laumann found that only 7.1% of men had engaged in sex with other men. One of the major reasons for this difference is that Kinsey included a greater focus on adolescent sexual experiences. Moreover, Laumann's study had problems of its own. Survey research methodologies often result in underreporting of stigmatized behaviors, and the figures of same-sex sexual activity reported by Laumann are not to be trusted.

During the 1960s several important works in the sociology of deviance were published, including Howard Becker's *Outsiders* (1963), Erving Goffman's *Stigma* (1963), and Martin Hoffman's *The Gay World: Male Homosexuality and the Social Creation of Evil* (1968). These works are important because they attempted to study homosexuality non-judgmentally, simply as a significant social phenomenon, without a particular concern for etiology. In effect, they attempted to rescue the subject from the province of psychology, which was then heavily invested in the sickness theory.

Another significant early sociological investigation into male homosexuality was conducted in 1970 by Laud Humphreys. This study involved covert observation of homosexual sex in public bathrooms, during which Humphreys acted as a "lookout" for those engaging in sex. After the sex acts were completed, Humphreys watched the men's cars leaving the area and recorded their license plate numbers so that he could visit them a year later in the guise of a health researcher. He determined that 38% of the men he observed were married and considered themselves heterosexual. While this research has been very important in broadening the sociological understanding of sexual behavior and homosexuality, it posed obvious ethical problems.

Lesbian and Gay Sociology

As the lesbian and gay civil rights movement began to build steam in the 1970s, students and faculty alike began to push for the development of courses on gay and lesbian experiences. At the same time, academics, activists, and other individuals began to publish the first wave of books focused on homosexuality.

These books became the texts for early lesbian, gay, and queer studies courses. While these courses were not generally found in sociology departments at the beginning (psychology and anthropology, along with experimental women's studies and English departments, were more accepting), it was almost inevitable that some of them would find their way into sociology eventually. This is because sociology has traditionally been concerned with inequality and social change, both facets of the study of homosexuality.

The development of feminist perspectives in sociology in the wake of the women's movement also brought about more investigations into homosexuality, particularly lesbianism. Feminist sociologists called for the deprivileging of heterosexist nuclear-family centered understandings of relationships and child-rearing.

They began to do research on family lives and intimate relationships that had previously been thought of as trivial by the male-dominated field. Feminist social theory emphasized conflicts rather than functions, enabling sociologists to see better how minority groups in society experience their everyday lives. Additionally, they developed new ways of engaging in research that reduced the social distance between the researcher and the subject, leading to more truthful and insightful research into private and intimate aspects of people's lives.

Among the social theorists who have been important in developing a sociology of sexuality are Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, two influential post-modern thinkers. Post-modernism brought to sociology the idea that knowledge is not a set of truths but instead a set of socially constructed beliefs, and that no one knowledge is more credible than any other knowledge.

Foucault was a French social philosopher who wrote not only on sexuality, but also on authority and social control. He authored an unfinished series of books entitled *The History of Sexuality* that showed how Western society came to see its members as sexual beings. One of Foucault's most important contributions to the sociology of sexuality is the idea that identities are fluid, rather than fixed.

Judith Butler, a professor of comparative literature and rhetoric, picked up on Foucault's ideas in *Gender Trouble* (1990). She wrote that gender expression and sexuality are all performances, rather than manifestations of our true identity. Indeed, she believes that we do not have a true identity of this kind at all. This idea subverts not only heterosexist and homophobic ideas about the unnaturalness of queer identities and behaviors, but also queer claims of essential identities.

Many sociologists who study sexuality have been influenced by Foucault and Butler. They focus on the social construction of glbtq identities; the differences between identity, desire, and action; and the way that sexuality and sexual behavior are talked about. Queer theory has used post-modern thought as its foundation, and post-modern theoretical frameworks have also been indispensable in the study of

transgendered lives and bisexuality, as these phenomena do not fit into the essentialist assumptions of many other theoretical schools.

Professional Associations

The American Sociological Association, the professional association for sociologists, developed a section on the sociology of sexuality in 1997. However, sociologists had been conducting research on sexuality before that date. The section gave them a way to come together as a subfield, produce a journal, and organize scholarly conferences. Sociology departments in many colleges and universities now seek faculty members with expertise in the sociology of sexuality so that they can teach courses for undergraduates, which are much in demand.

Current research topics in the sociology of sexuality include intersexed individuals, understanding sexual orientations in non-Western cultures, sexual health, the relationship between gender and sexuality, gay and lesbian families, and the formation of sexual identities.

Queer Methodologies

Research methods used by sociologists of sexuality vary. Some researchers conduct large-scale survey research on individuals' sexual desires, identities, and behaviors, as well as on attitudes towards homosexuality. Others conduct detailed interviews or engage in participant observation to understand the daily experience of living in society as a glbtq person or building a non-traditional family. Still others conduct archival research on the development of the gay and lesbian liberation movement or on changes in the laws affecting the lives of glbtq people.

The researchers who rely on a post-modern/queer theory framework in their research tend to rely on methodologies that fit well with these theoretical outlooks. These methodologies can be called "queer methodologies." They may rely on documents and sources not usually considered appropriate for social research, such as performances and visual representations. They are politicized in their research and in their choices of subject and method, as well as being engaged in a wider politicized community. Finally, as in post-modernism more generally, they seek to disrupt boundaries, knowledges, and a singular "truth."

Conflicts within the Sociology of Sexuality

Like the societies it studies, the field of sociology is constantly undergoing change and constantly experiencing its own internal tensions. Within the sociology of sexuality, there are many important areas of conflict.

While sociologists, like other social scientists, try to maintain objectivity in their research, there are times when research comes across phenomena about which it is hard to be neutral. In terms of research dealing with glbtq individuals and issues, examples of these phenomena might include hate crimes or pedophilia.

Sociology is internally divided over how to respond to these types of issues. Some sociologists believe that it is our duty to fight injustice wherever it occurs, and that we can use our research and teaching in order to win this fight. Others espouse *cultural relativism*, which is the idea that what is morally good and right is merely what is considered good and right in a particular culture. Cultural relativists do not pass judgment on injustice--they assume that the particular culture in which the supposed injustice occurred believes that this way of behaving is correct, and therefore, for that culture, it is. Many sociologists, of course, fall somewhere between these two poles.

Another current conflict is over the issue of categorization. Many glbtq people identify strongly with some categories of sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and/or gender. Examples of these kinds of categories are "lesbian," "M2F," "top," "bisexual," "two-spirit," "femme," "queer," or "boi," among many others. For

researchers, using stable categories to identify the gender, sexuality, and behavior of subjects makes the research easier to complete. For individuals, categories make it easier to identify one's self to others. Many of these categories have been politicized in important ways.

However, sociology views categories such as these as socially constructed ideas. For some sociologists, as for some individuals, these categories are constraining rather than liberating. The sociology of sexuality is currently undergoing internal conflict, as well as conflict with the glbtq communities it studies, over how and when to use categories, and when categories are used, which ones should be selected for inclusion.

Finally, sociology is experiencing conflicts with other academic disciplines over the explanations of sexuality and gender. These conflicts are primarily, though not only, with biology and psychology.

Biological explanations for sexuality and gender focus on the idea that genetic structures set at conception, perhaps along with environmental features during pregnancy (such as maternal hormone levels or drug use) set sexuality and gender in stone at birth. These explanations would say that if someone comes to an understanding of a different gender or sexuality later in life, he or she is either wrong or until then has been suppressing his or her "true" self.

Psychology, on the other hand, leaves some room for events that happen after birth to effect individuals' sexual and gender identities. Psychology, particularly its psychoanalytic branch, believes that the early childhood experiences, especially those in infancy, are important in shaping the gender and sexuality that an adult will later display. Traumatic events in later life can also cause changes in gender and sexuality.

These conflicts between disciplines are not only important in terms of drawing disciplinary boundaries but also have important effects for the real everyday lives of glbtq individuals and communities. For instance, if the biologists are right, then glbtq individuals could no longer be asked by conservative political and religious figures to change who they are. On the other hand, a genetic root to homosexuality could lead to genetic testing and selective abortion of fetuses carrying this gene.

Some glbtq people worry that if the sociological explanation for homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderedness is accepted, they will be held responsible for their genders and sexualities. The idea of social construction, however, does not mean that individuals "choose" to be glbtq (though it provides for the fact that some individuals could possibly make that choice). Instead, it means that biology and early childhood experiences are not destiny, and that the structure of society leaves room for changes in an individual's sexuality and gender throughout the life course.

Bibliography

Butler, Judith P. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993.

_____. *Gender Trouble (10th Anniversary Edition)*. New York: Routledge. 1999.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Volume One: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

_____. *The History of Sexuality Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

_____. *The History of Sexuality Volume Three: Care of the Self.* New York: Random House, 1998.

Holliday, Ruth. "We've Been Framed: Visualizing Methodology." *The Sociological Review* 48.4 (2001): 503-22.

Humphreys, Laud. *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1975.

_____. *Out of the Closets: The Sociology of Homosexual Liberation.* Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall,

1972.

Kinsey, Alfred Charles. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948.

Laumann, Edward O., et al. *The Social Organization of Sexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Lemert, Charles. *Sociology after the Crisis*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995.

Ponse, Barbara. *Identities in the Lesbian World: The Social Construction of Self*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1978.

Reinharz, Shulamit. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Seidman, Steven, ed. *Queer Theory/Sociology*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996.

Stacey, Judith. *In the Name of the Family: Rethinking Family Values in the Postmodern Age*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Tierny, William G. *Academic Outlaws: Queer Theory and Cultural Studies in the Academy.* London: Sage Publications, 1997.

Weston, Kath. *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

About the Author

Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Rhode Island College. Her research focuses on the emergence of academic programs in queer studies, Asian American studies, and women's studies in colleges and universities in the United States.