



**SIVARAJAVEL IAS ACADEMY**  
AN IDEAL INSTITUTE FOR CIVIL SERVICE EXAMS

# THE **SOCIAL FACT**

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**SOCIAL SYSTEM**



Sivarajavel IAS Academy 's

### THE SOCIAL FACT

is a monthly bulletin for sociology current affairs which tries to give aspirants a new dimensions in their sociology preparations. The Magazine has been designed in such away that the reading experience is enriching and insightful for the readers.

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### INSIDE THIS SOCIOLOGICAL BULLETIN

#### **Connecting the dots :**

Sociology is a process in making. Everyday newspapers and weekly have many important news, which have sociological angle in subtle form. This chapter helps you to connect those dots and give a clear picture of the reality.

#### **Beyond Basics :**

Going beyond basics in studies for examinations is crucial to foster a deeper understanding of the subject matter, enabling more comprehensive and critical thinking. It allows students to tackle complex questions with confidence and adapt to evolving exam formats.

#### **Perspectives :**

Beauty of Sociology, as a social science, is its capacity to offer different perspectives of a same topic. This chapter analyses a current topic with an unique social perspectives.



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## CONNECTING THE DOTS

- *The recent reports indicate that Amazon has introduced a stricter process for work-from-home (WFH) requests from specially-abled employees as part of its broader return-to-office policy. Under this revised policy, these employees must undergo a “multilevel leader review” and may face month-long in-office trials to evaluate their needs before remote work is approved: **The discrimination faced by specially-abled employees in policies like Amazon’s can be conceptualized sociologically as “ableism”, which refers to systemic and structural discrimination against people with disabilities. Ableism includes practices, policies, and attitudes that devalue individuals with disabilities, assuming they are less capable or deserving of equal participation in society.***
- *The death of Anna Sebastian Perayil, a 26-year-old employee at EY (Ernst & Young) in Pune, has sparked widespread discussions about workplace stress and toxic corporate cultures. Anna, who joined the company in March 2024, passed away in July after reportedly enduring extreme work pressure, late hours, and deteriorating health. Anna’s death has been described by her family as a tragic outcome of a culture that glorifies overwork. Her mother’s open letter criticized EY for unrealistic expectations that led to her daughter’s untimely demise: **This tragedy underscores the critiques of toxic corporate cultures that valorize overwork. Organizations like the “Big Four” often perpetuate systemic exploitation through hierarchical power dynamics, lack of support mechanisms, and unchecked workloads. Employees’ voices are often suppressed in favor of maintaining productivity and corporate image.***

- Colombia has officially banned child marriage after a 17-year-long advocacy campaign. The Colombian Senate passed a bill titled “They Are Girls, Not Wives,” which prohibits child marriage and early unions. This reform seeks to protect children, particularly in indigenous communities, where child marriage has been prevalent due to cultural and economic pressures : **The campaign’s persistence over 17 years demonstrates the evolutionary nature of social movements. Despite resistance from cultural traditionalists, activists succeeded in shifting legal and cultural norms. The law represents a transformative victory, showing how sustained advocacy and strategic alliances can lead to legislative change that upends harmful traditions. This movement reflects the characteristics of modern social movements: Intersectionality, Use of technology, Global-National Nexus.**
- The Rajasthan High Court recently ruled that the right to live with dignity, as guaranteed under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, includes the fulfillment of marital vows, particularly those taken during the traditional Saptapadi ceremony. This judgment emphasizes the importance of upholding commitments made in marriage, specifically in the context of ensuring that spouses honor their mutual responsibilities: **In India, marriage is not just a personal contract but a social and sacred institution deeply rooted in religious traditions like Hinduism. This decision exemplifies how personal laws and secular constitutional principles interact in India. It reflects the judiciary’s role in navigating the delicate balance between respecting cultural traditions and upholding fundamental rights**
- Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) founder Thol. Thirumavalavan said sub-categorisation would reduce the numerical strength of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), and only Parliament should have the final say on making changes to the reservation for the SCs. VCK general secretary argued that the Supreme Court’s verdict on sub-classification was essentially an attack on the Constitution: **The VCK’s stance reflects a Dalit political mobilization framework, where the emphasis is on retaining unity among Scheduled Castes to challenge the dominant caste-based order. Sub-categorization is viewed as a potential divide-and-rule tactic that undermines collective bargaining power. Historically, movements led by Dalit thinkers like B.R. Ambedkar have sought to highlight the shared oppression of SCs. Fragmentation risks shifting focus from systemic**

**caste oppression to internal competition.**

- The Samsung workers' strike at its Sriperumbudur plant near Chennai ended after 37 days of protests. Workers had demanded better wages, improved working conditions, and recognition of their union. While workers agreed to return to their duties, Samsung assured there would be no retaliatory action. However, the workers' demand for union recognition remains unresolved, highlighting ongoing labor rights challenges in industrial sector: **The labor rights expert, Standing has focused on the rise of the precariat, a new class of workers who face insecure employment conditions. In his book *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, standing outlines, the risks posed by the growing number of workers in temporary, low-paid, and unstable jobs, many of whom lack union representation and face deteriorating labor condition.***
- A stampede was occurred during a religious gathering at a 'satsang' in Uttar Pradesh, resulted in over 100 deaths. The incident took place in the village of Hathras, where thousands of devotees had gathered to witness the event led by religious preacher Bhole Baba. A massive crowd surge led to the tragic loss of life, as people tried to touch the preacher's feet, causing a stampede: **The gathering was centered around a charismatic religious leader, Bhole Baba, who, like many cult or sect leaders, attracted followers through personal appeal and the promise of spiritual benefits. Charismatic leaders often cultivate intense devotion among their followers, leading them to prioritize the leader's presence above safety concerns. The stampede can be seen as a direct consequence of this type of devotion, where followers exhibited extreme enthusiasm and devotion, disregarding their personal safety in the process.***
- Surgeon Vice-Admiral Arti Sarin on Tuesday became the first woman officer to assume charge as the Director-General of the Armed Forces Medical Services, the Defence Ministry said. The DGAFMS is directly responsible to the Defence Ministry for overall medical policy matters relating to the armed forces: **Glass Ceiling refers to the invisible barriers that prevent women from reaching higher levels of leadership and authority, particularly in male-dominated fields like the military. Sarin's appointment signifies a challenge to this "ceiling," as she becomes one of the highest-ranking women in the Indian Armed Forces. Her promotion highlights progress in breaking down gender-based barriers in the military.***

- *Germany has extended temporary border controls to all its land borders as part of its response to irregular migration and national security concerns. The decision, announced by Interior Minister Nancy Faeser, is primarily focused on strengthening internal security and combating the perceived risks of extremism linked to migration.: **Germany's actions could be framed within social closure theory, which explains how social groups protect their resources (such as jobs and welfare) by restricting access to outsiders, often leading to exclusionary policies. The reinforcement of border controls can exacerbate divisions between migrants and local populations, potentially increasing ethnocentrism and xenophobia, especially in response to growing support for anti-immigration parties like the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD)***
- *Ahead of the Assembly election in Maharashtra, industrialist Gautam Adani and the Dharavi redevelopment project in Asia's largest slum cluster have become a rallying point for the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA). While the Congress has consistently called the project a 'Modani enterprise', the Shiv Sena (UBT) has held street protests and press events on the issue : **The Dharavi redevelopment project, which targets Asia's largest slum, can be viewed as an example of gentrification. Gentrification often leads to the displacement of lower-income communities by wealthier ones, as seen in many urban areas around the world. The redevelopment project can also be examined through the lens of neoliberalism, which often promotes privatization and the commodification of public spaces for profit.***



# BEYOND BASICS

## THE SOCIAL SYSTEM OF TALCOTT PARSONS

*“Why should we go beyond the basics?”*

*Talcott Parsons’s theories of the social system and reference groups are foundational to understanding how individuals and societies interact and maintain stability. Together, these concepts provide a robust framework for analyzing both the structures that uphold social cohesion and the personal aspirations that drive individuals to align with influential groups. From an exam perspective, mastering these theories is essential, as questions often delve into socialization, identity formation, and functionalism. By studying these concepts in depth, students gain valuable tools to critically assess how social structures and group dynamics shape behavior, equipping them to confidently address complex exam questions and deepen their understanding of the intricate relationships that sustain society.*

Talcott Parsons, a prominent sociologist of the 20th century, developed the theory of the social system as part of his broader framework of structural functionalism. His work sought to explain how societies maintain order and stability while adapting to changes. Parsons’s ideas on the social system were deeply rooted in his desire to understand the dynamics of social integration and the mechanisms that enable a society to function cohesively. This article explores the social system as envisioned by Parsons, delves into the reasons behind his study, key concepts, significance, limitations, and its relevance in contemporary sociology. Validity in Quantitative Research

## ***Why Talcott Parsons Studied the Social System***

Parsons's intellectual journey was motivated by the quest to address a central sociological concern: How do societies maintain order and stability amidst complexity and change? Living in the mid-20th century, a period marked by global conflict, rapid industrialization, and social upheaval, Parsons sought to develop a theoretical framework that explained the mechanisms of social order.

His study was also influenced by the works of classical sociologists like Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Vilfredo Pareto. Durkheim's emphasis on social solidarity, Weber's focus on cultural values and rationality, and Pareto's systems analysis significantly shaped Parsons's approach. He aimed to synthesize these perspectives into a unified theory that could explain the interdependence of societal structures and individual actions.

### ***Key Concepts in Parsons's Social System***

Parsons's social system is grounded in several core concepts that define its structure and functioning:

#### ***1. System and Structure***

Parsons viewed society as a system comprising interconnected parts, each with a specific function contributing to the whole. The social system operates within the broader context of action systems, including the biological, personality, and cultural systems.

#### ***2. Action Theory***

At the heart of Parsons's framework is his action theory, which posits that human action is voluntary, goal-oriented, and guided by norms and values. Individuals act within a structured environment where their choices are influenced by shared expectations.

#### ***3. Functional Prerequisites***

Parsons identified four key functional prerequisites (AGIL schema) that every social system must fulfill to survive:



- **Adaptation (A):** The system's ability to secure and distribute resources.
- **Goal Attainment (G):** Establishing and pursuing collective objectives.
- **Integration (I):** Coordinating and maintaining solidarity among its parts.
- **Latency (L):** Preserving and transmitting cultural values and motivations.

The **AGIL framework** is one of Talcott Parsons's most significant contributions to sociology. It is a functionalist model that explains how any social system survives, maintains stability, and fulfills its fundamental needs. Each of these functions corresponds to a critical aspect of a system's operation, whether it's a society, organization, or smaller social group. Here's a detailed breakdown:

### 1. Adaptation (A)

- **Definition:** The system's ability to interact with its external environment, secure resources, and distribute them to meet the needs of its members.
- **Key Question:** How does the system respond to external challenges?
- **Examples in Society:**
  - **Economic Systems:** In a society, the economy fulfills the adaptive function by producing goods and services, allocating resources, and adjusting to external conditions like scarcity or trade demands.
  - **Natural Disasters:** Governments adapt by organizing relief efforts, securing resources, and rebuilding affected areas.

In short, adaptation ensures that the system can survive in its environment by maintaining a steady inflow of necessary resources and managing external pressures.

### 2. Goal Attainment (G)

- **Definition:** The process through which the system sets and achieves specific objectives to guide its members toward collective aims.
- **Key Question:** What goals does the system pursue, and how does it ensure their achievement?
- **Examples in Society:**

- **Government and Political Systems:** These institutions fulfill the goal attainment function by setting policies, enacting laws, and implementing strategies to achieve societal objectives like security, justice, or economic growth.

- **Education Systems:** Schools and universities help achieve long-term societal goals like knowledge dissemination and skill-building.

Goal attainment ensures that the system maintains direction and prioritizes objectives that contribute to its overall survival and progress.

### **3. Integration (I)**

- **Definition:** The mechanisms that coordinate relationships among the different parts of the system, ensuring that they work together harmoniously and avoid conflict.

- **Key Question:** How do the system's components maintain solidarity and cooperation?

- **Examples in Society:**

- **Legal and Judicial Systems:** Laws and norms serve to integrate diverse interests, resolving conflicts and maintaining order.

- **Cultural Symbols:** Shared cultural practices, traditions, or languages help integrate various groups within a society by fostering a sense of belonging.

Integration emphasizes the unity and coherence of the system, ensuring that the relationships among its components remain stable and cooperative.

### **4. Latency (L) (Pattern Maintenance)**

- **Definition:** The preservation and transmission of core values, norms, and motivations to sustain the system over time.

- **Key Question:** How does the system maintain its identity and ensure continuity across generations?

- **Examples in Society:**

- **Family and Religion:** Families socialize individuals into societal norms and values, while religious institutions reinforce shared beliefs and moral systems.

- **Educational Systems:** Schools instill cultural and ethical values in younger generations, maintaining societal stability.

Latency focuses on the “cultural capital” of a system—how it reproduces its defining values, beliefs, and practices to ensure long-term survival.

### ***The AGIL Model in Context***

#### **Interdependence of the AGIL Functions**

These four functions are interdependent, meaning a failure in one function could disrupt the entire system. For example:

- If a society fails at adaptation (e.g., managing environmental crises), it might struggle with integration (e.g., rising social conflicts).
- Without goal attainment (e.g., effective governance), adaptation and integration may break down, leading to instability.

#### **Application Across Levels**

Parsons designed the AGIL framework to apply to various levels of social systems:

- **Societies:** National economies adapt, governments set goals, legal systems integrate, and families or schools preserve cultural values.
- **Organizations:** Businesses adapt to market conditions, leadership sets goals, teams integrate through policies, and organizational culture ensures continuity

### **4. Roles and Norms**

In the social system, individuals occupy specific roles defined by norms. These norms guide behavior and create expectations, ensuring social stability. For instance, the role of a teacher includes norms of imparting knowledge, discipline, and fairness.

## **5. Pattern Variables**

Parsons introduced pattern variables to describe choices individuals face in social interactions. These dichotomies include:

- Affectivity vs. Affect Neutrality
- Self-orientation vs. Collectivity-orientation
- Universalism vs. Particularism
- Ascription vs. Achievement

These variables highlight the tension between personal interests and societal expectations in shaping behavior.

### *Significance of Parsons's Social System*

#### **1. Explaining Social Order**

Parsons's theory provided a robust explanation of how social institutions function together to maintain order. By emphasizing interdependence, his framework highlighted the importance of shared values in unifying diverse elements of society.

#### **2. Integration of Micro and Macro Perspectives**

Parsons bridged the gap between individual actions (micro-level) and societal structures (macro-level). His theory acknowledged the interplay between individual agency and systemic requirements, offering a holistic understanding of society.

#### **3. Foundation for Modern Functionalism**

Parsons's work laid the groundwork for modern functionalist sociology. Scholars like Robert K. Merton expanded upon his ideas, introducing concepts like dysfunctions and manifest/latent functions to address the nuances of social systems.

#### **4. Interdisciplinary Influence**

Beyond sociology, Parsons's ideas influenced fields like anthropology, political science, and organizational studies. His AGIL framework has been applied to analyze phenomena ranging from corporate structures to political systems.

#### ***Relevance of Parsons's Social System Today***

##### **1. Understanding Complex Societies**

In an era of globalization, Parsons's emphasis on interdependence and shared values remains relevant. For example, his framework can help analyze how international institutions like the United Nations work to maintain global order.

##### **2. Applications in Organizational Studies**

The AGIL schema is widely used in organizational analysis. Businesses and institutions adopt the framework to assess their adaptation strategies, goal-setting mechanisms, and integration processes.

##### **3. Cultural Integration**

Parsons's focus on value consensus resonates in multicultural societies striving to integrate diverse populations while maintaining social harmony. His concepts are particularly relevant in addressing issues like immigration and cultural assimilation.

##### **4. Critique of Modern Challenges**

While Parsons's theory does not directly address contemporary issues like climate change or digitalization, its emphasis on systemic interrelations provides a basis for understanding these challenges. For instance, climate policies can be analyzed through the lens of adaptation and integration.

##### **5. Relevance in Education**

Parsons's ideas about roles and norms are evident in educational systems, where clearly defined roles (teacher, student) and norms (discipline, academic integrity) contribute to socialization and stability.

## **Conclusion**

Talcott Parsons's social system theory remains a cornerstone of sociological thought, offering valuable insights into the functioning and maintenance of social order. His focus on roles, norms, and systemic interdependence provides a comprehensive framework for understanding societal structures. However, the theory's limitations, such as its neglect of conflict and overemphasis on stability, highlight the need for complementary approaches.

In today's complex and dynamic world, Parsons's ideas continue to inspire sociologists, prompting debates on their application and relevance. While the theory may require adaptations to address contemporary challenges, its core principles remain integral to the study of social systems and their enduring quest for cohesion and stability



# THE REFERENCE GROUP THEORY OF PARSONS: AN ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW

Talcott Parsons, a pivotal figure in 20th-century sociology, is renowned for his expansive theoretical contributions, including the concept of reference groups. Rooted in his structural-functional framework, reference group theory sheds light on how individuals shape their behavior, values, and aspirations in alignment with certain groups that hold significance in their lives. These groups provide a point of comparison, inspiration, or aspiration, thereby influencing an individual's self-concept and decision-making processes.

This essay explores Parsons's reference group theory, delving into its core concepts, the reasons behind its development, its significance, limitations, and contemporary relevance.

## *Why Parsons Studied Reference Groups*

Parsons's interest in reference groups arose from his broader endeavor to understand human action within a social framework. Inspired by the works of George Herbert Mead, Robert K. Merton, and Émile Durkheim, Parsons sought to explain how individuals internalize societal norms and values, and how these become guiding principles in their behavior. His reference group theory addresses fundamental sociological questions:

1. How do individuals identify with societal norms?
2. Why do people align their behavior with groups they are not directly a part of?

Parsons was particularly interested in the idea of normative influence, where individuals adopt behaviors and attitudes based on the expectations of significant others or groups. This provided a lens to examine societal stability and the mechanisms that maintain social cohesion.

## ***Core Concepts of Reference Group Theory***

Parsons's reference group theory revolves around key concepts that elucidate its mechanisms and implications:

### ***1. Reference Groups***

Reference groups are social collectives or categories that individuals use as a standard for evaluating themselves and their actions. These groups may be:

- **Membership Groups:** Groups to which an individual belongs, such as family, friends, or professional organizations.
- **Non-Membership Groups:** Groups to which an individual aspires to belong or uses as a benchmark, such as elite institutions or cultural icons.

### ***2. Normative Function***

The normative function involves the adoption of values, norms, and behaviors from the reference group. For example, a student aspiring to join an Ivy League university may adopt the work ethic and study habits typical of that institution's culture.

### ***3. Comparative Function***

The comparative function highlights how individuals evaluate their own status, achievements, or attributes against those of their reference group. For instance, a young athlete might compare their performance to professional athletes to gauge their progress.

### ***4. Positive and Negative Reference Groups***

- **Positive Reference Groups:** Groups whose values and behaviors individuals seek to emulate.
- **Negative Reference Groups:** Groups individuals consciously reject or avoid being associated with, such as rival social cliques or ideological opposites.



## ***5. Role of Socialization***

Reference groups play a vital role in socialization, influencing an individual's identity formation and integration into society. By internalizing the values of reference groups, individuals align their behaviors with broader societal norms.

### ***Significance of Parsons's Reference Group Theory***

#### ***1. Understanding Social Behavior***

Parsons's theory provides a framework for analyzing why individuals conform to or deviate from societal norms. It explains how people are influenced by groups they are not directly a part of, offering insights into phenomena like consumer behavior, political alignment, and cultural trends.

#### ***2. Bridge Between Individual and Society***

Reference group theory bridges the micro-level (individual choices) and macro-level (societal structures) by illustrating how personal decisions are shaped by social expectations. For instance, someone choosing a career in medicine may be influenced by the societal prestige associated with doctors, even if they are not directly part of a medical community.

#### ***3. Applications in Social Stratification***

The theory is instrumental in understanding social mobility and stratification. Aspirational reference groups, such as affluent or educated communities, often drive individuals to pursue upward mobility. Conversely, feelings of exclusion or inferiority may arise when comparisons to reference groups highlight disparities.

#### ***4. Influence on Identity and Motivation***

Reference groups significantly influence identity formation and motivation. Adolescents, for example, often adopt the styles, attitudes, or ideologies of peer groups they admire, shaping their sense of self and aspirations.

## **5. Relevance in Modern Contexts**

In today's interconnected world, digital platforms have expanded the concept of reference groups. Influencers, online communities, and global cultural trends serve as reference groups that shape behavior on a larger scale than ever before.

### ***Limitations of Parsons's Reference Group Theory***

While Parsons's reference group theory has had a profound impact, it is not without limitations:

#### **1. Simplistic Assumptions**

The theory assumes that individuals always act rationally in choosing reference groups. However, emotional factors, unconscious biases, or misinformation can influence these choices.

#### **2. Neglect of Structural Constraints**

Parsons emphasizes individual agency in adopting reference group norms but underplays the structural barriers that may limit access to certain groups, such as economic inequality or systemic discrimination.

#### **3. Overemphasis on Conformity**

Critics argue that the theory places too much focus on conformity and integration, neglecting resistance, rebellion, or the formation of countercultures as responses to reference group norms.

#### **4. Context-Specific Relevance**

The applicability of the theory is often context-dependent. Reference groups in collectivist societies may differ significantly in function and influence from those in individualistic cultures.

## **5. Limited Empirical Validation**

While the theory provides a strong conceptual framework, it has been critiqued for lacking empirical methods to measure the influence of reference groups in diverse settings.

## ***Contemporary Relevance of Parsons's Reference Group Theory***

In today's rapidly changing world, the concept of reference groups remains highly relevant:

### **1. Globalization and Digitalization**

Globalization has expanded the scope of reference groups beyond geographical boundaries. Through social media, individuals now compare themselves to influencers, celebrities, or communities from different parts of the world, reshaping their aspirations and self-concepts.

### **2. Consumer Behavior**

Marketers frequently leverage reference group theory to influence consumer choices. Advertisements often depict products being used by aspirational figures or groups, encouraging consumers to align their preferences with these reference groups.

### **3. Identity Politics**

Reference group dynamics are evident in identity politics, where individuals align themselves with groups that reflect their ideological or cultural values. This has implications for political campaigns, activism, and social movements.

### **4. Youth and Peer Influence**

The theory remains particularly relevant for understanding youth behavior. Peer groups continue to serve as powerful reference points, influencing trends, values, and social interactions among younger generations.

## **5. Cross-Cultural Analysis**

The theory provides a tool for comparing how individuals in different cultures select and interact with reference groups. For example, collectivist societies may prioritize familial or community-based reference groups, while individualistic societies might emphasize professional or aspirational groups.

### ***Examples in Real-World Contexts***

#### **1. Educational Aspirations:**

A student from a lower socioeconomic background might aspire to join an Ivy League university, using its students and alumni as a reference group to shape their study habits and career goals.

#### **2. Workplace Dynamics:**

Professionals often compare themselves to industry leaders or mentors, adopting practices and behaviors that align with these reference groups to advance their careers.

#### **3. Consumer Choices:**

Young adults may buy luxury brands not out of necessity but because their aspirational reference groups endorse these products.

#### **4. Social Movements:**

Activists might align themselves with historical figures or contemporary leaders they admire, using them as reference groups to shape their strategies and ideologies.

## **Conclusion**

Talcott Parsons's reference group theory remains a cornerstone in understanding the interplay between individual behavior and social structures. By examining how individuals adopt values, norms, and behaviors from influential groups, Parsons provided a framework to explain societal cohesion, identity formation, and social mobility.

Despite its limitations, the theory continues to offer valuable insights into contemporary phenomena, from consumer behavior to global digital trends. As societies evolve, the dynamics of reference groups expand, making Parsons's ideas more pertinent than ever. For students and scholars alike, exploring reference group theory deepens our understanding of the social forces that shape human behavior and societal integration.





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# PERSPECTIVES

## GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

- *Rebecca Rose Varghese*

*A look at how Judith Butler through her 1990 work, Gender Trouble, reimagined gender as something we do, not something we are and framed it as a socially constructed phenomenon*

A concept that has significantly influenced gender theory, gender performativity enables a more fluid understanding of gender by challenging fixed notions of identity. Poststructuralist scholar Judith Butler introduced this idea in her 1990 work, Gender Trouble. Butler critiques the essentialist view, which associates sex to the binary of the masculine and the feminine. Instead, Butler argues that gender is a socially constructed identity — produced, reproduced, and maintained through repeated actions, behaviours, and discourse. Therefore, it can never truly be a fully stable identity; even if it appears persistent.

Butler explains that social norms surrounding gender are so embedded in our lives that they seem natural and appropriate, confining individuals to rigid gender roles. However, these norms are not fixed and the roles can be subverted because they depend on constant repetition for their seeming stability. Acts of resistance within social structures can lead to transformation and a new understanding of gender. Butler's work on gender not only challenges traditional theories but also marks a milestone in third-wave feminism, making a significant contribution to queer theory.



## Two theories of gender

While there are many debates surrounding the definition of gender, two of the most significant theories are gender essentialism and social constructivism. Gender essentialism, in simple terms, posits that gender is best explained through biology — sex chromosomes and DNA determine one's sex, which in turn defines their gender. According to this perspective, the traits, roles, and behaviours associated with masculinity and femininity come naturally, as they are predetermined by biological factors.

On the other hand, social constructivism explains that gender identity is constructed through discourse, which includes not only language but also bodily, verbal, and non-verbal acts. Gender norms become internalised to the point that they feel natural to those who align with their assigned gender. For example, a child with a uterus is assigned the gender of a girl at birth, given the pronouns she/her, and exposed to traditionally feminine roles. Deviations from these norms are often met with bullying and disciplinary actions.

For example, in many schools in India, while girls are expected to have long neatly tied hair, if a boy grows his hair long, he may face criticism and be pressured to conform to traditional masculine norms and cut his hair short. This demonstrates how regulations and expectations shift according to gender, even in contexts where uniform standards should apply.

Iris Marion Young's 1980 essay, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality," examines how gender norms can also influence movement. Young shows that girls are expected to act in ways perceived as weaker and more restrained, such as using less physical space and energy when throwing a ball, compared to boys. Interestingly, these behaviours and roles are not constant and may shift over time and across cultures; for instance, in the 19th century, pink was considered masculine, while blue was associated with women.

This also reflects Simone de Beauvoir's assertion in the 1949 book, *The Second Sex*: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." De Beauvoir's statement underscores that gender identity is shaped and constructed through societal norms, and is not an innate quality.

## **Sex and gender**

Judith Butler extends this discussion, and critiques second-wave feminism's distinction between sex and gender. Scholars like Gayle Rubin argue that sex is determined by biological factors while gender is shaped by social norms. However, Butler challenges this separation, contending that even "sex" is subject to social interpretation. According to Butler, we cannot experience biological sex apart from the social meanings attached to it. Thus, both sex and gender should be viewed as socially constructed, as gender ultimately subsumes sex. The idea that a person's body predetermines their gender identity is a product of social discourse, not a biological fact.

Butler explains that gender is not something we are, but something we do. Instead of viewing gender as a noun, Butler conceptualises it as a verb — something one performs rather than possesses. One is not a woman but does 'womanness'. Gender thus, is defined as the stylised repetition of acts through time. This can be compared to the act of speaking. Just as talking involves the continuous repetition of words within the structure of language, gender involves an ongoing enactment of set roles. Speaking requires not just uttering individual words but engaging in a consistent and rule-governed process over time. Similarly, gender performativity involves the repetition of acts and behaviours aligned with societal expectations.

## **Performativity and performance**

While expanding on the notion of performativity, it is important to distinguish it from the concept of performance. Performance suggests that individuals take on a gender role and actively embody societal expectations of what it means to be masculine or feminine, as if role-playing is central to the gender we express. However, performativity of gender is not a conscious act that one can alter at will. Rather, it refers to the ongoing process through which individuals unconsciously perform and reinforce societal norms of masculinity and femininity. These norms are deeply ingrained, creating the illusion that they are natural, even though they are socially constructed.

For example, we give baby dolls to young girls to play with, which plays into feminine stereotypes of being nurturing as eventually a woman, as per societal norms, has to become a mother. Although these actions of caregiving seem instinctive, they are learned through imitation and reinforced by societal expectations. Performativity, in this sense, means that these repeated actions produce a series of effects — talking and acting in ways that reinforce the impression of being a man or a woman.

Gender expression then, according to Butler, does not originate from within the individual but is shaped by external social norms. People don't instinctively know how to be masculine or feminine; instead, it is through the repetitive enactment of societal expectations and norms that individuals come to express these gender characteristics.

### *Critiques of gender performativity*

Despite the groundbreaking impact of Butler's work, the theory has faced criticisms, particularly from transgender theorists like Julia Serano.

As a transgender and bisexual activist and author of *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, Serano argues that gender essentialism fails to explain the numerous individuals whose gender expression defies societal expectations. There are far too many of them to be dismissed as genetic anomalies. Yet, Butler's theory and social constructivism also fail to account for transgender individuals, whose gender expression is not merely a response to societal norms but often aligns with what feels right for the individual. This suggests that gender identity can emerge from within, especially as these expressions frequently manifest at a young age, before the full impact of social conditioning takes effect.

To address these gaps, Serano introduces the concept of "subconscious sex" where individual minds are intrinsically inclined toward a certain gender identity, independent of societal conditioning. While cisgender individuals experience

alignment between their physical bodies and gender identities, transgender individuals face a mismatch, leading to gender dissonance.

But while emphasising the role of the brain in gender identity, Serano agrees with Judith Butler and Simone de Beauvoir that social norms can influence or interpret one's subconscious sex. Thus, gender becomes both subject and object— shaped by internal inclinations as well as societal influence.



# SOCIOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Sociology, as a discipline, has always been dynamic, constantly adapting to the changing social realities of the world. As societies evolve, so too do the theoretical frameworks and sociological perspectives that seek to understand these changes. In recent years, new sociological topics have emerged, challenging traditional views, providing fresh insights into social phenomena, and offering innovative ways of analyzing human behavior in an increasingly complex world. This article explores several of these new perspectives in sociology, discussing their relevance, significance, and impact on our understanding of contemporary society.

## **1. The Sociology of Digital Networks and Social Media**

One of the most profound changes in recent decades has been the rise of digital networks and social media. These platforms have transformed how people interact, form communities, and construct their identities. In the early days of the internet, sociologists focused on the potential of digital technologies to bring people together across geographical boundaries. However, as social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok became ubiquitous, sociologists began to examine not only how these platforms connect people but also how they influence behavior, socialization, and power dynamics.

Digital sociology, as a burgeoning field, explores how social media shapes political engagement, the construction of online identities, and the spread of information and misinformation. One critical area of interest is the concept of the “filter bubble,” which refers to the tendency of algorithms to show users content that aligns with their existing beliefs, reinforcing biases and creating polarized echo chambers. This has significant implications for democracy, as individuals may become less exposed to diverse viewpoints, leading to increased social divisions.

Moreover, the rise of influencer culture and digital activism has provided sociologists with new avenues to explore the changing nature of power and authority in society. Social media influencers, for example, wield significant cultural capital, often dictating trends, fashion, and even political opinions. At the same time, movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have shown the potential of social media for grassroots mobilization and social change. These developments have forced sociologists to rethink traditional notions of authority, power, and influence in a digitally mediated world.

## **2. Posthumanism and the Sociology of Technology**

As technology continues to advance at an unprecedented rate, sociologists are increasingly turning their attention to posthumanism, a theoretical perspective that challenges the boundaries between humans, animals, and machines. Posthumanism interrogates the ways in which technological advancements are transforming what it means to be human, as well as the ethical and social implications of these transformations.

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and biotechnology has raised critical questions about the future of human agency, autonomy, and identity. Sociologists have begun to examine the impact of technologies such as AI on labor markets, social inequalities, and personal relationships. For instance, the automation of jobs through robotics threatens to displace workers, creating new social divisions between those who can adapt to the changing economy and those who cannot. Additionally, the increasing integration of AI into everyday life, from virtual assistants like Siri to surveillance systems, raises concerns about privacy, control, and the erosion of human autonomy.

Posthumanism also explores the concept of “human enhancement”, which refers to the use of technology to augment human abilities, whether through genetic modification, neural interfaces, or other means. Sociologists are questioning the social implications of these advancements: Will enhanced individuals become a new elite class, further exacerbating existing inequalities? How will society deal with the ethical dilemmas posed by the modification of human bodies and minds? These are important questions that sociologists are grappling with as they attempt to understand the complex relationship between technology, society, and human nature.

### **3. Environmental Sociology and Climate Change**

The issue of climate change has emerged as one of the most pressing concerns of the 21st century, and it has given rise to a new wave of sociological inquiry. Environmental sociology examines the relationship between society and the environment, focusing on how human behavior and social structures contribute to environmental degradation and how social institutions can address ecological challenges.

One key focus within environmental sociology is the concept of environmental justice, which explores the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on marginalized communities. Poor and working-class communities, especially those of color, are often the most affected by pollution, industrial waste, and the impacts of climate change. This has led to calls for a more equitable distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, as well as the need for social policies that address these inequities.

In addition, the rise of climate change denial and the global political struggle over climate action has prompted sociologists to investigate how culture, politics, and media influence public attitudes towards the environment. Why do some individuals and groups reject scientific consensus on climate change? How do political ideologies shape environmental policies and public perceptions? These questions are central to the growing field of climate change sociology, which seeks to understand how social and cultural factors contribute to the global environmental crisis and what can be done to mitigate its effects.

The concept of sustainability has also become a focal point of sociological analysis. As societies move towards more sustainable modes of production and consumption, sociologists are examining how these shifts are reshaping economies, industries, and lifestyles. Sustainable development is not just about environmental protection but also about creating more equitable and socially just societies. This intersection of environmental, economic, and social issues makes environmental sociology an increasingly relevant and important field in the context of global climate change.

#### **4. Sociology of Health and Well-Being**

Another emerging sociological perspective is the sociology of health and well-being, which examines the social determinants of health, the role of healthcare systems, and the societal factors that influence physical and mental well-being. While traditional medical sociology has focused on issues such as healthcare access and inequality, contemporary scholarship has broadened to include more complex understandings of health as a social phenomenon.

The social determinants of health approach looks at how factors like income, education, race, and geography affect an individual's health outcomes. For example, individuals in poverty-stricken neighborhoods often experience worse health outcomes due to limited access to healthcare, unhealthy living environments, and high levels of stress. This perspective challenges the biomedical model of health, which focuses solely on biological factors, by emphasizing the role of social and structural forces in shaping health outcomes.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of understanding the intersections between health, society, and global crises. The pandemic has highlighted how social inequalities can exacerbate health disparities, as marginalized communities have been disproportionately affected by the virus. Sociologists are now exploring the long-term social implications of the pandemic, including its impact on mental health, social cohesion, and the future of healthcare systems worldwide.

#### **5. Intersectionality and Social Justice**

The theory of intersectionality, first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, has become a key analytical tool in sociology for understanding how various social identities—such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability—intersect and create unique systems of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality challenges the idea of a one-size-fits-all approach to social justice by recognizing that individuals' experiences of discrimination and inequality are shaped by the multiple, overlapping identities they hold.

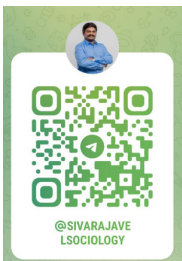
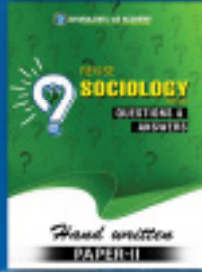


This approach has gained significant traction in contemporary sociological research, particularly in the areas of race and ethnicity, feminism, LGBTQ+ studies, and disability studies. By focusing on how systems of power operate on multiple axes of identity, intersectionality provides a more nuanced understanding of social inequality and helps to highlight the lived experiences of marginalized groups.

The social justice movement has also adopted an intersectional lens, as activists seek to address the ways in which multiple forms of oppression intersect and compound. For instance, Black women experience racism and sexism in ways that are distinct from both Black men and white women. Similarly, LGBTQ+ people of color may face discrimination that is shaped by both their sexual orientation and racial identity. By incorporating intersectionality into social justice efforts, sociologists and activists are better equipped to understand and address the complex realities of inequality in modern society.

Sociology, like the societies it studies, is ever-evolving. As we confront the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, new sociological perspectives are emerging that seek to address the complex realities of a rapidly changing world. From the rise of digital networks and posthumanism to the pressing concerns of climate change and intersectionality, these new topics offer fresh insights into how social structures and human behavior interact. By embracing these new perspectives, sociologists are better equipped to understand the complexities of contemporary society and to offer solutions to the social problems we face. As we move forward, these sociological frameworks will continue to shape our understanding of the world and guide efforts toward a more equitable and sustainable future.

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