

## Sociological Perspective on Social Policy

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## Common Grounds

- relationships between the State and the individual
- the identification, explanation and amelioration of social problems;
- social justice and (in)equalities – have also long been associated with sociological analyses.

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## Sociology *within* Social Policy

- There are at least three different ways of attempting a definition of or for social policy
- 1. Firstly, social policy has conventionally been used as a term to denote a set of policies and practices concerned with promoting social welfare and well-being.
- 2. Social policy as distinctive discipline
- 3. Have its own conceptual and theoretical framework

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## Shifts in the Contours

- Pursuit of all-encompassing theoretical explanations has been 'troubled' by calls to diversity, difference, partiality and the local.
- partly occurred as responses to wider social changes and transformations, which have shifted the theoretical, empirical, political, economic and social landscapes within which contemporary social policy is located.
- It is no longer desirable, or indeed possible, to define social policy in terms of a narrow understanding of social welfare or social services.

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## Shifts in the Contours

- It is difficult to sustain a simple national view of social policy in the face of increased global communications, and the processes of globalization more generally
- by taking a more holistic, and a less essentialist, view of social policy it is possible to expand the social policy horizon in analytically useful and important ways
- sociological perspectives, have been subject to the same shifts, developments and transformations.

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## Sociology

- Giddens (1997: 2) has described sociology as a 'dazzling and compelling enterprise'.
- make sense of the relationships between individual lives and social contexts
- the subtle yet complex and profound ways in which our individual lives reflect the contexts of our social experience' (Giddens 1997: 3).

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## Sociological Imagination About Social Policy

- Sociological thinking in this sense, then, is concerned with 'seeing' the social, and exploring the links between the social (society) and the individual.
- exploring the ways in which sociological ideas and perspectives can be used to illuminate the processes, patterns and experiences of social policy.
- think about sociological ideas as a toolbox of theoretical, methodological and analytical resources on which one can variously draw.

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## Sociological Theory

- At a very general level, sociological theory, in its many different guises, has a common objective: to try to **describe, understand and explain the social world**.
- Sociological work subjects social processes, institutions and phenomena to **systematic analyses**.
- Mills put forward the position that sociology (and sociological thought) has the capacity to transform personal problems into public and political issues.
- So to 'think' sociologically is to critically examine **relationships between the collective and the individual**; to explore the ways in which the biographical and the social are intertwined;

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## A Brief History of Sociology

- Enlightenment era
- Comte and social physics
- Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber (often referred to, some would say controversially, as the founding fathers of sociology) presented different ways of seeing and understanding the social world, and emphasized complementary aspects of the social

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## Grand Narrative

- Marx articulated a view of society that drew upon the concepts of power, class and inequality
- the ways in which the relations of labour and capital operated in order to reproduce inequalities
- Émile Durkheim is often credited with establishing sociology as a scientific discipline, taking forward the vision of Comte.
- His sociological studies sought to systematically link the individual to the collective – through the observance of 'social facts'.
- Social facts were defined by Durkheim as those aspects of social life that give shape and context to individual lives.

## Grand Narrative

- According to Durkheim, this social organization was based on a specialization of function, and built upon reciprocity, trust, shared norms and common values
- Thus Durkheim was able to consider how society is patterned and ordered (through this functional differentiation or specialization), and how the individual relates to the collective or the social.
- Durkheim also considered the (undesirable) consequences of this order or solidarity breaking down, which he described through his concept of 'anomie'.

## Grand Narrative

- Max Weber, a German contemporary of Durkheim, was also interested in the structure and organization of society.
- However, Weber was also keen to recognize the significance of **social action**, and argued that social action rather than social structure should be the analytical starting point for sociological work.
- different meanings and interpretations of social reality
- Weber developed a conceptual tool of 'ideal types' in order to explore this phenomenon. *Dr. Farah Naz*

## Sociological Canons

- multiple sociological perspectives
- structural functionalism adopts a macro perspective to the study of social life and social organization, and in so doing, structure is perhaps prioritized over experience and action.
- sociological work that has drawn upon and developed Marxist theoretical perspectives has placed much more emphasis upon social inequalities and the need for social transformation
- Interactionist perspectives concern themselves more with the micro order of society.

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## Thinking sociologically about social policy

- Social policy can be conceptualized in terms of broad social structures (through, for example, the State, the market, social institutions and organizations, and legislative and economic frameworks).
- Social policy can also be considered in terms of sets of individual, collective and auto/biographical experiences – with/in which social actors actively navigate social policy routes and pathways.
- Moreover, these pathways are navigated with/in specific temporal and spatial (as well as political and economic) contexts

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## Patterns and processes

- Thinking sociologically is also to explore the general in the particular; to take specific actions, interactions and events and to identify more general patterns and processes.
- For social policy, then, this invites systematic study of policy-making processes, settings and experiences, and developing the capacity to work at the interface between particular instances and broader categories of understanding.

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## Making the strange familiar and the familiar strange

- Hence sociological explorations can enable us to 'see' the 'familiar' through a new and more critical lens.
- Sociological perspectives and systematic study can thus provide a forum for revealing and re-seeing both the familiar and the not so familiar aspects of social policy.

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## Continuity and change

- Sociological theory provides frameworks for explaining social stability (for example, via processes of socialization, social differentiation and social reproduction) and for understanding the processes of social change.
- Navigating across and between different theoretical perspectives also presents the opportunity to consider the role of conflicts and tensions; socialization and culture; ideas and social movements; and human action, interaction and agency in the development, transformations and re-visions of complex social worlds.

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