

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348326929>

# Macro and Micro Perspectives in Sociology

Chapter · January 2021

CITATIONS

2

READS

17,894

2 authors:



**Jimoh Amzat**

Usmanu Danfodiyo University Sokoto

120 PUBLICATIONS 675 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



**Muhammad Maigari Abdullahi**

Al-Qalam University Katsina

25 PUBLICATIONS 25 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



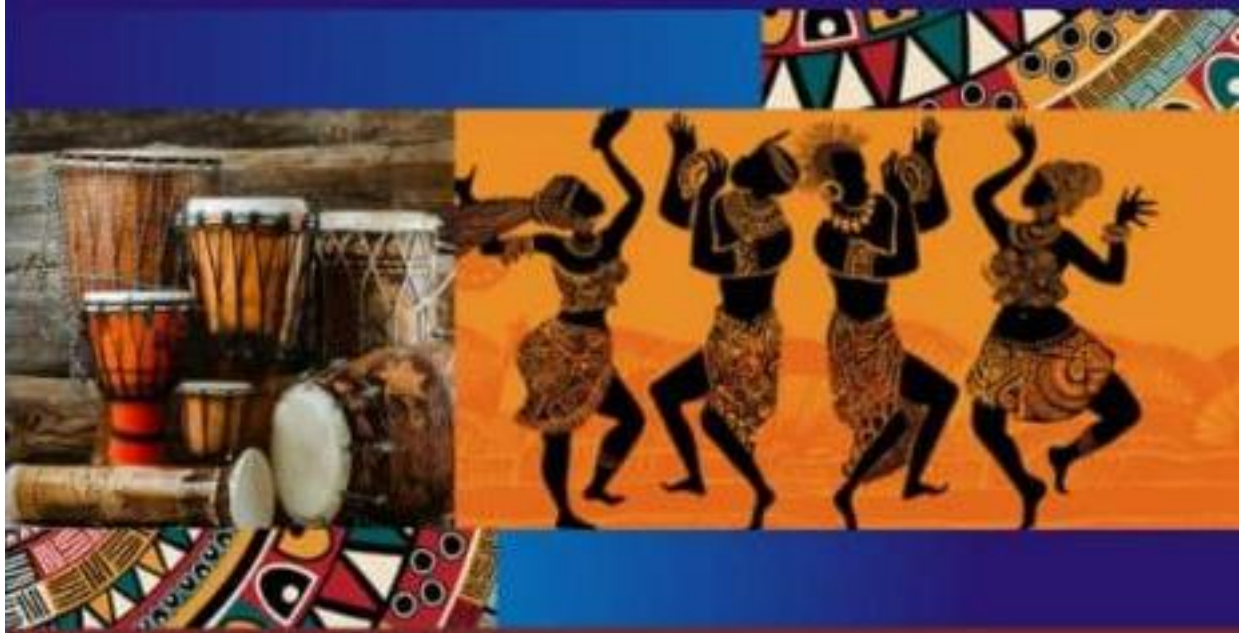
Academic writing [View project](#)



Academic writing [View project](#)

# Introduction *to* Sociology

AFRICAN CULTURE, CONTEXT AND COMPLEXITY



**EDITORS**  
Adetayo Olorunlana  
Femi Rufus Tinuola  
Olayiwola O. Fasoranti

## Chapter Six

### Macro and Micro Perspectives in Sociology

**Jimoh Amzat and Abdullahi M. Maigari**

Usmanu Danfodiyo University,  
Department of Sociology,  
Sokoto, Nigeria

#### Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you would be able to

- Identify the foundation of Macrosociology
- Ascertain the foundation of Microsociology
- Distinguish between Macrosociology and Microsociology
- Appreciate the macro-micro link

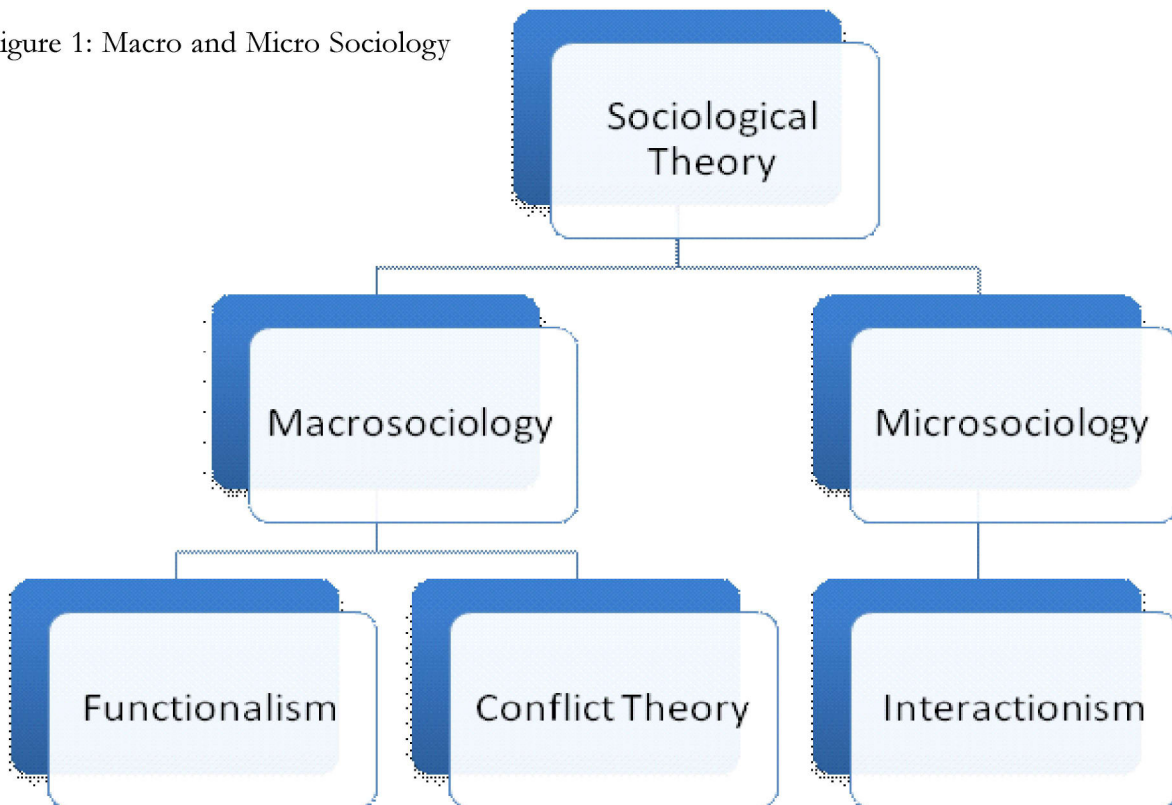
#### Introduction

The micro-macro or agency-structure problem is one of the important aspects of social theory and Sociology in particular. Many scholars (e.g. Giddens, 2001, 1979; Bourdieu, 1977; Archer, 1995; Collins, 1981; Coleman, 1990; Knorr-Cetina, 1981) have provided extensive explanations to address it. Microsociology and Macrosociology provide contrasting theoretical standpoints on social life, social change and behavioural patterns (see Blau, 1968). The differential unit of analysis is the fundamental basis that set the perspectives apart. From the micro perspective, the smallest unit of analysis is the individual, but to the macro, it is the family. In this sense, analyzing large-scale entities and minute social interactions have generated a lot of debates in social theory in general and sociology in particular. The critical question is whether society can be explained, understood from the level of individual or group.

Sociology as a discipline has always been stressed about how to understand and explain social relations and the more complex social patterns. Microsociology analyzes the essential social processes and patterns that produce interaction between persons (Blau, 1968). Expressed in another way, the focus of microsociology is on social interaction and communication, and important concepts are an attitude, perception, interpretation, exchange, significant symbols, obligations, whereas macrosociology analyzes the social structures and their consequences for the social system (Blau, 1968). These structures are external to individuals and serve as determinants of social processes and events. So, microsociology dissects the internal dynamic processes that serve as rationalisation or justification for social relations and human behaviour whereas macrosociology analyzes the external dynamic processes generating constraints and opportunities (Blau, 1968).

In sociology, there are three major paradigms: functionalism, conflict and interactionist paradigms. Both functionalism and conflict are from macrosociology, while interactionism is from microsociology (see Figure 1). After a succinct introduction on the dichotomy between micro-macro Sociology, the chapter discussed microsociology and macrosociology and their characteristics in detail.

Figure 1: Macro and Micro Sociology

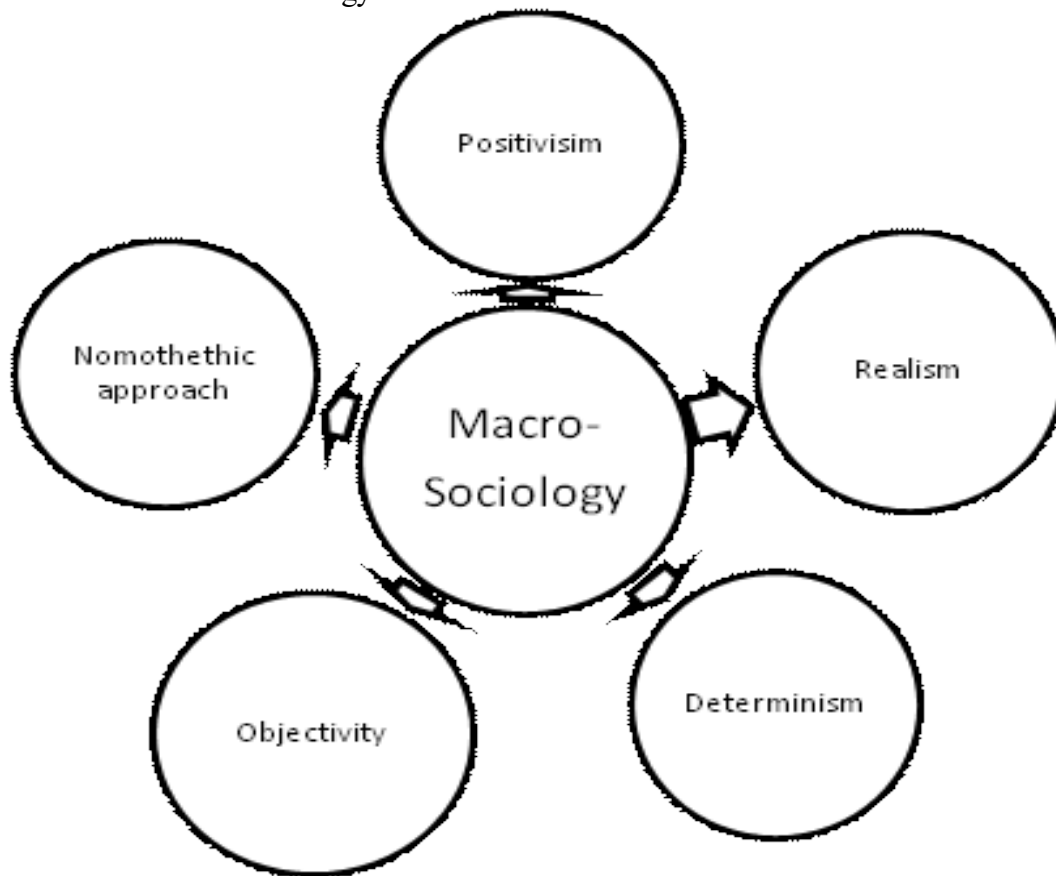


### Foundations of Macrosociology

Renowned social theorists (Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and Max Weber as well as Immanuel Wallerstein) focused their attention on studying large structures or the whole world. The primary focus of macro theories includes the struggle between classes in the society, social inequality, gender inequality, or the interrelation among major institutions in society such as government, religion and family (Babbie, 2013). Similarly, Collins (1987) considered macrosociology as the analysis of large-scale and long-term issues/structures in human society including state, organization, class, economy, culture and society.

Additionally, the macro analysis starts from objectivity (i.e., the objective structures). The stance is that society can only be understood through its objectified social structures. Invariably, macro-orientation explains both order (social static) and social change (social dynamics) through the structures (Schillo et al. 2000). The human society is real, hence should be considered as a reality its own. According to Schillo, et al. (2000) the individuals are less important in macro sociological analysis, they only play a minor part in the constitution of social life and its actual conditions. Therefore, macrosociology is associated with a number of features or characteristics, and hold implications on what sociologist study and how they study it. These features include realism, positivism, nomothetic approach, determinism (cause-effect) and objectivity (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Attributes of Macrosociology



**Realism:** the human society exists as an objective reality, not a “reality” that is mentally constructed. The society exists independently of being perceived (Philips, 1987). This is the philosophical orientation of Emile Durkheim and his conception of social facts. According to Durkheim, social facts are “ways of acting, thinking and feeling, [that are] external to the individual” –such as laws, moral rules, collective sentiments and institutional frameworks. Such way of acting is constantly under the influence of certain social forces. Both material and non-material social facts exist to provide opportunities and constraints for human behaviour. They are created as external realities, which can be studied objectively. He echoed the words of Plato and Socrates 2000 years before (Cohen, 2001). Like Plato, Durkheim considers society to be essentially a moral phenomenon, created within a framework of overarching eternal values. And, like Plato, he rejects individualism and introspection as assumed and proposed by thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith, with their attempts to create generalities out of particulars and to build social structures out of human agents. Instead, the Durkheimian model viewed society as the primary cause and not the effect (Cohen, 2001).

**Positivism:** This simply implies the application of scientific methodology, in this case, in understanding human society. Sociological enterprise should also apply rigorous methodology (such as experimentation and observation) obtained from the pure sciences to explain social processes (Hollis, 1994; Delanty, 2005). This is regarded as a sure way of obtaining objective knowledge that is verifiable and precise. The assumption is that the social world also operates like the natural world based on

some presumed set of universal laws. One of the primary tasks of sociology is to discover laws of social behaviour using logic and methods of natural sciences. Auguste Comte is one of the leading proponents of this tradition in Sociology. In short, Delanty (2005) observed that positivism projects that sociology should discover universal laws through the application of scientific methods.

**Determinism:** in human society, there are fundamental causes of human behaviour or social circumstances. Determinism implies that there are external forces operating on individuals that coerce them to act in certain manners. The external forces undermine individual choice and are lies beyond human capacity to change it. It is also been observed that that human inability to do things differently is not because individuals are physically compelled but literally do not believe or know that alternative real possibilities exist. This is akin to a mechanical model of man, a theory that implies that human beings operate like machines and not subject to unexplainable phenomena such as consciousness. It is similar to the concepts of determinism and behaviourism. The mechanical man concepts place all human beings as mechanical constructs, operating as machines on earth (Pam, 2013), thereby treating the individual as passive “subjects”.

**Nomothetic Approach:** the approach seeks to discover or identify what is true or generalizable for groups or populations (Grice, Jackson, and McDaniel, 2006). In nomothetic research, the practical idea in research is to select a representative sample from which generalizable inferences would be discovered and applied to the general population. The nomothetic approach to methodology, according to Burrell and Morgan (1979) is based on positivist research approached defined by systematic and highly organized research design. It is epitomized in the methodology employed in the pure sciences. The main approaches include experimentation and the use of quantitative techniques (especially the use of questionnaires and other standardized tests). Quantitative methods (e.g., survey and formal model which derive mathematical/statistical models or manipulations) are important to positivist and nomothetic analysis of the causal relationship. The quantitative sociology believes in objectivity in conducting social research. Elaborating on objectivity, Buddharaksa (2010) explained that the feature of the positivist approach is objectivity rather than subjectivity in its methods of inquiry. Furthermore, in order to gain data when conducting research, the positivists believe in value-neutrality, which separates the researcher’s bias or subjective thinking from the object under study (Buddharaksa, 2010)

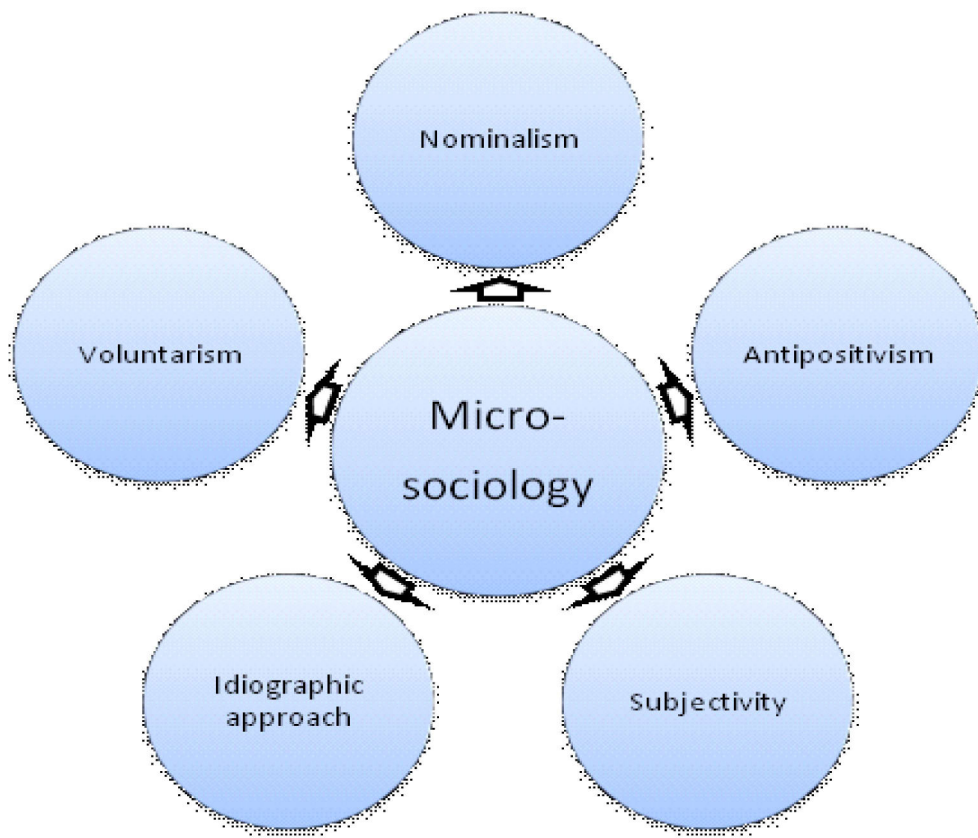
### **Foundations of Microsociology**

While macrosociology focus on large-scale entities and collectives, microsociology is a direct opposite of macrosociology, which focus on face-to-face social interactions. Babbie (2013) stated that microsociology is more of an intimate view of social life; and an approach that examines social life and processes at the level of individuals and small groups. As earlier observed, to the micro sociologists, the primary unit of the society is the individual, then the dyad, the triad and then small group. This perspective comes close to the realm of psychology but whereas psychologists typically focus on what goes on inside humans, micro theorists study what goes on between individuals, which is also subject to the mental interpretation of events. Furthermore, one of the proponents of microsociology, Collins (1981) summarized it as the detailed analysis of what people do, say and think about the

actual flow of momentary experience. Therefore, the basic distinction between macro and microsociology is a major point under any sociology paradigm. For instance, ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism usually rely on micro approach while conflict paradigm often relies on a macro level but can also be pursued at the micro level (as reflected in the works of George Simmel). In particular, the micro approach (see Figure 3) includes a subjectivist approach to social science, a nominalist assumption for ontology, an anti-positivist assumption for epistemology, a voluntarism assumption of human nature and an idiographic assumption for methodology (Luthans and Davis, 1981).

**Nominalism:** Nominalism is the position that social events are not real entities either in the world or in the mind, but names, which refer to groups or classes of individual things (Reese, 1980). What is called “reality” is mentally constructed, interpreted, and therefore eliciting a subjective response. There is nothing like a fixed reality. The social processes are fluid and constantly being reconstructed. And more importantly, neither interpretation nor response is also fixed. Events are only given identifiers (names) to enhance the process of communication. Reality is admitted only to actual physical particulars but not independent of the human mind. Universals exist only post res (after the thing; the thing exists first, then after it is in the mind) (Reese, 1980). In line with the foregoing, nominalists reject that human actions influence and constraint by the external environment.

Figure 3: Attributes of Microsociology



**Anti-Positivism:** Believes that society cannot be studied with rigorous scientific methods. They (Weber (1920), Collins (1981), Coleman (1990), etc.) stressed the ability of individuals to exercise control and choices over their actions. The individual is not passive and therefore, constantly in control of his/her actions. The nominalist argument is that of mini-narrative, stressing the differences in social action and responses. This is why the nominalists are not in favour of generalization. They are not also in favour of rigorous scientific methodology to study society: the object of study is different; the social world differs from the natural world (Jamieson, 2017). The bottom line is that sociological methodology should be flexible or less rigorous (Amzat et al. 2015). This is why, for instance, the nominalists prefer nonprobability sampling technique to the realist's probability sampling method.

**Voluntarism or Free-will:** the view is that individuals are active and creative in interpreting the social scripts provided by the society. This is like drawing an analogy between humans as actors in society, and the way in which a dramatic actor would work in the theatre (Goffman, 1974; Cooley, 1902; Garfinkel, 1967; Collins, 1981; are known for this tradition). Individuals act out of volition after understanding or interpreting the situation. This is close to the principle of self-responsibility that an individual is the author of his/her action and should be held responsible for such action. The social structures only create opportunities but do not impose constraints regarding human activities. Therefore, human action is, more often than not, a result of choice.

**Idiographic Approach:** the methodological implication of the idiographic approach: it is based on “qualitative, multi-aspect, in-depth study of one or a few cases” (Larsson, 1993). The qualitative approach allows for up-close analysis of cases in data collection and analysis. The qualitative research provides a detailed description and analysis of human experience usually in a natural setting (Marvasti, 2004). In general, critical overlap can be observed between nomothetic and idiographic approach, though they are viewed as diametrical opposites (Marvasti, 2004). As is the case with the positivistic/constructionist debate, quantitative and qualitative methods do not represent disciplinary absolutes, this is why some researchers opt for what is referred to as ‘mixed methods’ (Creswell, 2003), which combines qualitative and quantitative techniques (Marvasti, 2004).

**Subjectivity:** this implies realities are constructed through understanding and interpretation of events. Realities are a mere representation of how an individual understand, interpret and represent the world. Human actions are perceived differently, and therefore differential responses elicited in different circumstances. it has been observed that the aim of the social research is the production of how people see the world and understands their conditions or what is called “subjective understanding” of social processes (Sociology Shortcuts, 2013). In sum, micro-perspective approaches try to investigate how humans typically act under the assumption of the presence of the generalized others. These approaches pose the question of about what motives and guides expectations of an individual's behaviour. The priority is to deconstruct and reconstruct these motives, expectations, perceptions and justifications from observed situational contexts and behaviour (see Schillo et al. 2000).



### Macro-Micro Link

As earlier observed, macro-analysis stresses the independent and deterministic roles of the structural aspects of a social context in ensuring stability and change (see Schillo, et al. 2000). These structures also precipitate human behaviour and action. The structures are permanent entities, not dependent on any specific individual, and survive the individual. While this independence of structure from a specific individual holds, it is also true that the structure depends on the whole population for its reproduction. It is important to note that this reproduction happens even without explicit knowledge of the individuals (Schillo et al. 2000). The structures are reproduced as refined collective sentiments, which serve to manage the various complexities of life. As Schillo et al. (2000) observed society or organization could only exist on the basis of involvement or participation of individuals. By this argument, the macro is a collection of micro-units.

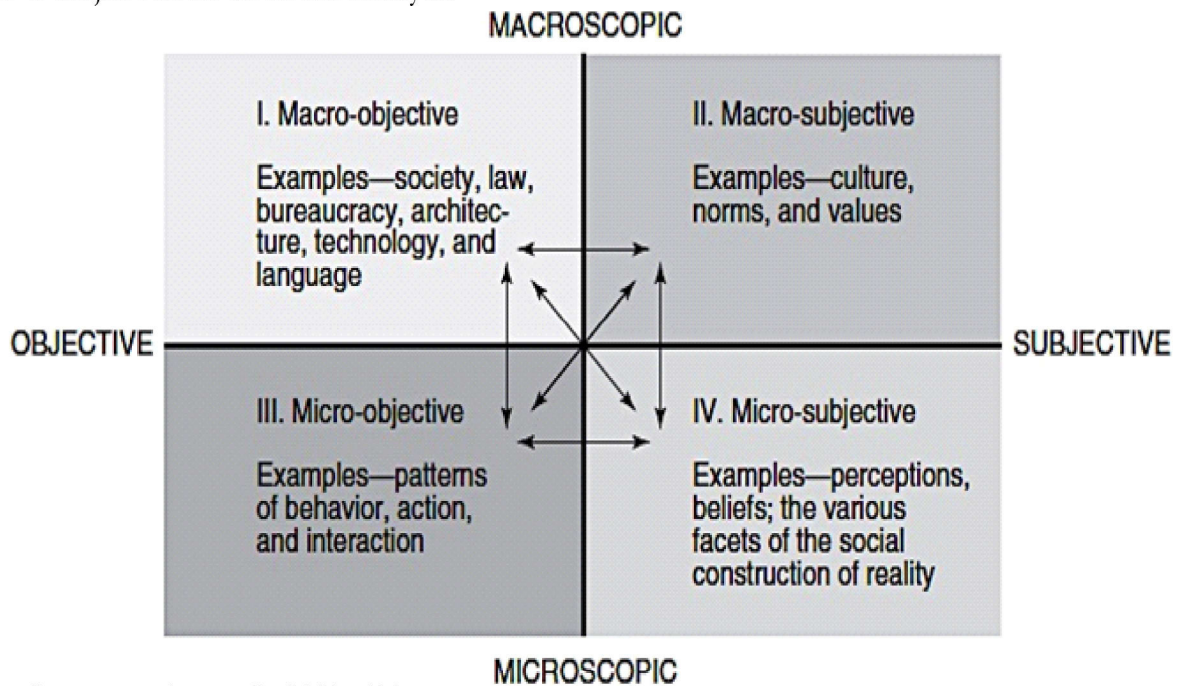
On the other hand, microsociology is based on methodological individualism, which treats an individual within the social context as a creative subject who enters into constant but negotiable interaction with others within the social context. To this view, society involves a complex concentration of interpersonal encounters. Methodological individualism implies that the so-called macro or large-scale phenomena can only be estimated from the situations, dispositions and beliefs of individuals. Therefore, to the view, it is not possible to study the society without making reference to individuals. However, macro sociologists empathize that the macrostructure provides a negotiable condition for individuals comprising groups (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, 1981).

Macrosociology is based on methodological holism, which means social behaviour of individuals should be explained in terms of role allocation and role performance, functions of the constituent parts and instituted norms and laws, which govern the system. The laws are part of external realities derived from common sentiments, and generally applicable to the whole system (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel, 1981). Therefore, the distinction between micro versus macro corresponds to the distinction between individuals and collectives (Coleman, 1987).

The major point of argument of micro-macro is a methodological one. It is after the collection of the data from the individual that is moved to aggregates. This is found in the Coleman critique of the Tocqueville's theory of revolution. Tocqueville based his theory of revolution on the idea of frustration. Coleman demonstrates the inadequacy of the theory because it definitely has a micro focus. Coleman observed that frustration is individualistic, while a revolt or revolution is a social phenomenon. Coleman further explained that only when the substantive majority feels frustration, they come together at the macro stage that a revolt is possible.

In providing the micro-macro link, Conte and Castelfranchi (1996) stated that it is believed that the micro-macro link should not just be viewed as a dualist conception of relating macro-structures (society) and micro-interactions (action) (see Giddens, 1984 and Amzat et al. 2015). Conte and Castelfranchi (1996) argued that it could be a three-faceted issue: (a) external forces and structures, (b) agents' cognition, and (c) their actions. Cognition is a major intervening factor between the external forces and the agent behaviours. Macro-social phenomena may emerge, unintentionally from micro-

Figure 4: Major Levels of Social Analysis



Source: *Ritzer, G. 2011: 503.*

interactions. However, they not only directly emerge from behaviours but also derive from the agent's cognitive representations (Conte and Castelfranchi, 1996). In creating the macro-micro links, Ritzer (2011) highlighted four major linkages including macro-objective, macro-subjective, micro-subjective and micro-objective (see Figure 4). It is important to understand this fusion in order to espouse a clear and comprehensive sociological explanation. The implication is that neither of the continua can be treated in isolation. This is why a more blended or integrated approach would promote holism in sociology (Amzat et al. 2015).

A classical depiction of the micro-macro link is found in the work of Max Weber: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber showed a transition from micro interaction to the macro level of analysis. That is how achievement motivation at the micro level is related to economic growth at the macro level. The Weber's seminal work portrayed that several societies experienced forms of capitalism as depicted by Western capitalism: a market; permanent industrial businesses making use of capital and accounting; free labour; separation of household and business; and the existence of cities and a rational state and as—all the ingredients of modern capitalism already existed (Weber, 1923).

Despite the foregoing methodological differences highlighted, both qualitative and quantitative techniques can be utilized or adopted in a single study to generate data. One variant of mixed methods research is the collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study (concurrent design) or a series of studies (sequential design). Its central premise is that the use of mixed methods provides a better and holistic understanding of research problems than either approach alone (Creswell and Clark, 2011). Furthermore, there is also a point of interface between

the methods. The point of an interface is a point where the two strands are mixed: possible points of the interface include data collection, data analysis, and interpretation (comparing or combining results from both methods) (Adopted from Bian, 2017).

### Summary/Conclusion

Micro-sociology or theory generally focuses on individual interactions. At the point of departure, they take interaction between individuals as the most important aspect of social life. Therefore, the focus is on the large structure that constraint or determines the behaviour of people in a group, organization or society. Micro-sociology takes into consideration the minute details of social interactions of individuals in face-to-face interactions. Therefore, the hot debates between macro and micro theorists is a sign of the vitality of the sociological enterprise and methodological difference between the two, where data are collected from the respondents during social research which none is better than the other or eliminate. However, social theorists from the microsociology camp made several attempts to resolve the micro-macro problem. It is, however, be noted that the debate is still on-going.

### Questions/Exercises

1. What is microsociology?
2. Explain the major features of microsociology.
3. How do you define macrosociology?
4. Identify and discuss the features of macro sociology.
5. Differentiate between microsociology and macrosociology.
6. Identify and explain the methodological implications of either microsociology or macrosociology

### References

- Amzat J., Omololu, F. & Abdullahi, A. A. (2015). Realist and nominalist traditions in sociology. In Ogunديya, I. S. & J. Amzat (Eds.), *Foundations of the Social Sciences* (pp. 137-147). Lagos: Malthouse Press.
- Bian, H. (2017). *Mixed Methods Research*. Office for Faculty Excellence. Retrieved from <http://core.ecu.edu/ofe/statisticsresearch/mixed%20methods%20new.pdf>, 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2018.
- Blau, P. M. (1964). *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Buddharaksa, W. (2010). Positivism, Anti-Positivism and Neo-Gramscianism. Ritsumeikan . Center for Asia Pacific Studies (RCAPS). *Working Paper No. 10-4*.
- Burrell, G. and Morgan, G. (1979). *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis*. London: Heinemann.
- Cherkaou, M. (2005). Micro-Macro Transitions: Limits of Rational Choice Theory in James Coleman's Foundations of Social Theory. *Revue française de sociologie*, (46), 79-101.
- Coleman, J.S. (1987). "Microfoundations and Macrosocial Behavior" in J. Alexander et al. (eds.), *The Micro-Macro Link*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- Coleman, J.S. (1990). *Foundations of Social Theory*, Cambridge (Mas), Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

- Collins, R. (1981). On the Micro foundations of Macrosociology. *American Journal of Sociology*.(5): 984-1 01 4.
- Conte, R. and Castelfranchi, C. (1996). Simulating Multi-Agent Interdependencies. A Two-Way Approach to the Micro-Macro Link. Troitzsch.
- Cooley, J. (1902). *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods Research*. 2nd ed.. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc
- Delanty, G. (2005). *Social Science*. 2nd ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Grice, J. W., Jackson, B. J., and McDaniel, B. L. (2006). Bridging the Idiographic-Nomothetic Divide: A Follow-Up Study. *Journal of Personality*, (74), 1191-1218.
- Hollis, M. (1994). *The Philosophy of Social Science an Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jamieson, R. (2017). Positivism -v- Interpretivism. *Sociology Factsheet*. No. 52.
- Knorr-Cetina, K., and Cicourel, A. (eds) (1981). *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Towards an Integration of Micro- and Macro-Sociology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Larsson, R. (1993). Case survey methodology: Quantitative analysis of patterns across case studies. *Academy of Management Journal*, (36), 1515-1546.
- Luthans, F. and Davis, T.R.V. (1981). *Idiographic Versus Nomothetic Approaches to Research in Organizations*. Department of Management, University of Nebraska NR170-913, Lincoln.
- Pam, N. (2013). Mechanical-Man Concept. Psychology Dictionary. Professional References.
- Phillips D. (1987). *Philosophy, Science, and Social Inquiry: Contemporary Methodological Controversies In Social Science And Related Applied Fields Of Research*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Reese, W. L. (1980). *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*. NJ: Humanities Press.
- Ritzer, G. (2011). *Sociological Theory*. 8<sup>th</sup> Edn, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- S-cool (2018). *Determinism and Free Will*. Retrieved from <https://www.s-cool.co.uk/a-level/sociology/key-problems/revise-it/determinism-and-free-will>. , 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2018.
- Schillo, M., Fischer, K. and Klein, C. T. (2000). The Micro-Macro Link in DAI and Sociology. *Saarbrücken*. Germany.
- Sociology Shortcuts (2013). *Objectivity, Subjectivity and Value-Freedom*. Retrieved from [http://www.sociology.org.uk/notes/SocShortcuts\\_methods13.pdf](http://www.sociology.org.uk/notes/SocShortcuts_methods13.pdf), 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2018.
- Weber, M. (1920). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Trans. with an intro. by Stephen Kalberg, Los Angeles: Blackwell.
- Weber, M. (1923). *Wirtschaftsgeschichte: Abriss der universalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*. Berlin, Duncker und Humblot.