2.1: Micro, Meso, and Macro Approaches

Learning Objectives

- Describe a microlevel approach to research, and provide an example of a microlevel study.
- Describe a mesolevel approach to research, and provide an example of a mesolevel study.
- Describe a macrolevel approach to research, and provide an example of a macrolevel study.

Before we discuss the more specific details of paradigms and theories, let’s look broadly at three possible levels of inquiry on which social scientific investigations might be based. These three levels demonstrate that while sociologists share some common beliefs about the value of investigating and understanding human interaction, at what level they investigate that interaction will vary.

At the micro level, sociologists examine the smallest levels of interaction; even in some cases, just “the self” alone. Microlevel analyses might include one-on-one interactions between couples or friends. Or perhaps a sociologist is interested in how a person’s perception of self is influenced by his or her social context. In each of these cases, the level of inquiry is micro. When sociologists investigate groups, their inquiry is at the meso level. Sociologists who conduct mesolevel research might study how norms of workplace behavior vary across professions or how children’s sporting clubs are organized, to cite two examples. At the macro level, sociologists examine social structures and institutions. Research at the macro level examines large-scale patterns. In recent years, sociologists have become increasingly interested in the process and impacts of globalization. A study of globalization that examines the interrelationships between nations would be an example of a macrolevel study.

Sociology at Three Different Levels

Let’s take a closer look at some specific examples of sociological research to better understand each of the three levels.
of inquiry described previously. Some topics are best suited to be examined at one particular level, while other topics can be studied at each of the three different levels. The particular level of inquiry might shape a sociologist's questions about the topic, or a sociologist might view the topic from different angles depending on the level of inquiry being employed.

First let’s consider some examples of different topics that are best suited to a particular level of inquiry. Work by Stephen Marks offers an excellent example of research at the micro level. In one study, Marks and Shelley MacDermid (1996) draw from prior microlevel theories to empirically study how people balance their roles and identities. In this study, the researchers found that people who experience balance across their multiple roles and activities report lower levels of depression and higher levels of self-esteem and well-being than their less-balanced counterparts. In another study, Marks and colleagues examined the conditions under which husbands and wives feel the most balance across their many roles. They found that different factors are important for different genders. For women, having more paid work hours and more couple time were among the most important factors. For men, having leisure time with their nuclear families was important, and role balance decreased as work hours increased (Marks, Huston, Johnson, & MacDermid, 2001). Both of these studies fall within the category of microlevel analysis.

At the meso level, sociologists tend to study the experiences of groups and the interactions between groups. In a recent book based on their research with Somali immigrants, Kim Huisman and colleagues (Huisman, Hough, Langellier, & Toner, 2011) examine the interactions between Somalis and Americans in Maine. These researchers found that stereotypes about refugees being unable or unwilling to assimilate and being overly dependent on local social systems are unsubstantiated. In a much different study of group-level interactions, Michael Messner (2009) conducted research on children’s sports leagues. Messner studied interactions among parent volunteers, among youth participants, and between league organizers and parents and found that gender boundaries and hierarchies are perpetuated by the adults who run such leagues. These two studies, while very different in their specific points of focus, have in common their mesolevel focus.

Sociologists who conduct macrolevel research study interactions at the broadest level, such as interactions between nations or comparisons across nations. One example of macrolevel research can be seen in a recent article by David Frank and colleagues (Frank, Camp, & Boutcher, 2010). These researchers examined worldwide changes over time in laws regulating sex. By comparing laws across a number of countries over a period of many years (1945–2005), Frank learned that laws regulating rape, adultery, sodomy, and child sexual abuse shifted in focus from protecting larger entities, such as families, to protecting individuals. In another macrolevel study, Leah Ruppanner (2010) studied how national levels of gender equality in 25 different countries affect couples’ divisions of housework. Ruppanner found, among other patterns, that as women’s parliamentary representation increases, so, too, does men’s participation in housework.

While it is true that some topics lend themselves to a particular level of inquiry, there are many topics that could be
studied from any of the three levels. The choice depends on the specific interest of the researcher, the approach he or she would like to take, and the sorts of questions he or she wants to be able to answer about the topic. Let’s look at an example. Gang activity has been a topic of interest to sociologists for many years and has been studied from each of the levels of inquiry described here. At the micro level, sociologists might study the inner workings of a specific gang, communication styles, and what everyday life is like for gang members. Though not written by a sociologist, one example of a microlevel analysis of gang activity can be found in Sanyika Shakur’s 1993 autobiography, Monster. Shakur, S. (1993). Monster: The autobiography of an L.A. gang member. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press. In his book, Shakur describes his former day-to-day life as a member of the Crips in south-central Los Angeles. Shakur’s recounting of experiences highlights microlevel interactions between himself, fellow Crips members, and other gangs.

At the meso level, sociologists are likely to examine interactions between gangs or perhaps how different branches of the same gang vary from one area to the next. At the macro level, we could compare the impact of gang activity across communities or examine the economic impact of gangs on nations. Excellent examples of gang research at all three levels of analysis can be found in the Journal of Gang Research published by the National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCRC). The Journal of Gang Research is the official publication of the National Gang Crime Research Center (NGCRC). You can learn more about the NGCRC and the journal at http://www.ngcrc.com. Sudir Venkatesh’s study (2008), Venkatesh, S. (2008). Gang leader for a day: A rogue sociologist takes to the streets. New York, NY: Penguin Group. Gang Leader for a Day, is an example of research on gangs that utilizes all three levels of analysis. Venkatesh conducted participant observation with a gang in Chicago. He learned about the everyday lives of gang members (micro) and how the gang he studied interacted with and fit within the landscape of other gang “franchises” (meso). In addition, Venkatesh described the impact of the gang on the broader community and economy (macro).

key takeaways

- Sociological research can occur at any of the following three analytical levels: micro, meso, or macro.
- Some topics lend themselves to one particular analytical level while others could be studied from any, or all, of the three levels of analysis.

Exercises

- Think about a topic that you’d like to study. From what analytical level do you think it makes sense to study your topic? Why?
- Find an example of published sociological research that examines a single topic from each of the three analytical levels. Describe how the researcher employs each of the three levels in her or his analysis.
- To learn more about micro sociology, check out the Social Psychology section of the American Sociological Association: http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/socpsych/ASA. What does your perusal of this site teach you about the micro sociological perspective that you did not know before?
- To learn more about macro sociology, check out the American Sociological Association’s section on Global and Transnational Sociology: www2.asanet.org/sectionglobal. What does your perusal of this site teach you about the macro sociological perspective that you did not know before?