Sociological Theory:

Georg Simmel
Georg Simmel 1858-1918

- Born in Berlin, Germany
- His family was:
  - Business-oriented
  - Prosperous
  - Jewish
- His father converted to Christianity
- Died in Simmel’s youth
Georg Simmel

How is society possible?
Sociologists should focus on people in relationships.

Society--the patterned interactions among members of a group
Georg Simmel

Simmel began with the elements of everyday life—

- playing games,
- keeping secrets,
- being a stranger,
- forming friendships
Georg Simmel

- As with Durkheim and Weber, Simmel resisted reducing social behavior to individual personality.

- Nor could social relationships be fully explained by larger collective patterns such as “the economy.”
Georg Simmel

- Everyday interaction creates a level of reality—an "interaction order"
- Never totally fixed
- Always problematic
- Capable of change
Georg Simmel

Self-conscious attempt to reject the organicist theories of Comte & Spencer

And the historical description of unique events that was cherished in his native German
Georg Simmel

- Suggested that society consists of A web of patterned Interactions

The task of sociology—to study the forms of these interactions as they occur and reoccur in diverse historical periods and cultural settings.
Georg Simmel

*Society* is the name for a number of individuals connected by interactions.

The major field of study for student of society is... *sociation*:

The particular **patterns & forms** in which people associate and interact with one another.
Distinct human phenomena may be understand by *reference to the same formal concept*
For example: The student of warfare and the student of marriage investigate qualitatively different subject matters, yet the sociologist can find essentially similar interactive forms in martial conflict and in marital conflict.
Little similarity between the behavior displayed at the court of Louis XIV and that displayed in the offices of an American corporation. A study of the forms of subordination and superordination in each reveals similar underlying patterns.
Georg Simmel: 
Formal Sociology (Social Forms)

Social Processes

- Conflict and Cooperation
- Subordination and Superordination
- Centralization and Decentralization
Georg Simmel:
Formal Sociology (Social Forms)

The term *form* was perhaps not the best choice...

Had Simmel used the term *social structure*—which is quite close to his use of “form”—he may have encountered less resistance.
Georg Simmel: Formal Sociology (Social Forms)

- Modern sociological terms such as status, role, norms, and expectations

- Elements of social structure are close to the formal conceptualizations that Simmel employed
Georg Simmel: Social Types

Simmel constructed a gallery of social types to complement his inventory of social forms:

■ The Stranger
■ The Mediator
■ The Poor
■ The Adventurer
■ The Man in the Middle
■ The Renegade
Georg Simmel: Social Types

Simmel conceives of each particular social type as being caused by specific reactions and the expectations of other.

The *type* becomes what he is through his relations with others who:

- **Assign** him a particular position
- **Expect** him to behave in specific ways.
The Stranger

“The stranger” in Simmel’s terminology, is not just a wanderer “who comes today and goes tomorrow,” having no specific structural position. On the contrary, he is a “person who comes today and stays tomorrow…He is fixed within a particular spatial group…but his position…is determined…by the fact that he does not belong to it from the beginning,” and that he may leave again. The stranger is “an element of the group itself” while not being fully part of it. *He therefore is assigned a role that no other members of the group can play. By virtue of his partial involvement in group affairs he can attain an objectivity that other members cannot reach.* Moreover, being distant and near at the same time, the stranger will often be called upon as a confidant…In similar ways, *the stranger may be a better judge between conflicting parties than full members of the group since he is not tied to either of the contenders…*

(Coser 1971:182)
Once *the poor* accept assistance, *they are removed from the preconditions of their previous status, they are declassified, and their private trouble now becomes a public issue*. The poor come to be viewed not by what they do--the criteria ordinarily used in social categorization--but by virtue of what is done to them. Society creates the social type of the poor and assigns them a peculiar status that is marked only by negative attributes, by what the status-holders do not have.

*(Coser 1971:182)*
The stranger and the poor, as well as Simmel’s other types, are assigned their positions by virtue of specific interactive relations. They are societal creations and must act out their assigned roles.

(Coser 1971:183)
Georg Simmel: The Dialectical Method

To Simmel, **sociation** always involves *harmony and conflict, attraction and repulsion, love and hatred*. He saw human relations as characterized by *ambivalence*; precisely those who are connected in intimate relations are likely to harbor for one another not only positive but also negative sentiments.
Erotic relations, for example, strike us as woven together of love and respect, or disrespect...of love and an urge to dominate or the need for dependence...What the observer or the participant himself thus divides into two intermingling trends may in reality be only one.

...Because conflict can strengthen existing bonds or establish new ones, it can be considered a creative rather than a destructive force.

(Coser 1971:184-185)
Simmel’s emphasis on the structural determinants of social action is perhaps best exemplified in his seminal essay “Quantitative Aspects of the Group.”

Goal of writing a grammar of social life by considering one of the most abstract characteristics of a group: the mere number of its participants.
The Significance of Numbers for Social Life

- He examines forms:
  - Group processes and
  - Structural arrangements
- As these derive from sheer quantitative relationships
Dyad versus Triad

A **dyadic** relationship differs **qualitatively** from other types of groups

- Each of the **two participants** is confronted by only **one** other and not by a **collectivity**
Dyad versus Triad

This type of group depends only on two participants, the withdrawal of one would destroy the whole

“A dyad depends on each of its two elements alone--in its death though not in its life

For its life it needs both, but for its death, only one.”
Georg Simmel:
The Significance of Numbers for Social Life

When a **dyad** is transformed into a **triad**, the apparently insignificant fact that one member has been added actually brings about a major qualitative change.

- In the **triad**, as in all associations involving more than two persons,

- **The individual participant** is confronted with the possibility of being outvoted by a majority.
The triad is the simplest structure in which the group as a whole can achieve domination over its component members.

It provides a social framework that allows the constraining of individual participants for collective purposes.
Significance of Numbers

Thus, the triad exhibits in its simplest form the sociological drama that informs all social life:

The dialectic of:

- freedom and constraint,
- autonomy and heteronomy
When a third member enters a dyadic group, various processes become possible that previously could not take place.

A third member may:

- Mediate
- Rejoice
- Divide and Rule
Georg Simmel: The Significance of Numbers for Social Life

Real World Applications of the Dyadic/Triadic Social Form
Economic exchange, Simmel argues, can best be understood as a form of social interaction.

When monetary transactions replace earlier forms of barter, significant changes occur in the forms of interactions between social actors.
The Philosophy of Money

Money is subject to precise division and manipulation

Permits exact measurement of equivalents
The Philosophy of Money

- It is **impersonal** in a manner in which objects of barter, like crafted gongs and collected shells, can never be.

- *It thus helps promote rational calculation in human affairs and furthers the rationalization that is characteristic of modern society.*
The Philosophy of Money

- When money becomes the *prevalent link* between people
- It *replaces personal ties* anchored in diffuse feelings
- By *impersonal relations* that are limited to a specific purpose
The Philosophy of Money

- **Abstract calculation** invades areas of social life
  - Kinship relations
  - Esthetic appreciation

- Which were previously the domain of *qualitative* rather than *quantitative* appraisals

- **Money** is the *universal* medium of exchange